

Discipline, the canon and the 'imperialism of reason'

My own involvement in the struggle for democracy started in the adult literacy movement inspired by the work of Paolo Freire, in the early 1980s. We worked in the huge informal settlement of Crossroads outside Cape Town, where thousands of Africans from the poverty-stricken hinterlands of the Eastern Cape had settled, breaking the pass laws and under constant threat of mass eviction by the police. Every evening we taught to the hiss of gas lamps -- there was no electricity -- in the classrooms of the local school.

Our practices were participatory and democratic, using pictures and stories to elicit dialogue through which, we hoped, the structural violence of apartheid and capitalism would be exposed. Instead of rows of pupils with the teacher standing in front we sat in a circle, the 'coordinator' -- as we called the teacher -- sitting in the circle with the learners. The learners entered gamely into this process, but at times they were frustrated and perplexed by the endless litany of questions they were asked about the blindingly obvious hardships they faced.

One evening one of our learners, a strong and intelligent woman who had spent five or six years in formal schooling, came in bearing a stick. When the session started she rose and came to the front with the stick, turned and faced the circle of learners, and said, 'This is how we want you to teach,' wielding the stick fiercely in the direction of the rest of the class.

We were crestfallen. 'The old ways die hard,' we told ourselves. But the incident did make us wonder whether we were serious enough about teaching the rules and structures of language, and whether our approach was too loose and open-ended. How astute she was, I think now, reading Michael's dialogue between Paolo Freire and Pierre Bourdieu (and Antonio Gramsci), about the significance of discipline and authority in education.

After some time we concluded that Freire did not work, at least as he had envisaged. We could not transcend the authority of the teacher, especially (but not only) when the teacher was white, and the exchange of views and knowledge was not equal. Perhaps in the case of intellectuals living amongst and working with the peasantry they taught Freireian pedagogy might work, but not in our case where the relationship was built around pedagogy alone. We concluded that consciousness could not be raised in any meaningful sense in this way, where the learners were scattered individuals and not part of any collective, and that the solution was to work with those who were already involved in popular organisation. From then on we concentrated on working with the members of trade unions.

It strikes me that Freire's strategy may have failed to work in Brazil as well. In the end it was not the peasantry that provided the main force in the struggle against the dictatorship, but the working class organised in trade unions and communities, just as it was in South Africa.

So, in some ways, our experience seems to endorse Bourdieu rather than Freire in this debate. Bourdieu recognizes the bodily training and mental discipline required by education. Yet his advocacy of schools that systematically make the legitimate culture available to the children of the subaltern classes, and inculcate it in them, seems insufficiently critical. Discipline necessarily entails subordination, and the question is, subordination to what? In schools organised according to the logic of the legitimate culture this must mean subordination to constituted authority -- the teachers, the school authority, and the many layers of dominant authority beyond that -- as well as to the sanctified texts of the dominant culture. Here we come back to our learner with the stick. This was exactly what she was invoking -- the authority of the teacher, the discipline of learning, the necessity of rules and punishment. Force is integral to education, she was saying.

How then could being steeped in the dominant culture be in any sense liberating or empowering, as it turned out to be for Bourdieu (and Gramsci), how could it provide any basis for critical thought, as it did for Bourdieu (and Gramsci)? In order to account for this we need to think about education as a contradictory process -- and not only in terms of a contradiction between technical and social dimensions, but also within these dimensions. Thus discipline entails subordination to material and textual authority, but it also provides the tools for self discipline and rigorous critical thought. Disciplining the self may enable the critical self to emerge. Learning the dominant culture involves submission to its rules and the symbolic order it sanctifies -- but dominant culture itself is sufficiently poly-vocal and contradictory that it provides subversive insights and the possibility of rebellion, at least to those disposed to respond to such insights. On the bookshelves of the libraries the curious student will find Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Simone De Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon.

This brings us back to Freire and the difference between his concept of a contradictory self and Bourdieu's concept of habitus. Freire's critical pedagogy allows us to think through the contradictions of legitimate culture and pedagogical practices, and think therefore about the formation of critical thought. If we bring Freire, Bourdieu and Gramsci together, we might think about critical pedagogy, not as something that can only take place in an alternative informal educational context, but as a constant potentiality within the schools and universities of the official educational system.

