

(Re) Imagining a Shared Future through Education for Global Social Justice

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Introduction

The positioning of the main discourses of our time as a “clash of civilizations” has had a profound impact on local, national and global relations through processes of legitimization. We have seen this positioning reproduce many traditional logics of supremacy, including cultural, racial, geopolitical, and patriarchal. By engaging in the problematic and ontologically Eurocentric clash logics, we enter into the process whereby particular groups are transformed into signs whose production and management are intentionally obfuscated to the point where projects of terrorism and counter-terrorism, and supremacy through essentialized centre-periphery hierarchies, are fabricated and eventually dangerously naturalized. As those groups who are relegated to the periphery try to de-centre dominant forces and reposition themselves as equal members of a global society, this repositioning is seen as a threat to a “natural” order. Contrary to this perennially confrontational global perspective, what humanity needs and can achieve through constructive agency and deliberative dialogue are active and engaged civic and institutional platforms that reduce inter-group and international misunderstandings and conflicts thereby enabling the co-creation of new and more just social realities.

To achieve the much needed counter-clash and open inter-civilizational dialogue and cooperation, we must also understand and be willing to deal with the devastating injustices of, for example, deep poverty, irreversible environmental destruction, and the myriad of globalization-driven structural violences that are affecting the lives of people all over the world. As was highlighted in the UN Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, there is an urgent need for engagement within, across, and among groups that challenges the 'separatist' logics and builds a praxis of respect and multicentric appreciation for the vast diversity and difference that strengthens our world. This engagement must also work to build bridges of understanding that support peaceful interactions that go beyond the rhetoric of coexistence, and aims to achieve respectful and reciprocal relations of recognition among individuals, groups, nations and hemispheres. Recognition at both the historical and subjective levels (see Taylor, 1995; Honneth, 1995), should be more than just the objective categories of actual relationships, but must be seen as a cultural and existential need that should not be denied to any people.

By advancing a line of analysis that disavows the clash logics, one could add so much to the recognition as well as the well-being of especially those communities whose lives have been destructively re-arranged by colonialism and globalization (Said, 1993; wa Thiongo, 1993). While all the noble, counter-clash possibilities mentioned here are important and urgently needed, they will not be achieved without enlisting the critical functions of new educational programs that effectively create such civic and continental engagements. To establish such programs of education, therefore, both the concept as well as the indispensable practices of social justice must be taken into account, with the newly inclusive spaces of learning being designed for, and achieving the social justice project. And that will not be possible without making the contents of the education program inclusive of the histories, cultures and the aspirations of all. As should be known to many educational researchers, schooling, in all its facets, and along with its sister contexts of informal and non-formal learning, has been instrumental in promoting and cementing the clash thesis (Achebe, 2000; wa

Thiongo, 1986). Hence, the need to reconstruct dominant educational programs that are actually representative of one worldview, but have been masquerading as genuinely universal for too long. To do so, the radical equalization of all life perspectives (Stam and Shohat, 1994) and we would add, life needs, should be highlighted and sought on behalf of all humanity.

Relocating the Meanings and Intentions of Social Justice

In the general intersections of liberal democracies and their attached discourses, social justice may be neutralized to the extent the rationalist notions of the enlightenment could reign supreme. Here, with life chances generally seen as fitting the now sociologically mute constructions of the functionalist-structuralist system, the assumption that social justice is there to be had by anyone who needs it, becomes problematic. Perhaps more than anything else, it is so de-historicized that it ignores, not only past injustices that have realized the current explosively unequal realities of life, it also deliberately forgets the continuities of highly uneven power relations that are sustaining the weaknesses we see in the overall project of social justice. It is also the case that with the proliferation of the projects of globalization, the weaknesses in global justice are expanding across the world (Abdi, 2007), and as in the liberal democracy belief systems, the presumed 'survival of the fittest' has derailed the lives of people who have been on the wrong side of the historical outcomes (Mann, 2006; Memmi, 1991).

It is in the context of this prescription, and with equitable intercontinental dialogue and understanding not on the agenda, that liberal democracy is supposedly curing everyone's ills (see Fukuyama, 1993) that people whose historical and actual trajectories are different from those of the European metropolis, would be asked, in fact expected to fit this model of social justice definitions and dispensations. Here, Nyerere's points many years ago should still resonate with much validity when he spoke about the counter-individualistic saliency of African life vis-à-vis the systems of colonialism that have distorted both the cosmologies

and earth-bound locations of Africans themselves (Nyerere, 1968). Indeed, with the communal and selectively geriatric life management ways of the East (not only Africa, but also Asia and pre-colonial Oceania), and the pre-Columbus Americas, now replaced by the exclusively detached rule of the Western educated elite (this is sometimes called democracy, which should be a misnomer), social justice has now become, not what you have a right to, but what the system prescribes for you in the realm of the world system. Amazingly, now with the project of the global injustice a fait accompli, the victors do not seem to be interested in engaging in some dialogue to lessen these pervasive conceptual and cultural disjunctures.

