

Diabolic Thesis

Outcomes and Governance of Public Education: Some Pessimist Theses about Schooling and Politics in Contemporary Societies

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Introduction

Greetings on behalf of the Research Committee on Sociology of Education of the International Sociological Association. I am convinced that this Mid-Term Conference will accomplish its lofty academic goals, enhancing our understanding of the outcomes and governance of schooling, and particularly providing new insights into the global agenda of privatization of public education.

In this opening address I would like to briefly offer to you a series of challenging thesis about the workings of contemporary schooling, its relationships with politics and civil society, and the impacts of privatization and globalization on public education systems. These theses take into account past and present research about the outcomes of schooling in contemporary capitalist societies, the impacts of privatization, and the process of globalization in public education systems.

But before I proceed to state the eight thesis of this Opening Address, I would like to add a word of caution about my motives and intentions. I know that all of us have spent a great deal of our professional lives trying to serve children, youth and adults with our research, teaching and outreach, seeking the improvement of school systems, teaching and learning, engaging in passionate public debates about education and culture—criticizing and celebrating at the same time—, and educating undergraduate and graduate students to be good and productive researchers, administrators, or teachers. In many different ways, a committed researcher in education is, invariably, an advocate for an educational system of quality and relevance in the lives of people. I also know that we want to expand the frontiers of knowledge because we believe that knowledge could be made a powerful democratic means for social transformation. Finally, I also know that every day,

everywhere in the world, the educational adventure is being recreated by devoted teachers who are eager to help children, youth and adults to get educated even in the most adverse conditions. Yet, I want you to consider for a minute these pessimist theses. They represent my attempt to act as a Devil's advocate in examining the purposes, outcomes and governance of schooling in contemporary societies.

Diabolic Theses?

Thesis 1.- Schooling justifies and reproduces inequalities in capitalist societies. A number of elements intervene to produce this outcome, including school tracking, racist behavior, elite networking, disciplinary sanctions, lack of relevance of subject matter for people's life, inefficient resource allocation and lack of efficacy of schooling as measured in high drop out and repetition rates or irrelevant *pro forma* learning.

Thesis 2.- Schooling reproduces authoritarian, classist, racists, homophobic and patriarchal relationships in capitalist societies. This is the result of the authoritarianism of administrators and school bureaucrats, and is compounded by the authoritarianism of parents, and the authoritarianism of knowledge production, distribution, exchange and consumption. Indeed, knowledge is not in and by itself democratic even though it could be placed at the service of a democratic project.

Thesis 3.- Education and schooling are not means to bring about a social revolution in contemporary societies. As Durkheim has reminded us time and time again, they are systems, as they always were, conservative in nature. Yet a number of contemporary factors contribute to underscore this situation. There is a slowdown of social movements. After the fall of socialism, capitalism seems to have triumphed all over the world. With the triumph of capitalism, individualism as a philosophy of life has triumphed. Individualism has triumphed because with the decline in the welfare state, any form of organized solidarity has also been damaged perhaps beyond repair. With the destruction of organized solidarity, competition and not collaboration have emerged as the key goals in educational institutions and elsewhere in civil society.

Thesis 4.- Schooling and knowledge commodifies social relationships. School culture creates nothing by a culture of consumption. Even in the

radical camps there is a culture of consumption prevailing. In the United States there is a cottage industry of Paulo Freire's thought. There is a cottage industry of radicals promoting models of social transformation that only advance their individual careers. There is a large number of intellectuals, many of whom previously were advocating social transformation that now act as a new class of managers in capitalist societies—more so in universities in capitalist societies. This new intellectual bourgeoisie cut across all races, ethnicities, sexual dispositions, genders, religions, and the like.

Thesis 5.- Some radical educators, including some following the Freirean tradition, at some point in their struggle for liberation have left school settings with the intention to change the systems of public education from the outside. This has occasionally resulted in that the Right has taken progressively more control of the available 'spaces' within academic institutions. This positioning has been helped by the logic of administrative and technical control, which challenges through instrumental knowledge any form of reflexive knowledge (à la Habermas), and creates new conditions for the manipulation of consciousness rather than consciousness raising.

Thesis 6.- While schooling may be pure social reproduction, in itself is losing ground as part and parcel of the socialization devices compared to the mass media. The schools are losing relevance; the written word is losing relevance facing the culture of the images; even the curriculum as official knowledge is losing relevance facing the hidden curriculum of the mass media. There is a growing sense of fragmentation and isolation in terms of social relationships and relationships of learning and knowledge. There is a kind of solipsism, which may in the end result in political apathy, nihilism, and social disorganization. There is an increased power of unconventional relationships taking over *le quotidien* of people (e.g. gang behavior). There is, finally, a breakdown in family relationships, in the connections between youth culture and adult cultures, in the connections between teachers and pupils, in the structured mechanisms of social control, in the rule of the law, and in community intimacy. In short, while schooling may be pure social reproduction, and mass media appears as a more powerful means of social reproduction than schooling, what is being reproduced are not even the traditional, conservative cultures or traditional themes of schooling but desegregated communities, fragmented selves, isolated individuals, nihilism and the utopia of apocalypses as reflected in the several school shootings that

have been experienced recently in the United States (Columbine High School is a case in point).

Thesis 7.- Schooling and educational expenditures, therefore, are just a waste of monies for society, a breeding place for nihilism, opportunism, and pedantism. Schooling is more valuable as a parking lot for children and youth, helping their parents forget about taking care of them for few hours. Schools resemble more boarding warehouses than learning places. They have lost the edge as state instruments acting in *locus parentis* helping children and youth to become socialize in morality, and cultivated in the disciplines of the spirit and the body. In short, a most meaningful cultural creation of the XIX century and modernism has become totally irrelevant in the XXI century.

Thesis 8.- The lack of relevance of schooling is now augmented with the phenomena of globalization. The dialectics of the global and the local show that the school, rather than being a space for emancipation is an space for authoritarianism, control, social reproduction, and disciplinary behavior. The dynamics of the global are demolishing the dynamics of local control of educational establishments and posing challenges that the educational establishment is unable or unwilling to meet.

Let me conclude with just one question: is my pessimism justified?

Thank you very much.

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