

RECONSIDERING THE TRANSITIONAL ROLE OF EDUCATION

« Faut-il faire de l'élève un futur chômeur intelligent et révolutionnaire ou bien un futur producteur-consommateur aliéné ? »¹

Legros, Bernard and Delplanque, Jean-Noël

« Il est tout à fait inévitable qu'une société ayant un niveau de prospérité très élevé se soucie de plus en plus de le préserver. Mais lorsqu'un plan d'études met plus l'accent sur la sécurité que sur le moteur réel de la prospérité, celle-ci sera tôt ou tard mise en danger »²

Avenir Suisse

A lot has been written by degrowth thinkers about different dimensions of social, economic and political structures regarding potential paths towards a societal transition. However, there is a big gap when it comes to education. One could wonder how it can be given the central role played by education in any society as a modelling tool of people's behaviour, values, skills and knowledge since ages³. It is not by chance that the control over education is found among the strategies of the leading elites to ensure the reproduction of the status quo and the social structure. Is it that education is just considered as a domination tool? Could we think about it as a path towards the construction of a new society? It is indeed a difficult question to answer. As equally difficult is to think about the use of accumulating an increasing number of years of education and diplomas in a conjuncture of multidimensional crisis, in which unemployment rates have risen to historical levels. This accumulation will not

¹ "Should we prepare the students to be intelligent and revolutionary but unemployed or alienated producers-consumers?", translation by the author

² «It's quite inevitable that a society with a high prosperity level is progressively worried to preserve it. But when a study plan focuses more on security rather than on the real driver of prosperity, this society will sooner or later be in danger », translation by the author. *Avenir Suisse* is an independent think tank based on the Anglo-Saxon model and sustained upon liberal values oriented towards market economy.

³ Just as an example, OECD countries, in 2010, spent on average 6.3% of its GDP on educational institutions.

necessarily help young generations to find a job and fulfil their *needs*. In that case, what is the real use of education?

The aim of this short paper is to analyse different dimensions of educational systems in *western developed countries* from a degrowth perspective. On the other hand, it also tries to explore possible elements that could eventually lead to a progressive social transition.

In the current *western developed societies*, and for a long time now, education has a clear and obvious role of transmitting values and shaping citizens' behaviours. These values clearly respond to a specific conceptualization of the world and our place in it, and they make difficult the task of gaining space for discussion or questioning. It is what Legros and Delplanque have called "teaching as usual" by referring to the current educational model as one that contributes to perpetuate a hegemonic thinking⁴. Behind it one can easily identify a mythicization of certain values such as growth, competition, individualism, success and progress. Besides, all of them are more often than not addressed from a quantitative perspective and they seem to be leading to a progressive marketization of education.

Faced with this context, one doesn't just start thinking about the contents of the educational system, but also about the possibilities of suggesting transitional paths towards potential alternatives. At this stage, we must confront once again the eternal debate about the source of change which can lie at different levels: the micro level (individual sphere), the macro level (collective sphere) or the meso level (as the interaction between the previous two). However, at first sight and given the apparent retro-alimentation existing between the current general educational system and the social structure, it seems plausible to trust individuals. With regard to this, and to come back to Latouche thoughts "educators should themselves be detoxified to transmit a non-toxic education"⁵.

This "non-toxic" education could, as a first step, revisit all the values, concepts, conceptualizations and contents that currently configure the educational core structure. One of the main elements considered here is the place that human beings occupy in the world and its relation with the environment. According to Orr there is currently a lack of sense of place which "is lost as we move down the continuum toward the totalized urban environment where nature exists in tiny, isolated fragments by permission only"⁶. Closely linked with this issue, we find a huge challenge for degrowth theorists regarding the increasing urbanization process all around the

⁴ Legros, Bernard et Delplanque, Jean Noël (2009), p.143

⁵ Latouche, Serge (2010), p.133

⁶ Orr, David W. (1992), p.103

world. Even if we are recently experiencing a subtle increase in what has been called “neo-ruralism” in *developed societies*, we cannot ignore the fact that emerging economies show a huge trend towards urbanization processes involving billions of people with all the implications it has regarding the disconnection with nature just mentioned before. Although degrowth is mainly used as a theoretical concept in *developed countries*, it is nonetheless an issue that should be addressed in order to convey a more coherent and reliable message.

