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# Anglo and Marxist Philosophy of Education: Can the Gulf Be Bridged?

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Is it possible to bridge the gulf between East- and West-block philosophers of education? In order to answer this question properly, we need to examine the nature and the size of the gulf we wish to bridge. In this paper, I will attempt to outline the assumptions and methods used by educational philosophers who work in these two worlds.

## Rational education: the crusade against indoctrination

Philosophers in the West are not the only group that reflects on education. In the 70s, a flock of sociologists intruded on this peaceful and undisturbed domain of conservatives. I will not touch on them for, while sociological approaches discuss values, aims of education, overt and covert curricula, and so on, they derive their theories from empirical research and, thus, are very limited in scope. Educational philosophy is concerned with a more abstract level of thinking and the statements provided by philosophers are less bound by *hic et nunc* circumstances.

Interestingly enough, sociologists in the British and North American educational arena, seem to take seats on the left, while philosophers settle on the right. The reason for this seems to lie in the fact that marxist or socialist analyses are, by almost definition, based on the historical assessment of a stratified society (good enough cause for using sociological methods), while philosophical investigation, due to its higher level of abstraction, requires steady conceptual grounds not subject to the whims of politics and history.

The pivotal point of this history-proof philosophy is rationality. No English/American philosophy of education survives the savage scrutiny of colleagues if the notion of rationality is not at the center of thinking. (See the works of R. Barrow, A. Flew, R.M. Hare, W. Hare, P.H. Hirst, R.S. Peters, A.R. White and others.) In philosophical parlance, rationality is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for a proper educational theory.

Choosing rationality as the *sine qua non* of philosophy has certain implications. First, the philosophy will be individualistic in the sense that it will primarily be concerned with the individual human

being. Rational thinking and rational behaviour are exclusively human traits and describe the antique idea of *zoon politicon*, the "animal that lives in society." As Hirst and Peters (1970) put it, quoting Aristotle,

...there is a potentiality in man which will become actual in an ability to use his reason in the sense of planning means to ends and regulating his desires ... in *any* culture, whatever the group or individual ideal of human development, there is a certain minimum level of functioning that is expected of anyone.<sup>1</sup>

This suggests that rationality is an innate potential of persons and is just as much a part of human nature as the use of thumbs. The claim is not subject to question. It exists because persons exist and humans exist because there is rationality. This argument would be rejected (as circular) by all rationalists in any other case. Interestingly enough, it would be perfectly acceptable to irrational or dialectical thinkers for whom the fundamentals of rationality are irrational (the problem is long known in Western philosophy, at least since Aquinas had to face it). Analytical philosophers are often exposed to this question and seem to solve it with inimitable grace. Hirst and Peters (1970) refer to Greek authorities (Marxists would be spanked by them if they leaned on Lenin, for example) and conclude that "...any concept of personal development must include some reference to the rationality of man defined in this minimum sense."<sup>2</sup> William Hare ponders this problem at length and resolves the dilemma by stating that questioning rationality leads to tautology because such an inquiry "would presuppose the use of rational thinking." Finally he states that "there could not be a good reason to reject reason in general."<sup>3</sup>

The fact that Hirst and Peters emphasized "any" when referring to cultures also suggests that there is a tendency in analytical philosophy to blur distinctions among cultures and societies separated from each other both in time and distance. Many of Western authors take their examples from Greek philosophy (it looks as if it were part of a ritual). They are not embarrassed by the fact that the context of the problems faced by, say, Socrates and Plato was entirely different from those we have today. They assume that there are eternal problems, solutions, and values. Constancy and consistency allows analytical philosophers to announce proudly that pure philosophy should be and is politically neutral.

While saying this, they very often judge political systems as desirable or undesirable. Negative points are made by referring to examples from Nazism and Communism, while positive points are

scored by references to Western democracy. This also means that Western type democracy is ontologically the highest form of social organization since rationality, the cornerstone of this political system, is intrinsic to personhood and reaches its full potential in this system.

The way to rationality is logic, Aristotelian logic in particular. This claim is also unquestioned. Flew says that "the fundamental laws of logic ... cannot be questioned, because any attempt to question them will presuppose them."<sup>4</sup> He claims further that not only the rules of logic but the material we work with is common:

We can have, and know that we have, a shared vocabulary only and precisely in so far as we are able to verify our mutual understanding by reference to public objects and public ongoing....<sup>5</sup>

