Democratizing Education

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Achieving comprehensive social change requires radical alteration of everything, including education. But most of the attempts to reform the educational system are limited. What is needed is a democratization of education through the introduction of alternative egalitarian and participatory institutional forms like public assemblies.

> Just think how the old traditional hierarchy is always trying to find out who is the best among us... and I think this is a bad idea. It is not the best, the greatest, but different that is beautiful. I don't want to see if someone is better or not better than me: I want to learn if something is different. That, from my point of the view is at the core of what we call democratic education.
>
> — Yaacov Hecht

Achieving comprehensive social change requires radical alteration of everything. But we often tend to forget this and focus instead only on certain aspects of life, like the "fetishization" of the economy by most of the revolutionary movements. There are many reasons for this, one of them being education.

In our deeply economistic world each one of us is viewed as a cog with specific tasks in a hierarchical mechanism. Unavoidably this is also reflected in large sections of the contemporary educational system. Specialization is being introduced into one's life as early as possible. But as the philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis points out,[1] this is extremely destructive for the personality of children as well as self-destructive. With the rapid paste of technological developement in our days, this narrow specialization simply cannot keep up and new programs for adult re-education are constantly being introduced. But to be able to absorb these new knowledges, Castoriadis continues, one must have a general educational grounding, and as long as this basis is maintained extremely narrowly through the process of early specialization, later education becomes impossible. Thus a deepening crisis is being formed in the educational field.

This crisis has been tackled with the same explanations used to excuse the need of the technocratic hierarchies determining the rest of society's spheres today. This narrative rests on deterministic assumptions of undeniable "truths" that enlightened few can understand and thus should lead the rest. The content and organizational structures of today's educational systems follow this logic and, as Ivan Illich puts it, they serve as "advertising agencies which makes you believe that you need the society as it is". The mystified world of technocratic knowledge demands obedient absorbing of predetermined thruths and thus there is little or no space for deliberation. According to Illich, "an individual with a schooled mind conceives the world as a pyramid of classified packages accessible only to those who carry the proper tags."[2] There are demands made by the "real-world" economy and the educational institutions, along with the rest of society's activity which must produce the proper product (in the case of education — the proper employee/freelancer with the necessary knowledges) to satisfy them.

Things could, however, be potentially rearranged in a completely different manner. There are alternative egalitarian and participatory forms, appearing and already existing in other spheres of social life which could also be introduced in the field of education. The theoretician of democratic education, Yaacov Hecht, calls the past and present predominant educational reality "time of

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[1] libcom.org
[2] Ivan Illich: *Deschooling Society*, Harmondsworth UK 1973, p.78

hierarchy", i.e. a state in which the student is doing what someone from above is dictating him to do, and thus no real knowledge is being acquired. He calls for us to leave this state and enter into "time of knowledge", in which actual knowledge is being developed through the deliberative networking of different and autonomous individuals.

Redefining education

That said, we must rethink what today is considered education. The way it currently is being instituted suggests that it essentially rests on transfer of information that is predetermined and flows essentially from top to bottom. Thus the imaginary it reproduces reflects the sources of this information.

There is however, another concept of education, as acts of cognition that criticize and negate this mechanical transference. If today's technology makes memorizing and preservation of information immensely easier than ever before, then there is little or no need for humans to engage in this mechanistic process. Instead, it opens up space for us to engage in what we are best at — imaginative creativity.

This emancipatory notion of education implies horizontalization of the educational process. Information is being firstly introduced to each individual for personal reflection. Then there is a collective, social level, on which these individuals collectively discuss and reflect upon it. This process of individual and social critical cognition produces knowledge that contains simultaneously the wisdom of the past with the boldness of the present and attempts at projecting into the potential context of the future. Paulo Freire, author of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, insists on the importance critical study (which requires dialogue and deliberation) has for the production of knowledge. According to him "when the reader critically achieves an understanding of the object that the author talks about, the reader knows the meaning of the text and becomes coauthor of that meaning. [...] The reader has worked and reworked the meaning of the text".[3]

The current search for educational improvement simply cannot be reduced to renewal of the content being taught. Instead new institutional forms should be introduced that resemble the notions of knowledge and learning described above. This will allow people to not only absorb information, but also to understand and develop the information further, becoming simultaneously accustomed to a dialectic civic culture that potentially could enrich the general public life.

The public assembly as component of education

One holistic approach to education implies that the organizational structure of such institutions to a large degree have to resemble the content they strive to teach. This means that, as Yaacov Hecht points out,[4] a school cannot teach democracy but remain undemocratic. If we desire to create human beings that will be collaborative and autonomous, it will not be enough to tell him how to become so, but let him experience these principals and embrace them.

The public assembly is an institutional form that allows for such experience. It enables communities to acquire the capacity to manage their own affairs and to influence the educational process. The institution of assemblies in education however, does not mean that the role of the

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[3] Paulo Freire: *Teachers as Cultural Workers – Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, Westview Press 1998, p.31

[4] www.opendemocracy.net...

teacher should be abolished, but rather that his authority should be replaced with more dialectic and supportive navigation.

If the introduction of public assemblies in the educational institutions is to have any meaning, then they must replace the centralized decision-making bodies, currently in charge of schools and universities. Thus their management, as well as the shaping of the learning process, will be achieved in a dialectic and deliberative manner between teachers, parents, students and staff.

There are many advantages of the introduction of such participatory bodies. Among them are:

- creating civic culture

- building well-argumented opinions

- understanding and reshaping knowledge through deliberation

- encouragement of responsibility-taking

- developement of oratory skills

- resurrection of philosophy

Such practices could potentially liberate human creativity from the technocratic logic that restrains it and dominates our contemporary societies because decision-making is what destinguishes us from machines and mere objects. These practices will encourage our differences, laying the foundations of healthy political pluralism on which our society thrive.

The educational potential of direct democracy are recognized also by practitioners of similar methods, like the co-founder of the 'Summerhill' school in England, A.S. Neill, according to whom self-governance is "the most valuable asset in education and life", while the general assembly is "more important than all the textbooks in the world."[5] Yaacov Hecht, one of the founders of the democratic school in Hadera, Israel, stresses the importance of peer learning, calling for the creation of "classroom[s] where everyone teaches everyone".

Conclusion

The need for radical change in education is recognized by many. However, most of the attempts to reform it are limited, as Castoriadis notes, by the whole social framework, which deepens the current crisis. Thus every attempt to democratize the content being taught should be accompanied by democratization of the whole educational managerial structure, as well as of every other field of social life. In this way a truly public space could be opened up by society itself that correspond to its deliberated needs and desires. Otherwise we risk continuing running around in circles, trying to fix the surface, while neglecting the rotten foundations that slowly erode the whole structure.

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[5] Richard Bailey: *A.S. Neill*, Bloomsbury 2013, p. 131

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