Learning as an ethical-political process

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THE AWARENESS OF THE POLITICAL

My intention in this paper is to discuss a conception of learning—a conception in which learning appears as an ethical-political process. This conception is embedded in a Freirean conception of education, where education is always seen as political. In *Pedagogy of Indignation*, Freire argues that "it is not possible to separate politics from education" and that each pedagogical or didactical act is always political (Freire, 2004, p.115) as it unavoidably conveys — even if only implicitly — a way of life, a way of living with others. In fact, it is only when education is stripped of its political nature, when education is reduced to "dexterity training" (Freire, 2004, p. 111), that the school can appear as "an exclusive technical space of pure teaching and pure learning" (Freire, 2008, p. 34).

However, students in our Teacher Education Program at Laurentian often find it difficult to understand that politics has to do with teaching—and in particular with the teaching and learning of mathematics. Have not we assumed that mathematics lives beyond culture and society, in a peaceful realm of disembodied and eternal truths, in a Platonic paradise?

In order to become aware of the political nature of education, I invite my students to go back to the interesting historical transition that took place in Ontario in 2020, when the liberal party was replaced with the conservative one. We discuss some government documents and see neatly emerge the idea of a new curriculum oriented to meet precisely the needs of the market. In fact, this orientation is not the invention of the conservatives. It was already present in the liberals' curriculum in its clear orientation to produce competitive actors within the frame of entrepreneurism.

One of the most important educational legacies of the dethroned liberals was a concise brochure intended for parents, educators and students called "Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision of Education in Ontario" (OME, 2014). The entrepreneurial accent of the document is, to say the least, frightening. If you count the number of occurrences of terms related to entrepreneurialism (such as entrepreneur, entrepreneurial, etc.) you will find, in the French version, 17 occurrences in a document of 20 pages! You will read that the Ontarian vision of education strives to "Foster more young entrepreneurs in Ontario schools by increasing training in innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship" (OME, 2014, p. 6). In particular, a spirit of creativity must be part of what that school produces since without it, enterprises will not be able to generate more and more consuming desires. The importance of creativity is stressed in an article in *Macworld magazine*, where Cipriani (2015, p. 71) notes: "In an increasingly competitive market, Bluetooth keyboard manufacturers have to seek out ways to differentiate themselves from the competition." To do so, creativity is required and so it has become one of those products to be urgently produced in the school.

When conservatives arrived to power, they complained that the liberals' curriculum was not adequate. The problem was not that liberals were on the wrong track with their insistence of a school tailored to satisfy the needs of entrepreneurs. Their problem was rather that they were not as ambitious as they should have. For instance, liberals introduced Financial Litteracy. In the eyes of the conservatives, that was not bad. What was bad was that the liberals financial litteracy's program was too vague and lacked ambition. The conservative governement stated that

> In the **2005 curriculum**, financial literacy concepts were limited to basic understanding of money and coins. In the **2020 curriculum**, there will be mandatory financial literacy learning in Grades 1 to 8, including understanding the value and use of money over time, how to manage financial well-being and the value of budgeting. (OME, 2020a, p. 2)

With the conservative Curriculum, the rather nominative idea of the liberals' curriculum of promoting the students' community engagement has faded even more away. And when it appears, it is in the vague sense of a community of monads related to each other through associative relations which are not enough to re-imagine a new sustainable society eradicated of social injustice and poverty. The new conservative curriculum rests a curriculum led to the satisfaction of the neoliberal global economy through the production of human capital.

As I mentioned earlier, my students in our teacher education program tend not to see the enormous political orientation of the curriculum. They tend to interpret it as a curriculum of "pure teaching and pure learning," as a politically purified set of principles—and I wonder to what extent the same could be said of principals, administrators and other educational agents.

How can we subvert the neoliberal colonialism afflicting our schools? How within an educational emancipatory project can we re-imagine teaching and learning in general, and the teaching and learning of mathematics in particular? I contend that the awareness of *education as political* is a first step towards subvertion. Of course, this awareness of the political is not enough to produce changes, but changes will not be imaginable without this awareness, which Freire called *conscientização* — concientization.

