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Toward a Pedagogy of Educated Hope under Casino Capitalism

Artículo de reflexión

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Hacia una pedagogía de la esperanza
educada bajo el capitalismo de casino

Para uma pedagogia da esperança educada
sob o capitalismo de casino

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Abstract

The purpose of this reflection paper is to analyze education and critical thinking as fundamental strategies for the consolidation of radical democracy. Social and political change, together with educated hope, are proposed as the main pillars to allow the construction of a non-authoritarian future. It is argued that critical pedagogy is the possibility for education to be recognized as a civic commitment that favors civic literacy, as well as the capacity for agency, action and change that allows for inclusion and social responsibility. Finally, it is affirmed that democracy becomes deficient when pedagogy is not the center of politics and that informed hope is the possibility of facing the obstacles and concrete realities of domination.

Keywords

pedagogy; educated hope; democracy; ethics; moral; politics

Resumen

La educación y el pensamiento crítico como estrategias fundamentales para consolidación de la democracia radical son el objeto de análisis del este artículo de reflexión. El cambio social y político junto a la esperanza educada se proponen como los ejes que permitirían construir un futuro no autoritario. Se argumenta que la pedagogía crítica es la posibilidad para que la educación se reconozca como un compromiso cívico que favorece la alfabetización cívica, así como la capacidad de agencia, acción y cambio que permite la inclusión y responsabilidad social. Finalmente, se afirma que la democracia se empobrece cuando la pedagogía no es el centro de la política y que la esperanza informada es la posibilidad de enfrentar los obstáculos y las realidades concretas de dominación.

Palabras clave

pedagogía; esperanza educada; democracia; ética; moral; política

Resumo

A educação e o pensamento crítico como estratégias fundamentais na consolidação da democracia radical são o objeto de análises desse artigo de reflexão. O cambio social e político junto à esperança educada se propõem como eixos que permitiriam construir um futuro não autoritário. Argumenta-se que a pedagogia crítica é a possibilidade para que a educação se reconheça como um compromisso cívico que favorece a alfabetização cívica, assim como a capacidade de agência, ação e mudança que permite a inclusão e responsabilidade social. Finalmente, afirma-se que a democracia empobrece-se quando a pedagogia não é o centro da política e que a esperança informada é a possibilidade de enfrentar os obstáculos e as realidades concretas de dominação.

Palavras-chave

pedagogia; esperança educada; democracia; ética; moral; política

Education is the oxygen for democracy because, without an informed citizenry, the formative cultures necessary for a radical democracy wither along with the institutions that make it possible. In North and Latin America, the forces of neoliberal authoritarianism are on the march. From Brazil to the United States, despots have seized political power and are transforming education into a feeder for the military, the workplace, and, in many cases, for the carceral state. In the United States, Donald Trump has assumed the presidency and has ushered in a culture of fear, humiliation, bigotry, and white supremacy coupled with a deep disdain for education and critical thinking. Ignorance is now valorized as critical education is viewed with disdain. This is all the more reason to once again connect learning to social and political change and to embrace a notion of educated hope in which it becomes possible to imagine the unimaginable, a future unwilling to mimic the authoritarian present.

Increasingly, neoliberal regimes across Europe and North America have waged a major assault on critical pedagogy and the public spheres in which it takes place. Public and higher education are being defunded, turned into accountability factories, and now largely serve as adjuncts of an instrumental logic that mimics the values of the market. But this is not only true for spaces in which formal schooling takes place; it is also true for those public spheres and cultural apparatuses actively engaged in producing knowledge, values, subjectivities, and identities. This applies to a range of creative spaces, including art galleries, museums, movie houses, and various elements of mainstream media (Giroux, 2011). What the apostles of neoliberalism have learned is that this art and science of education can be dangerous and can not only create critically engaged students, intellectuals, and artists, but can expand the capacity of the imagination to think otherwise in order to act otherwise, hold power accountable, and imagine the unimaginable.

