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The role of education in the discourses of the EU and of alternative schooling institutions

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses two different approaches to education and the way they are embedded in different discourses on education. The market-oriented approach is compared to the democratic approach. In the paper, the discourse of the European Union is considered as an example of hegemonic neoliberal discourse while the discourse produced by the Summerhill School and the Self-Managed High School of Paris is addressed as a counter-hegemonic discourse. Drawing on Critical Discourse Studies scholars such as Norman Fairclough, and critical pedagogic approaches such as Basil Bernstein's and Paulo Freire's, it will be shown that the difference in the ways these institutions represent the social world around them have a strong influence on their discourses on what education is for and should be like. For the European Union, education is a utilitarian means facilitating the adaptation of society to the economic system through the acquisition of predefined skills, while for the democratic approach it is rather a practice developing common decision-making and empowerment through an understanding of the world as a whole.

Keywords: education, critical pedagogy, critical discourse analysis, democratic education, *Europe 2020*.

1. Introduction

The preliminary question that I would like to answer is why bothering with investigating the neoliberal discourse of education.

My claim is that there is a project called democratic education that will provide means for learners to transform the world they live in according to their interests. In Europe, the democratic pedagogical approach is foreclosed by the current neoliberal discourse of the European Union, emphasizing the free movement of workforce and generalized competition.

However, I shall also argue, there exist possibilities of resistance to this discourse.

The focus of this paper should be on the extent to which people may self identify with it. Even if one is critical of the neo-liberal discourse, its arguments and dispositions have been interiorized to some extent.

To illustrate how the neoliberal discourse of the EU institutions permeates common sense knowledge, I will take the example of an independent Hungarian university student organization (viz. Hallgatói Halozat, literary “student network”). While it argues against the policy of the Hungarian government on education (such as forcing students to sign a contract to stay in the country for an exemption of tuition fee, in particular degrees seen as “productive” therefore worthy of state support): it claims that “The student contract also violates the European Union’s fundamental rights, especially the basic principle of the free circulation of workforce included in the Lisbon Treaty Treaty”¹ (Hallgatói Halozat, 2013 [translation by the author]).”

Let me expose the ideological investment this logic is embedded in: First, the free circulation of workforce is only implied by the Lisbon Treaty, articulated in the ideology expressed by the “free circulation of people” (European Commission, 2013). Let us be reminded that the Lisbon Treaty (signed in 2007 in order to make for the TEC rejected by French and Dutch voters) is articulating the institutional architecture of the EU. Second, an important part was omitted. The full statement of that EU treaty is actually “the free movement of *people, goods, services and capital*” (European Commission, 2013). The selectivity of the document issued by the Student Organization shows how dependent our resistances can be upon neoliberal frameworks of thinking.

In order to explore how to challenge neoliberal discourses on education by counter-hegemonic educational discourses and practices, I will:

1. Define an outline of what a democratic education should look like with a focus on critical literacy as a theory in action, based on the already existing practice of democratic education in contrast to present-day market-oriented education.
2. I will discuss the way the power relations of the late capitalist system at the European and local levels shape the discourses on education in the specific texts I have chosen for my analysis.
3. For the particular analysis, I will focus on examples from the Europe 2020 documents of the EU as the key text representing the neo-liberal discourse on education and analyze the representation of the social world in the European Commission’s texts that should shape the education practices the EU sees desirable at present. I will expose the ideological investments of the EU document against the practices of two existing alternative educational

¹ In the original: A hallgatói szerződés ellentmond az uniós alapjogoknak is, különösen a munkaerő szabad áramlására vonatkozó, a Lisszaboni Szerződésben rögzített alapelvek

institutions, the Summerhill School in the UK and the Paris Self-Managed Highschool in France. I want to demonstrate the possibility of a counter-discourse, enabled by critical literacy and critical pedagogy, to resist the hegemony of the European Union's neoliberal discourse on education, conceivable from within a broader social resistance against oppressions.