In a previous paper (Radford, 2012), I suggested that subvertion could start by envisioning *new forms of social relations* in the classroom and the school. I still think that this is only path that is available to us today. My proposal is to conceive of teaching and learning as an ethical-political process, and this conception of teaching and learning is what I would like to sketch briefly in this paper.

THE SOCIAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

Social relations in our curriculum take mostly the form of collaboration and communication. But it is often envisioned, I am afraid, within a weak conception of the social—a conception of the social that is transposed from society to the classroom where the relationships that link self and other are thought of as arbitrary and contingent, enacted by a performant agent from an individualist perspective.Thus, the Ontario Achievement Chart, referring to communication, states that, in communication "The student expresses and organizes ideas and information with considerable effectiveness" (OME, 2020b, p. 54). We see that communication is not seeing as a dialogical polyphonic Bakhtinian act, but the effective subjective expression of an individual.

What is the problem? In contemporary capitalist societies, the understanding of the social and the social relations that make it up is characterized by the enormous subjection of the social to the economic sphere. Balibar notes that "neoliberal governance develops forms of 'real subsumption'

of individuality under capitalist relations, which also have psychological dimensions, or generate 'voluntary servitude.'" Balibar and Negri, 2010 p. 325). Indeed, the market acts as the overarching mechanism of social insertion of the individuals. While the market was previously seen as the means through which society tended to solve its problems, the market, as the French philosopher Frank Fischbach notes, has become "not only a structure for economic efficiency or effectiveness, but also a means and an environment that ensures and enables the social integration of individuals and thus maximizes their chances of recognition." (Fischbach, 2015, p. 228)

Indeed, historically speaking, we are witnessing a reversal of things. In previous Western societal formations—for instance, in the Late Middle Ages or even early modernity—economy was an important vector of society, but it was not the driving vector. Today, everything is organized around the market and economic life.

To better understand the aforementioned reversal of things that paved the way to contemporary entrepreneurial conceptions of the social and social relations that we see happily embraced both by Ontarian liberals and conservatives, we need to go back to the origins of political liberal thought—something that, as we know, happened in the 18th century, in the historical movement that dislocated the feudal orders of the Middle Ages.

Now, my interest to go back to the origins of political liberal thought is not due to a historical curiosity. I have two reasons to do so. First, I concur with Ilyenkov (2008) who claimed that a truly understanding of reality has to be historical. Second, I take history as Freire suggested: not as an archaism, but as "possibility" (Freire, 2004, p. 113)—the possibility to imagine new futures. With this idea of history in mind, let me turn to the origins of liberal thought and its 18th century bourgeois society.

THE BOURGEOIS SOCIETY

The bourgeois society is the society of the modern self, the *subjectum*. The *subjectum* replaces (at least in principle) the *subjectus* or *subditus* (i.e., the individual subjected to something that transcends it: God, a King, a Prince, etc.) and erects itself as an individual or person subjected to the exercise of new form of power "whose model is primarily political and whose concept is legal" (Balibar, 1989, p. 28). The *subjectum* is nothing else than the *citizen*, the new figure of modern subjectivity.

The emergence of bourgeois society arose from the dialectical confluence of various societal processes, such as the growing secularization of society; the growing role played by the capitalist market; the political repositioning of the Church and the old nobility; new conceptions of the world and nature, and new conceptions in the theory of the subject and jurisprudence where the individuals are conceived as bearing equal natural rights.

From the dynamic of these processes appears the political idea of the modern citizen: one that posses *natural rights inherent in its human subjectivity.* And it is this new juridical and ontological view of the individual that is featured in the French 1789 constitution, where the natural and imprescriptible rights are thematized in terms of individual liberty and private property. This juridical and ontological view of the individual has enormous implications for the way in which the community and its politics are understood, not only in modern but also in postmodern times. Indeed, since the 18th century, it is not society or the community that is the organizing axis of life, but the individual: the individual and his property precede the political and all social relations. This is why, in bourgeois society, the role of the state is to make laws to ensure that the individual rights of citizens are respected. Culture and society are usually seen as constraints: as something

that *opposes* the individual. The ideal society, in this view, is one in which the state is reduced to a minimum. Politics is understood as the management of society.

