

## **What Do Educators Mean When They Ask Students to Be “Critical”? Rummaging through Foucault’s toolbox - Mr Oswald Tanti Rigos**

The aim of this paper to explore what “we educators” understand by critique. Over the last years several thinkers have questioned the role of critique: what does critique mean? What does it offer? Can it lead to political transformation?

The view of selfhood as socially constructed generates two sorts of responses. Optimists see human embeddedness in culture as an organic phenomenon. For them, initiation in the existing body of knowledge held by the group is a distinctive characteristic of the human species. It is what makes communication possible, and, in turn, communication is what allows for the growth of the individual members through a dynamic use of language that renews the social group. In the optimists’ camp, the individualising expression of criticality manifests itself in the individual’s drive to put into question existing social accomplishments, using the very language that made those accomplishments possible, and in a manner that mirrors the evolutionary trajectory of the social group, with the aim of orienting the accomplishments of the group towards further flourishing.

Pessimists are sceptical of this ecological understanding of the development of the social group. While they acknowledge the natural embeddedness of the individual in the social body, they refrain from extending this natural appeal to the “grammars of normativity” (Butler, 2004, p. 306) that emerge, and which go on to shape the possibilities of thought for its members. Seen in this light, the individualising quality of criticality, which is traditionally conceived as an authentic engagement of the self with the social body, amounts only to a sympathetic or (at most) unsympathetic reproduction of the language of society and the hierarchies of power embedded in it. In this logic, (natural) immersion in culture leaves the individual without any possibility of “withdrawing” (Adorno, 1984) from it. For the pessimists, naturalising the development of the group amounts to breeding a culture of complacency. Yet, on the other hand, the pessimists’ view leaves us with an impoverished definition of critique as merely fault-finding.

The conclusion that criticality is either naïve or normatively impotent has catastrophic ramifications on democratic politics. The dangers of un-criticality get particularly pronounced with regards to the schooling institution, whose aim is precisely that of initiating subjects into a critical attitude. Seen in this light, exercises in criticality (ironically) become tools that fossilise or simply describe existing hierarchies of power. My aim in this paper is to explore whether there are spaces of productive criticality, and if such productive criticality can inform the practices of democratic education.

References:

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