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CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

IMPERIALISMO CULTURAL Y PEDAGOGÍA CRÍTICA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I draw inspiration from Antonia Darder's chosen piece to indicate some of the challenges for a genuinely democratic education and critical pedagogy in these turbulent times. I give pride of place to the war in Ukraine, targeting the themes of imperialisms in a multipolar world, militarisation, extreme nationalism and Fascism. I also tackle climate change and potential wars in the south resulting from depletion of resources and the related theme of mass migration from 'South' to 'North'. I also tackle the tangible cultural products characterised by social relations marked by human suffering and slavery, these distressing histories carried forward as part of the 'portability of cultures' of descendants knocking at the gates of the West.

KEYWORDS: war, imperialisms, nationalism, Fascism, migration, tragic 'beauty'

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RESUMEN

Este trabajo se inspira en el artículo discutido de Antonia Darder para sugerir algunos desafíos a los que se enfrentan una educación genuinamente democrática y la pedagogía crítica en estos tiempos turbulentos. Se otorga un lugar preferencial a la guerra en Ucrania, seleccionando los temas de los imperialismos en un mundo multipolar, la militarización, el nacionalismo extremo y el fascismo. También se abordan el cambio climático y las guerras potenciales en el sur que resultan del agotamiento de los recursos, así como el tema relacionado de la migración en masa desde el sur al norte. Otro tema analizado son los productos culturales tangibles caracterizados por relaciones sociales marcadas por el sufrimiento humano y la esclavitud, historias inquietantes que son transportadas como parte de la 'portabilidad de culturas' de los descendientes que llaman a la puerta de Occidente.

Palabras clave: guerra, imperialismos, nacionalismo, fascismo, migraciones, 'belleza' trágica

Antonia Darder, a good personal friend, is a mainstay in the approach to education known as *critical pedagogy*. We have, over the years, collaborated on different ventures, with Paulo Freire being our common fount of inspiration. Another is Antonio Gramsci, on whom I have written extensively and whom she quotes prominently in the article to which I am responding. She writes about challenges to schooling in difficult times. This is a time marked by different responses to a global pandemic, the threat of planetary extinction, the rise of new Fascisms and authoritarianisms, multipolar imperialisms, a general culture of militarisation, mass migrations as a result of wars and climate change and globalised efforts propagated

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by the corporate sectors and their acolytes in the social and education fields. They generate, in the latter case, all-incorporating and ever colonising dispositifs to smother many forms of difference in society and the rest of the cosmos.

One can argue that many, if not all, of these developments are interrelated. Antonia wrote her piece before the recent distressing and shocking attacks on and developments concerning Ukraine where new forms of colonisations, occupations, military mobilisations and encroachments by either one state or a supranational entity make their presence felt. As in the early sixties when US missiles were deployed in Turkey facing the USSR and the latter's retaliatory deployment of missiles in Cuba facing the USA, the situation in Ukraine has brought us on the brink of a potential Third World War. One can re-echo Bob Dylan and his classic 'A hard rain's gonna fall'. In fact, at the moment, a hard rain is falling over Ukrainian cities as with Belgrade in the late nineties and Iraq and Afghanistan before and after. All these situations, often connected with the ominous presence of the Military-Industrial (and academic?) complex (Giroux, 2007), should be the staple of those who engage in a critical pedagogy. Antonia does a good job of bringing several relevant strands together in her piece. She does so primarily from a USA or at best North American perspective. This is understandable as she is a Puerto Rican whose family was uprooted from its territory to be relocated within the US. She is well positioned to discuss her lived experience of colonialism in a North American context. I too have been born, bred and still live with the shadow of colonialism around me, coming as I do from the Mediterranean island of Malta which has been tossed around throughout its history by various powers culminating in its formal independence in 1964 and the closure of British military bases on the island in 1979. It is now a full member of the European Union.

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Antonia has done much over the years to promote critical pedagogy and a genuinely international approach to critical pedagogy as evinced by the *International Critical Pedagogy Reader* of which she was lead editor with whom João Paraskeva and I collaborated as co-editors (Darder *et al.*, eds, 2015). In the piece under review, however, albeit quoting such international luminaries as Walter Mignolo and Bonaventura de Sousa Santos, she provides a predominantly North American centred discussion. I, for my part, will provide a wider international response, bearing in mind my own geographical location and that of the Spanish journal for which I am writing. I shall focus on militarisation and nationalism, mass migration and the long shadows of colonial genocide which render ‘things of beauty’, to be enjoyed ‘forever’, having human tragedies lurking beneath. I will not confine myself to simply schooling but will treat education in its widest context, echoing Gramsci when positing that every relationship of hegemony is a pedagogical relationship (Gramsci, 1971, p. 350).

