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Unpolite Citizenship: The Non-Place of Conflict in Political Education

This paper considers the role of conflict (its constitutive relevance or erasure) in the concepts and practices of democracy and citizenship. Critically reflecting on contexts of formal and non-formal political education, and on the observed practices and discourse of relevant educational actors, we intend to interrogate the school's conceptions, misconceptions and/or contradictions around democracy and political participation. Focusing on the arguments surrounding the perspectives oriented towards consensus vs. those embracing dissensus in social and political theories, this article considers the implicit and explicit powers existent or generated in school relationships, which inevitably affect our ways of looking at citizenship and of educating politically.

Cet article prétend aborder le rôle du conflit (du point de vue de sa pertinence constitutive ou de son effacement) dans des conceptions et des pratiques de la démocratie ou citoyenneté. Sur la base d'une réflexion critique touchant aux concepts d'éducation politique formelle ou non-formelle, ainsi qu'aux pratiques et discours d'agents centraux de l'action éducationnelle qui ont pu être observés, nous prétendons identifier des concepts, malentendus et/ou contradictions ayant trait aux concepts de démocratie et de participation politique. En examinant les perspectives visant à atteindre un consensus opposées à l'ampleur des divergences au cœur des théories politiques et sociales, cet article se focalise sur des pouvoirs implicites ou explicites, présentifiés ou générés dans des relations scolaires, qui affectent inévitablement notre manière d'envisager la citoyenneté, ainsi que l'action d'éduquer politiquement.

Keywords

Unpolite citizenship, conflict, education, political, school

1. Introduction

In the past decades we witnessed several transformations that had profound consequences for the way in which we recuperated and interrogate concepts such as citizenship and democracy. For example, the challenges posed by an intensified economic and corporate globalization, by the fluxes of migration and by transnational integration are dislocating old interrogations into the meaning of democracy itself (Trend 1996) and therefore recurrently demanding that we rethink and reconsider how to understand and perform citizenship and the political (Águila 2000).

This paper looks at citizenship education as a work in progress that articulates the concepts of politics, political education and democracy involving concrete educational practices. Also, assuming a critical perspective on education, we see the act of educating in opposition to that of inculcation or instruction. From this point of view, to think about education is necessarily to think about education for democracy. Educating citizens capable of respecting and practice democracy which also means citizens committed to questioning what democracy is and value its problematic definition (Ruitenbergh 2009). Underpinning this perspective is an understanding of democracy as a mobile structure which comprehends an ethical-political stance of constant relegitimation and distribution of power (Rancière 2006). In accordance with a politicizing approach that seems to be *lost in translation*, ci-

tizenship education is thus brought to the fore and its forms challenged. Following a path that involves ethics, anthropology and epistemology, we emphasize the implicit political dimension that cuts across education and its practices:

1. An ethical path, regarding politics as an ethical way through personal and social emancipation which radicalizes the idea of plurality. This reflects the assumption that democracy is an ethical-political frame which supposes identities to be relational and subjects and others to be "constructed at the intersection of a multiplicity of subjective positions (...) which are articulated as a result of hegemonic practices" (Mouffe 1996, 26). Plurality and conflict, thus, become a condition and beginning for the political.
2. An anthropological path, perceiving the educability of every person as one of the basic characteristics of human beings. This general assumption has also an interpersonal and societal element (Dewey 2002), because educability, in this sense, refers to the possibility of growing to society, with society and, in a way, with the right to conduct society.
3. An epistemological path, calling for the reinvention of knowledge concerning epistemological plurality. We are not referring to epistemological relativism, but both to a way of assuming diversity of knowledge and the possibilities of dialogue and confrontation. Any kind of passivity, on this matter, is a possibility of a quiet and discreet "colonization" (Santos, Meneses 2010).

