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Critical education yesterday and today

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Among such a rich list of panels and topics I don't see what could be my added value, except maybe the fuzzy, lazy, and somewhat Ancient Greek function of asking questions, delineating a problem, subverting the terms of the equation, being everyone's thorn in the side, trying to embarrass whoever takes things for granted, at the risk of being an embarrassment for myself.

Critical education, really? I am not referring (or not only) to the specific subfield of educational theory (or educational utopianism) recognizable under that label in bookstores and reading lists in the US, but more broadly to the likeliness (or *unlikeliness*) that higher education today—for I will stick to the university level due to lack of time and skills and to better suit my audience—sits with the rest of society and knowledge in a relation of resistance, of radical independence, of transgression, of wariness, of suspicion, i.e. a critical relation in the two senses (which will have to be bridged at some point) of social *critique* and textual *criticism*: higher education as critical weaponry, free-minded disobedience, well-read rebelliousness... What sort of words are these? In 2015, seven years into the financial crisis, twenty years into the digital revolution, in a neoliberal university system devoted to making money and placing it on the stock exchange, are these words even utterable? Or am I kidding, if not dreaming? Can and should education be *critical* (and of what) beyond the tenured leftist pause of some well-paid critics and the rhetorical abuses of the word critical on any campus in this country?

Well, I'll take a chance at answering Yes, or Maybe, and still now, more now than ever in fact... At least I would like to take these day-dreaming, limitless questions *seriously*, and confront them with the past and present (hence the "yesterday and today", but it'll be more about today. I apologize to fellow historians) of higher-educational alternatives in the U.S. and beyond.

First, what (sort of) critical education are we talking about? This one is a deceptively familiar term (an uncanny term, or "unheimlich" as Sigmund Freud would have it, strangely familiar, worryingly strange...), and behind it lie quite different things: there are at first three different levels of understanding of critical education, from less to more radical, and a big problem with each of them:

1) Education as freethinking, the acquisition of intellectual autonomy, and the practice of rational suspicion of what is: this is the role given to education and even thinking in general by the great European masters of humanism, from Descartes to Erasmus, Kant to Condorcet, David Hume to Wilhelm von Humboldt, founder of the world's first "modern" research university in Berlin in 1810—all of them under the most famous motto of the Enlightenment: *sapere aude!* Dare to Know! (and think by yourself).

The problem here is simply that the Enlightenment ideal is no longer sustainable, if it was not simply proved wrong for good in the twentieth century: whether or not you agree with Adorno that Rationality led above all to Auschwitz and Hiroshima, with Foucault that institutions fashion knowledge along their lines, or with Edward Said, Judith Butler, and all thinkers of the minority condition that the Enlightenment ideal of a rational order resembles more the imperialistic Western

ideal of the elite white man's worldview, in all these cases we have to admit that the very notion of Enlightenment is no longer a clear synonym for *critical* thinking.

2) Education as safe haven and world apart, as a separate universe, a site of exception and derogation, from which, thanks to the virtues of distance and exteriority, one could see the world operate, refuse its excesses, criticize its predicaments, and watch with irony its various evolutions unfold. Here critical education echoes the ambitions of critical *theory*, which so often sees itself as the (only) independent land of the mind.

What is sure, whether or not you believe in such a possible separate location, is that there is no longer such a thing as exteriority, which might even be the definition of our postmodern condition. More empirically, colleges and universities are too mainstream by now or too crucial to our dominant neoliberal regime, which they serve and advance and provide with the best workers, to ever become a temporary autonomous zone (as in Hakim Bey's concept of the "T.A.Z."). Notwithstanding the fact that there are serious social gaps behind this critical ideal of the *enclave*, an enclave is always for a selected elite. Exteriority (or its simulation) is mostly for the happy few, and while you put the best of the best in the leafy and quiet knowledge "theme parks" that most Ivy League campuses have become, you scatter the rest of them in classrooms not so well attended and more contiguous with the rest of society.

3) Then there remains, third but not least, education as sabotage of knowledge and active resistance, education at war with the rest. Indeed the only solution to a socioeconomic system so obviously eager to re-appropriate for its own benefit autonomous forms of knowledge initially designed against it would be to make them unavailable, to trap and sabotage them, to destroy knowledge from within so it can not ever help the bad guys...

But wait a minute, who would go for that? And beyond the neo-Luddite tone, or proto-leftist-terrorist undertones, of such a radical idea, does it make any sense; is it viable at all?

