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Adult Education
New Routes in a New Landscape

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Introduction: popular education under siege?

Showing evidence of a remarkable discursive centrality, the issues relative to the education of citizens in the now commonly designated learning and knowledge societies reveal, contradictorily, great trivialization and non-questioning, being transformed into depoliticized topics and relatively empty of meaning.

Things are decided on and prescribed originating from great generalizations and simplifications, based on great consensus and on supposedly shared diagnoses, or from that which is considered to be the imperatives of economic growth and competitiveness. On this level, the consensus is presented as being total and definitive to such an extent that “the end of the debates on principle” can be announced. This is what happens with the White Paper on Education and Training, entitled Teaching and Learning: Towards a Cognitive Society (Committee of the European Communities, 1995:27), where it is written: “The conception of the missions of the educational and training systems, the content of the disciplines, the pedagogy itself have often been an object of impassioned debates. The majority of those debates seems, today, to have been left behind.”

The predicted end of the debates on educational policy and the curricular polemics would configure, on the bottom line, the depth of educational thought. It is obviously an ideological and technocratic discourse that, from a position of dominance, proclaims that the educational debates should be considered ended, in order to, then, in a supposedly neutral and rational way, present a group of
"new orthodoxies of educational policy", as Stephen Ball called them (1999:133). But, what really allows the presentation and the imposition of a new politico-educational canon is not so much the establishment of a great educational and pedagogical consensus, or the dominance of a certain educational theory. It is rather what could be designated as a kind of educational economism, or the decisive influence of economic science and of global capitalistic economy on the public policies of education. In this sense, there has been criticism by many authors, among which that of the already referred to Stephen Ball (ibid:126), that accentuates "the increasing colonization of educational policy through imperatives of the economy"; and also that of Peter McLaren (1999:90), that, in regard to this, observes: "Slowly but surely, education has been reduced to a subsector of the economy (...)". Economy, and not pedagogy, constitutes, from now on, the principal basis of the legitimation process of educational policies, the reason through which the values of the competitive market and of the private as public policy started to reign.

In the case of the European Union, for example, the construction of the "Europe of Citizens" is frequently presented as an acquisition that is very dependent on education and, especially, on lifelong training and learning. Individual responsibility is reinforced and also the increasing importance of the "economic motivations" or the pressures towards competition, well expressed, for instance, in the objectives of the Bologna Process. In this case, the creation of a "European space" for higher education, notwithstanding all the claimed advantages of harmonization, intelligibility and comparability of the degrees, does not hide the necessity of organizing a global system of higher education in the terms demanded by the competitive markets, acknowledging, besides, the aims of competing with the United States of America.

Even when the European Union highlights the importance of education of its citizens towards social cohesion and recognizes the necessity of reinforcing its financing, it generally adopts an economic and competitive viewpoint: "to visibly increase the levels of investment in human resources, in order to give priority to the most important trump of Europe - its citizens", according to words in the Memorandum on Lifelong Learning (Committee of the European Communities, 2000:4).

Indeed, education is being transformed into a chapter of Human Resources Management, preferably oriented towards the production of "competitive advantages" in the global market, functionally adapted to economic rationality. This new canon despachets education towards a merely adaptive function and citizenship towards a market model of liberties, strictly economic ones, of consumers.

In this context, the humanistic-critical tradition and the emancipatory and transformative approach that characterizes popular education, in some cases from the end of the 19th century, find themselves strongly impeded. Subordinated to the global imperative of modernization and of productivity, of adaptation, and of employability, popular education is under siege. Either it is an object of a reconfiguration of a functional and vocationalistic type, evolving towards training of a professional and continuous type, articulated with the economy and with companies (and, in this case, it is prospered), or it insists on its tradition of social change and of "conscientization", articulating with popular social movements and renewing ideals of political education and of critical literacy (and, in this case, running serious risks).