Following Hannah Arendt, the political is here understood as the underlying question of "being diverse



and together” (Arendt 1997, 45), considering that political (and educational) thought comes from with- in lived experience, and should be attached to it (Arendt 2006). Nowadays, the experience of schools and school systems always promotes contact with ways of seeing and living citizenship that are often contra- dictory, and neither conceptually sound enough nor oriented to politicized behaviors reflecting demo- cratic awareness. Reflecting on the contradictory reali- ties that value citizenship at the same time undermine politics, we aim to conceive the non-place of conflict in school practices and discourses, under- lining the role of conflict at the heart of democracy. The notion of the political adopted in this paper is im- plicitly tied to that of democracy, as the notion of citi- zenship presupposes a participated and critical involvement in society and, certainly, in school sys- tems. When we aim to discuss notions of Democracy and the ways they are reflected in practices, we are as- suming the need to repoliticize – and of course to re- think – some practices of “citizenship” that are not clear enough. There are very subtle boundaries be- tween the concepts of the political, democracy and citizenship, which leads us to assume those concepts as widely implicated.

2. The Scholarization of Politics or the Curse of Midas

Considering what is understood as political edu- cation, both implicitly (taking lived educational ex- periences as a whole) and explicitly (in those more formal places of decision and representation), it is useful to pay attention to how it finds particular translations in schools, in the processes and mech- anisms for debate and negotiation, as in the ways decisions are made. What is questioned here is whether political education reconfigures (school) education or if, contrarily, school – or a certain un- derstanding of the territory of schooling – domesticates the intention and the practices that constitute a political education.

Starting (if not before) in the course of the Second Cycle of Basic Education (the 5th and 6th years of school), in the case of Portuguese schools, young stu- dents are involved in electing their representatives, in electing the student in their class that will occupy the formal position of Class Delegate [Delegado de Tur- ma], and who by virtue of such “office” can represent

the class in some of the Teacher Meetings for that Class [Conselhos de Turma]. Students are also encou- raged to participate, individually and collectively, “in the life of the class, the school and the community” (Decree-Law Nr. 6/01, 18th January). The political in- tentions are presented in the legal texts and already reproduced in a variety of official texts and discourses they are often countered by the instituted pedagogi- cal practices.¹ These practices, still anchored in a scho- lastic² model, are based on the permanent “scholarization” of all spheres of life, in such a way that anything that cannot find its place in the prior arrangement of school is neglected or put under the eye of the “discipline.” This “school-centrism” is then defined as a continuous scholastic categorization done by “those who inhabit the school,” in such a way that “what escapes this cognitive universe can only be apprehended under the sign of strangeness or as epiphenomena” (Correia, Matos 2001, 101). The distri- bution of people in the school space, from the clas- sroom to its outside, frequently obeys this school-centric dictate, in the invisible line between the student in the front row (and note that the orga- nization in rows is in itself revealing) and that the one at the back of the classroom, as well as in the various statuses and symbolisms available in the outside spa- ces of the school.

This is a version of the curse of Midas, here trans- ported to the context of education: everything that the school touches becomes school-like and it is not possible to add anything to the school that cannot be reduced to the school itself. School scholarizes, and in that it can prize, enrich, reduce or limit. Yet, the curse of Midas fatally limits the transformations: the school operates on its subjects as it limits its possibilities of being itself transformed. The curse of Midas blunts the school’s emancipatory abilities.

In its most common practices, and due to the ef- fects of the afore-mentioned “curse,” political educa- tion in schools submits to a scholastic model. To truly conceive politics and Democracy, civility and citizens- hip implies, as we explore further in the paper, to re- ceive (or harbor) that which the school cannot measure. A political education challenges the school, the public school in particular, to become permeable to differences, to heterogeneities, to divergences, as permeable as the distanced reality of what happens outside of the school walls.

1 Empirical evidence offered along this paper comes from a set of case studies conducted in several Public Basic Education Schools from the North, the Center and the South of Portugal on the Non-disciplinary Curricular Areas [Áreas Curriculares Não-disciplinares] and which include Civic Education. This re- search, conducted by a large group of researchers which in- cluded the first author of this paper, took place between 2006 and 2008 and was supported by the Portuguese Ministry of Education (Bettencourt et al. 2008).

2 With the word “scholastic” we mean all forms of “school based” relations and articulations, either personal, curricular or gen- erally institutional. We assume in this concept the idea that in- stitutions modulate in their own particular way relations and negotiations, with the tendency to impose its own particular rules and measures.



