Civic Incompetence: Proletarianization and our Impoverished Public Life

Ryan Kambich, *Xavier University*

Proletarianization, the process by which the American economy has shifted towards a wage earning labor force, has eroded the democratization of civic competence in American public life. The wage-earning economy has fundamentally adjusted both compulsory and higher education towards technical training in an effort to prepare workers to fulfill technical roles in the proletarianized economy. These education systems, once bastions for civic enrichment and critical thinking, have lost their formative value, and can no longer be depended upon as a foundation of competent citizenship. Meanwhile, the wage-earning workplace has similarly abandoned its role in civic formation as workers continuously lose their autonomy and engagement with tasks that cultivate responsibility. The impoverishment of these formational institutions has been fundamental to the erosion of competence in the United States.

In this paper I examine the rise of the proletarianized economy and how the proliferation of this system has changed the nature of education and the workplace. I then draw on these findings in order to determine their relationship to the democratization of competence across the citizenry. Finally, I explore potential solutions for the revitalization of the school and the workplace as foundations for the widespread formation of competent, responsible citizens capable of meaningful engagement with public life and the trials and tribulations of republican self-government.

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The civic ambitions of republicanism continue to be frustrated by the place of the school as an institution designed for the technical training of workers for the non-formative proletarianized workplace. Education and labor, two constant facets of life in the American republic, have little to say about the formation of competent citizens capable of accepting the responsibilities entailed in republican self-government due to their preoccupations with the productivity of the wage-earner economy. The American citizenry possesses the liberty necessary to forge its own political destiny, however it lacks the capabilities needed for a meaningfully participatory public life, lending to a sentiment of frustration and the permeating discontent that Michael Sandel diagnoses, "[we] fear that, individually and collectively, we are losing control of the forces that govern our lives."[1]

[1] Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 3.

Part I: Proletarianization and Formative Labor

Proletarianization refers to the process by which the labor force of a nation becomes one of wage-earners rather than property owning workers. The process of proletarianization takes on a number of forms, however most movements towards the wage-earning system share a set of common characteristics, "Proletarianization can be defined as a 'shift in middle-class occupations toward wage workers, in terms of: income, property, skill, prestige or power, irrespective of whether or not the people involved are aware of these changes."[2] It is the third of these changing characteristics, skill, that I posit bears intractable difficulties for the proletarianized American republic. The significance of skill development earned through labor and the responsibility garnered from engaging in skilled labor cannot be underestimated in their importance to the formation of the democratic individual. Labor is fundamentally a formative exercise, one that adult professionals engage with daily. As such, labor and the capabilities of a democratic population are inexorably linked. Therefore, it is important to examine the rise of the proletarianized labor force in the United States and the ways in which this laboring citizenry has been formed within that system in order to thereby determine the democratic consequences for our republic.

The wage-earner economy largely developed in the United States during the nineteenth century. Scholars give numerous accounts as to what arrangements specifically triggered the widespread rise of the non-propertied worker who lived off wages earned from employers. However, as Christopher Lasch describes, one component of the American proletarianized economy is inescapable, "By the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become increasingly difficult to deny the existence of a wage-earning class, even in the United States, or to pretend that every wage earner was a potential artisan, shopkeeper, or capitalist."[3] This last point requires significant consideration due to the historical implications of the growth of wages as a practice. The development of the wage-earning economy marked a significant break from the past; a reorganization of American economic arrangements away from the property owning agrarian and artisan lifestyles, a way of life long idealized by republicans for the virtues that these styles of labor endowed upon citizens. John Dewey offered a poignant lamentation on the loss of this way of life and its virtues in 1930,

> The old-type artisan, trained by individual apprenticeship for skilled individual work, is disappearing. Mass production by men massed together to operate machines with their minute divisions of labor, is putting him out of business. In many cases, a few weeks at a machine give about all the education--or rather training--that is needed. Mass

[2] Evelyn Nakano, Glenn Feldberg, and Roslyn L. Feldberg, "Degraded and Deskilled: The Proletarianization of Clerical Work," *Social Problems* 25 (1977): 52.

[3] Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 206.