In the scenario of pure adjustment and functional adaptation, the sectors of popular education will go through new symbolic and material means of reinforcement and legitimacy, although popular education will be an object of a complex process of transmutation, which can culminate in the extinction of the concept itself, eventually maintaining some methods of work and of social mobilization and also some participatory techniques. This is the most congruent scenario with the present-day loss of protagonism of the social-democratic root of the concept of lifelong education in the tradition of authors, like Hutchins (1970), Lengrand (1970) or Faure (1972), and the relative erosion of the concept of popular education that occurred, throughout the last years, in the dominant discourses on education policies. Vocational training and, especially, individual learning, directed towards the future employee that looks for new competencies in order to reach "employability", already represent the dominant perspective. Social improvement, democracy and citizenship, solidarity and social justice give way to individual performance and competitiveness.

As a matter of fact, the "neo-liberal welfare reform model of social policy" (Griffin, 1999) shifts from the provision of education by the state to the status of learning cultures and to the concept of learning, which is more individualistic, fragmented and instrumental. By emphasizing a more functional and adaptive concept of learning and overlooking the fact that, ultimately, there is no life without learning, they run the risk of dissolving the substantiveness of life throughout the learning process and abandoning the goals of transformation of both individual and collective life, in all its dimensions.

The reformist principles of neoliberal inspiration advocate a minimal role for the State and a leading one for society and the market. They are based on the concept of choice in accordance with the most typical individual strategies and rationalities which suit the lifestyles, interests and needs of the clients
and consumers of education. The strategic search for learning opportunities, which are transformed into "competitive advantages", is now an individual responsibility. It becomes an object of choice and the individual has to accept the consequences of good and bad choices, success or failure in the job market and of his/her (in)ability to determine and forecast optimal training routes. The individual will thereby design a rational learning biography which will purportedly produce high levels of employability, competitiveness, adaptability and mobility. As if it were possible, in those that Ulrich Beck (1992) defined as "risk societies", to guarantee a constant, isomorphic and successful adaptation to social change, from a paradigm of individual learning, capable of acting as an all-risks insurance, taken out by someone useful, alone, highly competitive and performative.

But education has been considered incompetent and in crisis whenever the adaptation to economy and competitive performance is not at the core of its mission. Learning humanity, solidarity and common good have perished with the status of modernist antiques in the light of a Pedagogy Against the Other. "Formativity", critically defined by Basil Bernstein (2001:14) as the individual ability the actor should have, only reveals its effectiveness when used against the other, with less "competence to compete". But, contrarily to what is stated by the dominant vocationalist ideologies, a system that would be able to fully satisfy the economy's demands and needs, producing the profiles and competences which are presented as imperatives, would be condemned to collapse. The competitive advantages and individual improvement would, then, be shared by everyone, or by the majority of individuals, being no longer advantageous and competitive. They would irremediably be replaced with new requirements, more selective and statistically less distributed within the respective population.

In practice, however, this ideology can impute responsibility for unemployment to education and its inefficiency in the production of skills it considers as relevant. It does so by hiding the economic and managerial rationale which justifies unemployment as a solution and conceives the downsizing phenomena as economic rationalisation and entrepreneurial modernisation strategies. The concept of employability, a symbol of the "conservative exaltation of individual responsibility" that changes each individual agent into an "entrepreneur de lui-même", as Bourdieu (2001:28) denounced, represents, now, one of the largest political and pedagogical mystifications that influences education and schools, that shapes curriculum, pedagogical practice and assessment. As István Mézsáros (2003:121) has recently explained, following his defence of society beyond capital, the fight against massive structural unemployment, under the labour concept of "a quantifiable cost of production", is absolutely inconsequent.

However, in "liquid modernity", according to Zygmunt Bauman (2001:141), "the art of administration (...) consists of keeping the 'human labour force' away or, even better, making it withdraw". The short time, the immediate and instantaneons became dominant, adopting the logic of consumption and choice without thinking in the long run. It is this apology of "nothing in the long run" that, according to Richard Sennett (2001:37), "corrodes trust, loyalty and mutual commitment", consequently engendering the need for a learning process geared to flexibility and, perhaps, even for the "corrosion of character", through potentially corrosive pedagogical practices, but not educational any more.