Darder writes about colonisation in education reflected in the constant subjugation of a whole variety of subaltern groups through monocultural curriculum and pedagogical regimes denounced by Paulo Freire and those who subscribe to a critical pedagogy. Colonisation in its wider context is a leitmotif throughout the paper. The dominant discourse is a monolithic one buttressed by periodic testing in support of a Capitalist framework comprising what are intended as ‘Capitalist schools’. This is not to overlook the sterling work, against all odds, carried out by progressive social justice educators using the contradictory spaces opening up within the interstices of the Capitalist schooling system, to teach for a democracy that is always in the making with no point of arrival. This work is complemented by efforts in the non-formal settings of popular education that emerge from numerous contexts such as the Latin American ones to which Antonia and her political pedagogical mentor, Paulo Freire,

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and others such as Gabriela Mistral (Mayo and Vittoria, 2021), with her commitment to rural schools and teachers, are attuned. However, we cannot underestimate the overwhelming and encroaching power, nowadays, of the military-industrial 'system world' that attempts to colonise and smother various resistant and alternative life-worlds. It does so through not only schooling but a variety of out-of-school public pedagogy means. One predominant theme remains that of the culture of militarisation. This culture, decried, during the two Bush years, by the likes of Henry Giroux, has been rearing its ugly head in various other places where, as we have been seeing with Vladimir Putin's aggressions in Crimea and Ukraine, and the ever expanding reach of NATO, despite the end of the Cold War, military solutions to burning issues take precedence over diplomatic ones. Decisions by oligarchs and warlords are brought to bear on the lifeworlds of ordinary citizens on both sides of the divide.

One author and critical pedagogue worth following, in this regard, is the Tuscan priest, Don Lorenzo Milani with his commitment to fostering education through 'reading history against the grain'. The students he led at Barbiana in the Tuscan mountains learned, through engaging in historical research, focused for the most part on post-Risorgimento Italy, that a 'just war does not exist' (Milani, 1988). The findings were the staple of Don Milani's defence against accusations, by the military chaplains and legal prosecutors, of 'unpatriotic' stances in favour of conscientious objection. The text of his defence in rebutting the military chaplains' position and answering to the judges, captured in *L'obbedienza non è più una virtù* (Milani, 1991) (Obedience is no longer a virtue), of which Milani (1988) is an English language translation, stands as a masterpiece regarding 'reading history against the grain'. Milani was vindicated posthumously and stands among other key figures in the struggle for conscientious objection. These include Franz Jägerstätter (Austrian

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who would rather face the guillotine in Nazi occupied France than join the German war effort), Raymond Williams (fought against Nazi-Fascism in World War II but refused to enlist in the Korea War), Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero (killed after exhorting, on radio, fellow countrymen to lay down their arms) and Muhammad Ali (well-known case of avoiding the draft for similar reasons). The events in and around Ukraine, and recognition of the underlying economic, imperialist and ethnic interests involved, render a critical approach to history, political economy and peace and conflict resolution studies key elements in a process of democratising education.

It also highlights, for critical education, the dangers of ultra-nationalism, the one phenomenon which, in my view, Karl Marx seems to have underestimated in the context of the question of overproduction in a Western Europe benefiting from the concentration of accumulated wealth through colonial enterprise. Nationalism, rather than an international socialism that transcended the Capitalist framework and the self-interests of elites within the nation state, won the day as a result of which workers were pitted against workers, in the quest for, among other things, wider markets. Excessive nationalism extending well beyond self-determination, especially in territories breaking loose from *direct* colonial (Said, 1993, p. 8) control, can furnish a fertile ground for nascent Fascism, as manifest in various parts of Eastern Europe and the target of Putin's accusations levelled at the Ukraine; there are allegations of a Fascist presence also in Russia. The shoe might well be on the other foot.

Nationalism and the turn to Far Right politics are also manifest in reaction to one outcome of a world divided, also territorially, in terms of 'North' and 'South', with respect to access to and depletion of resources. It is a world inhabited in its geographical 'South' by desperate multitudes bearing the brunt of emissions, primarily by the corporate sector, that lead to climate change. This results in those ensconced in the 'south', suffering from increasingly unliveable conditions, including