On the other hand, the school-centric image of the curse of Midas makes visible a series of translations apparent in pedagogical practices. To point out some of them:

1. the conflation between conflict and indiscipline. If most indiscipline translates into conflict, not all conflict translates into indiscipline. Indiscipline numbs by not allowing the contra-position or polemics. In contrast, conflict is the raw material of democracy, if converted in a politically supported attitude.
2. the confluence between debating what is happening/has happened and the mechanisms of surveilling self and other. If, in what regards citizenship, it may be convenient to “reason our humors” (dislocating Roland Barthes’s expression), that should not be mistaken with favoring practices of delation and censorship. At the level of practices, civic behavior is translated as the denouncement of uncivic behavior which brings forth issues of power and principle that challenge democracy in itself.
3. citizenship converted into politeness, or civics converted into rules of etiquette, results from an artificial neutralization of the word, as if the work of schools, teaching practices and formal and informal education were not itself political.

Beyond the conceptual issues they raise, these translations have consequences in terms of the pedagogical approaches themselves. The confusion between civics and etiquette shows rules as untouchable and unquestionable, as something that subjects have no possibility of transforming or reconvertng. The distinction between civic and civil has consequences for our understandings of citizenship and democracy, although its subtleties cannot be fully explored in this paper. If *civic* often refers to perspectives that are more clearly political and affirmative, favoring ideas of common fate, public responsibility and solidarity, *civil* is commonly seen as more connected to more protective perspectives, those more centered with individual rights, liberties and an orderly conduct (Kelly 1995). These tensions also appear (even though combined and transformed) integrated in the differences between perspectives on democracy mostly concerned with the setting of rules and procedures that ensure a just management of life in common and an orderly and civil way to resolve political choices and those more concerned with the struggle for and the participation in the definition and redefinition of who we are, can be and how we can live.

These questions point to problems that go beyond the field of education. They become dimensions that convoke current debates on the understandings of democracy and of the political as well as the rich and complex history of concepts such as citizenship and civility.

Without school-centrism, but keeping the school on the horizon, we will now focus on some of these questions.

3. Society vs. School or the Debate between Citizenship and Civility

Issues around the term “citizenship” seem to be comparable to the problematization of the concept of time by Saint Augustine: I know what it is if no one asks me; I no longer know what it is in the exact moment in which I am asked. This resistance to the thought plane stretches to related terms such as civility, in particular if one verifies this term. In their use both terms –citizenship and civility–are often taken as synonyms even if as ideas or concepts they are not the same. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that citizenship and civility are related and partly overlap (Kelly 1995). Interrogating the (necessary) distinction and the (problematic) overlaps between the two terms we may ask several questions: 1) what is the civic in citizenship?; 2) is there a place for the uncivic and the uncivil in constituting democratic citizenship?; 3) what approximates civility and politeness? To address these questions, we can start with the history of a translation.

If not by other histories, civility and politeness come closer by the classic translation of the Greek “Polis” by the Latin “Civis.” Civic and civil behavior pointed to a posture of an adequate relation between the individual and the State, in particular of how the legislated individual behaved within the space of appropriateness opened by the legislator State in a desirable and exclusive harmony. In a democracy of a few, the civic was the civilized, in opposition to the barbarian who was named as such for not having rules, or State or language. The barbarian owes its name to the onomatopoeia “bar bar,” presented as the incomprehensible; the gibberish wish has no meaning (Fialho 2006). This philological exercise is illustrative of the attitudes towards political education and its contradictions in practice can be understood. We could say that in an inclusive manner, political education exceeds the example and becomes the right to express differences and to negotiate from a diverse point of view. This is an expression of otherness and its desired influence in the welcoming society. But on the other hand, one could easily become attached to the example following the imposition and the rigidity of the rules that some individuals keep breaking by its distance from the symbolic language and meaning of institutions. In schools, this appears when the interviewed teachers kept blaming families and the contexts of origin for the lack of rules and the misbehaving of students. Pupils become “bar bar” by not understanding and not being understood; by being placed on the other side of a fence where the school is not meant to intervene.