> production causes a kind of mass education in which individual capacity and skill are submerged. While the artisan becomes more of a mechanic and less of an artist, those who are still called artists either put themselves, as writers and designers, at the disposal of organized business.[4]

With the loss of the agrarian and artisan ways of living came also a loss of skill and individualism found in these types of labor. Substituted instead was short-term technical training designed to maximize productivity with little regard to the development of the laborer. Mass production generated styles of labor incompatible with skillful specialization and individual competence and rather created a lifestyle centered on work in the name of production.

As seen in its far reaching social and political consequences, the wage-earning development was a force to be reckoned with in its swift changes to the American republic. Michael Sandel notes that

> The 1870 census, the first to record detailed information about Americans' occupations, confirmed what many workers already knew. Notwithstanding a free labor ideology that tied liberty to ownership of productive property, America had become a nation of employees. Two-thirds of productively engaged Americans were wage-earners by 1870, dependent for their livelihood on someone else. In a nation that prized independence and self-employment, only one in three any longer worked his own farm or ran his own shop.[5]

The loss of financial independence gave rise to anxieties about the constitution of the American individual, and the ethos and virtues imparted on citizens by the lack of autonomy and responsibility that property ownership had traditionally provided. The labor movement came largely as a response to these anxieties; a movement premised not only on protecting the interest of the laborer but also on defending and enriching the lives of those now entrenched in wage-earning work. Labor leader William H. Sylvis, speaking to a gathering in Chicago, provided an impassioned defense of the character of the proletarianized worker in the face of centralized corporate power,

> What would it profit us, as a nation, were we to preserve our institutions and destroy the morals of the people; save our Constitution, and sink the masses into hopeless ignorance, poverty, and crime; all the forms of our republican institutions to remain on the statute-books, and the great body of the people sunk so low as to be incapable of comprehending their most simple and essential principles;

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[4] John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New.* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1999; reprint, New York: Minton. Balch & Co., 1930), 20.

[5] Sandel, 184.

> with the wealth of the nation concentrated in the hands of the few, and the toiling many reduced to squalid poverty and utter dependence on the lords of the land, and with every position of profit and honor filled by the proud and opulent?[6]

The moral development of the laborer was a primary anxiety in the face of the proletarianized economy. The changing definition of work and the virtues imparted by it pointed to a major change in the formation of the citizen in his daily routine and activity. The individual, moulded by interactions with her environment, was faced with a new laboring life that stressed routine, productivity, and a destructive unthinking which threatened the very composition of the citizenry.

An intriguing case study into the impacts of proletarianization on working life and the individual involves clerical work as a profession. Clerical work (stenography, administrative assistance, etc.) holds a certain interest as a profession due to its position as skilled labor which borders on manual. By modern standards, clerical work appears to be arduous and unimaginative. However, it belongs in the category of professional work as "The features that distinguish clerical work, justifying its inclusion among 'middle class' occupations are: clean physical surroundings, an emphasis on mental as opposed to manual activities, reliance on worker's judgment in executing tasks, and direct personal contact among workers and between workers and managers."[7] It is in these characteristics that the corrosive forces of proletarianization become apparent. While clerical workers engage in a professional environment that is generally characterized as emphasizing mental activities and responsibilities in judgement, these ethos have been lost with the rise and expansion of the wage-earner economy over the last century. Specifically, "Proletarianization occurs as clerical work loses these special characteristics, i.e., as work is organized around manual rather than mental activities, as tasks become externally structured and controlled and as relationships become depersonalized."[8] Herein lies the modern perception of clerical work as the unthinking manual labor of the office. The work becomes automated and unconscious. Wage-earning labor structures give rise to office environments that emphasize productivity above all, generating an assembly line mentality that excludes the mental activity and autonomy of the individual in the quest for large scale production.

