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"Granice i transgresje współczesnego wychowania. Kontestacyjny wymiar pedagogiki krytycznej i jej praktyczne implikacje", Klaudia Węc, Toruń 2013 : [recenzja]

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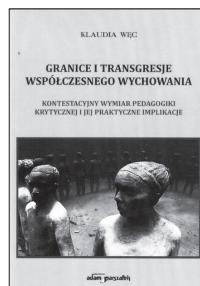
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Klaudia Węc,  
**Granice i transgresje współczesnego wychowania.  
Kontestacyjny wymiar pedagogiki krytycznej  
i jej praktyczne implikacje**  
[*Borders and Transgressions in Contemporary Education:  
Contestatory Dimension of Critical Pedagogy  
and Its Practical Implications*],

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Do We Need to Be the “Upholders of Lack”?  
Pedagogy in Search of the Unknown and the Problem of Criticism<sup>1</sup>

Klaudia Węc, in her book *Granice i transgresje współczesnego wychowania. Kontestacyjny wymiar pedagogiki krytycznej i jej praktyczne implikacje* [*Borders and Transgressions in Contemporary Education: Contestatory Dimension of Critical Pedagogy and Its Practical Implications*], presents the issue of a subject which is structured by a lack in their<sup>2</sup> search for a desire.<sup>3</sup> However, the lack is experienced by the subject as a yearning for something unknown, indefinable,

<sup>1</sup> The text is a presentation of some reflections after the reading of Klaudia Węc's book. It is written in the atmosphere of—as Andrzej Wierciński once expressed—*parestesia*, i.e. a frank speaking. The speaking from within a conversation with the book assumes a Ricouerian credit of trust as well as understand well-meaning criticism from the side of a reader.

<sup>2</sup> A short explanation: the form ‘them’ that will mean ‘he or she’ will be used when the sex of the subject is of no importance, because the statement refers to both of them.

<sup>3</sup> See K. Węc, *Granice i transgresje współczesnego wychowania. Kontestacyjny wymiar pedagogiki krytycznej i jej praktyczne implikacje*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń 2013, p. 10.

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vague. If I understand the point well, psychoanalysis states that the indeterminable wanting which produces a desire is the result of the Oedipus complex, namely love for the subject's mother—love based on the sex drive of the subject—is forbidden by the father who represents, symbolizes the law. The Law means a restriction imposed on the narcissistic subject in the form of a ban on owning the mother like an object of the subject's (sexual) desire. The necessity of the figure of the father consists in his symbolic power to enter between the child and the mother in order to show the mother as his own 'object' of a desire. If the complex is experienced normally, the subject (the child) suffers a bereavement, a loss of his beloved—in a way a loss of his own mother and the object of (sexual) pleasure—so he tries to find another object of his desire. However, from now on the subject is frail in the sense that he lost the first, biological object of his desire, and he must create himself from the beginning, but the lack is now the foundation of himself. So, on the one hand, the father representing the law, (and the culture, the society) symbolically separates the child from the mother and constitutes the lack that is the cause of a child's suffering. However, on the other hand, the separation is needed to develop the autonomy of a child, of their freedom to create themselves in search of the lost object. Therefore, the representation of the Law, of a ban, a limitation is undoubtedly needed in the normal development of a child.

Contemporary mass culture, focused on fulfilling the needs of people perceived as consumers of products rather than human beings, uses a promise of happiness and fulfillment thanks to the consumption (or consumerism) of the objects shown as necessary to achieve a goal, namely happiness. The problem is that the mass culture uses the very desire that is not to be fulfilled, because it is not at all possible to regain the first object of it. Moreover, the culture does not allow the subject to free themselves from their narcissism, because the culture offers and promises fulfillment of the needs that the subject is exposed to. As a result, the subject is released from any effort and is absolved of responsibility for themselves and for the others. The culture uses the rhetoric of easy success and happiness achieved through self-realisation. In this way, the mass culture is entirely responsible for creating mass society fed on the idea of freedom that is understood as never ending development without any obstacles

or troubles. If another stands in somebody's way to development, it is treated as an unwanted object to be removed. The problem is that the other with his claim to be noticed, seen and accepted enables the true freedom. The liberty lies in a dynamic relation with the other. So, emancipation that consists of an absolutely free subject is misleading and simply not real. It is an idea to make people more prone to manipulation and seduction that leads to alienation or empty activism—to put it in Emmanuel Mounier's words: to the alienation of Narcissus and Hercules. These forms of alienation have something in common, namely they leave the subject blind or deaf to the real desire of the other(s) or of the subject themselves. The lack which was supposed to shape the subject in their search of a desire turns into neurotic egocentrism that consumes everything and everybody. The demands of the subject seem to never end—the more they demand, the more they want. The problem is that they think their self-realization brings them happiness, however the realization never fulfills their true desire. However, is it possible that this true desire based on a lack will arise if the culture makes people unable to be wanted by significant (or even any) others? In this context Klaudia Węc introduces the important issue of educationalists and educational practitioners: to be the “upholders of lack”.