This distinction is currently also replicated in the debate between a “school for all”, a school supposed to affirm democracy and the Universal Right to Education, and a “school for excellence”, only for some, and directly influenced by market laws and the ideals of free competition, in this globalization insinuating one way everywhere. In schools, both discourse and practices permanently reflect the duality between the “school for all” and the “school for excellence”, as if these would exclude and cancel each other out. As Sacristán (2005) tells us, it is as if in the idea of school there remains the modern presumption of education as liberation and the pre-modern perspective of education as discipline and selectivity, in a tensional relationship intensified by the violent invasion of Neo-liberalism.

Beyond the scission between the two, it is important here to call attention to a point of junction, a blind spot in which the practices associated with education as liberation and the cold assumptions of the school as distinction converge. All happens as if the “liberation” largely affirmed in the idea of civility, required the abandonment of each singular social and political background through the conversion of the person to the uniform status of the “student.” Assuming the phenomenological presupposition that all liberation is liberation from something, we find the other end of the modern liberation ideal – difference. Liberation is also liberation from difference, from dissimilarity or conflict. Freed from the difference that singularly defines them as people, and liberated by civility, students are given the definable comfort of the word “student.” In short, it presents a formulation of civility against a definition of citizenship.

4. Repoliticizing Citizenship

Regarding the citizenship concept and its circumscribing practices, to underline an education for consensus or a pedagogy of conflict is to assume a fundamental difference (Ruitenberg 2009). Responding to similar questions around the terrible 9/11 events, philosophers Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida make evident their basic disagreements, exemplary disagreements in what they possess in terms of argumentative richness and of philosophical separation. While Habermas (2002, 2007) sees conflict as originating in the failure of communication, in the broken symmetry that “all speech situations require” (Borradori 2003, 37), Derrida (2001, 2003) considers the tension of the heterogeneous to be of utmost importance and places it at the center of what is inherited under the name of democracy – an idea which is never fully presentable. The dissension between Derrida and Habermas is irremediable. According to Habermasian conceptions, “communicative action” as a route to “mutual understanding” (Habermas 2002, 9) makes the reach of autonomy dependent on a com-

mon will (Habermas 1998). Under systematic and definable conditions, communicative action is directed towards achieving understanding (Habermas 2002), in line with a “universalized reciprocity” (Habermas 2007, 197) perspective. We are here in the presence of an understanding of political action and of democracy that is based on a pacifying consensus. As for Derrida (2001), on the other hand, to answer for a democratic inheritance (deconstructing democracy as a regime of presence and stability, in the name of what he will call a *democratie à venir*) demands that we recognize in democracy an inadequacy towards itself. Democracy is more a commitment, a promise than a regime (Derrida 2001). Thus, democracy is the only system that, by assuming its imperfection, opens itself to perfectibility (Borradori 2003). Dissensus and “*polemos*”, and conflict are constitutive of democracy and its process. The political begins precisely in the moment of an opposition without war (Derrida 2003), where a “community of citizens is one in which speech takes the place of blood, and acts of decision take the place of acts of vengeance” (Pocock 1995, 30), in the open possibilities of questioning, critique and deconstruction. And that is how, in Derrida’s thought, “there is no deconstruction without democracy” and “no democracy without deconstruction” (Derrida 2003, 117). While a fuller exploration of this close relation between deconstruction and democracy, as in the Derridian sense of a *democratie à venir*, goes beyond the focus of this paper, it is important to emphasize how this affirmation of dissensus over consensus, is useful in thinking citizenship as unpoliteness.

The conflict as *polemos* or as a certain unpoliteness is at the core of democratic processes. Developing, constructing relationships with others and managing those relationships, learning and gaining skills at various levels always involve conflict-generated processes. There is no actual learning and development which is not at least partly conflictual. When political education is at stake, the role of conflict is stressed by the fact that disagreement and the consequences of the processes of disagreeing can become actual skills.

