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Critical Pedagogy Today – a Word of Introduction

On 28–29 May 2012, the Institute of Pedagogy of the University of Gdansk held a conference which bore fruit in the form of volume IX of the Academic Journal *Ars Educandi*. The issue around which our efforts were organised concerned the status of the theory and practices of critical pedagogy, as well as – as stressed by Lech Witkowski – radical pedagogy. It is as early as at this point that we are faced with the problem of critical pedagogy as an “absent discourse” – a problem, which in the categories of Žižek’s psychoanalysis could be expressed as one of an unbridgeable gap. What I mean is that radical and critical pedagogy is still at the stage of “textualisation”, although it is in an entirely different place than when Zbigniew Kwieciński undertook the effort of introducing to Polish pedagogy the thinking approaches that might provide it with new strategies of interpreting the reality after the formative turn¹. The comment made by L. Witkowski does hit the essence of the problem, which Lucyna Kopciwicz very clearly captured in her text-manifest. Both these texts open volume IX of *Ars Educandi* and fit Z. Kwieciński’s formula of the “textualisation of absence”. Speaking in a more straightforward manner, although critical pedagogy is no longer the “absent discourse” in the space of academic discourse, this is because it still remains in the academic ghetto and continues to be helpless in the face of the blockade preventing it from progressing from criticality to radical pedagogy, or – better still – to radical pedagogics. Putting it in a nutshell, the great effort of researchers identifying themselves with the radical and critical paradigm of pedagogy is from the pragmatic point of view of social involvement entirely free from practical consequences. What is more important, this is not so much due to the shallowness of research and theories, as – paradoxically – due to their theoretical refinement.

The following quotation from Slavoj Žižek seems to fit radical and critical pedagogy: “[...] the answer to the question ‘Who, where, how is the (fantasizing) subject inscribed into the phantasmic narrative?’ is far from obvious; even when the subject himself appears within his narrative, this is not automatically his point of identifi-

¹ See Z. Kwieciński, *Tekstualizacja nieobecności. Wprowadzenie* [The Textualisation of Absence. Introduction], [in:] *Nieobecne dyskursy* [Absent Discourses], Z. Kwieciński (ed.), Wydawnictwo UMK, Toruń 1991, pp. 5–12.

cation – that is, he by no means necessarily ‘identifies with himself’. At a different level, the same goes for the subject’s symbolic identity; the best way to render its paradox palpable is to paraphrase the standard disclaimer from the movie credits: ‘Any resemblance to actual events or persons is purely accidental’; the gap between [...] the void of the subject and the signifying feature which represents him, means that ‘any resemblance of the subject to *himself* is purely accidental’².

In other words, all resemblance of radical and critical pedagogy to itself is purely accidental – radical and critical pedagogy is not what it is not because it does not want to be so, but the other way round. The problem I am writing about culminates in L. Witkowski’s finding that when applied to critical pedagogy, the label of “criticality” can be irrelevant, just like the label of “socialism” can be irrelevant when applied to the so-called socialist pedagogy; it also culminates in L. Kopciewicz’s claim that we are dealing with a “safe interpretation” of what results from postulates of critical pedagogy, which satisfies itself with the creation of knowledge on “our excluded ones”. Simply put, critical pedagogy does not resemble itself due to the fact that it fetishizes critique and due to the related consequences: the overwhelming power of theory.

Nevertheless, critical pedagogy must not resign from critique – S. Aronowitz and H. A. Giroux argue that anti-racism, anti-sexism, and anti-capitalism are principles that are responsible for a broader mobilisation of intellectuals taking the side of radical democratisation³ – and such “taking the side of” or rather “taking one’s own side” is a statement constituting a “countertext”⁴, it is a critique and it takes the voice from the dominating discourse. Here we arrive at the starting point: is critical pedagogy only a “safe” instance of taking a voice or is it only such a “safe” nonchalance of academicians, to which we could apply an anarchistic slogan concerning elections – here in the following version: “if critical pedagogy could change something, it would be banned”.

Critical pedagogy is not yet lost whilst we still live, whilst there are exclusions, social asymmetries, and alienations. Until we are haunted by the “spectre of Marx”. Jacques Derrida writes: “I reread *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*. I confess it to my shame: I had not done so for decades – and that must tell one something. I knew very well that there was a ghost waiting there [...]. Now, of course, I have just discovered, in truth I have just remembered what must have been haunting my memory: the *first* noun of the *Manifesto*, and this time in the singular, is “spectre”: “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism”⁵. The spectre of Marx haunts J. Derrida, and it also haunts Tomasz Szkudlarek, despite – to cite his own words – his “particular allergy to Marxism”⁶. The allergy T. Szkudlarek mentions

² S. Žižek, *The Plaque of Fantasies*, Verso, London New York 1997, p. 40.

³ S. Aronowitz, H.A. Giroux, *Postmodern Education. Politics, Culture & Social Criticism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis–London 1991, p. 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 118–121.

⁵ J. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, Routledge, New York – London 1994, p. 2.