Maybe we need to see things from a slightly different angle then. Let's confront the ideal of a critical education, and its large part of wishful thinking, with the two paradoxes plaguing education in general, or at least specific to it. From these two strong paradoxes one could easily infer the idea that a critical education is impossible, another oxymoron we should simply get rid of. Or isn't it, on the contrary, that these paradoxes demand we go beyond the current situation and reinvent higher education? That today's situation requires we return to such contradictions and deal with them for good? These two paradoxes I would simply call the paradox of time and the paradox of equality, the former famously formulated by Hannah Arendt and the latter best theorized by Jacques Rancière.

First the time paradox of Arendt: students and teachers, she noted back in the late 1950s, are always from a different space-time, a different epoch, and at the end it amounts to a handful of representatives of the old world claiming to be able to teach younger ones how to behave and survive in the new world. This doesn't sound like a good idea, or does it? Students should rather teach all of us, in that respect... In a nutshell, it's the crazy cycle making transmitted knowledge instantly obsolete by virtue of its very transmission.

Such a paradox is still valid of course, but in a time when change and unchange have been brutally redefined (by political inertia, counterrevolutions, and constant technological upheaval), it might be relevant to displace these terms, to see what's operational in the old thinking, what's wrongly innovative in the new one, or if the old and the new haven't been swapped (indeed some teachers are epistemologically "younger" than their students aged 20 years less). In any case it would be a good thing to cooperate among generations in pinpointing what's really new about our supposedly "new" era, in deconstructing fake innovations, in tracing direct lines from a remote past until today at many levels.

But more tricky maybe is the paradox derived from Jacques Rancière's fascinating inquiry into the alternative experiment of Joseph Jacotot and his counter-school in the 1820s and 1830s (*The*

Ignorant Master, initially published in French in 1987). The central notion of Progress, Rancière recalls, so central to the overall sociopolitical regime we've been living with for better or worse for almost two centuries now, presupposes *inequality*, both as a departing point (to later make things more even in a fair society) and as an intrinsic goal. If the principle of equal opportunity is another name for a Darwinian selective process to sort out the best from the worst, you give each one his/her chance, but since you believe they are initially NOT equal you always reproduce and even petrify such inequality.

Equalizing inequalities is a terrible thing, says Rancière in a strange formula (if that's what our *unequal* societies actually do...), when what we should do, he adds, is rather unequalizing equalities.

The notion of progress (individual *and* collective), cornerstone of our educational system, is indeed highly ambivalent. It presupposes a structural belatedness and the need to catch up on it (belatedness of the young, the untaught, the people), all reinforcing a political model whereby a brainless multitude will always end up run by a smart, well-taught elite. This very idea is the central ideological foundation of our educational institutions, and it explains the larger phenomenon so widespread in the Western world of a "pedagogization" of all of society (education online, offline, on site, edutainment via the entertainment industry, or even the repressive institutions, education at all ages from newborn to continuous education...). Such pedagogization amounts to the infantilization of all citizens, who all need to be taught *endlessly*.

If the doctrine of Progress, as the source of our educational system, requires unequal abilities and results and requires the hegemony of the improved over the improvable, then Rancière is right. "Advancing and institutionalizing Progress is giving up on the intellectual adventure of equality," and "*public instruction becomes the work of mourning of (the project of) emancipation.*" In other words education as we know it is not only *a*-critical but even alienating, and the only alternative to such a state of things would be, suggests Rancière after Jacotot, to let ignorant masters teach, or to ask ignorant students to teach, or to have them use their intellectual abilities to question and transmit something they didn't know. But I'm afraid this slogan ("the less you know the better you'll teach") will not sell very well over here on real campuses.

Maybe we need to figure out also *how critical* knowledge should be to still be relevant or to what extent education should put the social order in question in order to be valid. Is our ultimate goal to criticize (and assault and refuse) the system in place, or rather to optimize education within an unchanged environment by inserting in it a strong critical element? These two goals are quite different! It's a bit like what the vanguards of modernism said about art, from surrealists to *poètes maudits*: should art just serve to improve society, or decorate it, or if the only goal is in fact to oppose the said society shouldn't art disappear and sacrifice itself to let a better world unfold? Are we building a work or a world said modernist artists? And for education, are we building just a better school or indeed a better world?! By submitting it to a critical gaze we often improve the very system we thought we were criticizing (a system, we've learnt by now, which feeds itself on the rage and ideas of its opponents).

In other words, if education is the insect and our dominant social order the elephant, is the insect's bite on the back of the elephant a strong poison, a threat on its life, or nothing more than a small stimulus, welcome and productive, which will just help set the heavy beast in motion?