The task means that the professional individuals responsible for upbringing and education must understand the subject within a tension between nature and culture, the subject shaped by the phenomenon of perception and language, the subject who wants to be a desire for another individual. The most important trait of both educationalist and practitioner is to be critical of the culture—the culture that promises too much; to be vigilant against any kind of alienation (especially of their transgressional behavior) and to fulfill the need of significant other who makes the subject able to question themselves in order to re-build them. The lack is their defense against the apparent harmony of life<sup>4</sup> provided by the mass culture. The subject seduced by the culture relaxes their own vigilance against some false identifications which lead to mindlessness, so the subject loses reflectiveness and responsibility. In other words, the real development of the subject lies in a balance between law and desire, i.e.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibidem, p. 11.

between the other's demands and the subject's desire.<sup>5</sup> A strategy of development needs to take this into account because—in the light of psychoanalysis—there is no development without taking into consideration the other as well as without taking a risk. And here the problem begins, because the Author states that contemporary adults lack the ability to predict events that go beyond the process of teaching/learning (the didactics); moreover, they are not capable of understanding the changes to a culture and in the same time they do not understand the process of human's development.<sup>6</sup> So, they abandon the real education and up-bringing of children and young people. At the same time, they expect children to be good, polite, well-behaved, and all this with no awareness that these expectations increase the children's sense of guilt.<sup>7</sup> Psychoanalysis has been treated here as a remedy for the situation but the reading of the book leans towards the question of whether the Author does not absolutize it. Certainly, psychoanalysis can be helpful in understanding people's behavior and in explaining the cultural mechanisms of seducing the subject. Furthermore, it is a good background for showing the implications of such mechanisms for education. Despite these useful applications, the main question is whether the claim of its (practical, technical?) universality as a unique remedy for mass culture (as well as for the mass education) is not a problematic one, because it can lead to a psychoanalytic reduction effect.

It is worth noticing that psychoanalysis is a language that must be learnt, so one must assimilate its vocabulary and its way of reading the other, its symbolic power. It is a very enlightening, salutary experience that teaches us a lot. So, it seems to be a good idea to introduce it in the process of training teachers. As professionals they can broaden their horizons and be enriched with a certain way of looking at their work with children and other people as well, namely, they can gain a symbolic, language perception that is to be built up, energize their ability to talk with deep meaning, to conversation and to get rid of a blind—and deaf, one can add—empty talking, a babbling. However, one can wonder whether the training is to increase the openness to the other, to enhance one's vigilance and sensitivity

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 12.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 16.

or, on the contrary, to decrease—rather unwittingly—one’s openness to a reality of the other that goes beyond the psychoanalytic language and its way of perception/understanding of the other. The idea of psychoanalysis which provides instruments for education (and, in doing so, to our life in general as well) because the discourse—that of course is aware of the contemporary culture (or cult) of efficiency, so it must use a terminology taken from it—that can make people not to be either vigilant or sensitive to the real otherness of the other. Practitioners can very easily take the terminology for granted and simply use it as closed off—in a sense—walled-in language, and in consequence, they can to easily reduce some experiences of the other to psychoanalytical language. The intellectuals, theoreticians, in turn, can easily universalize the reduction being condemned to stick to psychoanalytic universe, even if they criticize their founder.

Another issue arises in the light of the second subsection of the second chapter of the book. The question now concerns the status and the meaning of the personal life and development of the psychoanalyst. The chapter has at least a twofold importance: firstly, it is very useful to academic study, because it shows some interesting—and very popular in education—interpretations (or even overinterpretations) of psychoanalysis, with a healthy dose of criticism; secondly, it introduces the very question of the kind of person who teaches psychoanalysis in the context of their biography. The issue makes it possible to recall the old question about who is the real pedagogue, the educator or good parents. It is of such importance because within the very question resides the tension between the natural and the cultural—a tension so important in psychoanalytic understanding of the subject and the culture. However, it is the issue of the pedagogy of culture and critical pedagogy as well. The issue has the chance to be awakened in every experience of the upbringing of a child, because it lies in our experience of the world. Taking into consideration the meaning of psychoanalysis in the interpretation of the subject, one must remember that psychoanalysis, as well as any kind of criticism, only plays a shaping role if it enables us to see (and hear, and feel) something or the other in a n o t h e r way. It is the sense of education—to learn to see differently and to have opportunity to talk about our experience with the openness to the other way of experiencing the world.

The reading of Klaudia Węc's book can give an impression that we—as adults, educators, pedagogues, parents—should be, on the one hand, the “upholders of lack”, namely the subject's desire (the desire of something vague and unknown and the desire to be a desire of the other); on the other hand, the rhetoric of the book shows us psychoanalysis and critical pedagogy as a privileged, if not the only, healing way to follow. And here another twofold issue is to be considered: What is the relation between being the “upholders of lack” and following Lacan's psychoanalysis situated in the context of critical pedagogy? The answer is by no means simple. Whichever way one look at it, one should give some thoughts to the elements of the relation the question concerns.