Under these conditions, popular education faces, at the present time, challenges of great magnitude, especially when it doesn't renounce its contributions towards a critical education of citizens, towards political and economic democratization, towards transformation of the power of decision-making and towards social change. As we shall see next, the liberal and elitist theories of democracy, and also the principles of economic competitiveness of the market, reveal their opposition to the majority of the ideas of popular education, rather favouring individual learning processes, apparently neutral and depoliticized. Indeed, it seems that Boshier (1998:5) can have good reasons to conclude in a rather sour way: "If lifelong education was an instrument for democracy, lifelong learning is almost entirely preoccupied with the cash register."

Theories of democracy, participation and citizenship

The relationships between education, democracy and citizenship have been, for a long time, the object of attention in the field of theories of democracy. I defend, besides, the need to convene debates around the theme of democracy in order to clarify the different concepts of citizenship, not all with democratic roots, as we know, and not all with equal democratic and participatory intensity. In the same way, the different concepts of democracy and of citizenship imply distinct concepts of education and considerably different projects in what education towards citizenship is concerned.

Carlos Alberto Torres (2001:183) relevantly calls attention to what he designates as "a central conceptual problem, a dilemma of democracy" — the
the principal degree of excellence that a good government can have (Mill, 1998:226). According to him, "any education which aims at making human beings other than machines, in the long run makes them claim to have the control of their own actions" (Ibid.: 243). This will bring about, as the author defends, that democratic participation will not be limited at the national level of government, but will equally occur at the local level and even in the place of work, where each participant can learn how to self-govern him/herself.

Even in the case of certain supporters of liberal democracy, it is possible to find references to the educational worth of participation, as is the case of Alexis de Tocqueville (n/d:90), that, in his De la Democratie en Amérique, acknowledges: "The most efficient process, and, maybe, the only one left, to interest men in the destiny of their country, is to lead them towards participating in the government."

However, as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2001:48-49) calls attention to, liberal political theory is, today, used as a recourse to justify a weak State. According to the author, this theory, "(...) particularly in its origin, defended the necessary convergence between political freedom and economic freedom, between free elections and free markets as two sides of the same coin: common good reached through the actions of utilitarian individuals involved in competitive exchanges with minimum state interference." In truth, the demobilized canons is based on the pretext that, without competition, there is no freedom, assuming that the diligent pursuit of private interest of each person will result in the obtaining of the general interest. It, therefore, assumes a weak or technocratic version of participation in contrast to the theory of participatory democracy (the strong version), insisting on a socio-technical concept, collaborative or a participationist type. Niklas Luhmann (1985:89) spoke of this, of the "false emancipation", this is, emancipation as the "last management trick: to deny the distinction between superiors and subordinate, thereby taking away, from the subordinate, the power base." The Brazilian sociologist, Maurício Tugtenberg (1989:15-16) referred ironically to "Alice in Wonderland", that is, to participation reduced to the distribution of some profit or to an improvement of information, thereby permitting an improved functioning of the system. A participation of the sort, "Participate, since things will continue the same."

But, it is the so-called elitist theories of democracy that more openly refuse democratic participation in the decision process, education for and by participation and a concept of active and critical citizenship. I sustain that knowledge of their principal theses is shown to be indispensable towards the
analysis of contemporary educational policies and towards the understanding of the reasons and the consequences of the devolution policies of education, that we could also call returned education; returned by the State to a civil society increasingly merchandised, where, according to Geoff Whitty (2002:87), "consumer rights will prevail over citizen rights" and where that "will reduce the opportunities for democratic debate and collective action."

This not being the place to proceed towards a thorough analysis of the elitist theses, I would like, nevertheless, to only remind you of some of their central elements. Those elements that, in articulation with various suppositions of liberal democracy, have been summoned to legitimize restrictive forms of democracy and citizenship and educational concepts of economic extraction, of a productivist character, on the basis of which the disconnectedness between education and democracy, between training and fighting for a fairer society, between learning and social emancipation is promoted, in short, the reinforcing of the separation between politics and education.