The question here is the question of what we are talking about exactly: is it a pragmatics of critical education or a radical critique of education itself? There's not much difference between critical thinking "tactics" (instrumentalized to improve methods and results, as they can be everywhere, from medical training to MBAs) and a form of critical thought ambitious and radical enough to contradict the very principle of the transmission of a certain social order.

At this point what I suggest we do is quite simply to establish a picture of where we stand make an assessment of what's still available (if anything) in order to make a critical approach to education viable and (even) desirable.

The question then, abysmal indeed, is the following: on the ruins of our critical utopias, after a long backlash against the great cycle of the 1960s and 1970s (youth protest and political unrest worldwide), in an academic system devoted entirely to developing skills and finding jobs, what is still critical about our higher education ("our" meaning here "first-world" universities, which are quite similar in that respect on both sides of the Atlantic)?

Indeed, before lamenting what should be, and can't be, let's start by recalling what is, i.e. the still divergent or "critical" aspects of higher education in itself, even the fundamental ones. In other words, let's go back to basics (and sorry if it sounds so obvious):

- higher education is still a time spent (and to a lesser extent, a space occupied) *away* from mainstream society;
- it still hosts a more or less ambitious questioning of methods and principles and, thus, does not always (nor only) endorse the dominant logic of result;
- it remains for most students a trusted institution (or at least respected, or just expected to perform), partly safe from the demise of all sociopolitical and collective institutions of yesteryear; if nothing is trusted anymore by the youth (elections, parties, science, and finance, old but also new media...), the university seems here to endure a *lesser* suspicion;
- and indeed university education offers a more direct connection with the past and future than through existing media and social networks, which are mostly instances of *presentism*, stuck in a timeless and inert, constantly updated, *instant*, which by now the youth has learned to suspect. They know that there's more to learn about today in a history class than in an online news update.

So these obvious things haven't changed, sorry for reminding you of the obvious. What *has* changed over the last few years (and decades), changed dramatically even, are elements of context, which have affected the content of higher education:

- we have had more than 50 years of a strong demographic pressure, since the 1950s' baby-boom and the G.I. Bill of Rights, which has triggered forced adjustments: a less demanding pedagogy, a more efficient curriculum (no longer just for a lazy upper class), more costly and larger institutions, a more competitive and risk-oriented environment;
- more importantly, there is the capitalist takeover on higher education, which started in the Gilded Age, with philanthropists mounting the first corporate universities, all the way to the late-twentieth century endemic crisis which has favored a specializing and professionalizing approach and the final triumph of the *vocational* college, if one is to find a job at the end. From the first MBAs created before World War I to the post-World War II waves of specializations of knowledge, via changes in the economic model (private universities living off their alumni's donations and public ones refinanced through financial speculation), one could say that the motto coined 100 years ago in this country for the first MBAs, "learn to earn," has now become an official doctrine throughout most of its vast university system;
- so much so that by now higher education has been terminally individualized, turned into a personal career strategy, and its corpus and curricula turned into menus in which the user/customer student just has to help him or herself, without any consideration given to education as a possible whole and to the collective as something other than... a college football team. For that latter reason at least (i.e. the individualization of education), today's rapidly rising MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are a real threat to our educational systems, to not even speak of other reasons: the technophilic illusion behind it, the employment disaster it implies (if 100 courses can be replaced by just one online, taught by the same teacher), or the profit targets of universities launching them;

- but among these new elements of context one should also note rising discrepancies between knowledge transmission (with its long-term principles and age-old rigidities) and the ever-changing needs of a highly volatile labor market. If the rationale for such a professionalizing and vocational evolution (at the expense of the humanistic, universal, disinterested model of an institution devoted mostly to producing knowledge) is to better serve the job market, or better tie education with professional lives, then today's turmoil turned that into a failure. New jobs and skills appear every year, many of them made obsolete in another year, and many sectors start the year needing to hire and end it forced to fire, so much so that the dream of adjusting education to labor needs has become a real nightmare;

- and among these elements of context there's also the more recent *double* crisis, institutional *and* financial, of the academic institution, which has lost some of its ethical and intellectual autonomy (as a consequence of this vocational evolution) and, in a different sense, has also "lost" billions of dollars on financial markets due to the crash of 2008-2009 (to only make things worse);

- the main conclusion to be drawn from the above is, at this point, a crisis of the very *universality* of universities (or of their unconditionality, in Jacques Derrida's terms). There are now conditions, criteria, utilitarian goals and means, a logic of investment and the need of a *return* on such investment, and, as for the attendance of such institutions, there's so much diversity (we'll go back to this) that indeed one should speak now of multiversities rather than of the good old universities.