The authors of this study are quick to emphasize that clerical work did not always exist in this unthinking form. Rather, clerks once took on a role that required responsibility and high minded competence, "In the older offices the clerical staffs were small. Clerks were 'all-around' workers: they handled all phases of an assignment, both organizing and executing it, and they did a wide variety of

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[6] James C. Sylvis, *The Life, Speeches, Labors and Essays of William H. Sylvis* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1872), 127.
[7] Glenn, Feldberg, and Feldberg, 52-53.
[8] Glenn, Feldberg, and Feldberg, 52-53.

tasks."[9] Clerical work was once distributed across a much smaller staff and therefore put greater responsibility on each individual. This expectation, however, was lost with the rise of the proletarianized economy. The automatic organization of wage-earning offices took responsibility out of the hands of individuals and diffused it across a growing number of clerical workers, "Scientific management was used to break jobs into a series of steps, which were then reordered to save time, and/or divided among different groups of workers. Physical re-arrangements eliminated wasted motions."[10] As a result, the modern clerk lacks the level of individual creativity and professional responsibility once associated with the profession. The impact of this movement is largely detrimental to the cultivation of a competent individual in the workplace. The clerk has gone from a laborer who finds fulfillment and rich challenges in his work to one who finds that his "mental choices are limited to predetermined categories," denoting a lack of mental autonomy in the constant search for increased proletarianized production.[11]

This development in the professional life of clerks is highly problematic for the individual growth and formation of the laborer in their daily contact with their work. In particular, skill development has been trivialized and is growing largely obsolete. A profession that once required a knowledgeable laborer, great personal responsibility, and well developed skills to match a great diversity of office challenges has now largely lost this skilled individualism. Rather, clerical work has instead turned to a largely non-autonomous and hastily trained labor force,

> As a result of the changes described above, old skills have been made trivial and opportunities to develop skills have been reduced. Traditional specialities such as stenography and bookkeeping, which required extensive training, have been displaced or simplified beyond recognition. The skills now required are more mechanical as in operating a xerox machine, lower level, as in typing addresses on automatically typed correspondence, and/or narrower, as found in the administrative support center. Many clerical jobs can be taught with step-by-step manuals in a few days.[12]

While this simplistic mindset towards labor does wonders for productivity on the margin, those workers engaging in this type of labor have lost their potential for personal growth and development and the ability to exercise personal skill. Meanwhile, as sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larson points out, the tremors of the movement away from skill development are felt across the proletarianized economy and into the world of education, "The welfare-warfare state, the gigantic business corporation controlling and manipulating its international markets, the automated factory and the 'scientific establishment' symbolized, in their apparently insatiable

[9] Glenn, Feldberg, and Feldberg, 53.
[10] Glenn, Feldberg, and Feldberg, 54.
[11] Glenn, Feldberg, and Feldberg, 55.
[12] Glenn, Feldberg, and Feldberg, 57.

hunger for educated labor-power, the rise of a new class bred in the mass university."[13] This new echelon of hastily trained professionals leaves little room for the individual to grow and develop. Rather, laborers are taught to sit down at a desk, punch records into an excel file for eight hours, collect their wage, and go home. The effect is palpable; a frustrated and confused laboring body that engages little with stimulating and challenging formative work but rather exists in a position that lacks autonomy or any sense of greater engagement.

The rise of the non-autonomous proletarianized worker has generated a palpable political fallout. American citizens, who once found labor to be an engaging exercise, are now left frustrated and confused as to the civic traits they lack due to their formation in the proletarianized system. The proletarianization of the citizen is one of the major causes for the rabid discontent across American society that Michael Sandel worries of.[14] This lack of democratic capability to combat the frustrations of the age poses a great threat to our republic as citizens find their professional and civic capabilities handicapped by the system in which they live, as Larson eloquently summarizes,

> When a society promises advancement through education but withholds its rewards, cynicism and anger are easy; but what people do with their anger depends on ideological constructions and, especially, on the possibilities of action that are historically available. Even the more autonomous and the more privileged of educated workers can experience *political* alienation in the organization of their work lives.[15]