2. Outline of a democratic education with a focus on critical literacy

There are different understandings of literacy. The most widespread understanding is the one that Harvey Graff calls the literacy myth. According to the dominant logic, literacy is seen by education planners as a skill whose aim is to bring "economic development" and "individual advancement" (Graff, 1991, p. xxxviii; as cit. in Behrent, 2012, p. 219). Because it supposes literacy as a universal skill that should apply in all and any context, it is possible to believe that literacy is a matter of some innate intellectual capacity. That is, the pedagogic practice that should follow from the conceptualization of literacy as a skill will consider and treat the student isolated from the real world. In other words, this kind of literacy aims at "containing" within the status quo rather than "liberating" the student from its dominating logic (Freire, 1968).

Another understanding of literacy is critical literacy. Critical literacy counts as a revolutionary, liberating pedagogical action, in that it would result in a schooling that produces participants who can reflect on their lived experiences through developing a critical awareness of the textual production of life.

It consists of a re-appropriation of priorities in the classification of subjects (Bernstein, 2008) in the curriculum to fight class inequalities perpetuated by education and to allow for learners to understand reality as changing and therefore changeable. Subjects should be classified in such a way that education allow any learner to understand reality as a changing and changeable whole, while it should avoid at all costs compartmentalization as it is done nowadays and challenge it because:

this method of work has also left us as legacy the habit of observing natural objects and processes in isolation apart from their connections with the vast whole; of observing them in repose, not in motion, as constraints, not as essentially variables; in their death, not in their life (Engels, 1970, p. 128, as cit. in Knopp, 2012, p. 16).

This means that in democratic schooling, a dialectical approach should be applied for literacy as well as an alternative to the compartmentalization of literacy into different skills. More concretely, according to the Russian-Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, the difference between critical awareness or reflection and compartmentalization is comparable to:

The chemical analysis of water into hydrogen and oxygen, neither of which possess the properties of the whole and each of which possesses properties not

present in the whole. The student applying this method in looking for some explanation of some property of water –why it extinguishes fire, for example, will find to his surprise that hydrogen burns and that oxygen sustains fire (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 4, as cit. in Knopp, 2012, pp. 17–18).

Critical literacy also entails empowering students through creating the space for them to make decisions on how and what they learn. This would mean that the education process should take place in an environment favoring cooperation over competition, the latter is the ultimate value shaping all activities in neo-liberalism that, according to Bernard Legros and Jean-Noël Delplanque, requires the education system to prepare the students in fact for the suffering of their future when they will be “judged according to the techno-economic criteria of profitability” (Legros & Delplanque, 2009, p. 69).

These major principles of liberating education are discussed in details in Paulo Freire’s educational Praxis. He makes an important point about democratic education: it does not limit itself to making learners intellectually conscious of the world and the relations between the social groups, (what he calls emergence) but it also involves acting upon the world thanks to the gained awareness, inside and outside the classroom (what he calls intervention). Thus, praxis is the simultaneous “action and reflexion of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (Freire, 1968, as cit. in Johnson & Terzakis, 2012, p. 195). The school itself becomes the realm of participating in such a democratic, liberating practice.

3. Relations between the capitalist system, power relations at the European and local levels, and the way these are embedded in the discourses on education.

First of all, I would like to define Neo-liberalism or late capitalism: drawing on David Harvey, I see it as a reconfiguration of the mode of capital accumulation that started in the 1970s and 1980s, leading to the dominant mode of production in the past two decades, characterized by what Harvey calls “flexible accumulation” of wealth and which from the perspective of the field of cultural production is usually labeled as “the knowledge economy”. The various institutions then shape the corresponding subjectivities in accordance with the values of “flexibility,” “lifelong learning” and “diversity” (Harvey, 1992, p. 150).

The texts will be analyzed based on Norman Fairclough’s model of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1992, 2011). For him, particular ways of representing reality (the actual discourses) are shaped by their institutions of production. The emerging texts can have more or less immediate effects on reality; depending on the power potential of those that are authorized by the given texts as “experts” of what comes articulated as “knowledge”, i.e., the expected ways of doing thing, such as educating children in the 21st century in Europe. One of the most relevant “factors” that determine whether texts have an effect on

the institutional changes is the position of power, especially political power, of the actual institution issuing a document. Therefore it is crucial to study the texts of the EU 2020 strategy that is endowed with hegemonic power for the member state's education policies in the couple of years ahead of us.