Considering this, interrogating the relationship between social and educational contexts, we can see that the meaning of a political education, realized in an education for democracy, by conjugating citizenship and civility, favors an attempt of institutional totalization which imposes the culture of the institution over the culture of the individual. This imposition affirmed as a process of socio-cultural fusion (erasing the cultures of “origin”) is also a process of epistemological colonization. More traditionally scholastic knowledge prevails and strategically forces itself in the name of a platform made of consensus, of avoidance of conflict and erasure of other discourses. In potentially more politicized domains, as would be



that of citizenship education practice, this consensus-oriented pacifying strategy is ruled by the attempted inculcation of a school culture, with diversity contexts being subjected to the monologue plane we previously conceived as the curse of Midas. Schools are, of all institutions, those which are more clearly organized in their own closed lexicon (Troger 2002). The *huis-clos* of the school tends to create community, but opposes a democratic day-to-day [quotidian] and its expression in the actual right to differ. The “polite” Citizenship depoliticizes in the name of Civility.

Let’s get back to the case studies we previously referred to. The interviews conducted with the teachers (the whole group of teachers) of a class considered to be “undisciplined” and “problematic” reveal interesting (and recurring) interpretations of the term “citizenship.” The teachers responsible for the curricular area of Citizenship Education when they were asked whether the class had class assemblies or if the class would participate in school assemblies refused, without a doubt, that those activities could be a possibility for that group. For these teachers, the inherent conflict proneness of that group of students would make any assembly impossible. As they explained, these students “were not prepared” for it.

This positioned them within an institutional approach to an assembly which tries to exclude or at least to limit conflict. Also, the pronounced sentence – the stated lack of preparation or the unreadiness of these students – points to some possible contradictions:

1. “the students are not prepared”... What teachers consider to be lack of political competence justifies, in contradiction, the exemption from an act of political education. In this manner, the non-existence of something is explained by its prior need.
2. “the students are not prepared”... Being prone to conflict (and unruly in those conflicts) absolves them from political action. To avoid a situation of possible conflict, such as argumentation situations, passes as the solution to the problem. Political education appears as “docile;” the need to rule the conflict is presented as the alibi to avoid conflict and therefore not ruling it.

5. Resignifying Democracy

Used so often, and so often abusively, as a buzzword or as an embellishment of administrative discourse, the term “democracy” has been losing its meaning, or digressing from its meanings. The discretionary use of expressions such as “education for democracy” threatens to reduce an actual political and educational matter to an ornamental expression, a reduction with dangerous consequences.

To the extent that “democracy” loses its meaning, citizenship and political education face effective risks. These risks, painless up to a point, appear when the neutralized use of the word “democracy” dismis-

ses or contradicts the practices and standpoints related to its significance. Suddenly, in each and every context supposedly “democratic,” the scholastic dimension of democracy presents a cluster of solid justifications around what is considered “admissible,” “accepted” and “visible”. Beyond this line, behaviors, attitudes and knowledge develop far beyond the walls of “polis” – they are only seen as problematic when they directly affect its centre. Therefore, questions like cultures, identities or sexualities, just to name some examples, while they do not interfere (in a disruptive way) with the center of what is institutionally formalized, keep being unformulated or silenced. They stay outside. They stay somewhere. They are not sayable in a closed polis, subdued to a discreet surveillance. The invisibility is precisely what gives effectiveness to the whole system.

The French philosopher Jacques Rancière provocatively refers to this non-repressive but invasive force as a “police order”. It is interesting to acknowledge, on this matter, Rancière’s (2009) description of “police order” as a docilization of subjects conducted by the definition of strict boundaries between visible and non-visible behaviors or sayable and non-sayable discourses. The validity of what can be heard contrasts to what is considered “uncivic noise.” This noise is invalidated as irrelevant, as pointless concerning a consensualized order of the “police order.” The problems of exclusion or persecution never happen within this order mainly because, like classical democracy in ancient Athens, everything is presented in its right place, the issues of position and difference are resolved. Like Biesta (2011, 144) remarks on this subject: “women, children, slaves and immigrants had a clear space in the Democracy of Athens as those who were not allowed to participate in political decision-making. In precisely this respect every police order is all-inclusive.”