Disbelieving the goodness, and even the possibility, of a democracy understood as the power of the people to govern themselves, the elitist perspectives, on the contrary, assume a concept of democracy as the power of the elite; the elite that are only chosen by the people to, in their name, govern them. It is, therefore, a "governed democracy" and not a "governing democracy", in accordance with the distinction proposed by Georges Berdu (1975:33-39), based on heteronomous decisions and rules; a democracy reduced to a kind of competition of the elite for the people's votes. To this end, Joseph A. Schumpeter, in his Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy, is quite clear in opposing the idea of political participation by citizens and, limiting democracy to a method of selecting leaders, proposes a kind of political competition, in great measure derived from an economic view that transforms voters into political consumers. Rejecting the ideals of common good and popular will, Schumpeter counters them with the law of the mediocrity of the masses and a supposedly general will, but, in fact, manufactured by manipulation and by electoral marketing. Democracy is transformed, in this way, into a "theory of competitive leadership", into a "democratic method" that the author defines as "that institutional agreement to reach political decisions in which individuals acquire the power of decision-making through a competitive struggle for the population's vote" (Schumpeter, 1984:336). It is, therefore, an instrumental perspective of democracy, a formal view that reduces it to a selection method and, as Bobbio (1988:13) says, to "a group of processual rules in what the formation of collective decisions is concerned", alienating the substantive dimensions, disdaining the purposes and objectives, already definitely subordinated to means. In short, democracy, according to Schumpeter (Ibid.:355), "only means that the people have the opportunity of accepting or refusing the persons designated to govern them."

Highlighting especially the oligarchic sides of democracy, Robert Michels had already, at the beginning of the XXth century, insisted on the idea of a passive or "dependent" participation, as Alain Touraine would be calling it (1970:13). In his Sociology of Political Parties, and also starting from the thesis of the "intellectual superiority of the professional leaders" (derived from their education and technical competence) over the correspondent "formal and real incompetence of the masses", Michels (1982:35) concludes that "in spite of complaining sometimes, the majority is deep down delighted in having found individuals ready to take care of their matters." The power of the leaders is, therefore, not only guaranteed, but also legitimized in moral terms (Ibid.:56), reinforcing the aristocratic character that the author attributes to democracy and also its technical-rational character, since, according to Michels, the conflicts between efficiency and democracy will invariably be resolved with advantage towards efficiency, at democracy's cost, from which we can conclude that, in the future, it will always be preferable to have less democracy than too much democracy. A democracy, in any case, considered, by him, to be "completely incompatible with strategic readiness", since "its strength is not fit for rapid action" (Ibid:28).

Profoundly criticizable from the point of view of the theory of participatory democracy, the elitist approaches, in articulation with various other principles of economic liberalism that gave substance to the theory of liberal democracy, are shown, however, to be extremely influential today and, even though painfully, they can't help forcing us to conclude how, in their own way, they outline a diagnosis of contemporary democratic practices that are impossible to ignore.

For all that, democratic invention continues to take place nowadays through struggles, protests and rebellion that, according to Lefort (1981:42), "re-teach us that democracy is not, in its essence, bourgeois." Nevertheless, the problem is that, at the historical moment in which democratic struggles for the expansion of citizenship and for the rendering effective of new rights occur with great intensity, social regressions and attacks on the exercising of citizenship occur simultaneously. It is for this reason that the warning given by Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon (1994:105) is very opportune when they state: "Today, when rhetoric about the 'triumph of democracy' accompanies economic devastation, it is time to insist there can be no democratic citizenship without social rights."
The “audit education” towards the competitive market

Considered an embodiment now in the pangs of death, of social democracy, the Keynesian Welfare-State has been, for a long time, an object of rejection from the moment of the Hayekian defence of the superiority of the free market and its “spontaneous order”. The freedom to choose proposed, among others, by F. Hayeck and M. Friedman, originates from a definition of freedom where the absence of coercion is enhanced over the interests and activities of a private and individual character, where the “theory of public choice”, in fashion nowadays, operates towards the politico-administrative system and towards the public sector in general as a kind of “invisible hand”, similar to the regulating effect that the latter performs, according to Adam Smith, in what the market is concerned.

The elitist elements, of competition and of political consumerism that I referred to before, in relation to the elitist theories of democracy, are now acquiring fresh importance, so much so that authors, like O’Brien & Penna (1998:103), have concluded that classical liberalism of the XIXth century represents a humanist reference and too compromised with the idea of improvement and of human progress in order to continue to integrate the neoliberal project.

