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Critical Pedagogy Today?

My answer to the question what critical pedagogy is in today's Poland, after twenty years of political transformation, does not fit into statements like: "it doesn't exist", or "its condition is poor". This diagnosis is certainly accurate, but it refers (rather) to "pedagogy today" as a whole and not only critical pedagogy. What I mean when thinking about this "absence of pedagogy", is its marginal position in the university and its weak, mute condition in the public space.

The question about today's critical pedagogy in Poland is connected with another question – what it used to be for me, for other students of pedagogy at the University of Gdańsk. Studying critical pedagogy in the early 1990s was fascinating because of its distinctness from the compromised socialist pedagogy and its clear distancing from the "obligatory" pedagogy, inspired by the catalogue of conservative values. Critical pedagogy was expressive and different. It offered access to a different set of tools (theories, ideas, analysing methodology) and showed new possibilities of research: the relations of power, the political nature of culture, the strength of the position of subjects in the existing social order, the processes of creating and imposing some versions of cultural order at the expense of other versions, or the inequality of power among social groups, established by the school.

Critical pedagogy was decisively exciting and strong to us all – the pedagogy students at that time. We talked about it during classes and at parties. No other subject was worthy of more interest. Personalistic pedagogy seemed suspicious and false, while numerous liberal currents; although acceptable, were not as stirring as critical pedagogy. A few people who belonged to the Catholic Light-Life Movement had a less trustworthy attitude to it (because it was "corrupted by the left"). However, upon leaving the university, we were convinced that among the many inspiring currents, this one was the "most important".

Looking at it from today's perspective, we realise that critical pedagogy in Poland was interpreted very safely. Until today, many problems have not been seriously worked on. What I mean is a variety of topics which radically problematise

a group of issues connected with standardisation, hierarchisation and the policy of the voice of the minority. The environment of pedagogues, also those dealing with critical pedagogy, is rather reserved when it comes to supporting this voice. I do not think that minorities can count on us.

Another crucial matter which we assumed to be certain was that critical pedagogy refers to “cultural others”, weaker social groups, marginalised and destined to be silent in the socialising school training. Nevertheless, Polish critical pedagogy satisfies itself with the creation of knowledge about those “others” (their inequality, the social conditions in which they live) and to a lesser extent – the engaged knowledge created in their interest. The effects of this work include many brilliant empirical studies, which undoubtedly facilitate academic advancement but do not necessarily serve the emancipation of the people whose biographical experience became valuable “empirical material”.

Another important problem connected with the modern critical pedagogy is a “significant omission” of one of the key research threads, i.e. the analysis of the power relationship in pedagogy itself. It is most unfortunate that we do not study what power relationships are and what they are like in academic pedagogics; how we “have power” (how we use it) or how the power “has” us, limiting our research imagination, sometimes forcing us to be silent, and taking away our moral courage.

Studying the power relationship could, in my opinion, bring knowledge about the amount of condescension and various forms (situations) in which condescension appears: where science disciplines the humanities, independent workers take dependent ones down a peg, scholars dealing with school do the same with teachers, academic workers with students, and the hermetic university circle with “practitioners” – and in many other divisions between “us” and “them”.

Studying the power relationship would give us knowledge about various forms of censorship and self-censorship taking place in academic life – fear, guardedness, “biting one’s tongue”, the certainty that “it will change nothing anyway” – in the name of some “greater good” or one’s peace of mind. That censorship *de facto* limits the freedom of scientific research guaranteed by the Constitution (for fear that “such” a topic will never be accepted for ideological reasons), kills moral courage, and induces false suaveness and courtesy in the hierarchical academic relations.

Studying the power relationships, as pointed out by, for example, Pierre Bourdieu, could give us knowledge about the opportunities and restrictions of realising scientific *libido dominandi* in the pedagogical field of knowledge and power. I am thinking here about the everyday situations when seemingly minor but actually poignant narcissistic wounds are inflicted: undervaluation, omission, rejection, overlooking. In other words, the creation of someone’s unimportance – or their lack of significance. Such actions of dispersed, discriminating power have been described in many studies devoted to the barriers impeding professional advancement of individuals originating from weaker or repressed social groups.

Thus, instead of the strategy of a refusal of access, another strategy appears – that of “overlooking”, and instead of bans and exclusions – disdain.

Confrontation with the mechanisms of making one insignificant generates frustration, aggression, or powerlessness (“inadequacy”). While analysing numerous situations of feeling frustration, aggression, jealousy or powerlessness (quick academic advancement of a younger colleague, someone’s higher salary, more numerous publications, a stronger position or clout, a different, especially philosophical, theoretical base) it is possible to learn about the modes of action of today’s authorities. It is also worthwhile to have a close look at the phenomenon of “gaining an advantage”, the strategies of the growing in strength of individuals and groups in the pedagogical field of knowledge and power. What routes and strategies lead to this aim? My intention is not a cynical instruction of how to efficiently move about in the local pedagogical field (identifying the paths of fast advancement, proper subjects of research or gaining power), but the willingness to make oneself familiar with the particular mechanisms in order to control them – wherever possible. Taking a closer look at oneself in the situation of powerlessness or frustration as well as perpetration makes it easier to answer questions about who we are and what we want. This knowledge could also order our relations with subjects situated outside the world of academic pedagogy. What language do we need in order to announce our presence, to regain our voice? What language are we going to use to communicate with teachers, unions, NGOs, the media? Must the effects of our research achieve the heights of theoretical sophistication (and sometimes the limits of communicativeness) so that we are considered good scholars by reviewers when we want to climb the career ladder? Or should we try to achieve such effects of work that they make us conversation partners (partners who have something sensible to say and can talk about it in non-academic situations)?

Today, the academic *libido dominandi* is additionally being severely tested by precarisation in universities (lack of employment security and its continuity), which unquestionably reinforces pedagogues’ focus on advancement and disinterest in what is going on “next door”. It induces new “narcissistic pretensions” (among doctoral students for instance) that the university is “as blind as a bat” and “does not see” that they (doctoral students) are real depositaries of the critical spirit of pedagogy, which they have moved outside the university walls and raised to such great heights as are not even sensed by academicians¹. Disregarding the fact that the university in this very statement has gained the attribute of the observer who should see and appreciate, it is worth noting a number of “ambivalent sensations”, well described in studies about postcolonialism – the contempt toward the conservative, fossilised institution which does not enable one to find a job within its walls (at least with a fixed-term contract) mixed with the dreams of being included – becoming a part of the community existing within its walls (and having a contract of employment, be it a fixed term one).

¹ Facebook posts after the conference *Pedagogika krytyczna dziś* [Critical Pedagogy Today].

Critical pedagogy today is the pedagogy of the time of a crisis. And such a time is doubtlessly favourable to the social movement to the left, towards the ethics of care, restoration of the sense of being a community and of solidarity. Let us hope this time will not be wasted.

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