

POSTMODERN EDUCATION IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBALIZATION

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Abstract: My intention here, as regards the concept of postmodern education, is to draw attention on the lack of coherence and clarity in this very important area of contemporary education, and to offer some relevant distinctions in order to make the concept more plausible. Initially my paper deals with a series of descriptions of the complex phenomenon of globalization, provided by various discourses and domains, aiming at highlighting some common values and principles. The next step is to clarify what is and what is not relevant to my topic, from all the aspects characterizing the various discourses on postmodernism. Then I focus on the main general trends in what is called postmodern education, and also on their specific educational effects. My final considerations will show a sceptical attitude toward the embracing of this new perspective on education in its present form.

Keywords: cultural relativism, education, globalization, multiculturalism, postmodern education.

Globalization on a descriptive level

The phenomenon of globalization has aroused numerous approaches in its defining or description since the very beginning, and sometimes it triggered an abundance of considerations and assessments. Therefore, I deem it fit, for the purpose of this paper, to operate the necessary selections and to extract a leading line relevant for the topic of education.

I shall quote below just a few of the descriptions made to this phenomenon by various authors in the economic, political, social and cultural domains; we shall thus be able to highlight the intertwining of different levels and references, from plus to minus, from appreciations intended to be neutral to evaluations verging on prophecies, from assertions regarding facts to others touching upon subjective perceptions.

- George Soros describes globalization as “the free capital movement”, while adding that it is accompanied by the “dominance of global financial markets and of multinational companies over the national economies” (Soros, 2002, p. 15);

- Ulrich Beck regards the phenomenon from a different angle, as “an escape of the politics from the categories of national state and even from the schema defining what is «political» and «non-political» action” (Beck, 2003, p. 13);

- Various authors, under the coordination of Serge Cordellier, invoke the “dream of the global creed” observing however that it decayed due to the “increase in the number of the excluded” (ed. Cordellier, 2001, p. 81);

- Zbigniew Brzezinski associates globalization to the “global modernity model”, arguing that it is put forward by the American society which is “the first global society in history” (*apud ibidem*, p. 77.)

The distinction I deem useful in approaching this theme is that between the *descriptive* level of the globalization phenomenon and its *normative* level.

- 1) The *descriptive level* focuses on this phenomenon from the angle of its objectivity of deployment – all those spontaneous and hasty changes at international level, the processes and events that naturally emerge from them, according to statistical

objective laws, involving both the social, economic, cultural environment and the natural one;

- 2) The *normative level* is more centred on that vaguer, subjective scope of projects, strategies, measures, directions of action based on evaluations, planning, predictions etc. in all fields of activity that impact upon all the above-mentioned environments, deliberately, consciously modifying them through politics and policies.

As I see it, the normative level is still brought up for discussion after decades of debates on globalization. At least in its current phase, globalization seems tailored after a highly Western pattern, which is exactly the reason why it stumbles across criticism; some analysts pinpoint its tendency of exporting or even imposing a style and a form exemplifying the American society (Martin & Schumann, pp. 354-361). In this regard, Dumitru Borțun observed that in many cases the subject of public rejection is not the globalization, but “a globalisation à l'américaine” (Bornu, 2012, p. 30).

Therefore, since we have yet to hear a unifying voice at least regarding the opportunity of a broader, strategic directive encompassing our entire civilisation, I shall further focus only on the descriptive level. I shall make use of a definition of globalisation relating to phenomena, processes and events bearing a higher degree of objectivity, which are notorious and which we may all agree upon.

Broadly speaking, to my understanding, *globalization* is this tendency of enhancing the interdependencies and cooperation between states, regions and continents as well as the acceleration of the rhythm of the economic, technological, informational, cultural international exchanges.

Elements such as communications, trade, tourism, immigration have proliferated on an unprecedented scale since the end of last century, given the political orientation from various regions of the planet to democratic regimes. Hence, the hastening of interconnection and circulation even in the most remote areas equally characterises money and goods on the one hand and ideas, values, individuals on the other.

Considering these circumstances, the interest of education shall be build, unquestionably, around a normative level, starting, however, from the descriptive particularity of globalization. Two German authors specialised in the European facets of the phenomena argued as follows:

“The correct answer to globalisation resides in a productivity competitiveness of companies and states. We need good training, good schools, good universities, good research institutions, good infrastructure both for roads and railways and for the *data highways*.¹” (Lafontaine & Muller, 1998, p. 17).

The entire book focuses on the fact that *productivity* is the key word and, at the same time, the main means of boosting the economic development and the life standard of this world of current interdependencies, whereas *competitiveness* is the criterion of sustainability of the activities and measures that serve this purpose.

As regards information, the speed with which it circulates and interconnects the most secluded and remote communities inspired Marshall McLuhan in coming up with the metaphor that compares the “new world” to a “global village” (McLuhan, 2011, p. 138).

¹ Subl. n., C. S. M.