Reclaiming pedagogy as a form of educated hope begins with the crucial recognition that education is not just about job training and product manufacturing, but also about matters of civic engagement, critical thinking, civic literacy, and the capacity for democratic agency, action, and change. It is also connected to the issues of power, inclusion, and social responsibility.¹ If young people, artists, and cultural workers are to develop a deep respect for others and a keen sense of social responsibility and civic engagement, pedagogy must be viewed as a cultural,

political, and moral force. That collective force provides the knowledge, values, and social relations that make such democratic practices possible in order to connect human agency to the idea of social responsibility and the politics of possibility. In this instance, pedagogy needs to be rigorous, self-reflective and committed to the practice of freedom, to advancing the parameters of knowledge, addressing crucial social issues, and connecting private troubles and public issues. At stake here are pedagogical practices that create militant dreamers, people who are willing to struggle for a more just and democratic world. In this instance, pedagogy becomes central to politics and critical to the practice of art—a performance addressed to changing the way people think—one that awakens passion and energizes forms of identification that speak to the conditions in which people find themselves.

Critical pedagogy must be meaningful in order to be critical and transformative. It should be cosmopolitan, imaginative and demand a thoughtful engaged interaction with the world we live in, mediated by a responsibility for challenging structures of domination and for alleviating human suffering. This is a pedagogy that addresses the needs of multiple publics. As an ethical and political practice, a public pedagogy of wakefulness rejects modes of education that are removed from political, social, historical, and unjust concerns. This is a pedagogy that includes “lifting complex ideas into the public space” (Said, 2000, p. 7), recognizes human injury inside and outside of the academy, and uses theory as a form of criticism to change things. This is a pedagogy in which educators and cultural workers are neither afraid of controversy nor the connections between private issues and the broader elements of society’s problems that are otherwise hidden.

Critical pedagogy arises from the conviction that artists, educators and other cultural workers have a responsibility to unsettle power, trouble consensus, and challenge common sense. This is a view of pedagogy that should disturb, inspire, and energize a vast array of individuals and publics. Critical pedagogy comes with the responsibility to view intellectual work as public, raise political awareness, make connections to those elements of power and politics often hidden from public view, and remind “the audience of the moral questions that may be hidden in the clamor and din of the public debate” (Said, 2001, p. 504).

Pedagogy is not a method but a moral and political practice, one that recognizes the relationship between knowledge and power. At the same time, it realizes that inside what is central to all pedagogical

1 On this issue, Giroux, S. (2012) and Giroux, H. (2014).

practices lies a struggle over agency, power, politics, and the formative cultures that make a radical democracy possible. This view of pedagogy does not mold, but inspires, directs energizes, and is capable of imagining a better world and the need to reimagine a democracy that is never finished. Critical pedagogy is a form of educated hope committed to producing young people capable and willing to expand and deepen their sense of themselves, to think of the “world” critically, to imagine something beyond their their own self interest and well-being,” to serve the public good, take risks, and struggle for a substantive democracy.²

Pedagogy is always the outcome of struggles, especially in terms of how pedagogical practices produce particular notions of citizenship and an inclusive democracy. Pedagogy looms large in this instance, not as a technique or a priori set of methods, but as a political and moral practice. As a political practice, pedagogy illuminates the relationship between power, knowledge, and ideology, while self-consciously, if not self-critically, recognizing the role it plays as a deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities are produced within particular sets of social relations. As a moral practice, pedagogy recognizes that what cultural workers, artists, activists, media workers and others teach cannot be abstracted from what it means to invest in public life, presuppose some notion of the future, or locate oneself in a public discourse.

The moral implications of pedagogy suggest that our responsibility as cultural workers cannot be separated from the consequences of our knowledge, our social relations, and the ideologies and identities we offer up to students. Refusing to separate politics from pedagogy means that teaching should not simply honor the experiences people bring to such sites, but should also connect experiences to problems that come from everyday life. Pedagogy, in this sense, is not just about deconstructing texts, but about politics in a broader sense. Such a project recognizes the political nature of pedagogy and calls for artists, intellectuals, and others to assume responsibility for their actions. As Susan Sontag (2003) once suggested, this summons these people to link their teaching to those moral principles that allow them to do something about human suffering. Part of this task necessitates that cultural workers anchor their own work, however diverse, in a radical project that seriously engages the promise of an unrealized democracy against its radically incomplete forms. Of crucial importance to such a project is rejecting the

assumption that theory can understand social problems without contesting their appearance in public life. Yet, any viable cultural politics needs a socially committed notion of injustice if we are to take seriously what it means to fight for the idea of the good society. Zygmunt Bauman (2002) argues that “if there is no room for the idea of *wrong* society, there is hardly much chance for the idea of good society to be born, let alone make waves” (p. 170).