It is telling how the EU 2020 document silences the few existing projects that imagine the political possibility of a democratic education, which doesn't appeal to the violence implicated by the dominant neoliberal discourse of meritocracy that rests on the value of competition.

Some local projects of democratic education are however possible. And indeed, what I have found in my research for existing models of such schooling are the particular examples of the Paris Self-Managed Highschool (Lycée Autogéré de Paris, or LAP) and Summerhill, UK.

4. The European Commission's way of representing the social world shapes its texts and, in turn, education practices.

I am going to focus on the most important ideological features of the discourse of the EU on education as articulated in the *Europe 2020* strategy.

The highest level EC document starts with the descriptive claim that there is a 'discrepancy' between the speed of economy and politics over the past two years to be solved in the EU. The systemic naming of the two decades ("it") as the grammatical subject instead of naming the logical subject of the dramatic changes, actually responsible for the dramatic figures of unemployment and debts, directs the critical gaze away early on from discussing what is implicated as crisis, how it has come about, towards the pragmatic requirement to deal with this "challenge", reassuring the reader that the "burden" of the crisis is eventually a matter of skilful "management". Here is the actual formulation of the social situation calling for the issuing of the EU document:

Economic realities are moving faster than political realities [...] the last two years have left millions unemployed, it has brought a burden of debt that will last for many years. It has brought new pressures on our social cohesion. It has also exposed some fundamental truths about the challenges that the European economy faces. And in the meantime, the global economy is moving forward (European Commission, 2010, p. 2).

What is most striking in the above excerpt is the logic according to which economy and politics are two distinct phenomena, each with their own distinct pace. Yet in so far as economy is simply stated as the field that happens to be "moving forward" within a particular span of time economy comes to be represented as a naturally moving object along a trajectory that happens to move twice as fast as politics. On the other hand politics comes to be positioned by this logic as the field that is trying to catch up, live up to the challenge. Hence politics comes to be distinct from the field of economy once again, indirectly implicated

to be marked by some agency. The social event of the crisis is thus represented as a natural phenomenon that happened without any social actors, only as a result of time passing by: “the last two years”. The pronoun “it” refers to the span of time not the actual social actor responsible for the results of the crisis. This is an ideological mitigation of social responsibility (Fairclough, 2003, p. 144).

According to this logic, the claim that training people in accordance with the “need” of the job market will resolve unemployment follows. This discourse is an ideological myth: it is aimed at strengthening the power of the employers over everyone’s education. In so far as unemployment is argued to pertain to the “youth” in general, it is “reasonable” to link it up with the changes in the field of education that should now be forced to “deliver right skills”. Ironically “all relevant stakeholders” come to mean the job market, i.e. the employers, quite exclusively.

The most pressing challenges for Member States are to address the needs of the economy and focus on solutions to tackle fast-rising youth unemployment. In this communication, emphasis is being placed on delivering the right skills for employment, increasing the efficiency and inclusiveness of our education and training institutions and on working collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders. (European Commission, 2012b, p. 2)

A more interesting feature of the Commission’s discourse is its representation of foreign language learning as a “basic skill”. What is interesting here is not that much the categorization of learning (foreign) languages as a matter of skills, that is in line with their general perception of teaching/learning. The European Commission bases its argument on the widely shared common sense knowledge that learning/teaching languages is a matter of learning skills that should help workers adapt to the employers needs in a unified and deregulated European multicultural and multilingual labour market. What is more noteworthy now is that the Commission legitimize the need of inclusion of foreign language skills based on the assumption that there are not enough people speaking foreign languages because of the failure of language pedagogy (only):

In a world of international exchanges, the ability to speak foreign languages is a factor for competitiveness. Languages are more and more important to increase levels of employability⁹ and mobility of young people, and poor language skills are a major obstacle to free movement of workers. Businesses also require the language skills needed to function in the global marketplace. This means that after several years of studying at school, the majority of young Europeans are not able to have a simple conversation in the foreign languages they have learned (European Commission, 2012a, p. 5)

We can notice immediately that “international exchanges” are not meant to imply tourist travels of leisure or cultural exchanges of entertainment but purely work-related exchanges taking place through the mediation of the markets.

