

At the Limits of Transformation? Human Rights Education Between Colonial Conditions and Emancipatory Counter-Projects

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Abstract:

The collection of articles titled *Critical Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy Education, Entanglements and Regenerations* and published as a part of Bloomsbury's series on Critical Education revisits some of the numerous engagements with the human rights project and its educational forms. The aim is to draw attention to controversies and a necessary critique of the concept of global pedagogy for human rights, democracy, and citizenship, in order to underline what many critical theorists and specifically post- and decolonial scholars have been stressing for decades: The ongoing suppression of various voices, namely those from the global south, whose perspectives on human rights might disrupt the hegemonic narrative of the global north – a narrative deeply intertwined with racism and colonial violence. Mindful of these entanglements, the authors within the volume probe into the limits of human rights as a critical endeavor and push for answers to the question of whether a critical human rights project is possible.

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Zembylas, Michalinos & André Keet (eds.): *Critical Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy Education, Entanglements and Regenerations*. London: Bloomsbury Critical Education, 2018. 256 pages, 81 GBP. ISBN: 9781350045620.

Abstract:

The collection of articles titled *Critical Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy Education, Entanglements and Regenerations* and published as a part of Bloomsbury's series on Critical Education revisits some of the numerous engagements with the human rights project and its educational forms. The aim is to draw attention to controversies and a necessary critique of the concept of global pedagogy for human rights, democracy, and citizenship, in order to underline what many critical theorists and specifically post- and decolonial scholars have been stressing for decades: The ongoing suppression of various voices, namely those from the global south, whose perspectives on human rights might disrupt the hegemonic narrative of the global north – a narrative deeply intertwined with racism and colonial violence. Mindful of these entanglements, the authors within the volume probe into the limits of human rights as a critical endeavor and push for answers to the question of whether a critical human rights project is possible.

We live in uncertain times, in which the established hegemonic order of neoliberal democracy is being challenged and even fully repudiated. Various movements across the world relapse into a worrying rhetoric of racism, where claims for stricter asylum laws blur the lines across traditionally opposite political fractions. Nonetheless, one core feature of the currently contested democratic system is seldom doubted: Human Rights. In their edited volume, Michalinos Zembylas and André Keet assemble thirteen chapters which theoretically as well as practically address educational programs for human rights, citizenship and democracy. The editors point out that “the constitutive relationships between citizenship, human rights and democracy are presupposed in the founding document of the United Nations (UN), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and subsequent declarations and

conventions” (p. 2) and therefore condense the pedagogical efforts in the field into the category of “citizenship-, democracy- and human rights education (CDHRE)” (p. 4). Keet and Zembylas invite their readers to critically consider such entanglements, and the different contributions by academic scholars as well as educational practitioners offer various perspectives to the field; from (Africana) Critical Theory, to engaging “counter narratives” (p. 67) as a dare to conventionally uncritical approaches in CDHRE.

The volume contains two main parts, enveloped by an introduction and an afterword. Section one groups five contributions that all concern “Key Theoretical Issues”, whereas the book’s second part provides six case studies of attempts to put critical CDHRE into action. In their introductory remarks, Keet and Zembylas refer to the very basic and widely accepted claim that “in a democracy, citizens have rights” (p. 1), upon which CDHRE relies. After mapping the scholarly field concerned with CDHRE the editors then come to identify a lack of critical engagement with both the “knowledge base” (p. 3) of democracy and human rights as well as its pedagogical forms.