Therefore, the public sector should never more dare to try to compensate for the weaknesses of the market, but, on the contrary, should learn from it and, isomorphously, should adapt its functioning mechanisms to a philosophy of the laissez-faire type, in accordance with the Ricardian logic (cf. Lane, 1997:302-303), in order to increase its efficiency.

Some of the theses of elitist democracy, of liberal democracy and economics, are now radicalized and connected through neoliberalism, originating from the principles of government through the market and the theories of public choice to which all the political, economic, social and cultural spheres should submit. Individuals and organizations of every type, similar to companies, that are presented as archetypes of rational, innovative and efficient organization, will begin to follow managerial principles, commanded by neo-scientific or neo-taylorian doctrines of management (Lima, 1994).

Education begins to be integrated in a service industry, in a market of competitive suppliers, hoping that, in terms of results and management processes, education can, finally, adapt completely to the “knowledge economy” and successfully face the international competitiveness requirements. To that effect, there is a need to teach how to compete, which will only be possible if the education system, itself, learns how to compete through the practice of competition. Emulation and rivalry are the central values, originating from an individual and psychological base that is transferred and generalized towards international organizations, countries and institutions. Private education appears, consequently, as the closest to the principal ideal of the competitive market, a principle that should be spread to public education through the creation of “internal markets” in its interior. As Zygmunt Bauman (2001:156) critically sustains, “the issue of improvement is no longer an educational undertaking, but an individual one”; and, in this way, the author ironically says, “There are many areas in which we need to be more competent, and each one of them requires a “buy”. ‘Let’s go shopping’ for the abilities necessary to sustain us and for the means to convince our possible employers that we have them (...)” (Ibid.:87).

Considering education a “factor” and an indispensable infra-structure for “national competitive advantage”, Michael Porter (1993:702-703) is one of the most outstanding defenders of the alluded to “internal rivalry”, proposing, as a pedagogical principle, the motto that learners should “compete to progress”. For him, reform of the educational system based on those principles represents the true priority of governments; as he writes, it is “a question of economy and not only social policy.

Another of the more influential management authors, Peter F. Drucker, explains how the social role performed by schooling, starting from the 1950s and 1960s in the United States of America, was negative, because of basing itself on an inversion of priorities: instead of pursuing its original objective – individual learning –, schools were transformed into agents of social and racial integration. As he concludes, “Therefore, placing social objectives ahead of pedagogical ones became a very important factor in the decline of basic education, this is, in the crisis of traditional instruction in the United States” (Drucker, 1993:196). He defends, on the contrary, the re-centering in restricted individual learning, without any compromise with social improvement, and not exclusively of school, that should lose its monopoly in order to become a simple partner, “in competition with other suppliers” (Ibid.:202).

The idea is generalized that it is indispensable “to stimulate competition” between schools and other educational organizations in order to increase the “quality” of the “educational service”, an idea that is far from being exclusive to education, but is shown to be central in the reform of public administration proposed by the paradigm that is being analyzed here. Notice, as an example, the wording of the proposals presented in the Report conducted by the then North American vice-president Al Gore (1996), entitled From Bureaucracy to
Efficacy, Reinventing Public Administration, where the creation of “business-related-type organizations” oriented towards obtaining results, placing “the client in first place, introducing market dynamics” and “competition between services”, “making a choice possible”… are assumed as strategic orientation for the “new public management” or, in this more precise case, for the “business-related public administration”.

_Homo oeconomicus_ suddenly reveals himself as the authentic pedagogical subject under construction, starting from a paradigm of citizenship based on a “democracy of consumers” of an elitist character. Education for this new concept of citizenship is at the core of an exogenous, technical-instrumental process, of an ethnocentric type, in the best _extensionist_ and of _cultural invasion_ style, in accordance with the concepts of Paulo Freire. It is an “audit education” (Lima, 1996). On promoting homogeneity originating from the superiority of the values of effectiveness, of adaptation and of competitiveness, one opts, as Stor & Cortêsio pertinently conclude (1999:107), for “a selective monocultural concept of education”. One returns, indeed, to a formal citizenship as the characteristic quality of a modernization process of an economic and managerial type, quite influential in the agendas of educational policy of various institutions, and, namely, of the European Union.