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anticipated excessive heat rises and vanishing resources, besides the proliferation of diseases such as malaria. The struggle over and for resources would lead to wars fuelled by the presence of an arms industry. The geographical global south is characterised by mass migration flows towards the perceived *Eldorado* that is the Western world. Numerous tragedies and exploitative situations occur en route. For many in the different territories, this leads to the kind of 'otherisation' that Antonia writes about. Mind-forged real and metaphorical barriers are conceived by fellow humans in the territories targeted by migrants as desired destinations. Fascist politics are part of the reaction to mass migration, with international solidarity of the kind Marx dreamt of becoming precisely that, a mere pipe dream. A critical education, confronting this form of ethnic supremacy and attempts to keep migrants at arms' length, preferably, in certain cases, out of sight and out of mind, becomes urgent. It is the kind of education advocated by those who espouse the fostering of a genuinely democratic society characterised by 'harmony in biodiversity'. This is where Antonia's invocation of a Freirean dialogical pedagogy becomes pertinent. It would be governed by a vision whereby people traversing borders, risking life and limb in the process, are regarded as not simply examples of portability of labour power, suiting the cheap labour and labour-market segmentation needs of local overseers of Capital (a *divide et impera* strategy imposed on the working class, autochthonous or international), but as examples of what I call 'portability of cultures'. It is the interaction of cultures that renders dialogue authentic in which people learn from each other, being teachers and students at the same time, as conceived by Paulo Freire (Freire, 2018).

As a result, communities and societies are ever evolving. Education would here extend beyond the conventional *assistencialismo* of hierarchical ‘local educators-migrant’ relationships. Of course, any democratic dialogical exchanges

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cannot be naively conceived outside the parameters of existing educational-power relationships. In the words of Handel Kashope Wright (2009), one needs to address the key critical pedagogical question: who dialogues with whom and from which position of power or powerlessness? Also, in this regard, a critical education requires an additional task when fostering an understanding of migrants. Again, the community is here conceived in terms of its power dynamics. It is therefore not monolithic (see Wright, 2012, re totalising constructions of 'the African') but is conceived as an ever changing entity, contrary to Fascism's static and essentialising sense of its 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1983) predicated on myths and 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). The task would entail one's following Gramsci's instruction in this regard. One needs research on people migrating, research that concerns their point of origin and not simply one starting from their point of arrival and resettlement. This would involve learning about the structural conditions which made them emigrate in the first place. Gramsci wrote about this in his criticisms of popular writers of novels focusing on immigration from the Southern regions and islands of Italy moving towards the Northern sectors of the peninsula. Unless one knew the kind of peasant lives, in differentiated forms, they led in the fields and *latifundiums* of say Sicily, one is likely to lapse into the kind of fabricated myths and stereotypes that these authors concocted. These he calls Fr. Bresciani's progeny because they follow the Jesuit priest in falsifying aspects of European history to produce self-accommodating narratives. The same would apply, in my deduction from Gramsci's writing, to immigrants hailing from more distant territories, notably Africa and Eastern Europe, which was not the case, in Italy, in Gramsci's time; this is most certainly the case nowadays. Gramsci also brought teacher education into the equation as attempts were made to include the study of various cultures throughout the peninsula and islands in teacher preparation

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courses. Gramsci feared that, unless serious studies on different people are carried out in their place of origin, schools will continue to perpetuate such falsehoods (Mayo, 2020).

One final point of relevance to migration concerns the colonial tragedies underlying what are often depicted as 'works of beauty and opulence'. These works are meant to attest to a country's level of 'civilisation'. Museums, palaces and churches in the West, including Southern Europe, boast such lavish settings and artefacts. A critical education would focus on not simply the finished product but primarily the social relations of its production. It would potentially make one aware, following Eduardo Galeano (2009), of the mass human tragedies occurring among Indigenous groups and other historically subaltern people, featuring nowadays among migrants, for the extraction of the gold and silver. These constitute the raw material for such works as the adorned ceiling of Santa Maria Maggiore Basilica in Rome or the 48 golden panels, ironically depicting scenes from the life of Christ, in Seville Cathedral's *Retablo Mayor*. These are just two examples among many. As with teaching the Columbus 'descubrimiento' and the colonial pillage and centuries of Indigenous subjugation to which it led, discussing extracts from Galeano's text can prove chillingly instructive. Galeano's account of killings and maiming, through mercury, of Indigenous slaves forced down the pits to extract these raw materials, allegedly leading mothers to kill their babies to spare them such an ordeal, as with Seth's killing of Beloved in Toni Morrison's complex eponymous novel, can hopefully provide sensitivity and indignation for the plight of the subaltern who keep knocking on Europe's doors. In this case it is the Indigenous of the Americas. In Morrison's *Beloved*, it is Afro-Americans. The plight and suffering of the subaltern, those perennially regarded as 'lesser beings' in Edward Said's words (2000), lie at the heart of what we regard as a 'thing of beauty being a joy forever'. It can easily have



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a colonising murderous foundation. A decolonising critical education, at a time when the descendants of these victims continue to be a subaltern presence within Western societies, should foreground this. Gracias, Antonia!

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