The American skilled laborer, stripped of work experiences that teach important ethos of responsibility and allow for an autonomous use of one's skills is left alienated by a democratic form of government that lacks knowledgeable and autonomous laborer-citizens. The laborer exists now as she has not before; degraded, unskilled, lacking in autonomy and the finer formation inherent in competence-building labor that challenges the intellect, creativity, and responsible capacity of the citizen in a working environment. Bygone are the days in which "Skilled workers [...] shaped local affairs, calling mass meetings, collecting strike funds, and establishing libraries and reading rooms. They [...] controlled many workplace decisions and enjoyed considerable political power locally."[16] The proletarianized economy has given license to a way of life that lacks civic considerations and the personal development of the individual. A civic mindset is not cultivated in the daily classrooms of office cubicles and excel files. Rather, the rabid quest for productivity has eroded the individual's capability to exercise and grow through autonomous engagement with daily labor.

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[13] Magali Sarfatti Larson. "Proletarianization and Educated Labor." *Theory and Society* 9 (1980): 132.
[14] Sandel, 3.
[15] Larson, 170.
[16] John Fairfield, *The Public and its Possibilities: Triumphs and Tragedies in the American City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 194.

Part II: The Erosion of Democratized Competence in the American Republic

Maria Montessori crafted a teaching philosophy for early childhood development that was centered on active engagement with a classroom environment. In the Montessori style, children do not sit at desks and take notes from an instructor, but rather move around a classroom and interact with physical materials aimed at shaping young minds towards active and effective problem solving. Montessori classrooms are filled with shelves stocked with these materials, and each work station is designed for a meaningful interactive experience to teach children about the world around them. This teaching philosophy is premised on an important understanding of human nature; we are fundamentally shaped by our interactions with our environment, and if that environment can be conditioned towards a certain outcome, these interactions can be formative towards that end. As with the development of young critical thinkers, our interactions with stimulating civic environments are formative in our growth as citizens. Our open and honest education and discussions with other citizens as to the state of the nation, beginning from a young age, teach us how to think critically about pressing public matters. They also show us the significance of engagement in public life. Taking for a moment the Montessori classroom as an example, we as citizens are as those young unformed minds; stumbling around the room with our minds eager and our hands outstretched towards the formational tools of civic society. However, we find the shelves of our classroom embarrassingly empty, "Our fast-paced habits leave neither time nor--more important--places for good talk, even in cities the whole point of which, it might be argued, is to promote it."[17] The ill effects of this largely unstimulating civic environment are palpable, once again pointing us to the very real consequences that Michael Sandel envisions for the American republic.[18] We, like the eager child met with bare shelves, are left confused and frustrated as to our purpose as citizens and where the citizen fits into a largely uninviting, fundamentally disinteresting public life.

The main culprit for this impoverished sense of public life is the erosion of democratized competence across the American republic. The democratization of competence, as coined by Christopher Lasch, is the widespread cultivation of competence for public matters across American society, and for Lasch it is fundamental to American political development,

> Citizenship appeared to have given even the humbler members access to the knowledge and cultivation elsewhere reserved for the privileged classes. Opportunity, as many Americans understood it, was a matter more of intellectual than material enrichment. It was their restless curiosity, their skeptical and iconoclastic turn of mind, their

[17] Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 118.
[18] Sandel, 3.

> resourcefulness and self-reliance, their capacity for invention and improvisation that most dramatically seemed to differentiate the laboring classes in America from their European counterparts.[19]

Competence is indispensable to active and effective citizenship, which in turn is the very foundation of self-government. The ability to think critically about public life and to form and effectively communicate opinions are essential functions of the republican citizen, and have been hallmarks of American society from the very start, "Ordinary Americans had opinions on every imaginable subject and that few of them seemed to have any sense of their proper place, but it was this very lack of deference, as Americans saw it, that defined a democratic society."[20]

For the nation's founders, the competent citizen was to be the building block of the lofty republican experiment. As such, the formation of the citizen was of central importance in the early years of the fledgling republic, and debates on how best to enact policies which would cultivate competent and effective citizenship took center stage in the political sphere.[21] Noah Webster, writing in the pre-constitutional years of the American republic, provides us with a clear picture of the competent republican citizen,