Indeed, the already mentioned White Paper (European Communities Committee, 1995) clearly insisted on “individual employability”, on the necessary “capacity of adaptation”, on the complementarity of schools and companies as “places of learning”, on the urgency of “investing in competencies”. “Employability” was transformed into the substitute of “educability”, and “economic education” for the transformation of the economy and the society, at one time proposed in the Report _Learning To Be_, coordinated by Edgar Faure (1972) for UNESCO, yielded its place to education as an economic variable and as simple adaptation to the imperatives of informational and global economics. It is this economy that, according to Manuel Castells (2003:464), demands new modalities of organization and administration, that the author calls “a network company” and that, in its turn, originated a profound redefinition of the labour force, with a highlight for the “self-programmable labour force”; based on high educational levels that contrast with the levels demanded by the “generic labour force”, these latter centred more in specialized knowledge that, more easily, can become obsolete. But, the concept itself of “knowledge obsolescence” adopts an economic and utilitarian meaning in relation to the referential system of “useful knowledge”, also adopted by the European Union, that tends to conceptualize knowledge as marketable private goods and to evaluate its use in a totally independent way from interests.

In any case, the competitive performability of a utilitarian and mercantilist kind reveals a principle contrary to a humanistic and critical education, oriented towards solidarity and common good, placing all the pressure on individual adaptation, on suitability and on adjustment in terms of knowledge, of qualifications and, now, of “competencies” that are demanded. Education is, in this way, exempted from democratic citizenship towards social emancipation. The construction of modern citizenship was already based, in many cases, on hierarchies and class, gender, and racial inequalities, revealing itself unable to break off from European imperial and colonial tradition and from its civilizing and redeeming mission. That perspective was not only not withdrawn, but has, today, new articulations with ethnocentric views based on development models and on economic and cultural relations of dominance, giving rise to a second-class citizenship, this is, mitigated and highly stratified.

I believe that, much more than symbolically, the politico-pedagogical motto of “acquisition of competencies to compete” refers to the protagonism of the market, of privatization and of the individualization processes, accentuating the pragmatic, instrumental and competitive character of education and training. In this sense, as I have already called attention to, the expression “competencies to compete” cannot help being a redundancy, highlighting, even more, the elements of competition and of emulation that are already inherent in the word _competence_ itself. In fact, _competence_ also signifies, in Portuguese and in other Latin languages, dispute, struggle and conflict in looking for the same thing on the part of two or more competitive individuals, that, in this way, are rivals, and, in this way, imply hostility instead of cooperation and solidarity (Lima, 2003). This also signifies, as José Romão (2002:102) very well observed, to refer to “innate or already incorporated faculties and that, therefore, should only be evaluated”.

**Popular education as resistance and the democratization of democracy**

As we saw, the principle of competition leads to corroded and fragmented citizenship, and not to democratic and cosmopolitan citizenship, committed to critical education, leaving space for discussion, argumentation and collective deliberation. But, this opening is incompatible with the ideology of education as an adjustment to “objective needs” of the economy and learning as domestication. On the contrary, it wishes to redeem education as a potentially divergent space,
in relative disconnection from immediate and unilateral exigencies of the economy, as simple preparation for life and as simple adaptation to the world of work; rather valuing, in it, the space-time of critical and creative questioning of life, the capacity to renounce the breaking in, to be able to disagree and even to resist. As I have already defended, "Critical learning, non-mimetic, implies not only knowing and following heteronomous rules, but also being able to break them in order to, in this way, unlearn, to be able to learn again; it supposes consenting and acquiescing, but also discussing and resisting certain values and objectives; it demands intimacy with contents and techniques, but also critical distance that will foment its reinvention" (Lima, 2003:145).