There are two questions of interest to us that can be asked from the assumptions of the bourgeois society. The first question is about the kind of social relations that such a society entails. Balibar provides us with a straightforward answer: the relations are those of the *social contract*. "The contractual bond is in fact the only one that can be thought of as absolutely homogeneous to the reciprocal action of equal individuals, having no other presupposition than this equality" (1989, p. 41). The problem with the social contract as "the mechanism that 'socializes' equals by virtue of their equality alone" (Balibar, 1989, p. 41) is that it cannot produce more than a society that is an assemblage or an aggregate of individuals. This problem was already noticed by a French deputy in 1817: "We cannot conceal from ourselves the fact that our long civil unrest has given birth among us, not to a new nation, but to a collection of individuals." (Villèle, quoted by Rosanvallon, 2004, p. 160). The second question is about the beneficiaries of this new society. It is true that equality, understood as the possibility for everyone to do what they want, was experienced by the 18th century peasantry as a liberation from the world of privileges of the old social order. However, as Rémond notes in his study of the Ancien Régime and the French Révolution, "Civil equality and freedom essentially benefited the bourgeoisie, whether landed, industrial or commercial" (1974, p. 189). And it is against this historical backdrop that, as the role of capitalism became more and more predominant in the following centuries, that the individual became increasingly affirmed as their own foundation and the foundation of society. In terms of Lipovetsky (1989), a process of personalization took place; that is, a process that "has massively promoted and embodied a fundamental value, that of personal fulfillment" (p.7).

THE INDIVIDUAL AS THE CORNERSTONE OF SOCIETY

In the field of politics, the contemporary neoliberalism encapsulates this idea of the individual as the foundation of society. Mulot defines neolibralism as "the school of thought that defines a free society as a capitalist economy whose main political foundation is respect for individual freedom, conceived as an individual's freedom of choice exercised in a competitive market" (Mulot, cited in Pachod, 2015). Neoliberalism strips humans of all their social, historical, and cultural determinations, and thus turns them into languid, emptied selves who carry in their innermost core only one thing—what philosophers call their *ipseity*; that is, their selfhood. Mathematics Education becomes conceived of as led by two antagonistic principles, characteristic of postmodern society. On the one hand, the student is considered as human capital, as I tried to show in the first part of this paper. On the other hand, the student is considered as a self-making individual. The role of the school is to provide the student with the necessary support to reach their full potential. The Ontario Mathematics Curruculum stresses this idea when it asserts that "A robust mathematics curriculum is essential for ensuring that all students reach their full potential" (OME, 2020b, p. 65). In this context, social relations are, as it has always been since the advent of the bourgeois society, ephemeral and contingent relations, formed in interaction. Constructivism has shown better than any other theory this concept of social relations through the notions of sociomathematical and classroom social norms. Consistent with the ideas of neoliberalism and the bourgeois society, both kinds of norms are conceived as classroom self-contained. They are ahistorical, apolitical, and acultural. They are the outcomes of mere negociations of equals engaged in pure teaching and pure learning.

What is common to Constructivism and the Ontario liberal and conservative curriculum of mathematics is that they operate within a weak conception of the social where social relations are

a kind of accidental and contingent phenomenon. As Balibar (2014) says referring to the individuals of modernity and postmodernity, "it is only a posteriori, when they have already constituted themselves as individuals [...] that the individuals can relate to each other in different ways. But these [social] relations are by definition accidental, they do not define their essence" (p. 213). The result, as my students come to realize not without dismay, is a depolitization of subjectivities, a "depoliticized and de-ideologized hypermodern subjectivity, alien to any utopian conception of society and inscribed, fundamentally, in a hedonistic perspective of enjoying life right now" (Cruz Kronfly, 2021, p. 32).

In the following, I present a conception of teaching and learning as an ethical-political process. This conception seeks to address the limitations of the individualist, instrumental, and ahistorical contemporary concepts of learning typical of postmodern educational approaches. This conception has been built up in discussions and reflections with my students and the school teachers with whom I have worked up over the years. It is based on the idea that learning is a collective process, forged in a genuine community. In this perspective, freedom is no longer defined as individual independence, but as form of communitarian solidarity, while the classroom is conceived as the constitutive moment of ethics and the political (*le politique*).