First, the issue of lack. Do we need to be the upholders of something that unavoidably appears during the process of natural (socio-biological) development?<sup>8</sup> If the development is impeded or disturbed as it appears to be in our narcissistic mass culture which produces no place for relationships based on the desire of the other, namely true love or at least respect for other relationships, the very culture produces the lack of a significant other as well—that is why the narcissistic subject is in search of something but they do not know exactly what is missing. This lack is efficiently used by the market and politics that promises too much. So, the lack is already within our (every?) culture. The problem seems not to be in the lack of lack but rather in the problematic identification that the subject does in search of fulfillment. So, the most important is not to be the upholders of lack but rather the upholders of the great significance of (symbolic) father's role. Only the very task is crucial for education which is to maintain the vigilance against transgressive behavior.<sup>9</sup> In this conception of education, a risk is the condition of subject's development: education is about the ways of confronting the subject with

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, pp. 215–222. The Author describes the important Lacanian concept, namely the moment of the birth of the speaking subject as the lack. The order of language is preceded by the Oedipus complex that is evoked in turn by the father's ban on the child's access to the mother. The frustration enables the child to enter the symbolic (language) order. Taking into account that the instrument of psychoanalysis is language—the act of speaking—the moment reinforces the meaning of a good education which prevents the subjects' transgressive behavior. See: *ibidem*, p. 84 and cf. pp. 253–258.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 259–262.

a difficult situation which is under control of the other.<sup>10</sup> Reflexive and at the same time skillful educationalists and teachers are invited to create initiation experiences which influence all of the existential events of the subject.<sup>11</sup> Another issue worth noticing is how these experiences are to be created, and organized. Does not the organization, creation, involve being the upholder of a certain truth, rather than—as the Author states—the upholder of lack?<sup>12</sup>

Secondly, there is the issue of the status of psychoanalysis. If we assume that the psychoanalytical discourse and the critical pedagogy want to be the significant other to us (and to influence the people like the symbolic law does), it is worth respecting. The very yearning can be understood as the true desire to take responsibility for people and—in a way—for the culture they want to create: the culture that, on the one hand, responds to the desire of the subject, but on the other hand, is a space for socially demanding relationships that respect the desire of the other. However, if we take into account the conviction that we all live within a narcissistic culture which produces no space for the symbolic Father, the assumption seems to be more problematic. If the culture makes it impossible to go through the process of identification, the mirror phase, the Oedipus complex and sublimation, the significant other cannot appear unless the culture is not changed. But how can one change the culture? It seems—at least in the light of the book—only by the force of revolution and, of course, there is the question of what kind of revolution is at stake here. In any event, the owners of psychoanalytical knowledge can justify a (symbolic) violence and seductive power imposed on others. That is why one should think of psychoanalysis and critical pedagogy as rather a kind of experience that must be rendered into a language within a conversation in which the other is not imposed on the interlocutor as the one who knows better, but as the other who sees differently and gives the interlocutor a unique opportunity to awake their own reflection directed toward their own lives and experiences that must be loved and accepted. If not, the criticism of ideology (reinforced by psychoanalytic discourse) is in danger of transforma-

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. *Ibidem*, p. 262–263.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 298.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 297.



tion into fault-finding that can become an ideology itself.<sup>13</sup> Then it is prone to criticize everything but itself. The context brings to mind a private, rather provocative statement concerning the matter that still—to say it colloquially—gives food for thought:

They criticize the business strategy, but they promote their own strategy of ideological success. They criticize wealth and lavishness, but they dream for the richness they do not possess. They overthrow the political system and social order in the name of freedom and happiness of individuals, but they justify it by violence.

In the same mood one can express some reservations about the psychoanalytical approach after a reading of the book:

They criticize the human needs, but they have to create a feeling of lack in order to make people want something, desire something, even the unknown. They must be upholders of lack, because they are partly responsible for our mass culture. They discovered—perhaps too late—they create the Narcissus of today, so needed to make people to ask for their salvation.<sup>14</sup>

Hermeneutic criticism, in turn, is always directed not only to what it questions, but first of all toward a self-criticism of somebody's (self)understanding, as Hans-Georg Gadamer emphasizes. In this way, the hermeneutic criticism is neither too repressive nor too gullible or artless. It is more open to the experience of Paul Ricoeur's credit of trust and welcoming the other in their otherness, not reduced to psychoanalytical interpretation but open to the language of hospitality.

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<sup>13</sup> The very paradoxical aspect of the critical pedagogy and the criticism of ideology has been noticed and elaborated by Rafał Włodarczyk (*Lévinas. W stronę pedagogiki azylu*, Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, Warszawa 2009). His argument is very interesting because the author himself belongs to the critical pedagogy.

<sup>14</sup> The last sentence bring to mind a novel by Iris Murdoch in which a multilevel (and amusing) criticism of psychoanalysis is presented. One sentence uttered by Georgie, one of the novel's characters, seems to be especially meaningful: "As for setting people free, I don't trust these professional liberators. Anyone who is good at setting people free is also good at enslaving them, if we are to believe Plato. The trouble with you, Martin, is that you are always looking for a master". I. Murdoch, *A Severed Head*, Penguin Books and Chatto & Windus, Middlesex 1961, pp. 6–7.