

EDUCATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE. THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY OF
INQUIRY.

By Teresa De La Garza

“The first agreement that the very first gods had, was to recognize and accept the difference and to accept the existence of the other...After this first agreement, they kept the discussion going, because one thing is to recognize that there are others that are different, and another, very different, to respect them...

“Then they were silent and each one talked about his difference and each one of the other gods that were listening, realized that it was by listening and knowing the differences of the other that they knew themselves better, so they reached the agreement that it is good that there are others that are different, and that we should listen to them to know about ourselves.”ⁱ

Relatos del Viejo Antonio (Old Antonio Tales)

One of the most significant experiences I've had is that of a visit to an Indian community, San Juan Chamula. In the church, with the floor covered with pine leaves, the smell of copal and the incredible colors in the robes of the saints aligned in the walls, an old woman was praying. Suddenly she turned towards me and looked at me briefly. In her black eyes, surrounded by wrinkles I could see all the suffering and the impotence of the excluded among the excluded. Entire generations of Indian women, oppressed, exploited, excluded... were contained in that look.

It is true that in my country all children have the right to free basic education (from kindergarten to high school). It is obligatory for all Mexican citizens, but in fact, the economic situation of a family determines who is going to get education. The poor, which in most cases, belong to the original communities, frequently do not go to school because they have to work at home or on the fields. Language is also a problem, because not all children are bilingual and not all teachers can communicate with them. And girls are the most excluded, they must take care of the younger children and help with house work.

The need to live in a society, in which everyone is free and equal, arises from the experience of injustice and from solidarity with those who are excluded. The project of a new social reality in which suffering and injustice tend to be eliminated is born from the rational argument moved by the desire for justice that is linked with responsibility and compassion. Through compassion we come to admit that we are responsible and that it is our duty to work towards the construction of a community that instead of excluding the other, enriches itself through their inclusion.

The faces of excluded women and children are questions: questions about a common history that has been built with the victories of some and the defeats of others; the problem is that the last have been forgotten. When the questions of the excluded bring to light their violated rights, we can see the forgotten inheritance; we can hear the voices of those who express suffering caused by injustice. From this perspective, the task of education links with political ethics: it is defined by the need to do justice to the excluded, to take responsibility over the injustice. The special perspective of the excluded, the oppressed, the sufferer of injustice, is the critical perspective and, therefore, the perspective of hope.

The experience of the excluded is the basis to think that which has not been thought before. The marginal point of view represents the hope to construct a new universality, one that does not exclude, but includes difference. To think from this perspective is to think from the experience of denial, from the experience of otherness, from the point of view of those:

...that have to die in order to be heard... those always forgotten...those without a face...those whose voice is not important.... (Old Antonio Tales)ⁱⁱ

In many Latin-American countries, poverty is regarded as a *quasi*-ontological deficiency, and social *Darwinism* has excluded the poor, that almost always is also the native people, especially women and children. Poverty is experienced as deprivation of land, culture, language, and dignity. That is why we must recover that part of our history that lies hidden, the memory of injustice that will allow us to take care of the rights of the defeated. History is a common weave of different experiences: each one is personal and partial, but, at the same time, necessary for the reconstruction of a common history that prevents the

reproduction of injustice. This is the task of a political ethics of compassion and justice and the right way to construct a caring society.

Modern philosophy, starting with Descartes, is founded in an unlimited confidence in human reason, faith in progress, history conceived like a great story *-gran relato-* and a paradigm, both epistemological and ethical-political centered in the subject and tending towards universality.

But since the end of XIX Century we can find strong voices that question this paradigm: Nietzsche, Marx, Freud and pragmatism, vitalism, historicism, existentialism, critical theory and the different kinds of postmodernism.