> …every man is in some measure an artist--he makes a variety of utensils, rough indeed, but such as will answer his purpose--he is a husbandman in summer and a mechanic in winter--he travels about the country--he converses with a variety of professions--he reads public papers--he has access to a parish library and thus becomes acquainted with history and politics, and every man in New-England is a theologian. This will always be the case in America, so long as their [sic] is a vast tract of fertile land to be cultivated, which will occasion emigrations from the states already settled. Knowledge is diffused and genius roused by the very situation of America.[22]

In this lofty vision of American citizenship, knowledge is not reserved to an intellectual aristocracy, but is instead within the reach of all citizens. Every man is active and engaged in the pursuit of knowledge through literacy and the conversational arts and are thusly formed into competent citizens. The result is a citizenry that is capable of fulfilling the responsibilities of self-governance that republican ideals demand. It is important to note that this vision is premised on the agrarian way of life argued for by Thomas Jefferson and other early republicans. In this view, citizens are property owners formed by the responsibilities of tending to one's land. The lifestyle produces competent citizens, and if all engage in this

[19] Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, 59.
[20] Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, 58.
[21] Sandel, 142-150.
[22] Noah Webster, *Sketches of American Policy* (Clark: The Lawbook Exchange Ltd, 2008; reprint, Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1785) 29.

lifestyle, then competence is democratized across the population. The agrarian view of political economy does not necessarily require other formative institutions to produce competence. Religious and educational instruction may contribute to further competence, however the agrarian life in an agrarian economy is sufficient to instill and democratize competence across the citizenry.

We, clearly enough, do not live in the idealized agrarian republic. The rise of manufacturing and the proletarianized economy has rendered the agrarian way of life largely obsolete for a critical mass of citizens. With the rise of the wage-earning and propertyless citizen, we have lost the formative exercises of agrarian life, and therefore must rely on accessible and effective formative institutions in order to democratize competence. One such institution is the school, a centerpiece of life in the formative years of childhood and young adulthood. Returning to the Montessori example, the school is an educational material that we as fledgling young minds interact with on a daily basis. School life is a mainstay of our civic classroom, perhaps the most significant formative material on the shelf. As youthful citizens, we interact constantly with the school, and therefore look to it as a primary source in our own formation as competent and engaged citizens. However, what we find on the shelf is not an interactive and engaging educational material, but instead a textbook; an instruction manual filled with technical jargon and commands teaching us not for competent citizenship, but rather training us for our place in the wage-earning economy. The rise of technical education to meet the demand for wage-earning laborers has left our citizenry without one of its most significant sources of civic instruction and has eroded democratized competence across the American public.

Educational institutions on all levels in the wage-earner republic have seen a shift away from formative exercises set on the development of critical thinking and competent citizenship towards technical job training. Specifically, this shift is illustrated in the move away from liberal arts education towards technical education for a specific career path. This transformation is significant due to the longstanding relationship between the liberal arts and citizenship, "Traditionally, the liberal arts are those subjects or skills that were thought [...] to be essential for a free person, i.e. a *citizen*, to know in order to take an active part in civic life, and thus become a virtuous, knowledgeable, and articulate person."[23] Clearly, a widely accessible education system centered on the liberal arts is a critical formative tool for competence. The ethos of a liberal arts education are not only compatible with those of the republican ideal of competent citizenship, but meaningfully embody the vision which Webster had for the republican citizen, "A liberal arts education fosters, not least of all through its discussion format, a hunger for knowledge and an innate curiosity, a love of ideas and a passion for meaningful information, a fascination with new discoveries."[24] For a young citizen to spend their earliest years in an institution that fosters thought and reflection on all aspects of life, and

[23] Erle Lim, Johan Geertsema, Sow Chorng Haur, "The Value of a Liberal (Arts) Education," *Journal of the NUS Teaching Academy* 4 (2014), 1.
[24] Mark W. Roche, "The Landscape of the Liberal Arts," *New Directions for Community Colleges* 163 (2013), 8.

specifically on public life, would be to fill our civic classroom with invaluable formative materials. Widespread interactions across the citizenry with an institution such as this would be the basis for the democratization of competence.