TEACHING AND LEARNING AS AN ETHICAL-POLITICAL PROCESS

Our concept of learning as an ethical-political process is subsumed in a broad conception of education understood as an emancipatory project. Emancipatory from what? From the current neoliberal inspired practices that reduce the students to human capital while making them believe that they are being offered a path to their own fulfilment. We conceive the goal of mathematics education as a political, social, historical, and cultural project aimed at the dialectical creation of reflective and ethical subjects who critically position themselves in historically and culturally constituted mathematical practices, and who reflect on new possibilities of action and thought.

A RE-INVENTION OF COMMUNITY

A challenge in the re-invention of the classroom as a community is to move beyond the current conception of community as an assemblage or aggregate of atoms or monads and its underpinning social relations of a contractual nature—those that manifest themselves in the simple contingent collaboration of constructivist and other contemporary empiricist educational approaches. We envision community as a political-ethical space where learning together, we labour hand in hand towards the production of a common good. In this context, we move beyond subjectivist, behaviourist, and rationalist conceptions of learning. We conceive of learning as an *encounter*— an encounter with cultural knowledge. This encounter is understood not only metaphorically but also poetically; that is to say, an encounter that opens up a window to converse with culture, with its tensions and its contradictions, while imagining new courses of action and creating new forms of critical social consciousness.

What is the building block of a community? The building block of any community is the system of its activities (activity in the sense of *Tätigkeit*, i.e., cultural-historical activity, and opposed to *Aktivität*, as merely doing something). Leont'ev (1978) argued that an activity is characterized by its object/motive; that is, the object towards which the individuals' actions converge. However, looking closer, we came to realize that having a common object in sight is not enough. There are two intertwined organizing components that, in addition to its object/motive define how joint activity unfolds: (a) the forms of human cooperation, and (b) the forms of participation. In the case of the mathematics classroom, the community we foster is oriented towards the practice of a

communitarian ethics in which forms of human cooperation and their concomitant social relations feature responsibility, commitment to collective work, and the care of the other (Radford, 2021). The forms of participation refer to the manner in which mathematical ideas are produced and circulated in the classroom. These forms of participation define the political nature of the collective. The political dimension of learning is, then, the participative dimension of the teachers and students in which ways of thinking, living together, and governing lives manifest themselves, and where problems of power, freedom and equality arise.

Because activity has so many different meanings in the literature, to avoid ambiguity we call *joint labour* an activity whose forms of human cooperation are underpinned by a communitarian ethics and the forms of participation are inclusive, reflective, critical, and endlessly open. Joint labour is hence not to be conceived in an instrumental sense—as mere interaction or collaboration between people to reach a goal (as in *Aktivität*). Joint labour is the name of that process through which the individuals co-create themselves as they produce the social world against the backdrop of culture and history. This is why joint labour is a *form of life*. Thus, if classroom labour is alienating, then teaching and learning will be alienating—as, for example, in pure teaching and pure learning, which by dispossessing the students of political and democratic concerns, alienates teachers and students from the cultural-historical world.