In chapter one, by Keet, and chapter two, by Zembylas, the need for critiquing the ideological foundation of the human rights project is explored. Both authors find it deeply rooted in Eurocentric thought and demonstrate how a human rights agenda unaware of its “ontological and epistemological premises of the West” (p. 40) tends to become a “neoimperial” (p. 25) project; one that is ignorant of any other forms of knowledge than that stemming from the global north. Due to these ties the practical expressions of CDHRE more often than not prove incapable of unfolding emancipatory potential but instead, as Rebecca Adami notes in chapter five, risk “being both missionary and colonial in approaches” (p. 67). Joanne Coysh’s contribution then points the reader to the crucial role of knowledge-production as an “operation of power” (p. 52), exercised throughout the human rights project. Coysh carefully unpacks the multilayered practices of human rights education in the global south and makes clear the correlation to methods employed in early phases of colonial rule; namely a systematic sedimentation of knowledge and therefore *expertise*. From a distinctly feminist perspective that is also mindful of the knowledge-power nexus, Adami in her text argues for a focus on the experiences of marginalized subjects, indicating a “critical potential of using counternarratives” (p. 67). A promotion of alternative narratives would make visible and hence disputable the fact that, currently, human rights are merely extended to other subject positions that are not white and male but don’t actually recognize them in their uniqueness. Adami’s contribution is novel and overall convincing, though I want to cast some doubt on her call for emphasizing experiences of difference as evidence against hegemonic narratives. I propose to take into account the work of feminist historian Joan Scott (*Experience*, in Butler J./Scott J.W.(Eds.). *Feminists Theorize the Political*. New York 1992) who reminds us how “the evidence of experience then becomes evidence for the fact of difference,

rather than a way of exploring how difference is established.” (p. 25) A more contrasting usage of the category of experience would have enriched Adami’s article further and maybe even raised its critical promise.

The case studies in part two of the book help clarify some rather abstract deliberations from part one and add to the substantiality of the entire publication. Especially for those readers who mainly engage with human rights theoretically, the chapters looking at the cases of Northern Ireland, India, Pakistan, South Africa, England and the US provide insight into some of its pedagogical manifestations. It soon becomes obvious how well the theoretical articles captured the various tensions and conflicts practitioners of CDHRE are facing when working in the field. While the volume makes great leaps through schools of critical thought as well as space, the assembled texts interlock notably well; supplementing each other, adding weight to or further engaging arguments made in prior chapters. A major concern voiced within the edited volume is identified here by Kayum Ahmed in his chapter on South Africa: “HRE [human rights education] will inevitably be implemented in a manner that simply reproduces the list of rights contained in human rights declarations and the bill of rights [...]” (p. 176).

After embarking on the various critical perspectives laid out in the book, I eventually found myself wondering why, despite the very critical assessments of various aspects of CDHRE, most contributors to the book still hold high the ideal of a human rights education as a genuinely critical project? Hence, they call for regenerations and transformations of the educational forms rather than a radically new concept, let alone its dismissal. Or put differently: Due to their ontological bindings human rights remain closely intertwined with the colonial condition (as the authors have persuasively argued them to be). So how can disobedient approaches to it avoid being either ignored or simply integrated into the hegemonic framework and thus be stripped off all critical potential?

Pondering these questions, I am hesitant to offer a conclusive assessment, mainly because the editors did such a good job in dismantling any nostalgic notion of the human rights project. So even though they themselves seem indecisive whether or not to drop the ideal of it at all, what remains is the apprehension that there are only paradoxes to offer.

German Abstract:

Emanzipation (un)möglich? Das kritische Potential von Menschenrechtserziehung neu gedacht

Der Sammelband mit dem Titel *Critical Human Rights, Citizenship and Democracy Education, Entanglements and Regenerations* ist in diesem Jahr bei Bloomsbury erschienen und von André Keet und Michalinos Zembylas herausgegeben. In insgesamt dreizehn Kapiteln unternehmen die Autor_innen aus verschiedenen Fachdisziplinen sowie aus der pädagogischen Praxis eine Bestandsaufnahme aktueller Menschenrechts- und Demokratieerziehung und der ihr zugrundeliegenden Wissensbestände. In den jeweiligen Artikeln wird immer wieder auf die Unzulänglichkeiten wie auch ontologischen Verwicklungen des Menschenrechtsdiskurses mit eurozentristischen Denktraditionen hingewiesen und diesen insbesondere dekoloniale Perspektiven entgegengestellt. Anhand ausgewählter Aspekte und Fallbeispiele wird somit auf Widersprüche wie auf notwendige Kritiken der Theorie und Praxis von Menschenrechtserziehung eingegangen, aber auch das emanzipatorische Potential dieses globalisierten Bildungsprojekts ausgelotet.

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