Walter Benjamin and Franz Rosenzweig saw in the First World War the end of this model of history founded in the ideas of continuity, causality and progress. In their place they propose the ideas of discontinuity and actualization of time. According to Benjamin the western model of History excludes from the collective memory the failures, emphasizing the victories. That is why it hides the issue of the rights of the defeated. But memory is capable of awakening this forgotten past, making us aware of the rights of the defeated.

Benjamin is against the idea that progress is the ultimate goal of human history, because it turns into ideology that justifies the suffering of persons in order to achieve it. The rights of the defeated are not cancelled, and we have to recognize them and work both, at revealing past injustice and impeding its reproduction. We have a responsibility towards the victims of past injustices in constructing a present that does not deny them.

In reflecting upon these ideas we have to ask ourselves if this exclusion of the rights of the defeated in history, is something we have conquered. And we have to accept that we have not. In the midst of our societies we can find injustice and exclusion; the condition of indigenous people in our countries is that of extreme poverty and ignorance. Their exclusion is not only economical, but also political and cultural. The exclusion of our original people in our societies is a debt we have to pay before we can begin to talk about justice. It demands our efforts towards justice and solidarity. The foundation of an ethics of responsibility and compassion can only be found in the recognition of our responsibilities in history.

The point of departure is the fact of poverty in our societies together with the will to not give up. The one who suffers, the one who is hungry, who has been the victim of an injustice, is not the object of commiseration. He/she is a human subject that has been deprived of a dignity that is rightfully his/hers: here is where compassion appears as a feeling for a human being that, at the same time, is a demand to recognize his/her dignity and work towards justice.

But the excluded, the defeated, are entitled to their rights and remind us that we all come from one tradition and that we are the heirs of a history that must be acknowledged. In this common history we can find injustice that causes suffering and misery, Benjamin's idea is that temporal distance does not liberate us from responsibility. The past is central for Benjamin; his approach criticizes the conception of history as linear progress, capable of self-realization. Instead he presents us the image of the *Angel of History*, who sees the future in the past. The future holds the unrealized hopes of past generations that must be acknowledged by present generations. These hopes illuminate our conscience and allow us to see our own chains; at the same time they give us the strength to liberate us. It is only if the present generation actualizes the hopes of the past generations, that the present can be broken, generating change. And the only past capable of liberating us is the past of the defeated, the forgotten past, and not the past of the winners, that is already contained in the present. In order to perceive this liberating past, that at the same time is fracture and liberation, the only way is *memory*, the special kind of memory that Metz has called *anamnetic reason* or *memoria passionis*

What we need is a solidarity that transcends the barriers of space and time, a relationship of responsibility between the past generations and the present one. That is why Benjamin says that: "not even the dead are safe from the enemy if he wins."

The responsibility of the present generation is rooted on the idea that if we don't recognize the rights of the victims, the same injustice will happen again. From this perspective, there is a defense of the authority of the sufferer that, through the acceptance of responsibility, opens the path to morality.

We must remember that for the illustrated Modernity, social inequality is seen as a natural fact, while in Benjamin's perspective, it is caused by human decision. That is why we have a responsibility towards those who suffer. The fundamental category is therefore, that of memory, capable of discovering responsibilities. Through memory we can see suffering as caused by men, and therefore, men must repair it. In order to construct a just and caring society we need that perspective, we need to be authentic and recognize our common history.

But responsibility leads to action. Any political transformation requires the projection of a critical approach to ethics, in order to propose to society a social order based on justice. Critical ethics should be, therefore, disruptive and capable of transforming society. That would only be possible if it is concrete, rooted in the context, and answering to the needs of concrete individuals and communities.

But undoubtedly the means to go towards a just society is education. Education conceived as community of philosophical inquiry. In a community of philosophical inquiry, children can learn to accept difference as an opportunity of mutual enrichment, and can become sensitive towards injustice, in order to develop respect and solidarity for others and the desire to work together for a just and caring society. At the same time, through reasonable and collaborative dialogue they can develop responsibility and a reasonable wish for justice.