At this point the *critical* in our subject is shrinking. It seems more and more useless, or obsolete, or counterproductive, or deprived of any relevant meaning... or is it not? Well, maybe not. To start with, we can always rely on a few lessons from the past, for better or worse.

Potential lessons, first of all. Education has always been critical when it could afford to be heterotopian, or dystopian, when it was daydreaming another place, another world, another dimension in which another education could take place. Whether they were fictitious or real-and-archived, a few isolated experiments have played the role of a critical horizon over the centuries: Rabelais' famous Abbaye de Thélème (fiction) where the only injunction was to just do what one wants ("Fay ce que voudras"...); 1960s alternative or anti-schools such as Summerhill in the U.K. (real); the counter-pedagogy of Joseph Jacotot mentioned above in early nineteenth-century France (real *and* fictitious, with so many volumes written about it); but also more recently Vincennes or Berkeley in the 1970s as places where ordinary education with its hierarchies and obligations was temporarily suspended and replaced by an unprecedented curricular freedom (this has been real, yet highly sublimated by those who remember it, with a highly theatrical nostalgia about it).

And running parallel to this endless dream list of utopias, real or fictitious, comes the dream list of alternative concepts elaborated to think and practice the entire thing anew. We've seen how radical was Jacotot and Rancière's notion of "equality of intelligences" as a performative presupposition or an ethical cornerstone, but then one should never forget either Paulo Freire (after all he's the only one whose life and work have been entirely devoted to fostering critical education) and his many provocative concepts, such as the Marxist notion of "conscientization" as a social awareness or reawakening which education should aim at inspiring, at producing in each subjectivity. Lots of ideas are also to be taken from radical feminist alternatives (alternatives to a gender-reinforcing and heteronormative education...) such as the pioneering "feminist pedagogy" elaborated by Judy Chicago. And inside a specifically American intellectual tradition, pragmatism has groundbreaking notions for an alternative education, such as John Dewey's "experiential education" (in which theory and praxis, counterworld and real world, critical and consenting approaches remain *unseparated*, tightly bound together); etc.

However the problem remains that next to such isolated (enclaved) experiments and ideas, the main lesson of the past is not such good news. What we now know, whether you're a critical sociologist or a realistic politician, is that the role of education, including higher education, is mostly the role of manufacturing consent, favoring enrollment, and (re)producing the social order and hierarchy (as

demonstrated by the likes of Alain Touraine, in his study of American higher education in the 1970s, and Pierre Bourdieu, whose entire work is aimed at documenting this).

What history shows us is mostly the sad role usually played by educational systems to promote, embody, illustrate, permeate, reinforce, or fully justify the dominant social system—which is obvious; we all know that. Compare France's official views on education at the beginning of Third Republic and today (almost 150 years later). In the 1880s there was the colonizing and civilizing self-appointed missions of Imperial bourgeois France (let's remember that Jules Ferry was minister of colonies for close to a decade and of instruction for less than a year, and that both colonialism and *l'éducation nationale* had then in mind the production of *the good citizen*). Today, we see a desperate attempt to justify the hierarchies of our neoliberal socioeconomic order (and the reduced submissive function of democratic politics in it), from serving the labor market to worshipping the all-technological solution and from dividing the human collective into competing individualities to sticking to the instantaneous update of the online media timeframe... Schools here, both yesteryear and today, *follow* the trends. They imitate the trends, and they never create nor deconstruct them.

But enough of history as just a vast conspiracy theory. Maybe we should end on a more positive note by recalling a few (more recent) positive changes, which might be enough to try to gather something like a collective momentum:

- first there's globalization as having also a good side, not only the one of finance and "governance" and new technologies but also the new global academic scene for scholarly debates, common curricula, institutional dialogue (including critical ones). In other words all I'm telling you now is not that new. What is new is that students and activists and scholars and teachers can exchange ideas about it, can work on it or change it *together* worldwide, from Cairo to San Paolo, Tokyo to Colorado, Soweto to Orlando, Milano to San Francisco (to stick to rhymes in o...);

- then, there are 50 years of campus-based identity politics and an increasingly critical approach to issues of identity and subjectivities, which might not have revolutionized higher education overall but at least have helped make students and teachers more aware of, and more demanding with, the intricacies and contradictions of the minority condition in today's world. Higher education, in that light, might have failed at many levels, but it is now, at least on many U.S. campuses, the main site where identity is put in question, which is so crucial in our historical moment;

- we can also see good points in the rise of meta-education, of a secondary literature devoted to debates about the right education (more critical or more just...), enhancing the constructed and transformational nature of our educational systems, while the critical assault on bastions and disciplines has helped deconstruct many rigid categories;