In most cases, in the so-called developing world, the stunting of the counter-clash dialogue platforms, lead to mass deprivations that are firstly created by the world systems, then labeled by the same systems as backwardness and underdevelopment. Here, an interesting point is that the meanings of deprivations, why it is happening, what it means and why these people are in a worse shape than, say, those in Canada, are also almost exclusively constructed by those who, in the first place, were responsible for the problems. In attaching our analysis for the need to understand social justice in a common historical and descriptive platforms, i.e., all of us coming together to figure the issue out, we cannot discount the ideas and theories of development. Here again, though, the needed discussions on the situation have also been betrayed by the lack of inter-civilizational dialogue. Needless to add that development is itself an imposed ideology for many (Rahnema & Bowtree, 1997; Ake, 1996), that never fulfilled its promise, and interestingly here again, the space for dialogue and discussion is not open. It is now almost 20 years since there was a widespread consensus that development as a program that makes people's better is no longer inclusive and therefore, selectively invalid (de Rivero, 2001; Leys, 1996; Schuurman, 1993). Yet, the problematic promise of development was neither redefined nor re-analyzed. Majid Rahnema's pointers in this regard are instructive and are directly related to the lack of global dialogue on social justice. He writes:

In the postcolonial era, through] the banner of development and progress, a tiny minority of local profiteers, supported by their foreign patrons set out to devastate the very foundations of social life. [In the process], a merciless war was waged against the age-old traditions of communal solidarity. The virtues of simplicity and conviviality, of noble forms of poverty, of the wisdom of relying on each other, and of the arts of suffering were derided as forms of underdevelopment (Rahnema, 1997, p. x).

Here, Rahnema's points present a starkly clear case of what happens when new meanings and categories of life are constructed for people without asking the concerned people what they thought about the situation. More problematically, this is happening when the previous categories of life are no longer there. Here, therefore, the processes of de-ontologizing are extensive, and without creating a new common forum for dialogue and understanding, the project of global social justice may be farther away than ever. Interestingly, even the late John Rawls (1971), undoubtedly the justice theorist par excellence in the West, and by extension (we now understand), around the world, analyzed and critiqued the rationalities of justice, but never disavowed the need to see beyond the orthogonal structures of the case, and look for everyday reasonableness of the applications of social justice, i.e., the changing contexts and possible malleability of the case, and how that should persuade us to be more open about our intentions and applications. For Rawls (2001), therefore, justice was not to be detached from the overall project of fairness, an idea that will probably not appeal to the new apostles of the neoliberal paradigm.

Conceptualizing Education for Global Social Justice

Many educational efforts are couched in the language of social justice, but as happens with so many other popular terms, much of the exhortation may actually be superficial. For example, the lack of any real conceptualization of what justice entails, particularly global social justice is at best weak, if not entirely alien to the overall analysis. In many cases, this lack serves to

keep justice efforts marginalized at best, and more often, anemically ineffective. More than that, the lip service that is paid to global social justice does not only betray the promise, it may also falsely convince us that things are fine, and the building of just multicultural relations is on course. We suggest that, while justice must always be historically and contextually based, there is a need to critically examine issues of distribution, recognition, engagement and violence in order to turn social justice education into more effective directions and toward global justice.

How do we bring global social justice and related educational practices into the space now dominated by messages of a hopelessly divided world? Dryzek (2006) argues we are seeing a clash among discourses rather than among civilizations. Discourses, in this sense are, as Milliken (1999) presents, a shared set of concepts, categories, and ideas that become embedded in practice through enactment. The subsequent conflicts between and among discourses is, what Dryzek (2006) suggests, where we need to focus our educational efforts. The dominant discourses reflect longstanding race, class, and gendered hierarchies that continue to be reproduced through new events and responses. For example, the discourses of globalization, anti-globalization, and de-globalization reflect many of the patterns of distribution established through colonial systems and resistance to these systems held in place by an ideological foundation of scarcity, individualism, and self-interest that normalizes privileging of a few at the expense of the many. A global social justice education must then engage learners as well as educators in deliberative engagement to address this macro-level discourse and the subsequent institutional structures that so severely impact life in locales throughout the world.

Dryzek (2006) also identifies the conflicting discourses of human rights and citizenship, where universal basic rights are contrasted against counter-terror discourses which would subordinate human rights and citizenship engagements to issues of security. Similar tensions exist in cases where national, religious, or ethnic identities are set up as oppositional. In response to these conflicting discourses, Dryzek (2006), Green (2006), and Benhabib (1996) describe how an important

deliberative turn in both understandings and practices of democracy is emerging in response to current conflicts and geopolitical, social, and economic trends of globalization. With this turn, we see democratic legitimacy currently being framed in terms of engagement or participation without the effective deliberation by those who are subjected within current systems and conflicts (Abdi, 2008), as well as more generally, those who are subject to collective decisions. The needed deliberative dialogic engagements may be the critical element in creating any shared future that extends beyond essentialized identity borders, beyond logics of supremacy, toward an authentic engagement with multiple worldviews based on reciprocity and respect.