This task is mediated by language. Words are a possibility of liberation, because they are the incarnation of truth, they have meaning.

"La palabra, que es única, es al mismo tiempo y por eso mismo, gregaria. Al surgir convoca la presencia de todas las otras que le son afines, con las que le atan lazos de sangre, asociaciones lícitas y constituye familias, constelaciones, estructuras".
(Castellanos, Rosario, 1975)

Words are unique, and for that reason, gregarious, Rosario Castellanos (1925- 1974) Mexican Philosopher and writer, tells us in this beautiful text that I couldn't resist quoting in Spanish, and in which she invites us to dialogue. We must recreate language, she says,

using the pearl hidden in every one of us, that of meaning. Words have meaning that should be present every time we use them; meaning is destined to those who listen and who, in time, will answer. Dialogue is a very special relationship among persons, guided by truth and meaning, but only possible among those who consider and treat each other as equals, and that will be fruitful only among those who want to become free together.

Following Ann Sharp's teachings and example we have written several stories to work Philosophy for Children with deprived children in different parts of our country in the hope of including the voices of children, both boys and girls in the ongoing conversation about human concerns.

We, in México have found that Philosophy for children can be a powerful way to achieve a just and caring society, both because of its theoretical foundations and its communitarian practice. It provides the kind of education that excluded women and children need. The community of inquiry provides the ideal setting for the poor to realize their essential equality with all human beings and their worth as autonomous individuals whose participation in society is necessary to construct a better way of living together and cooperatively.

The experience to be listened to attentively and to be taken seriously is very rare to girls and even to women, especially those belonging to the poorer, and therefore I consider it very important in the development of self-esteem and self-confidence. The community of inquiry provides the setting for this development. Furthermore, it gradually helps to become self-corrective and to sharpen not only thinking skills, but also verbal abilities.

In this sense, it can be liberating. I remember one small girl from a public school in México City. When I first met her she was very shy and never talked. Gradually I came to know that she was the only daughter of a very authoritarian and sexist father and a quiet and submissive mother. At home she was not allowed to take part in the conversations, so she learned to be silent. But she also learned to listen, and when she finally talked, she amazed the group, including me, with her keen remarks on the arguments of others. With time, she became a very important part of the group and when the course was over and we

had to say goodbye to each other, she gave me a gift that I treasure. It was the drawing of a blooming flower (herself?) and at the bottom she had written: "Thank you all for this space where I feel free to be myself."

If Philosophy for Children can provide this "space to feel free to be oneself" for more children I want it for all the girls and boys in my country, maybe then we will be able to work together in the construction of a society that is free of uncritical acceptance of assigned roles that have oppressed so many women in the past.

Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695) one of our greatest poets and scholar is considered one of the first feminists in the history of México, was a great defender of the right of women to education. She had to fight all her life to be able to study, and in her work she shows epistemological and scientific knowledge usually not accessible for the women of her time.

In *Primero sueño* (First Dream) she describes the unconquerable quest for knowledge of the soul undoubtedly inspired by her own experience. In the *Respuesta a Sor Filotea de la Cruz* (Answer to Sor Filotea de la Cruz) she openly defended the right of women to attain knowledge.

Let us hope that in the context of the community of inquiry girls will learn that knowledge is their rightful heritage, as this notorious woman found out for herself in the XVII century.

Philosophy for children as I see it can be a powerful way, both because of its theoretical foundations and its communitarian practice, to achieve the kind of education that children my country need. The community of inquiry provides the ideal setting for them to realize their essential equality and their worth as autonomous individuals.

When we talk about education, citizenship, democracy, we must not forget that not all persons living in our societies are real citizens. When they remain in ignorance, exploitation, poverty, many of our children are very far from a democratic citizenship.

The children from indigenous communities speak a different language; they have a different *world view* from that of Western culture. But the main problem is that difference

is linked with hierarchy, because they are in fact, second rate citizens, deprived of the same opportunities of education, political participation or labor.