This is true if one stays within the paradigm of rationalism and talks only to those who share the references to ones 'public objects' and 'ongoings.' The splendid isolation of language from culture is comfortable and harmless until it becomes normative. Here philosophers seem to set the pace for others by this indispensable dictate of ideology. But is there any kind of coherent set of thoughts that could be refuted on its own grounds? Flew (1976) flatly dismisses the possibility of discussion with any kind of conceptual framework. He says, if there were groups with different concepts of rationality, for example, then they would "...become to that extent non-communicating, mutually unintelligible sub-species."<sup>6</sup> He arrived at this conclusion by asserting that there cannot be different concepts of rationality, only various conceptions of it. But since that concepts only exist in relation to each other and analytical philosophers provide us with an array of conditions derived from these interrelations of concepts, there is little room for alternative interpretations. Were we to put the concept of rationality within, say, a Marxist context, the implantation would be successful, albeit we would gain a completely different interpretation. But what happens, in fact, is that philosophers constantly refine their already polished arguments for rationality thus developing the rational paradigm, and produce more of the same. All of this has implications for a particular view of rationality:

1. It is individualistic in the sense that it sees personal happiness as the source of the common good. But at the same time philosophers define rationality as the degree to which the individual is able to function in society (not in any society, one must add).

2. It is unquestionable and axiomatic and thus normative.

3. It is part of the essence of what it means to be a person.

4. It is contextually unbound, its rules are valid regardless of time and place.

5. Although it is allegedly unbiased and non-political, it is committed to human happiness (achieved through rational behaviour) and rejects all systems of societal organization other than Western type democracy.

## Communalism in education

It is almost as difficult to characterize communist or socialist educational theories briefly as it is those in the West. There are, however, some common points which are typical of the divergent trends. I will focus here on communal or community education, the cornerstone of marxist pedagogy<sup>7</sup> which will point to the basic differences between contemporary Western and Eastern approaches to education the communist educators' concern is with the society or the community. The individual is important not in its own right but as a part of the community or society.

I talk about communal education rather than community education because the Western reader might be misled by the latter phrase. When writing about communist education, one should be aware of the fact, no matter what conceptual analysts say, marxism in the East works with a completely different set of concepts using the same words as the thinkers in the West. The words might be the same but the structure of the conceptual framework is entirely dissimilar. Therefore, when discussing community in marxist education, it is better to use words which are not as loaded with everyday meanings as is 'community education'.

In order to throw more light on this problem, let me give some attention to the concept of community in East European marxism with special regard to education. The *Hungarian Pedagogical Encyclopaedia* defines community for the purpose of introducing communal education as follows:

Community is the union of people in which they are joined by common interest, aims, and aspirations. The socialist society is built up from communities which are entitled to fulfil one or another important function of the society (for example, economical-productive, political-societal, cultural, pedagogical).<sup>8</sup>

Further examples show that communities in this interpretation

mean organized and legitimate groups in society. Actually, through their legitimacy, they are communes of the state. But smudging the distinctions between state and society is not a surprise in communist logic. In fact, if the state is the state of the workers who constitute the great majority of the society with their allies the peasant class, then it represents society as such. For a communist, the socialist state cannot (and why should it?) have aims and interests different from those of the people. The highest aims of society, articulated by the state, are broken into lower-level goals. The worth of a particular community and of the individual is determined by the extent to which they contribute to these overall aims. This is one reason why East European communists are sensitive to accusations that they oppress the individual. As it is explained often, the community (commune) does not suppress, annihilate, or make uniform the individual. On the contrary, only the community provides freedom by ensuring equal positions in the community and by blocking individual aspirations which jeopardize the interests of others.

Although the argument may seem sound, there are some problems. The first is that, as it has been stated by the classics of marxism, communism, or socialism in the Marxist sense is not an organic development in history. As one of my communist colleagues put it: communism does not happen; it has to be made. And this is the most challenging and finest task for persons as teleological beings, who can, as we know from Aristotle and his followers, make means and ends meet (rationally). The history of mankind is seen as a struggle towards this highest state of being. Communism is, thus, made to be the aim of humanity and, hence, regarded by marxists as normative and desirable. It is only communism when and where persons develop full potential and fight off historic alienation. One may or may not like this conclusion, but the argument is flawless on its own grounds. Problems arise only when we have a closer look at society, its structure, and functioning. On one hand, we have a created social order and on the other a society built *from* or *of* communities. In theory, society's elementary units are communities but in practice the social order of the communist-socialist state has to be created first in order to formulate those communes. What happened in all marxist-socialist countries is that state was made equal to society and its functions were reduced to elements of societal life. Community thus became everything that was legitimate in the state.

This slip in logic had serious consequences. If the state is the state of the workers of a society, and if the communities are elementary units of society (and thus the state), then anybody whose interests run counter to those of the smaller commune are working against the interests of the society and the state. Although communist philosophers may use a sophisticated maze of dialectics to resolve this

paradox of community as both the source and result of the same process, the solution not very satisfactory.

Communist ideologies have been reluctant to identify the dilemma about community until quite recently. East European marxism is in many respects as contextually unbound as rational philosophy on the West. The difference is that while rationalists do not seem to face the problem of time and distance, East European orthodox marxists tend to think only in world-wide time and space dimensions and ignore here-and-now conditions. This is just one more reason for the relative insensitiveness very often experienced in everyday decisions in Eastern Europe.