Regrettably, this is not our reality. Mark Roche offers a sobering assessment of the modern educational climate;

> The liberal arts today have fallen in prestige. In the early decades of the 20th century, about 70% of U.S. undergraduates majored in the liberal arts; today barely 40% major in the liberal arts. Research universities have seen movement of students to practical disciplines, such as business; many traditional liberal arts colleges are becoming hybrid liberal arts colleges, with a general education core but majors beyond the arts and sciences, such as education, nursing, and criminal justice; and community colleges have increasingly shifted their identity away from preparing students for college and toward developing vocational skills. More widely, we see American society reducing the value of higher education to its economic impact.[25]

Education has become divorced from citizenship. Rather than act as a means of forming competence in the name of good citizenship, education has become a tool for professional training. The value of learning is no longer measured in civic terms, but rather in terms of economics. In this light we see the erosion of the central institution for competence in the name of preparation for the proletarianized economy. Schooling is no longer set on shaping individuals into critical thinkers and competent citizens, but is rather an exercise to produce laborers who will sit in an office, complete economically valuable and civically unfulfilling work, collect their paycheck, and retreat into the private sphere to spend their hard earned wage. The result is a civically impoverished citizenry fraught with anxieties over their role in a republic premised on self-governance, but built upon citizens who are unprepared, apathetic, and incompetent in the sphere of public affairs. Like the child left alone with the textbook, we may discern some type of career path bent on earning the highest wage or obtaining the most economic success possible in the proletarianized economy, but in the absence of formative educational materials to interact with we are left woefully unequipped to question public institutions, form opinions on public matters, and clearly communicate our positions. We are as the child; prepared for success in our lives, but unprepared for the challenges of communal life in the larger world which necessitate competence for all members.

Just as the child, we must be shaped in a stimulating and active environment. Formative educational institutions are critical materials in our civic classroom, and only through their proliferation and open access can we hope to gain the widespread competence necessary for self government. We must fill our shelves with these materials in order to combat the incompetence at the heart of a failing republican experiment. The school can no longer exist simply as an instructor for survival in

[25] Roche, 4.

the wage-earning economy. Rather, we must recapture the formative spirit of the liberal arts for all in the name of recalling a golden age of competent citizenry characterized by citizens with the ability to "work with their head as well as their hands."[26]

Part III: The Rebirth of Competence: Essential Functions of the School

In hopes of salvation for the American public, there seem to be two straightforward and divergent paths; the retreat of the public into the realm of the elites or the mass democratization of competence through standing institutions. The route of the elites would place the deliberations of the American public squarely in the hands of those who are deemed capable of taking up public life; those well educated and formed in the art of citizenry from a young age, largely due to wealth and privilege. This vision mirrors, in some ways, the philosopher kings of Plato, which would seek to consolidate deliberations on questions of public concern within an initiated elite. Given the civic impoverishment of the American public, this path may seem tempting if not necessary. Take away the civic responsibilities of the masses and their impoverishment ceases to be a pressing concern. Engage in a liberal public philosophy that "treats private interest as the essential business of life," and allow Americans in the proletarianized economy to work in the interest of accumulating wealth with no regard or responsibility to larger public life.[27]

This vision, however, is not ours. It fundamentally forgets the republican aspirations of our forefathers and disregards the glory of the idealized public realms illuminated by the work of thinkers such as Hannah Arendt and Jurgen Habermas. Furthermore, this overwhelmingly private vision is incomplete, lacking the "borrowed capital from civic and religious traditions that tempered and enriched its vision of private freedom."[28] The public, despite its current state of impoverishment and incompetence, has shown brilliance in matters of common concern and democratized citizenship. The necessary path then, is not the simple one; public matters cannot be reserved for the realm of the elites. Rather, formative experience must play a role in developing a more competent public from birth. Through the experiences most familiar to the American public, education and labor, a rebirth of competence is possible. By rejecting the acquisitional focus of the proletarianized economy in the classroom and striving for workplace experiences that promote autonomy and responsibility, perhaps we may yet experience a renaissance in the American republic and witness the rise of a new civic age to quell the rising tide of discontent.

[26] Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites*, 69.
[27] Fairfield, 1.
[28] Fairfield, 2.