However, it is necessary to acknowledge that education cannot, by itself, democratize society and the economy, institute democratic and multicultural citizenship. The epic and grandiloquent discourse of the creation of the "new man" through socialist education is, especially today, too simplistic and unrealistic. On the other hand, history revealed how much certain generous and progressive ideals were an object of technocratic and extensionist programmes, profoundly contradicting the democratic and emancipatory principles that inspired them. But, the necessary criticism of a certain traditional pedagogy of the left, this is, of the ingenuous belief in the capacity of, only or mostly, through progressive education, being able to change the world and to transform society and the economy, cannot make us ignore how much an identical pedagogy, even though of a contrary belief, is being resumed and profoundly disseminated under the inspiration of pedagogical *economism*. That supremacy of the economic over the pedagogical gave origin to a new type of pedagogy—economic and social pedagogy—, based on an extensive pedagogization of society and the economy, providing a pedagogical solution to each economic and social problem. Basil Bernstein (2001:13) referred, in relation to this, to the "Totally Pedagogised Society".

It comes to mind, merely as an example, how a certain pedagogical therapy has been corresponding to each social diagnosis: to structural unemployment, employability; to the crisis of public financing of education, the introduction of more exams and of greater "quality control"; to school bureaucracy, the pedagogical motto "compete to progress"; to the lack of national competitive advantages, the reform of education in vocational terms. Except that this new pedagogy, apparently neutral and rational, is based on beliefs that are, today, stronger, and faces problems considered universal ones, defined in an apparently consensual form and insisting on the search for lesser means and not on the discussion of aims and objectives. After all, educational neoliberalism also constructs its metanarratives, promotes practices that it considers good, carefully selects its case-studies, rationalizes *a posteriori* what it considers successes—a all this, having as a base, an ideology that dissembles, hidden among buzzwords and slogans of economy, expressive metaphors and exciting interjections of management.

The overcoming of one and another form of pedagogism presents itself as a critical exigency towards the whole project of democratic education, necessarily less epic, more humble and conscious of its limitations, especially open to democratic experimenting, trying out new correspondences between cultural diversity and "demodiversity", looking for unedited combinations between representative democracy and participatory democracy, from which democratic deepening can result (cf. Santos & Avritzer, 2003:64-66).

In this referential framework, the idea, that was so many times, and in so many ways, presented by Paulo Freire (1996:126) gains particular significance: "If education cannot do everything, it can do something fundamental. If education is not the key to social transformations, it is also not simply the reproducer of the dominant ideology."

Education can, therefore, in its way, participate in the process of democratization of democracy, even when that participation does not represent sufficient condition, assuming itself as an indispensable or relevant contribution. However, popular education towards democratic and multicultural citizenship emerges, as we saw, considerably hindered and, sometimes, devalued even in the interior of various sectors that affirm they are democratic.

In these last years, popular education was profoundly influenced by the neoliberal reform of the Welfare State, with which it had strained relations; on the one hand, critical relations about meritocratic perspectives, about fighting and about calling for social democratization, through social movements and popular organizations. The democratic reinvention of the Welfare State and the social struggles for its transformation represented important accomplishments of the social movements and organizations of popular education. Simultaneously, the objectives of the democratization of the state and the concept of popular education as critical education oriented towards social emancipation managed, at certain historical moments, to pressure governments and local authorities, to call for resources and to obtain more public financing, and also the ratification of progressive legislation and the creation of public networks of education.

However, throughout the last two decades, the emergence of the so-called Third Sector has been occurring, composed of a vast and heterogeneous number of NGOs. It is a sector that, for many authors, is understood as equivalent to
civil society, in this way, conceiving civil society as a homogeneous whole, ignoring its social stratification and its position as a field of social struggles that originate through divergent interests.

Apparently situated between the state (the first sector) and the market (the second sector), the concept of Third Sector is frequently depoliticized, starting from a sectorial and fragmented view of the totality of the social (Montaño, 2002). The NGOs would represent the more dynamic sector of the civil society, through the role of new intermediaries between the social movements and the state. The tradition of social struggles, of political militancy and of reification would now be substituted by a more institutionalized and organized sector, capable of managing social problems through reformist solutions more or less opportune. In this way, the bureaucratic and paternalistic character of the state and its fiscal crisis would be surpassed, guaranteeing, in imitation of the market and of the business world, greater efficiency and innovation. Management and negotiation have the tendency to substitute the old logic of fighting for transformation, exactly like the former militants are partially substituted by new professionals with insecure contracts; new social managers now follow popular leaderships of a collegial and participatory type.