Localization being one of the key elements of degrowth approaches in order to achieve a more socially, economically and environmentally sustainable society, this becomes a fundamental element concerning education. There is an urgent need to relink children with nature and society, as it is probably the only way future generations may learn to respect them. At the same time, this localization of the educational process would also imply an adaptation of the academic content to every single context by opposition to the current international trend towards homogenization.

Secondly, we could wonder about the content of education itself and what aims it should respond to. If the answer is to “live life to its fullest”⁷ there should definitely be a reconnection between the intellectual and the emotional side of the educational process as a whole. And not only this, but also a revalorization of certain activities which link us with our environment and that have been set apart in the spiral logic of accumulating more and more knowledge, this accumulation being an end per se. For this reason, an interdisciplinary approach would probably help to have a more humanistic vision of the world we are living in. Trying to understand the world from a specific silo is not sufficient: it is critical to have an integrated and holistic view of it to be able to analyze systematically the current challenges. A first step towards this interdisciplinary approach could be for instance to valorize vocational training, dual education and/or apprenticeships.

Thirdly and closely linked with what has been exposed so far, there is the need to rethink the learning outcomes evaluation systems which in most of the cases are based on quantitative methods, reflecting the memory capacities of students. If we approach education from a degrowth point of view, these evaluation systems have no sense any more. It shouldn't be about ranking students, and setting from the very first steps of their socialization process a clear trend towards competition, comparison and fight. Instead, a more convivial educational system would make the most of every student, no matter what their qualities are. The same argument together with the localization issue can be used when considering international evaluation systems comparing how different countries perform. Do they reflect a will of improving each educational

⁷ Orr, David W. (1992), p.99

system to respond to their specific contexts and challenges? Or, do they rather measure how well each country is adapted to a certain set of standardized values?

However, and even if these few elements can sound obvious and logic at the theoretical level, how can a progressive transition take place when the system does not offer places from where questioning the roots of its weaknesses? In this regard, it may seem that there is an urgent need to reflect about the possibility of hybrid transitional models which could push for a change at the interaction space between both the individual and the collective level. From this perspective, “grass-roots participation will be essential in the process of reorganizing systems”⁸ as it would also fulfill the will of democratization naturally intrinsic in the degrowth approaches.

This leads us to highlight the issue of where education takes place. Is it just inside classrooms? We don't think so. When talking about learning how to live one's life at its fullest, it seems that education is more likely to respond to a life-long learning process happening in a wide range of places, situations and contexts. According to Delors and his holistic approach to education: “learning to know happens at school, learning to do happens in the workplace, learning to be happens in the private sphere, and learning to live together happens in the public sphere”⁹. It is precisely in all these spaces, outside the formal educational circuits, where we, as people, have the power to make a change.

Nevertheless, as emphasized in the first opening quotation, in order to make this transition through education possible, a balance needs to be found between socializing students to be part of the existing society, while at the same time providing young citizens with the tools and the critical spirit to try to find new ways of doing things. To find this balance without taking the risk of excluding people of the system itself seems to be a complex engineering work.

We need ambitious, though realistic and doable propositions adapted to each context and community. Herein lies the democratic dimension of the whole process, and probably its chances to succeed. It's not about designing big strategies, but being conscious of what we, as people, can do in our everyday life and in our most immediate environment.

This process has undoubtedly to start within ourselves, as the current educational system is hugely permeable and will continue to perform its shaping capacity upon people and their behaviour, values, skills and knowledge which lie at the heart of the status quo reproduction. Maybe this is one of the reasons why almost nobody from

⁸ Orr, David W. (1992), p.133

⁹ Delors, Jacques (2013), p.321

the degrowth paradigm has really explored ways, processes or alternative structures with regard to education.

If we want to fill this gap there is an urgent need in the first place to awaken interest among adults, so as they become aware of what kind of society they want, and therefore, of what sort of education they envisage for their children. It is, of course, a slow transitional process which will probably take more than one generation, but in which each of us can become an “educator” in our own environment. The nature of this process would not just be decentralized and locally based, but also democratic and participative. And, in that sense, it would be perfectly in line with the main values of the degrowth paradigm.

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