In the Mexican Federation of Philosophy for Children we have been exploring two paths. The first one is to include in our communities of inquiry in schools, ethical and political reflection. We hope that in such a way children can learn to accept difference as an opportunity of mutual enrichment, and can become sensitive towards injustice, in order to develop respect and solidarity for others and the desire to work together for a just society. At the same time, through reasonable and collaborative dialogue they can develop responsibility and reasonable wish for justice.

Another strategy is the use of short stories in which children from different sociocultural environments engage in a dialogue. This, we think, is a more appropriate model for societies as ours, in which more than 52 languages and cultures co-exist.

In order to write these stories, philosophy students lived with indigenous communities during the summer, and learned about their ideas, ideals and beliefs.

To bring the communities of inquiry to indigenous communities, we worked with teachers to translate the stories into Tseltal and Totsil, two of the most used languages in Chiapas, so children can learn to think together in their own language. Some of our researchers developed materials in Náhuatl, another important language in our country.¹

At the same time we offered workshops for bilingual teachers, so they could work with children both in Spanish and their own language. The workshops were held during weekends, and even when the bilingual teachers had to travel a long way, they were the first to arrive each Saturday morning. At first we had some difficulties arising from linguistic misunderstanding, as well as from a different perspective due to a different world view, but with the help of everyone, we could solve them and started to share points of view. At first, the teachers spoke very little, but after a while, they began to be more

¹ In this Project we worked with Juan Carlos Lago, from the Spanish Center of P4C and with Juan Moreno, Tseltal teacher who was part of the team that translated the stories.

confident and they brought to the discussion suggestive new perspectives about the ideas we discussed.²

After some time, we had the opportunity to visit several schools. The first time we visited a school in an indigenous community, we were surprised by the quality of the dialogue and the seriousness with which, both the children and the teacher, were involved in it. We were received very formally, and one of the children told us that, although they always spoke *Mazahua*, they would speak Spanish, so we could participate. (One of the aims of the project was to improve bilingual efficiency.) At the end of the session, the parents offered us a light lunch they had prepared. Being a poor community, we were ashamed to eat their scarce food, but they were so proud of sharing with us, and so grateful that their children were doing so well at school, that we had to accept.

In another school, we visited pre-school teacher that picked up her pupils from their houses, combed their hair and washed their hands, gave them breakfast and then started the community of inquiry by showing the kids an illustration from a magazine. The children were eager to participate and seemed to have mastered the basic moves of a philosophical dialogue.

When the teachers graduated from the Diploma, they presented Pixi's plays according to their interpretation. We had the chance to see the bilingual teachers comparing the myths of origin of their own culture, with the platonic myths, giving us a beautiful lesson of intelligent conversation between cultures.

Then, there was a formal ceremony with a speech from one of the teachers in which he thanked us for what they called "the light of philosophy". We had a celebration sharing delicious tortillas hand made by the teachers.

But the transformation worked both ways. Both the other teachers and us, the teacher educators grew out of this experience. We learned, not only that difference enriches us, but also and more important, that difference should not be conceived hierarchically. We formed a community committed to join efforts for justice. So, who learned more?

² In this Project I worked with two of my colleagues :Yolanda García Pavvón and Pablo flores del Rosario.

These experiences showed us that the community of inquiry can help to develop sensitivity and commitment towards the other that is also part of our identity. Through memory and compassion we can educate for a social order based in justice and solidarity.

In educating for democracy we must not forget that a necessary precondition is education for justice. Without justice reasonable participation of citizens in democratic life is impossible.

A democratic society requires education in critical ethics, capable of presenting new social order to society, one based on justice and solidarity, in which memory prevents us from repeating injustice; only through that road will we have a real political transformation.

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Kindergarden in the State of México

Language: Otomí

ⁱ Relatos del Viejo Antonio Translation is mine

ⁱⁱ Relatos el viejo Antonio. Translation is mine