The distinction between *police* and *politics* imposes itself in this matter. Assuming “politics” and “democracy” as also having a role in the framing and management of conflict and right to disagreement (Rancière 1999; Mouffe 1996), a “political order,” in opposition to a “police order,” presumes that the established rules can – and in some cases should – be destabilized. In Rancière’s words, politics makes visible “what had no business being seen, and makes discourse audible where once there was only place for noise;” clearly, the political is here understood as work in process, as democracy itself defined as “whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it” (Rancière 1999, 29–30).

The rigid establishment of laws and rules, in schools as in other contexts, of any closed set of just rules and proper procedures, does not create space for citizenship. On the contrary, this rigidity opposes citizenship. Citizenship education must open the possibility of



speaking and taking stances beyond fixed models of belonging, beyond crystallized places of positioning and beyond resolved notions of what can be. This means that the political presupposes the voice of someone, despite its established role or origin. To sum up in Rancière's words: "There is politics in the moment where we are no matter who" (Rancière 2009, 93).

Analyzing this depoliticization by conceptual impoverishment, Jean-Luc Nancy (2009) assumes the duality of the concept. On the one hand, democracy refers to procedures of government that have no prior or transcendent foundation. On the other hand, democracy presupposes the human ability to "develop an integral autonomy" (Nancy 2009, 78). Between one and the other, what we have is a conception of democracy that is visibly critical of the ways in which political education is at the same time promoted and surrendered.

Unlike democracy, power is everywhere (Nancy 2009). We need, therefore, to repoliticize (educational) practices, bringing critical tools and rationality to the instituted school. Politics is to unjustified forms of power what logos was to myth (Nancy 2009) by stripping illegitimate forms of authority of reason and justification. Here, the views of Nancy (2009) and Rancière (2006) draw closer together. For Rancière (2006), the political starts in the separation between government and the principle of kinship, when belonging to a family, an *ethnos* or a religion, is not associated to the legitimation of any form of government. For Nancy (2009), politics (democracy as a political concept) is the impossibility of foundation or justification from a transcendent point of view; the political arises from the absence of a human nature.

Taken together, the refusal of a heteronomous grounding of democracy and the understanding that regarding the political processes that place people and groups, power and rule, there is no outside, immediately places conflict at the center of politics, democracy, citizenship and... education. To construct inclusive schools and a democratic education is primarily to overcome "police orders," to open the institutions to the voices of others. The knowledge that these voices can be disruptive, destabilizing and even unfair only assures us about the permeability, reflexivity and openness that allow for the experience of democracy, and where people can stand for democracy

as the right to difference and the possibility of change. To face the challenge of citizenship is to regard the place of conflict as a negotiated way of constructing a political order from educational grounds between adversaries who are not enemies.

6. Conclusion

Exposed to the instability and the fluidity of time, the contemporary school faces particular challenges. Admitting that "liquid modernity," using Bauman's (2006) concept, is characterized by uncertainty and instability in structuring instances such as family, culture, labor and values, (political) education is dealing with a reconfiguration of responsibilities which is particularly visible in public schools. Like social and cultural elements, schools have special responsibilities towards diversity. To affirm the richness of this diversity transcendent to the apparent unity of the whole becomes a particular task in public schools. There the "right to education" established in the Declaration of Human Rights becomes a particular challenge in the response to each singularity that actually composes universality. This is one of the political/educative roles of an education that does not deny or avoid conflict but actually underlines its presence as a particular and manageable value.

As we understand it, political education is one of the important issues faced by contemporary schools, also because its assumption of conflict helps to insure a plural and participatory democracy. This implies a democracy that challenges and interrogates, interferes with borders and repositions and is able to carry on the counter-hegemonical mechanisms we need in order to face (and conflict with) the surviving ghosts of totalitarian powers.

The interrogations and reflections advanced in this article have implications for school organization and teaching practices at both policy and practice levels. A lot more could have been said about the topic how school finds its order(s) and the educational role conflict can have in the everyday life of schools. Responses to these matters, however, need to be found at each specific level and context, without faith in magic or general solutions. Finding better practices and ever disputed solutions is always an urgent second step.



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