Revitalization and the Liberal Arts

The revitalization of the competent public must begin, as much of life does, in the classroom. School life is the first and one of the most formative social experiences the American citizen encounters. Therefore, the charge is to the classroom to begin the lifelong process of developing citizenship. As I have previously argued, an education firmly grounded in the tradition of the liberal arts is critical to ennobling the mind of the competent citizen. In *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern,* renowned political philosopher Leo Strauss offers a resounding defence for the utility of a liberal arts education as it relates to political life,

> liberal education in the original sense not only fosters civic responsibility: it is even required for the exercise of civic responsibility. By being what they are, the gentlemen are meant to set the tone of society in the most direct, the least ambiguous, and the most unquestionable way: by ruling it in broad daylight.[29]

From its origin, the liberal arts espouse a tradition of civic responsibility. They provide, from a young age, the tools necessary for civic competence. Among a number of factors, this is largely due to a lack of concern for economic acquisition within the liberal arts. Technical training is not the focus of a liberal arts education. Rather, the growth of the individual and the cultivation of a civically apt mind are central tenets. The skills of critical thinking, rational debate, and effective communication that make up the core of a liberal arts education are indispensable to effective public engagement. The enabling of citizens to think and debate clearly about public matters is the great gift of the liberal arts. Thereby, they provide the fundamental groundwork necessary for a competent public.

Strauss worried, as I do today, about the rabid promotion of a technical competence rather than civic competence in modern education, "Instead of the fruitful and ennobling tension between religious education and liberal education, we now see the tension between the ethos of democracy and the ethos of technocracy."[30] Once, the debate of the age belonged to religion and liberalism. Both ideologies are set on the improvement of the individual and how that individual can relate better to the world around them. Both cultivated the mind and awakened the young to debates about ethics and societal organization. Technical education has replaced religion in the debate, opening education to a new set of ethos that are not nearly as compatible with the demands of citizenship. Strauss noted that this shift was significant in the downfall of republican aspirations in America, "In the light of the original conception of modern republicanism, our present predicament appears to be caused [...] by the decay of liberal education of the representatives of the people."[31]

[29] Leo Strauss, *Liberalism, Ancient and Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989; reprint, New York: Basic Books, 1968), 13.
[30] Strauss, 22.
[31] Strauss, 18.

The changing nature of education and its focus has had substantial civic impacts, generating a public well trained for the pursuit of profit, but not for engaging public life. It is through a rediscovery and revitalization of the liberal arts that we might yet seek to create a more enlightened public realm, "Liberal education is the ladder by which we try to ascend from mass democracy to democracy as originally meant."[32]

The Imperative of Responsibility

A central tenet of civic competence is the imparting of responsibility upon the individual. Through formative experiences in the school and the workplace, the individual learns to take ownership; of himself, of his community, of public life at large. As I have argued, the proletarianized workplace strips laborers of their responsibilities and larger autonomy, leading to an impoverishment in valuation of the world around them and their duties to public life. The late Christopher Lasch thought along similar lines, "His former works indicate that capitalism is at fault for making moderns narcissistic."[33] The experience of responsibility and the recognition of the significant civic expectations placed on the republican citizen are imperative to the development of effective citizenship and a competent public. As previously noted, technical education and labor significantly lacks this characteristic, raising questions as to the disconnect between the technical citizen and responsibility,

> The technicians are, if not responsible, at any rate responsive to the demands of the mass; but a mass cannot be responsible to anyone or to anything for anything. It is in this situation that we here, and others in the country, raise the question concerning liberal education and responsibility.[34]

Philosopher John Dewey presented an educational vision that seeks to answer to this disconnect by providing for both the mental development of children as well as imparting an ethic of responsibility in the schooling environment. Dewey saw the sins of the proletarianized school and its detriments to the development of the republican citizen,

> American society is more driven by acquisition than ever, and its children are exposed to an unprecedented onslaught of advertising aimed at training them in the practice of consumption. In school, the same children are scrutinized by high-stakes, standardized

[32] Strauss, 10.
[33] Arthur A. Molitierno, "The Authentic Negative Voice of Democracy: Christopher Lasch's Last Will and Testament," *Midwest Quarterly* 41 (2000), 130.
[34] Strauss, 23.