DIFFERENCES AND CONTRADICTIONS

Our teaching-learning activities are configured in such a way that they provide room for different voices and perspectives to be heard and understood, and where difference is valued. In a Grade 6 class with which we started working recently, when the teacher discusses for the first time with her students the meaning of team work, the question of difference of ideas arises. In the beginning, students tend to see difference as a token of the presence of something that is not them—a mere idea that announces a "you" that opposes the "I" ($A \neq B$). You hear the idea. Period. And if you learn something from it, good for you. This is not the kind of ethical responsibility we seek to foster. Thus, through a classroom discussion with the teacher, the students come to realize that the difference between the "you" and the "I" can be seen dynamically, as a powerful means to move forward. As one of the students put it, "if, for example, my partner comes up with an idea and I don't necessarily like it, instead of saying I don't like your idea, I can try to mix his idea with my idea to move the work forward." Here difference is not seen as a *fixed* and *external* relation between different ideas; difference is the starting point of transformative dialectical movement that Hegel (2009) called *contradiction*: the movement through which the new is produced, the "movement that discovers in each of these [ideas] the truth of the other and thus produces them as moments of a unique process in which they appear as inseparable" (Macherey, 2011, p. 121). Difference is hence valued, but not as such, as in the superficial and condescending sense proposed by neoliberalism (Da Silva, 2000). From our Hegelian perspective, grounded in ethical responsibility, difference moves beyond pure exteriority and, in a dialectical movement, opposites come together to create something entirely new. The idea B of "you" is valued not by virtue of being different from the idea A of "I," but because through an ethical responsible relation that involves listening attentively and thoughtfully to others—both intellectually and affectively, as they express their own subjectivity—A *and* B come to form a new dialectical entity. This entity becomes inscribed within the community, offering a new possibility to advance its collective projects.

WE AND I

Our ethical-political conception of teaching-learning activity embodies the idea that there is a strong relation between the various "I" of the classroom and the "We." In fact, there is a *dialectical* relation that means that the "I" recognizes itself in the "We" and reciprocally. The "We" is not an addition of various "I" but a new dialectical entity, like hydrogen and oxygen in the constitution of water. In a classroom of monads, where classroom activity is a mere instrumental process, the various "I" form a "We" but it is a very weak "We": the ephemeral "We" that Fischbach calls "a We of similarity." That is, "a We that expresses a resemblance, but not a community; therefore, nothing properly *social* is expressed in this We" (Fischbach, 2015, p. 208; emphasis in the original). A concrete example, if you need one, is the socioconstructivist one, which leads to the intersubjective model of consensus that constructivists call taking-something-as-shared.

THREE RUPTURES

We can see that the answer to the question of how to move from community as an assemblage or aggregate of atoms or monads (a swarm or herd of individuals) to a real community where learning is a genuine collective process, where learning is the production of something common, something produced in real community (*une œuvre commune*), requires us to break with three long-standing ideas about teaching and learning.

First, we break with the traditional separation between teachers and students that puts the student in a place of inferiority and obedience with respect to the production and circulation of knowledge in the classroom. To use Freire's (2005) term, we dethrone the teacher of their role of messiah of the students. Second, we break with the constructivist separation in which the teacher is seen in pastoral terms: as an intellectual guide who helps students to go as far as they can with their own cogitations. In our conception of teaching and learning, teachers and students *learn together*. This is why we talk of teaching-learning activity as joint labour. As a result, in our classrooms, there are no *n+1* activities carried out simultaneously in the classroom, the *n* activities $a_1, a_2, ..., a_n$ of the monads $e_1, e_2, ..., e_n$ plus the teaching activity a_t of the teacher, *t*. There is only *one* activity: teaching-learning in which students and teachers work side by side (although not necessarily doing the same thing). Third, because of this, we also break with the idea that learning is the property of a student. Here learning is something predicated of the classroom as a collective. In our classrooms, teacher, students, and researchers learn together, amid tensions, objections, etc., but together, collectively.

The driven principles of the collective are not freedom and autonomy, but the ethics and politics of the collective. In this context, freedom is reinterpreted not as independence vis-à-vis others but as a collective capacity of action that manifests itself in politically engaged subjectivities (Lenoir, 2023, p. 184).

As we can see, learning as an ethical-political process involves a reconceptualization not only of the community but also of the social. The social is not an external space that subjects enter and exit at will. It is an inherently indeterminate space that we come to inhabit and transform as we act.

> Precisely, there can be no democracy and no space for political discourse unless the latter assumes the indeterminacy of social reality. And it is precisely on the basis of an indeterminate reality that individuals can act. Political action is a response to this indeterminacy, because by arguing and debating among themselves, people draw the contours of the possible. (Lenoir, 2023, p. 24)

In this sense, collective learning in our classrooms unfolds within the tension between the effective capacity of the collective to debate and solve problems and the intersubjective, communitarian ethical stances that the students take in doing so. Through this process we move beyond the confines of "pure teaching" and "pure learning."

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