A society must constantly nurture the possibilities for self-critique, collective agency, and forms of citizenship in which people play a fundamental role in critically discussing, administering and shaping the material relations of power and ideological forces that impact their everyday lives. At stake here is the task, as Jacques Derrida (2000) insists, of viewing the project of democracy as a promise, a possibility rooted in an ongoing struggle for economic, cultural, and social justice. Democracy in this instance is not a sutured or formalistic regime. It is the site of struggle itself. The struggle over creating an inclusive and just democracy can take many forms. That struggle offers no political guarantees but provides an important dimension to politics as an ongoing process of democratization that never ends. Such a project is based on the realization that a democracy open to exchange, question, and self-criticism never reaches the limits of justice.

Theorists like Raymond Williams and Cornelius Castoriadis recognized that the crisis of democracy was not only about the crisis of culture, but also the crisis of pedagogy and education. Cultural workers would do well to take account of the profound transformations taking place in the public sphere and reclaim pedagogy as a central category of politics itself. Pierre Bourdieu (1998) was right when he stated that cultural workers have too often “underestimated the symbolic and pedagogical dimensions of struggle and have not always forged appropriate weapons to fight on this front” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 11). He goes on to say in a later conversation with Gunter Grass that

left intellectuals must recognize that the most important forms of domination are not only economic but also intellectual and pedagogical, and lie on the side of belief and persuasion. It is important to recognize that intellectuals bear an enormous responsibility for challenging this form of domination. (Bourdieu, 2002, p. 2).

These are important pedagogical interventions and imply rightly that critical pedagogy in the broadest sense is not just about understanding, but also about assuming the responsibilities we have as citi-

2 See, especially, Newfield (2008).

zens to expose human misery and to eliminate the conditions that produce it. Matters of responsibility, social action, and political intervention do not simply develop out of social critique but also self-critique. The relationship between knowledge and power, on the one hand, and creativity and politics, on the other, should always be self-reflexive about its effects and how it relates to the larger world. In short, this project points to the need for cultural workers to address critical pedagogy not only as a mode of educated hope and a crucial element of an insurrectional educational project, but also as a practice that addresses the possibility of interpretation as intervention in the world.

I want to end by insisting that democracy begins to fail and civic life becomes impoverished when pedagogy is no longer central to politics. The failure to recognize the educative nature of how agency is constructed, moral witnessing legitimated, and the politics of social responsibility renewed, empties democracy of any meaning. Democracy should be a way of thinking about education, one that thrives on connecting equity to excellence, learning to ethics, and agency to the imperatives of the public good (Giroux, 2015). The question regarding what role education and pedagogy should play in democracy becomes all the more urgent at a time when the dark forces of authoritarianism are on the march all over the globe. As public values, trust, solidarities, and modes of education are under siege, the discourses of hate, racism, rabid self-interest, and greed are exercising a poisonous influence in many Western societies, now most evident in the discourse of the right-wing extremists vying for the American presidency. Democracy is on life support, but rather than being a rationale for cynicism, it should create moral and political outrage, a new understanding of politics, and the pedagogical projects needed to allow democracy to breathe once again.

As Ernst Bloch (as cited in Benjamin, 1997) once insisted, “reason, justice, and change cannot blossom without hope” because educated hope taps into our deepest experiences and longing for a life of dignity with others, a life in which it becomes possible to imagine a future that does not mimic the present. I am not referring to a romanticized and empty notion

of hope, but to a notion of informed hope that faces the concrete obstacles and realities of domination yet continues the ongoing pedagogical and political task of “holding the present open and thus unfinished” (Benjamin, 1997, p. 10).

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