The European Commission is not using its habitual discourse on cultural openness and diversity any longer. The utilitarian view is now hegemonic. The content of language teaching should by the force of this logic lead to a focus on practical and communicative skills for they are the ones that will be needed in such a context of increased mobility within the labour market – at the same time always assuming that the default case in communication “competences” by definition is “understanding”:

The choice of languages and *emphasis on competences* should be inspired by a clear vision of their value for mobility and for work in enterprises and organisations active at the international level, *with a focus on practical, communicative skills* [emphasis added] (European Commission, 2012a, p. 24)

For language skills to translate into better job opportunities, it will also be important to *ensure a more accurate targeting of the language competences* of young people. Rather than aiming at an unrealistic ‘native speaker’ level, what they learn must enable them *to perform the tasks* they are likely to face in further education or in professional life [emphasis added] (European Commission, 2012a, p. 6.)

The “unrealism” of the native speaker myth, argued, ironically by critical literacy scholarship (Birdsong, 1992) as *really* unrealistic and contradictory because appealing to the ideology of the universal innate norm, is here contrasted with the *realism* of using language in “professional life”, thus the effect produced that there seems to be no alternative in between those two possibilities, one of them even being in the realm of the impossible.

5. Counter-discourses resisting the hegemonic discourse on education

The Summerhill and the LAP documents I have chosen are “Introduction to Summerhill” (Summerhill School, 2013) and the book published by the LAP for its twentieth year anniversary (Lycée Autogéré de Paris, 2012).

One of the roles of the school is to teach democratic experiences in order to allow learners to take into consideration the common good, instead of letting the adults impose their rules without debate, in an authoritarian fashion.

This transformative perception of education above all entails the practicing of critical literacy on a daily basis. The Summerhill School wants to achieve this objective by making school into a site of affect where students to learn through emotion and love, through engaging with issues relevant for their immediate context rather than from top-down schoolbooks.

We can pose a few awkward questions. Why does man hate and kill in war when animals do not? Why does cancer increase? Why are there so many suicides? So many insane sex crimes? Why the hate that is racism? Why the need for drugs to enhance life? Why backbiting and spite? Why is sex obscene and a leering joke? Why degradation and torture? Why the continuance of religions that have long ago lost their love and hope and charity? [...] *I ask these questions because those so often asked by teachers are the*

unimportant ones, [emphasis added] the ones about French or ancient history or what not when these subjects don't matter a jot compared to the larger questions of life's fulfilment – of man's inner happiness. (Summerhill School, 2013)

The French project, the LAP, undermines the EU'S claim to “transversal skills” by turning them into possible tools for critical literacy that are aimed at practicing democracy through debating. This position acknowledges the diverse social and cultural background of the students and puts the negotiation of those differences into the center of its curriculum:

It [transversal skills] corresponds to general know-how implemented by one or many teachers in various disciplines. It can go beyond the subject limits and can also take place in the base group, the weekly assembly in which all the learners are incited to speak, to argue, and to finally vote on the propositions made about the good functioning of our structure.² (Lycée Autogéré de Paris, 2012, p. 57, translated by the author)

Transversal skills are important to achieve what they call “transdisciplinarity”, i.e. a range of educational approaches which break boundaries between subjects. It is hoped to allow students to see the objects studied as “alive” and “global” (Lycée Autogéré de Paris, 2012, p. 55). Re-establishing bridges between subjects (ibid, 50) is not achieved by advocating pluridisciplinary approaches as they only bring two subjects closer without breaking their boundaries. It can be achieved by a transdisciplinary approach that means “activities that, in high school, are embedded in knowledge or skills indifferently to boundaries set between disciplines” (Lycée Autogéré de Paris 2012, p. 55). At the same time, even the ideal of pluridisciplinarity or interdisciplinarity is limited by the final exam imperative the LAP must follow as a dependent institution from the French ministry of education (Lycée Autogéré de Paris 2012, p. 53). The dilemma for LAP is resolved by a compromise: transdisciplinary activities take place outside the curriculum, under the form of various democratic practices and optional projects blending subjects together, and is embedded in critical literacy since they ask general questions about the meaning of elements from the social world, such as “the city”, the idea of “west” or “totalitarianism” (Lycée Autogéré de Paris 2009, p. 44). Pluridisciplinarity on the other hand takes place in institutional subjects such as the *Travaux Personnels Encadrés*, which goal is to add one subject to the final examination, i.e. the *Baccalauréat*, and for which two teachers from respectively two different disciplines bring together their knowledge and experience, hence the unchanging boundaries between subjects:

² In the Original « Cette activité correspond à des savoir-faire mis en œuvre dans plusieurs disciplines et peut être menée à bien par un ou plusieurs enseignants. Elle peut échapper au cadre disciplinaire stricto sensu et avoir lieu aussi dans le groupe de base, réunion hebdomadaire où tous les élèves sont amenés à prendre la parole, argumenter et finalement voter des propositions relatives au bon fonctionnement de notre structure ».

Whereas we benefit, according to our status inside the National Education system, from a total pedagogical freedom in the *seconde* class [the first of the three high school years], the *première* and *terminale* classes [the two last high school years] –preparing students for the *Baccalauréat* – follow a curriculum more in accordance to what is done elsewhere. It means that we have to follow more strictly the prescribed norm with a view to the examination the students will have to be confronted with at the end of the year, if we do not want them to be punished for a lack of practice. Interdisciplinarity does not take on the same form according to the different levels we deal with. (Lycée Autogéré de Paris 2012, p. 53, translation by the author)³

There lies the essential contradiction of a school like LAP that we can encounter in its discourse: it benefits from material support only if it follows the imperative of training students to fit the requirements of the state-imposed *Baccalauréat* exam, which is embedded in the neoliberal approach to education. It is torn between institutional imperatives and a liberating goal.

6. Conclusion

I have shown that the European commission conceives education according to a purely utilitarian logic, aimed at adapting education to a world-economy of “free movement” that is taken for granted as if available for anyone provided they acquire the “appropriate skills.”

On the other hand, the alternative texts drawing from democratic education praxis are an optimistic break from this hegemonic neoliberal order in the sense that they step aside the discourses of meritocracy and argue for discourses of democratic participation in shaping the curriculum and the relations of interaction on a daily basis while at school. The question that remains though is: to what extent and how can such practices be introduced elsewhere?

A period of social and cultural crisis like the one we are currently going through can be a potentially good moment to try. Crises can bring to light the interiorized habitus of the workers of education and make them realize that adhering to the value of an individualized achievement promoted by the dominant ideology of competition is a form psychological and moral alienation which is trying to consolidate the system that is in fact in crisis as an effect of such values and institutions (Accardo, 2003). My reading of the current situation is not necessarily an instance of idealism. It is reinforced by what Myles Horton has said

³ In the original « Alors que nous disposons d’une liberté pédagogique totale en classe de seconde conformément à notre statut au sein de l’Education Nationale, les classes de première et de terminale –classes à examen – suivent un cursus plus en conformité avec ce qui se fait ailleurs. Cela suppose qu’en vue des épreuves auxquelles nos élèves seront confrontés lors de ces échéances, nous devons nous ranger davantage dans la norme prescrite si nous ne voulons pas qu’ils soient sanctionnés par manque d’entraînement. L’interdisciplinarité ne revêt donc pas la même forme si nous parlons de ces trois niveaux. »

about the chances of change in education, namely the importance of structural changes that follow from the dialectical relationship between habitus, i.e., the institutional practices and economic structures:

It's the structures of society we've got to change. We don't change men's hearts... it doesn't make a great deal of difference what the people are; if they're in the system, they're going to function like the system dictates they function... I've been more concerned with structural changes than I have with changing the hearts of the people. (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 103)

In Freire's articulation:

when the revolutionary cry is in power, then revolutionary education will take on another dimension: what was before an education to contest and challenge [like alternative projects such as Summerhill and LAP] becomes a systematized education, recreating, helping the reinvention of society (Freire, 1970, as cit. in Gadotti, 1994, p. 63).

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