Chapter 6

Academic Community in Transition: Critical Liberatory Praxis in the Network Society

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ABSTRACT

Based on critical transdisciplinary research methodology, this chapter develops a Freirean model of the role of academic community in the network society. The developed model consists of four steps: individual conscientization, building attitudes, interaction with people and broad approach which encompasses the whole society. Those steps are constantly repeated in a never-ending circle, where each iteration provides deeper understanding of people’s current circumstances and background for active participation in the society. The model reflects the fact that the role of academic community in the network society is directly associated with the question what kind of world we would like to live in. On such basis, it calls for active personal development and wide social engagement. In this way, this chapter replaces pessimism contained in contemporary critiques of global education with moderately optimistic critical liberatory praxis.

INTRODUCTION

We live in the age of transition from the massive society into the network society (van Dijk, 1999; Castells, 2001). In order to inform practical action, this chapter focuses to the role of academic community in these processes. The social role of academic community consists of various dialectically intertwined dimensions. Academics are teachers, scholars and philosophers. They produce theoretical concepts and practical applications. They are rebels and high government officials. In this chapter, however, we are not interested in all aspects of academic work. Instead, we shall focus to the social role of contemporary academics in the sense of Gramscian intellectuals: as commenta-
tors, critics and active creators of past, present and future social relationships. In *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci describes this position as follows:

*The mode of being of the new intellectual can no longer consist in eloquence, which is an exterior and momentary mover of feelings and passions, but in active participation in practical life, as constructor and organizer, “permanent persuader” and not just a simple orator... from technique-as-work one proceeds to technique-as-science and to the humanistic conception of history, without which one remain “specialized” and does not become “directive” (specialized and political) (Gramsci, 1971, pp. 10).*

At medieval courts similar roles had been occupied by court fools or jesters. Protected by kings and tsars, jesters could comment all aspects of the society without repercussions. Situated at the very origins of political and military power, their critiques have often played significant roles in royal decisions (Southworth, 1998; Otto, 2001). In order to provide a fresh insight into the role of academic community in the network society, this chapter seeks inspiration in the parallel between contemporary academics and ancient jesters.

There are at least two main inspirations for such research approach. First, traditional science of education seems unable to produce viable long term solutions for the current educational crisis (Brighouse, 2004; McLaren, 2000; Novy, 2012). On such basis, it seems legitimate to explore new research frontiers. Second, recent authors have successfully used analogies with ancient jesters in diverse fields from medicine (Warren, 2011) and arts (Higie, 2007) to history (Otto, 2001). On such basis, it would be interesting to see whether a similar research approach has the potential to make a contribution to the science of education.

The parallels between ancient jesters and contemporary academics can be justified in two main ways. First, historians have clearly showed that the relationships between ancient rulers and jesters can be easily extended to various historical periods, occupations and contexts. Based on specific power relationships, they are metaphors for the universal dichotomy between authority and creativity (Southworth, 1998, pp. 3). At least to some extent, therefore, lessons from medieval courts can be applied to the context of the network society. Second, in the next section we shall show that the parallel between contemporary academics and ancient jesters is methodologically viable within the combination of the theoretical framework of critical theory and transdisciplinary research strategy.

The first part of the study analyses the role of academic community in transition from ancient jesters through the massive society to the network society and shows that, in this specific context, evolution is more efficient than revolution. Looking into the past for guidance, it recognizes the specific position of academics which lies somewhere between their ideals and the reality of their social position called *in and against the State*. Finally, it shows that the oppositional possibilities developed by London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group (Mitchell et al., 1979) are conceptually inadequate for the contemporary context and seeks solution in bottom-up approach to modelling.

The second part of the study reinvents Freire’s model of adult literacy in the context of the role of academic community in the network society. Firmly situated into the conceptual framework of critical theory, it calls for active personal development and wide social engagement in the quest for a more just society. It shows that the parallel between academics and jesters has an important advantage over more substantial comparisons, because its allegoric character opens space for contemplation which is by and large free from tacit knowledge about the current social reality. Finally, it analyzes various restrictions arising from the used critical transdisciplinary research methodology.
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