- in that last respect, let me recall the kind of radical *critical* suspicion which can be turned against *each* disciplinary paradigm: it is the case in history (with sub-altern or people's history *vs.* the monolith history of winners); in literature of course (with readers' collective uses and interpretative creativity opposed to masterpieces and sacralized canons); in philosophy, also (to the extent that it can be used to *think* rather than to heal, to *fight* better and not only to feel better); in foreign languages indeed (translinguistic and transcritical approaches *vs.* the worst of Cultural Studies and "la psychologie des peuples"); in social sciences often (critical sociology as opposed to quantitative and functionalist epistemologies serving powers in place, in this country at least since Paul Lazarsfeld in the 1930s); in arts and architecture also (seen as "worlds" cooperating together and fighting for more autonomy in our daily lives, instead of going along the dominant lines of professionalization, individualization, and commodification); in law even as critical legal studies have become a more widespread reflex and not only an exotic useless corner of the field; and why not in business and MBAs if they managed (but could they really?) to make more room to the nonprofit logic and post-capitalistic experiments of the Web 3.0. Also, far from our intrinsically *critical* humanities (born themselves a few centuries ago from a primal critique of deceiving appearances, of trivial functions, of utilitarian hierarchies), a critical touch has even proved desirable in "harder" sciences: in medical sciences against the hegemony of the pharmaceutical industry and its flawed

logic of short-term result; in psychology against the behavioral biases of neuroscience and their way of serving the labor market; in physical, chemical, and biological sciences if they are taught with the environmental crisis in mind and against a proto-Cartesian human-centered bias ("we are not defending nature, we are nature defending itself," as radical eco-activists explain nowadays when they're fighting the police...);

... and always and always, as a major yet hardly visible U-turn, and indeed counting among the good points, there's the effort to be made again and again, in every field, and at best transversally, at *decentering the West*, at debunking the archeo-colonial, *developmental* paradigm and the white-male unconscious *eideon*, at de-Westernizing concepts and methods in short, not for a symbolic repair or strategic relativism but to let "their" adjustments, hybrid solutions, and ethical safeguards help reinvent our educational contents over here. The "South" might play a bigger role than all our well-paid critical minds over here in making the first world's higher education system more "critical" again...

Now if you take all of this and try to recapitulate (the necessity to preserve the epistemological and political autonomy of higher education, the importance to be given to minorities and dominated subjectivities, the necessity to fight from within a deregulated and brutally competitive market-of-everything, the need to live and struggle together against commodified and individualized life forms...), it quickly becomes clear that those most conscious of it all are not so much teachers and scholars, paid to be where they are after all, as students themselves, who for a few years now have been back on the battlefield everywhere on the planet, after more than three decades of an obvious counterrevolutionary cycle, fighting today as they all are against cheap labor on campus, against outrageous tuition rises, against colleges used as leverage for the human resource management of corporations and governments, or against a general spirit of submission to the logic of finance.

And they are fighting everywhere: many sites of the University of California network are mobilized as in the good days of Berkeley's revolts; Mexican students from Oaxaca to Chiapas are the backbone of a national refusal of corruption; the brave students of Quebec and their Maple spring (*printemps érable*) were met with disproportionate police repression; for four years now the great student movement of Chile has been challenging a quasi-privatized university system while offering the *pobladores* of Santiago's hills the spectacle of a besieged and outnumbered police force; in Africa there's the brave role of rebellious students as the vanguards of national resistance, from Egyptian secular revolutionaries to South Africa's defenders of a national reconciliation rooted in equal opportunity; in Asia even, where social movements are often less spontaneous, activism has made a return over the last few years, with student unions in South Korea, student activists against contested governments from Thailand to Burma, students of progressive Indian universities opposing the discrimination of women and lower castes, and the invisible struggles of millions of Chinese students; and in Europe, where Brussels' neoliberal prescriptions and technical reforms have often demobilized students' oppositions, there's a feel of submissiveness again, when the university of Toulouse is occupied for weeks as an act of solidarity for an eco-activist killed at a constructing dam nearby, when the self-managed social centers (*centre sociale...*) of universities from Milano to Napoli help maintain a grassroots popular resistance in Italy, when students in Madrid's Computenza or Athen's Polytechnika work as political relays of promising national left-wing movements such as Podemos or Siryza, and when even students at Oxbridge or Berlin's Humboldt would rather express their dissatisfaction with the current evolution than keep silent and comply with the new rules for the sake of their future "careers"...

They are the critical part in critical education, and we teachers are just the educational one – the old world, as Arendt kept repeating. I shall end on this *withdrawing* note.
Thank you very much.

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