In Eastern European education, the problems with the marxist concept of community show even more. What we have in Hungary is a Stalinist approach to education as well demonstrated in the list provided below. The points answer the question of what are the traits of a socialist community.<sup>9</sup>

1. It has common aims based on common interests represented by the state with which individual aims and interests are in harmony.

2. For the achievement of the aims, there is a commonly centrally organized activity. The main criterion for evaluating the individual is his contribution to the fulfilment of the common aims.

3. The community is part of the socialist society. Its aims are in harmony with those of the whole society.

4. The community is responsible for its members in front of the country (!) and in front of the other communities.

5. Its members share the same ideological principles (this, regarding 3 and 4 means that everybody should share the same principles and those who do not are not qualified to be members of society).

6. In order to function, it needs a formal organization (i.e., spontaneous groups are not communities!)

In school, the community is the community of students and teachers. Their interests are the same: to prepare students for life. The sense of community is developed through the common activity teaching and learning and through extracurricular programs. The Ministry of Education helps them overcome difficulties of fitting into higher societal aims by providing compulsory programs and also, together with local authorities, shepherd them to be responsible towards others. The school is organized functionally where modelling the same structure class-communities live up to the expectations listed above.

What is stunning is that East European marxist educational theories do not violate the rules of logic or the requirements of

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rationality any more than thinkers in the West. If rationality is knowledge organized along the rules of logic on the basis of moral commitment, then communist educational theories are rational and no more indoctrinatory than other systems of thoughts. It is not the presence or the lack of rationality that makes the difference, nor the political load provided in either approach.

In summary, I would like to point at the chief characteristics of analytical and East European marxist thinking on education. We have seen that the two philosophical schools work on entirely separate lanes and use divergent conceptual frameworks when talking about the very same things. Conceptual philosophers do not see the different concepts because they talk only to each other and are confident there are no fundamental problems. Similarly, Eastern philosophers quote each other exclusively. Their awareness of a conceptual Babel only reassures them that they are going in the right direction (for example, they are ever more alert to signs of infiltration from bourgeois ideology). This situation is satisfactory if we choose to maintain gulfs, but not if we wish to build bridges.

The common misconception between Western and Eastern philosophy is that each views its own approach as rational and politically unbiased and holds the opposite about the other. It has been argued that Western analytical thinkers are politically committed whether they like it or not. Actually, no philosopher can avoid being political (as we all know, many uncommitted philosophers have ended up in royal dungeons or imperial gallows). The communist theory of education, on the other hand, simply complies with the requirements for rationality.

Another important common factor is that neither approach much about reality. In conceptual analysis, the historical frame is completely missing, thus it lives in philosophical evergreens; in marxism, the concrete societal surroundings never seem to bother the high-flying ideas of educators. Such a persistent and stubborn alienation from reality cannot be a quality of any valuable philosophy of education.

Both sides share the more or less overt conviction that theirs is the only proper way of thinking. Basic human values are constant and the solutions these philosophies offer are highly normative. This normativeness is legitimized by referring to authorities in their own paradigm and to ontological statements about human nature. Basic, irrefutable, normative axioms are taken for granted. Questions about the justification of these *a priori* laws of thinking are proudly refused both in the East and West as unnecessary.

So, if we ask again whether there is possible to build a bridge between these two empires of educational philosophy, the answer would be a definite *no*. No communication is possible because both sides are absolutist and declarative. But another question arises: do

we need communication between these two ideologies? Maybe not. What we need is communication between those who are willing to communicate and prepared to find the tools. For discussion, participants have enough flexibility to seek at least one idea which they share. In order to find the path to this new theoretical paradigm within which we can have intelligible discussion, I suggest that we take a negative approach. Let us not search for the common points in traditional theories, but let us seek something they both reject. If these two schools of fire-and-ice philosophies hate something un-animously; then it may have something positive for us. There is one danger both conservative Western philosophers and communist educators warn their less experienced followers with a chill: Do not sink into relativism! I say, "Maybe we should."

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters, *The Logic of Education* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970) 57.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>3</sup>W. Hare, *The Defence of Open-Mindedness* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985), 62.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>5</sup>A. Flew, *Sociology, Equality, and Education* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), 40-41.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup>See, for example, *Pedagogia*, Volume 2 (Budapest: Tankönyvkiado, 1985) by K. Szanto (Ed.), a textbook that is compulsory in all teacher training colleges.

<sup>8</sup>S. Nagy (Ed.), *Pedagogiai Lexikon*, Volume 2 (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiado, 1977), 463.

<sup>9</sup>See the works by K. Szanto and S. Nagy already cited and J. Barsony (Ed.), *Az iskolai kozossegi nevelés* (Budapest: Tankönyvkiado, 1964).