If deliberation is a key to re-imagining a shared future including global justice, we need to understand what forms the basis for such deliberation if it is to move us toward new possibilities. Adam Kahane (2007) draws on his extensive work in post conflict negotiation and processes of change in Africa, Europe, Latin America, and North America, to adamantly claim that no change will happen without engagement and deliberative dialogue that addresses both love and power. As Honneth (1995) describes, love, rights, and solidarity are key processes of reciprocity that can enable an expanded path of relationships of recognition (p. 170). Counter-clash dialogic platforms founded on human rights and citizenship provide access as well as creative and transformational possibilities in relation to normalized exclusions of the majority of worldviews. Human rights and inclusive citizenship becomes the pathway for finding shared language to make experiences of disrespect and exclusion both visible and audible. This appeal to co-created projects of resistance and re-imagining reveals the normalized clash logics as elite-serving constructions rather than necessities of a modern age.

Kahane highlights the need to engage deeply respectful relationship building, or love, to move us beyond established fatalistic logics. As Martin Luther King Jr. declared in a speech shortly before his assassination,

... What we need to realize is that power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental

and anemic. It is precisely this collision of immoral power with powerless morality which constitutes the major crisis of our times. (Martin Luther King, Jr., 1967)

To negate the existence of, and in fact need for power relations in social contexts, is surely a real threat to global peace. Here, violence and injustice become unrecognized and hidden behind the silent face of obedience and false appeals to rational liberal thought. It has been the denial of both influences of love and power and a claimed neutrality that allow discourses of hegemony to persist in reproducing hierarchal social relations and massive inequalities in the distribution of both material and social benefits. Mansbridge (2006) defines power as “the actual or potential causal relation between the interests of an actor or set of actors and an outcome in which cause operates specifically through the use of force or the threat of sanction” (p. 47). If power is the ability to achieve a particular purpose for oneself or one’s group, then education for social justice must help students connect with their deepest purpose rather than uncritically subscribing to an externally determined purpose imposed through obfuscation of normalized relations of inequity, exclusion and injustice. If love is about connection with people, then we need to help students connect deeply with others to positively influence patterns of social development and social justice. Deliberative dialogue as educational process engages teachers and learners in the struggle for the establishment of relations of mutual recognition and reciprocity. The interconnectedness of conditions for practical relations between self and others must be based on universal respect for human dignity and creating a social and cultural climate of extensive human solidarity, even as this means deliberating about and through the conflict and struggle related to these shifting relations (Shultz, 2008). In this, education becomes as much about unlearning as it is about learning. There is a need for students to engage in unlearning and relearning through understanding how they have been positioned in relation to dominant discourses. Deliberative dialogue provides a way for learning the limits of our own knowledge as participants are engaged in re-imagining, reconstructing and therefore, repositioning toward more just relations.

Teaching and learning through dialogue engages both educators and students in processes of critical thinking and enactment of citizenship rights and responsibilities. This is not to suggest the path is an easy one. Much of the education system as it currently exists, reflects the very same normative structures and logics existing in the wider system. The predominance of instrumental and technical educational contexts means there are few spaces for such generative dialogue or deep listening within formal educational institutions. This lack of space, coupled with a fear of engaging in identifying how power operates or in social justice processes that inevitably involve conflict if they are to be authentic, means that educators must be very committed to generative dialogic processes if they are to challenge the structural impediments to such education. However, each educator who does begin to engage in the project of global social justice stands to add to the wide transformation of creating a more just social reality.

Conclusion

In this short article, we have analytically examined the possibilities of achieving globally inclusive social platforms that can bring together people's intentions and livelihood practices so as to attain more constructive and dialogically enriching spaces that are intended for the betterment of the overall human agenda. In many instances, though, those who continually profit from the status quo would prefer the so-called 'business-as-usual' line that thrives on the logics of separation, historical essentialism, inter-civilizational conflict, and the marginalization of such noble projects as human rights and social justice. A telling point here is how even such primary contexts of life as the rights claim to the basics of life are portrayed as untenable socialist projects that want to equalize all. Apparently, social equality is, for the powerful at least, a common pathology that should be avoided as much as possible. Undoubtedly, it is on the problematic exhortations of such ideologies that conflict is created in the first place. As interestingly and by extension, those who are seeking their rights by fair, peaceful means are created as the enemy that

must be fought against, and the bogey man of clash theses is deliberately constructed and maintained.

To deal with these now selfishly globalized programs, we cannot and should not give up on the possible social justice project that may only be achieved through open dialogues and mutual understanding among peoples, states, and indeed, globally. To achieve this at a level that can have a widely diffused impact, the role of educators and educational programs cannot be underestimated. It is through learning that the all too important counter-clash possibilities may be realized. It is through the new education that we can re-launch new multicultural spaces that value all histories, achievements and aspirations. In other words, to achieve effective cases of intercivilizational dialogue involves yearning for and harnessing new capacities to learn together and learn from each other, for despite all the short-sighted desires of the current global power elite, our destiny is bound together more than ever.

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