⁶ T. Szkudlarek, *Wiedza i wolność w pedagogice amerykańskiego postmodernizmu* [Knowledge and Freedom in the Pedagogy of American Postmodernism], Impuls, Kraków 2009, p. 226.

is also suffered by the figure of key significance for critical pedagogy: Z. Kwieciński, who believes that critical pedagogy must not be associated with Marxism⁷. With all these problems, L. Kopciwicz reflects that critical pedagogy texts were the most valuable readings of her university times, and I can add that this was also the case when one was a student of philosophy (my example), and not pedagogy. Retroactively, an entirely new sense emerges from the texts of representatives of the Frankfurt School, Antonio Gramsci, Gyorgy Lukacs, Stanisław Brzozowski, and finally Marx himself, whose debtors, willy-nilly, we theoretically are.

The problem under discussion lies in the fact that critique is an indispensable, albeit not a sufficient condition for possible social change, as insightfully noticed by Bogusław Śliwowski in his paper included among the ones opening up this volume; in his reminiscences of the period of the transformation turning point, the author recalls the moment of the publication of *Wyzwania pedagogiki krytycznej i antypedagogiki* [Challenges of Critical Pedagogy and Antipedagogy] – one of the most important books from the point of view of students reading about the radical and critical theory of education. Simply put, since theory may be an impulse for social change, we still lack something, while the radical and critical theory of education tries to contextualize this shortage.

Volume IX of *Ars Educandi* is a collection of texts that express various types of criticality and constitute different varieties of critical actions. Katarzyna Szumlewicz discusses the absence of the history of ideas and the history of education from the point of view of the radical and critical theory of education. The author reconstructs the roots of the idea of emancipation by education – the roots from which we keep detaching ourselves due to the poststructural critique of the mind, forgetting that emancipation is an entirely Renaissance undertaking. In his article, Szymon Dąbrowski tries to reconstruct the critical paradigm in the area of a sub-discipline – the pedagogy of religion; what is more important, religion can also be emancipatory.

The subsequent two papers: one authored by Michał Zawadzki and the other one by Monika Noworolnik-Mastalska, deal with the contact point between education, economics and politics, focusing on the most cynical asymmetries present on the surface of today's social practice – asymmetries resulting from the division of labour. Michał Zawadzki presents the concept of managerial education that will be critically-oriented through the denaturalization and instrumentalisation in labour processes. The other side of the problem of the instrumentalisation of labour subjects is the issue posed by Monika Noworolnik-Mastalska who analyses conditions for the possibility of the democratisation of relations in the workplace. Przemysław Szczygieł's text being a result of his association of the feminist thought with the radical and critical pedagogy can be summed up by a travesty of The Manifesto of the Communist Party: A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of equality.

⁷ Cf. Z. Kwieciński, *Tropy – ślady – próby* [Clues – Traces – Attempts], Edytor, Poznań–Olsztyn 2000, p. 173.

An interesting variety of critical pedagogy is presented by Anna Walczak, who analyses the issue of forms of knowledge, language, and the hidden program in the perspective of Jungian psychoanalysis.

The block of texts which concentrate to a higher degree on the presentation of results of empirical procedures starts with Agnieszka Imbierowicz's paper opening critical and radical pedagogy to the issues of ageism, and, to be more precise, the tabooization of the sexuality of third age persons. The mosaic of the sensitisations of critical and radical pedagogy is supplemented by Jolanta Rzeźnicka-Krupa who focused her analyses on disability, fitting it into the notion network determined by the categories of the body and engaged art.

The subsequent three papers are successful examples of the use of discourse analysis. Justyna Dobrołowicz presents the results of her research concerning the image of school created by opinion-forming weeklies – the picture emerging from media narration might be called one of moral panic. In turn, Karolina Stary's text is a methodological lecture on the theoretical bases of studying textbooks by means of Critical Discourse Analysis, involving the presentation of results and interpretations of studies on social studies textbooks. At the same time, Łukasz Stankiewicz focuses on the analysis of documents generated as a part of the debate on the higher education reform in Poland, meticulously reconstructing a vision of the role of students.

The last block of texts, too modest for the pragmatic ambitions of radical and critical pedagogy, is devoted to practical applications of theory. Agnieszka Janik presents the functioning of the *Bajkobus* project carried out under the auspices of Wrocławski Teatr Lalek [Wrocław Puppet Theatre]. Agata Rzeplińska and Jarosław Jendza's paper is an attempt at building a transition from the concept of critical pedagogy to its practical application, while Beata Karpińska-Musiał presents the variety of critique consisting in the reflective practicability of an academic teacher.

Encouraging you to read on, and summing up my word of introduction, I shall reach for the question formed by P. Freire: "In favour of what do I study? In favour of whom? Against what do I study? Against whom do I study?"⁸. We must not avoid the thus-formed issue in the area of the social sciences, and in particular in pedagogy.

English translation: Anna Moroz-Darska

⁸ P. Freire, *Pedagogia da indignação. Cartas pedagógicas e outros escritos*, Editora UNSEP, São Paulo 2000, p. 37.

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