It was precisely this recognition of the subversive potentiality of 'legitimate culture' that led the apartheid regime to ban books and destroy independent missionary education -- through which many of the greatest leaders of the liberation movement gained access to 'legitimate culture' and forged habits of mental and physical discipline -- and bring all black schools under its control, creating a special 'bantú education' that would not permit blacks to foster false ideas about their prospects; as was famously said by one of the regime's education ministers, blacks were destined to be 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' in white South Africa. Despite this, the massive expansion of black secondary schooling in the townships provided the seedbeds of the youth revolts in 1976 and the 1980s; schools were unsuccessful in inculcating black subservience to apartheid or suppressing the idea of what a 'good education' might look like.

Nonetheless, bantu education has left a terrible legacy for post-apartheid South Africa -- numerous poorly trained and incapable teachers, teachers who not only lack technical skills, but also the habits of self-discipline and commitment to pedagogy that are so important for teaching. While the purpose of 'Bantu Education' was to discipline the body and mind for menial work and domination by whites, preventing access to the canonical texts of the dominant culture, post-apartheid education in many schools in the poor black communities are unable to install physical or mental discipline. Neither does it provide access to any canonical culture, whether Western or African, since recent educational reforms deny the relevance of 'canon' in favour of 'outcomes'.

As a consequence, in many of the worst-performing schools the new generations of schoolchildren growing up in a free and democratic South Africa come through 10 or 12 years of schooling without the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy, and lacking as well the social skills of self-discipline and learning. What kind of habitus do children and teenagers emerge with from such a blighted education, with what kind of dispositions towards society, solidarity, work, family? What kind of symbolic violence does this experience constitute? Are the young adults that emerge from this system capable of understanding what our learner tried to teach us -- that knowledge and mastery of the world requires discipline and a degree of force?

Another question strikes one forcibly, reading Bourdieu in Johannesburg. What do we make of his argument that access to 'legitimate culture' provides the resources to enter the world of reason located in the values of truth, and emancipation, in a word, Enlightenment...' and its correlates, democracy and human rights? This formation of reason in the fields of modern education and social and natural science provides the basis for Bourdieu's conception of liberatory politics shaped by intellectuals -- 'the Realpolitik of reason'. (2000: 70-2)

In the colonies and the post-colonies, legitimate culture mostly means Western culture, the culture of the colonising nations, or now, after colonialism, the nations that currently dominate the world order, and this is a culture which negates the world of the native as something non-modern and 'backward'. As Bourdieu notes, the 'imperialism of reason' generally serves 'to justify the established order, the prevailing distribution of powers and privileges -- the domination of the bourgeois, white, Euro-American heterosexual male', imposing the dominant values of the dominant nations on the rest of the world. Bourdieu condemns the 'abstract universalism' through which the non-Western world is found lacking and denigrated, and argues for mobilisation and struggle through which those who are denied access to the universal can claim and realise such access.

What might this mean for education in a country such as ours? Is the 'universal' something that can be separated from the dominant culture in which it is embedded? Modernity was constituted in South Africa through violence: colonial conquest, dispossession, slavery, forced labour, the restriction of citizenship to whites and the application of violent bureaucratic routines to the marshalling, distribution and domination of the black population. Knowledge, reason, rationality, science, and the

state were racially constituted structures of violence. Is it possible to separate Reason from the domination of the west and its implication in colonisation?

There are those who argue that Western culture is intrinsically racist and hostile to the rest of the world; that it is inherently a form of symbolic violence which can only be oppressive. Would the teaching of Latin and French and Voltaire and Shakespeare in South African schools be a way of making the world culture of reason available to all and therefore an emancipatory endeavour, or would it perpetuate oppression? Should it instead be a priority to teach seSotho or isiXhosa (the teaching of which is still rather rudimentary) and construct a new canon drawing on Steve Biko and Ngugi wa Thiongo as part of a project to value indigenous culture, knowledge and resistance, and draw from them in constituting a new post-apartheid democratic culture, as against a project of Eurocentric universalism?

Put differently, could it be that some of the self-limiting perspectives of the national liberation movement which make it susceptible to the prevailing orthodoxies of global capitalism have been derived from the influence of the very missionary education that made so important a contribution to the formation of generations of its leadership?