

Opponent's review on

Tóth Tamás' dissertation:

***Crossing the Threshold in the Margins. From the Critique of Ideology towards
Emancipatory Pedagogical Praxis***

The dissertation covers a huge territory of social and philosophical sciences and attempts to use several branches of sciences to arrive at educational conclusions. It is worth accepting the intellectual challenge this dissertation offers. As an academic piece of writing it shows how a new language used in educational sciences and the analysis of political philosophy can fruitfully add new theoretical and empirical approaches in pedagogical issues. Due to this unique character the dissertation lacks regular chapters of a dissertation: no explicit research aims, research design can be found in the text. This is, however, not a real mistake in this case: the richness of the text, the deep analysis of the relevant literature and the description and analysis of the ethnographical findings produce an exceptional dissertation.

A well-written dissertation imposes questions, invites for discussions and debates within its subject. Precisely this is the case with this work. While reading Tóth Tamás's dissertation the reader sometimes approves of the findings, sometimes argues against the expressed flow of thoughts, sometimes feels to be convinced, sometimes attempts to distance herself from the conclusions the researcher has arrived at.

The structure of the dissertation leads the reader from wide theoretical discussions to further theoretical discussions embedded in ethnographic experiences. Part I. and Part II. as theoretical chapters analyse Marxist and post-Marxist theories with an emphasis on political-philosophical approaches. Although Part I. and Part II. seem to be an independent dissertation based on the unfolding of the postmodern approaches that are relevant to understand the possibilities of transformative education, the author attempts to clarify the functions of these chapters within the context of educational issues. Part III. contains the researcher's ethnographic findings that enrich and mostly illustrate his explicitly focused theoretical conclusions.

The theoretical point of departure of the dissertation lies in the author's firm commitment to critical theories and Marxist orientation. It is the researcher's autonomy to choose a philosophy as a strong theoretical background to his findings. The researcher's wide reading in the field of post-Marxist theories, postmodern political philosophies is unquestionable. Not only relies he

on the important writings of Laclau, Mouffe, Wacquant, Foucault, Zizek etc but he is able to reflect upon them, analyse their works, give fundamental argumentations. The researcher steps out from the mainstream (neoliberal and neoconservative) discourse of educational problems and his standpoint is clear within the neo-Marxist discourse. Yet these theoretical chapters are too detailed: less would have been more if the intention of the researcher was to use this discourse to support his ideas about the role of education.

The ethnographic research taken in Poland, Roumania and Hungary reflect a huge field-work in Roma communities, at educational and social authorities and ghetto schools. We get only superficial information about how the ethnography was carried out, yet the composition of these chapters offer an exiting journey throughout the dilemmas, difficulties and meaningful findings of the researcher's ethnographic practice. He is well aware of the importance to always clarify his role in the field. Despite of the efforts taken the ethnography remained illustrative: he looked for empirical data to reinforce his strong and well-founded theoretical assumptions.

As this is a dissertation submitted in educational doctoral programs let us see how it unfolds educational problems.

Although the dissertation concentrates on education in regions and spaces of urban poverty, it arises some fundamental questions. What is the role of schooling and education and teachers in modern and postmodern societies? Is it justified to challenge the theory and practice of (neoliberal) education based on notions of progress, upward mobility, hopes, tolerance etc. („*contemporary educational gospel*“)? What is left for teachers and educators in general while dealing with children? If helping Roma children in ghetto schools is simply maintaining the non-desirable class structure of society (cf. pp. 368-369), if „*in the daily confrontation with urban poverty even the most 'innovative' educational strategies and best practices can easily transform into farce*“ (p. 340) what is the solution? I understand that the researcher's deconstruction of educational notions makes these questions highly irrelevant, and within his chosen ideology he rather focuses on putting other questions as a point of departure to giving solutions, that is, solutions start with putting essential questions about the relationship of the educational and the social. He draws attention to the „*messianic imaginary of education* „ (p. 149.) and labels efforts within this educational landscape fruitless, at least in the context of schooling in the poverty-stricken regions. At the end of his discussion, however, he admits: „*Even if sometimes I was extremely critical with the school, it is so important to acknowledge the potentiality of small, particular practices.*“ (p. 369.) I found the Concluding Remarks very

inspiring as it not simply repeated the arguments he had used earlier but added new thoughts to strengthen his way of thinking about the role of education. Analyzing theoretically the role of school in societies the researcher cites arguments about the School in a position of constant defense „*as constantly failing to deliver both 'what is' and 'what is not yet'*” (p.374.), and in a footnote (!) he touches a very important point: the failures of education invite other academic disciplines to enter into the field of educational sciences in order to solve „*the problem of educational impotence.*” (p.374.) This is a very interesting argument about the interdisciplinary nature of education that has been taken for granted!

We know after Foucault that a school is historically part of disciplinary agents in societies. Does the disciplinary nature of school/education only have a punishing function? Again the role of education in societies in historical context arises that can be interpreted in different ways. Interpreting Foucault's argument about the role of discipline we can accept Lois McNay's comment that disciplinary power is fundamental to the growth of capitalism and disciplining the human body provide submissive, productive and trained source of labor force. (Lois McNay: Foucault. A Critical Introduction. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996. p. 93.) Does it refer to the punishing function of schools in general? Or recent postmodern societies should define the disciplinary power of school in another way?

As for the formal requirements of the dissertation it has a very extended list of literature that well reflects the researcher's immense reading, the references are OK, footnotes help clarify some points that could not be detailed in the main text. The synopses in English, Hungarian and Polish give additional help to re-read the dissertation. Ethical Considerations as crucial factors in the case of ethnographic research are convincing. The Table of Contents in my printed copy had some inaccuracy but it did not hinder thorough reading.

Summary of the scientific values of the dissertation:

By writing an English language dissertation the researcher gives a chance to a wider audience to face issues of social, educational problems that are characteristic of recent Central-European societies, and expounds these problems in a unique way. Educational issues are embedded in a complex political-social context supported by a well-argued political-philosophical position. His argumentation is very clear in his chosen ideological field. Ethnography as a methodology is used to reveal everyday life stories of Roma people in Poland, Roumania and Hungary, and is used in some cases as illustration of the elaborated

theoretical foundations. This encounter of theoretical and empirical issues results in deconstructing notions of education thus calling attention to the need of discourse about the role of schooling and education in our recent societies.

I strongly support the dissertation be submitted to an open debate and be honoured with the PhD degree.

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