> examinations that stand as the goal and measure of learning. Education itself becomes a commodity among commodities.[35]

He sought to reform this relationship by creating a classroom environment that did not center on acquisition and consumption but rather on individual development and personal responsibility. The classroom environment was structured to meet the specific needs of the child, slowly pushing them along as they grew. Dewey was not as concerned with the memorization of technical skill as he was with the development of thought and critical thinking. This was paired with growing levels of responsibility placed on the child, "Education itself is a sort of apprenticeship in which children work with adults and older peers, gradually taking on responsibilities commensurate with their developing capacities."[36] Herein lies the significant connection between the cultivation of the mind and responsibility. In the educational environment, the child not only learns to think but also learns that she possesses expectations to use learned knowledge and to be responsible for her ties to those around her. Thus, the young citizen not only learns to grow and think but also to mind the expectations implicit in a republican society. This is critical to the development of the citizen; the implicit understanding that not only must one have the ability to think and communicate clearly in the public realm, but that one possesses the expectation that they utilize these abilities in the name of public participation. The long term effects of Dewey's educational system are just that,

> Equipped with the fortitude this sort of education grants them, these students emerge from their education ready and willing to do work that both matches their capacity and serves society; they will also be eager to discover and solve the problems that inevitably arise along the way. Accordingly, these students will be happy and capable in their work, and though he doesn't mention it explicitly, Dewey implies that they will have developed the ability to identify the social conditions necessary to sustain their good work as well as that of their neighbors.[37]

With this education as a foundation, students not only develop their mental capabilities but also become equipped to find fulfillment in the workplace environment lending to the further development of responsibility. Labor, in the wake of this education, transcends the unthinking of proletarianization and the increased capacity of the students allows them to take on greater responsibilities and engage with the workplace more meaningfully. Therefore, Dewey's educational system enables more meaningful and somewhat autonomous labor despite the context of the wage-earning economy. This heightened sense of responsibility, then,

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[35] Ian T.E. Deweese-Boyd, "There Are No Schools in Utopia: John Dewey's Democratic Education," *Education and Culture* 31 (2015), 69-70.
[36] Deweese-Boyd, 70.
[37] Deweese-Boyd, 71.

translates to greater ownership over public life and public things as wage-earning laborers sharpen and exercise their expanded civic capacities.

A Synthesis

The revitalization of the American public requires Strauss and Dewey to be merged in a practical sense. The school serves an essential function in this process. The skills and personal development cultivated by a liberal arts education are invaluable tools to be used in public life. Critical thought about public matters, careful consideration of other's viewpoints, and effective communication are fundamental to a competent public that is capable of facing the challenges of self-government. However, beyond these simple tools, there must be a desire, or at least an understanding, to contribute and engage actively in public life. This comes through the cultivation of a sense of responsibility in all facets of life. Dewey's model of education, by replacing mundane technical training with personal development and growing levels of responsibility, cultivates this essential sentiment. Furthermore, the lasting effects of an education of this style mitigates the deprivation of autonomy experienced in the proletarianized workplace by embedding in the individual a keen recognition of the expectations and interconnections that weigh on them as a citizen.

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The American public stands today, perhaps more so than ever in the last century, frustrated and discontent with the powers that govern our lives. This sentiment is the product of a deep disconnection with public life and, perhaps more discouragingly, a debilitating inability to engage effectively when opportunities to participate in public life arise. Among the many factors at fault is the rise of proletarianization and its deep impacts on our public competence across all citizens. From shifts in schooling away from the liberal arts towards technical training to unfulfilling and non-formative labor in the workplace, the wage-earner economy has failed to cultivate the sort of ethos necessary to lead a rich public life. Through a rediscovery of the liberal arts and an understanding of our fundamental responsibilities to ourselves, our communities, and our impoverished public life as a whole, we may revitalize our public imagination and forge a more competent citizenry that is capable of confronting the immense task of self-government.

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