The state politically delegated part of its social responsibility to the Third Sector, decentralizing the management and execution of the diverse social and educational programmes, but centralizing political decisions, keeping the NGOs with whom it contracts for the fulfillment of services away from those same decisions. Also, for this reason, social and educational services progressively substituted the concept of human and social rights, since the former are more easily an object of commodification and of trade.

The organizational survival of the new instances of the Third Sector, its logics of managerial action, the competitiveness between organizations, its dependence facing the state, the official programmes and the bureaucratic requirements, the enormous centrality of the fund-raising activities, represent, among other aspects, a crucial change. The assumption of counter-hegemonic projects, of critical agendas and of actions of contestation, this is, the political dimension of these organizations tends towards being substituted by a more functional and instrumental feature, more collaborative, where the ideals of radical democracy and of social change give place to objectives of an assisting nature or of adjustment.

Being theoretically weak and ambiguous, representing a considerably heterogeneous and multifaceted reality, the Third Sector contains, nevertheless, popular organizations and it sometimes articulates with social movements that escape the generic characterization that was just presented. Certainly, we all are acquainted with examples of organizations and of popular education projects that creatively resist the mentioned process of institutionalization and of normalization; a process based on the management of poverty starting from the thesis of the shortage of resources, or based on the social demobilization and on a concept of social exclusion that wiped out inequalities in order to concentrate on individual responsibility and on solutions of a biographical character for structural problems. However, the process of privatization or the character of a social enterprise to which were subjected various organizations that, in the past, promoted popular education is too visible. On the one hand, some of them were transformed into organizations of rendering social and educational services through privileged partnerships with the state. On the other hand, some of them opted for the status of private companies of vocational training, selling training programmes on the market, producing training kits, or even consuming products imposed by franchising systems.

However, one can see, in many places of this planet, the emergence of new alternative dynamics in which popular education is strongly articulated with social movements, with popular organizations, with struggles for social emancipation and for a fairer society and with more quality of life (Souza, 1999). In this way, they assume the “politicity” of education conceptualized by Paulo Freire. However, in these cases, popular education retrieves and reinvents its critical and transforming tradition, actively and creatively resisting its weakness and its condition of a docile and functional sector.

I believe that studying and debating the multiplicity of perspectives, projects and activities of popular education that occur, at the present time, in different political, economic and cultural contexts, one can contribute to assessing present-day risks and also present-day potentialities of popular education. There is a need to understand the on-going changes and, maybe, the renovation of popular education itself whilst a factor of democratization of democracy and of social emancipation.

In any case, I think that this debate can be critically oriented through pertinent questions, of which I give, here, only some examples. What is popular education today? Can popular education insist on partnerships with institutionalized powers and give up its incorporation towards social struggles? Is it possible to combine partnership and struggle? In what way can we evade a dichotomic conception of the relationship between the state and civil society and escape the subordination of the Third Sector facing governmental policies and dominant economic interests? How can one demand the democratic
reinvention of social welfare from the state, maintaining the capacity of developing rebellious activities and of fighting passive acquiescence? What are the potentialities of the counter-hegemonic type of popular education in contexts of global capitalism? How can social rights be extended without running the risks of being transformed into instances of merely rendering services? How can the predominance of positivist epistemology be withdrawn, valuing popular knowledge, participatory-action research and the collective construction of knowledge, avoiding the risks of ideological celebration of common sense and of tradition? How can public debate, collective deliberation and popular participation in decision-making processes through education be amplified, without fatally integrating the more traditional logics of political parties or adopting the conquest of power as an objective? How can support and public resources for popular education be guaranteed, when it risks, in many contexts, being rejected because of the subversive and disfunctional character that is attributed to it by conservative sectors?

Finally, a last issue that affects us all personally: how can work of research, of education and of intervention in favour of popular education in our university departments be maintained and developed, when universities seem to want to free themselves from their social responsibilities, adopting market and emulsion logics and opting, more and more, to work with economic and social sectors that guarantee a higher status and higher financing to them?

References