The context of postmodernism

It is again essential to make some distinctions and selections in order to preserve, from the large spectrum of the discourses on postmodernism, what is useful and significant here. And this is due to the fact that the specialised literature indicates that the sciences of education do not and, in my view, they cannot find inspiration directly from the conceptions of some renowned representatives of postmodernism such as François Lyotard, Richard Rorty or Michel Foucault. It is a too large precipice between the theoretical thinking paradigm of pedagogy and the mental games of approaching reflexivity, truth or human condition in the philosophy of the mentioned representatives. It seems inconceivable, for instance, to assimilate in the scientific, thus strongly theoretical, discourse an anti-theoretical vision, or the deconstruction of the axiological modern underpinnings (Lyotard, 1996); or to wed the educational ideal to a discursive perspective on man, as a mere construct of modernity (Focault, 1996); or to foster community, social, national and international values while embracing a rather individualistic perspective of the liberal ironist (Rorty, 1997). These are just a few examples of incongruities, as I see them, but the list can continue. In addition to that, if we were to adopt in education a new model of postmodern inspiration, should we go for a single perspective or for more? And how would we harmonize them? I believe that adopting one of them would mean completely changing what the sciences of education represented thus far and this would equal to a theoretical revolution or a theoretical abandonment impossible to account for. Only the radical change of the human being would enable us to pose the challenge of stepping into another pedagogical era. Moreover, the field of pedagogy is so constructed that it cannot promote new directions, new goals and objectives, oblivious of their precise target, not knowing the overall picture of determinisms, conditions and the vast implications thereof.

These aspects are under debate and I subscribe to David Lyon's opinion that they require a "debate on the current society's nature and directions in a globalising context" (Lyon, 1999, p. 132).

Current trends of postmodernism in education

From the available literature, I managed to synthesize the most extended postmodern trends in the context of globalization which I deem viable for the future of the field called the sciences of education:

- the elimination of the "great themes", the pedagogical correspondent of the *great generalizing narratives*, triggering totalitarianism, a dominating ideology and the congestion of the secondary and post-secondary syllabuses (Cristea, 2010, 112-114);
- the valorising of the communication codes and the orientation toward the creative one, within a formative, open and global space (*ibidem*);
- the multiplication of the formative styles within the curricular educative project (*ibidem*).

Considering the actual effects of such megatrends, we can distinguish and deduce the following:

- the increase in relevance of the person that acts responsibly in the social space, that is competitive and adapts to the new work requirements and circumstances, that boosts the student's importance as *person* in the unfolding of the educative process. He *constructs* its own personality (Păun & Potolea, 2002, pp. 19-20);

- the current theoreticians' (psychologists, anthropologists, epistemologists) awareness on the fallibility of the knowledge and theories used along the years, as well as of the ideologies restructures the teacher-student interaction on the basis of cooperation, relativizing the epistemic and moral authority of the teacher;

- the attitude-related and civic relaxation of the postmodern society, paralleled by the competitiveness and the migration of the labour force further humanizes the teacher's attitude toward the student, making the former consider not only the rational but also the affective-emotional side of the student. The latter, undergoing a personality-building process, should be thus trained to cope with the frequent changes of social environment in which he will work and live;

- the cultural relativism led to a more lax approach regarding interpretation and meaning, inducing in education another perspective on learning, one in which the teacher and the student participate in the construction of meanings and takes into account the different cultural contexts (*ibidem*).

Final considerations

This synthesis represents, in my opinion, expected trends and effects rather than precise directions, given the general cultural change of society and even of the civilisation we live in. I refer here to a change, in an anthropological sense of the word, both at the objective level of globalization as well as at the subjective one of Occidental intellectual discourses and options for postmodernism.

As Linda Hutcheon puts it, the initial concern of postmodernism is “to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ [...] are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us”; therefore, postmodernism “de-naturalises” dominant features of our way of life (Hutcheon, 1997, p. 5). This is an effect of cultural relativism – the new paradigm of thinking that reveals the subjective, historical, contextual or ephemeral particularity of some principles and fundamentals that once seemed to be self-asserted and, eventually, be universally and everlastingly valid. However, as I argued in another paper (Matei, 2014), at least in the field of education, the concept of postmodernism gives away a risky ethical relativism. It is a negative effect the scholars in various domains (philosophy, anthropology, social psychology, ethics) still have to deal with. And that's in spite of cultural relativism's good influence on disavowing ideologies, prejudices, racism and many other kinds of discrimination. Still moral relativism could not be accepted as it leads to the dissolution of values and norms which are vital for the existence of any community.

A modern author wrote about the change in education as follows: “when a certain change is not operated in the spirit of existent values and of the beneficiaries' experience or it opposes the structural characteristics of the receiving institution, the odds of success are slim; this is the crucial difference between changing things and changing people...” (Huberman, 1978, p. 103).

As I see it, this opinion is as important today as ever, although it was launched more than three decades ago. It is more natural to accept that we cannot use the same methods to promote changes for things (events, relations, structures) and for people than to call into question, in a postmodern spirit, either the author's view on values, or the weight of experience or the contextual nature of the involved principles.

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