THEORIZING EDUCATION

On the Politics of Educational Theory

Rhetoric, theoretical ambiguity, and the construction of society

Tomasz Szkudlarek

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'What does educational theory *do*? This bold and original text positions educational theory as producer of social realities and political ideas.'

Claudia Ruitenberg, Associate Professor, Philosophy of Education, University of British Columbia, Canada

'Educational theory is seldom treated with more important than it is in this book. Instead of trying to construct yet another educational theory to change, understand or explain the role of education in social contexts, Tomasz Szkudlarek starts from educational theory itself as a porous, vibrating field of energy inherently producing social reality. Instead of social reality establishing the conditions for educational thinking, Szkudlarek stresses how educational theory is a creation of certain visibilities that organize the social world and shape political hegemonies. As such this book is both innovative and provocative in its conceptualisation of the relationship between education, theory and politics and in its capacity to visualise how active social forces constitute what we consider to be 'real'.'

Carl Anders Säfström, Professor of Education, Södertörn University, Sweden

'Tomasz Szkudlarek succeeds superbly in pointing to the constitutive role of education in the construction of the political and in showing why Ernesto Laclau's political theory needs pedagogical supplementation. And while he makes very clear how thinking pedagogically is essentially in need of postulational rhetoric, i.e. in need of using 'should's and 'we's, he at once, brilliantly, makes us become very vigilant about their use. This is a great contribution to educational theory, including truly original readings of the classics Rousseau and Herbart.'

Jan Masschelein, head of the Laboratory for Education and Society, and of the research group Education, Culture and Society, KU Leuven, Belgium

'In this admirably clear, stimulating and path-breaking book Tomasz Szkudlarek politicizes educational theory as a specific genre of public discourse. Through a close engagement with founding figures of educational thought as diverse as Rousseau and Herbart, the author offers valuable explorations of how educational theories are implicated in politics by means of their role in the constitution of social ontology. To this end, Szkudlarek relies on a broad range of important thinkers (from Derrida and Foucault down to Rancière and Laclau) while supplementing their analyses with conceptions that do justice to objections raised by critics. Altogether this important new work brings some much-needed fresh insight to bear on political educational issues of invisible modern power relations and will be welcomed by readers in search of original perspectives on time-honoured tensions within educational and political theory.'

Marianna Papastephanou, Professor, Department of Education, University of Cyprus, Cyprus

On the Politics of Educational Theory

On the Politics of Educational Theory considers the political significance of educational theory as a specific genre of public discourse. Rather than understanding educational theories solely as addressing issues of childrearing and instruction, this book aims to view educational theories in a broader socio-political context. It explores the role of educational theories in the construction of collective and political identities and analyzes them as rhetorical strategies operating as political discourses.

Defining the methodological framework through the perspectives of Michel Foucault and Ernesto Laclau, each chapter examines the ways in which theories of education contribute to the creation of social realities and identities. Such issues as the construction of visibility and invisibility of power, the tropes of temporality, or the use of postulational language where theorists say what "should" be done in and by education, are some of the threads that weave through particular theories – from Rousseau to the discourse of education in the knowledge-based society – analyzed as ontological rhetorics constitutive of political identities.

This book suggests a direction for a more conscious way of dealing with the political in education. As such, it will appeal to researchers, academics, and postgraduate students in the fields of educational research, philosophy of education, curriculum studies, social and political theory, and theory of education.

Tomasz Szkudlarek is Head of the Department of Philosophy of Education and Cultural Studies at the Institute of Education, University of Gdańsk, Poland.

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Chapter 1

Theory, (in)visibility, and totality

Theories of education as discourses. By way of introduction

This book does not focus on the political content of educational theories, or on how they describe or design education in relation to the demands of given political systems either overtly, as in the programs of civic education, or covertly, as critical pedagogy aptly reveals. Although I do not exclude such elements from my analyses, they are aspects of a broader issue in which I am interested: the political significance of educational theory as a specific genre of public discourse. The way I understand this perspective is informed by Ernesto Laclau's theory, in which discourse gains ontological meaning: it is constitutive of social structure (Laclau 2005; 2014).[1]

Originally, the notion of discourse refers to linguistic practices (like conversations, policy documents, or media reports), but in Laclau's theory, which deals with the construction of political identities and with the very question of societies *becoming* what they are, discourse is understood in a broader sense:

> Discourse is the primary terrain of the construction of objectivity as such. By discourse . . . I do not mean something that is essentially restricted to the area of speech and writing, but any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not preexist relational complex but are constituted through it. Thus "relation" and "objectivity" are synonymous.
>
> (Laclau 2005, p. 68)

The broadening of the notion of discourse is helpful in building a theory in which similar structural patterns can be applied to analyze that which falls into the traditionally (linguistically) understood discourse and that which traditionally would be called material conditions. The relations we deal with in social sciences are structured not only by literally understood communication, but by numerous patterns of social space, temporality, and causality; their structures precede objects that can be recognized in given contexts. In other words, the understanding of discourse here is much broader than that applied, for instance, by Jürgen Habermas (1984), for whom the ethics of discourse relates to the process of rational public deliberation constitutive of democratic societies. As

Laclau admits, the source of his understanding of discourse is Foucault's work. In his later publications, however, Laclau redirected this way of thinking about discourse toward a more rhetorical approach and incorporated Lacan's psychoanalytical theory more directly and extensively (Laclau 2005; 2014). His analyses sometimes appear close to Rancière's understanding of politics as well. All these traces will be present in my interpretation of what I call the politics of educational theories.

Educational theories are, thus, analyzed here as ontological devices implicated in the construction of social objectivities. I am interested in how theories are productive of, and how they position themselves in, the flow of signifiers that can be used for the maintenance and change of the social, and how their concepts, explanations, mythologies, and rhetorics can possibly be utilized in other discursive practices which, together, form what Laclau calls political hegemonies, i.e., the figures that give the social its precariously totalized, historically specific shape.[2] What this means in practical terms is that theories are seen not only in their rational and intentional layers: as expert constructions where clearly defined concepts are linked in logical relations so that they form generalized descriptions of given realities in a way that is operational, i.e., that allows for empirical testing, predictions, and the production of technical blueprints. The notion of discourse goes beyond such rational and technological dimensions. It encompasses also that which is vague, contradictory, or figurative; not only descriptions and abstract models, but also persuasion and appeals to identification with their proposed visions; not only logics, but also rhetorics; not only that which is present in them, but also that which is structurally absent; and finally, not only the text, but also the context. Such a broad approach touches a fairly sensitive issue. Theories of education, and the discipline of educational studies in general, are sometimes accused of being dubious in terms of their academic quality, exactly because they are saturated with normative claims and persuasive rhetoric, and because of their notorious lack of conceptual clarity. Seen as discourses, with all these features as constitutive to their genre, along with those believed to be academically solid ones, they can be investigated as implicated in the construction of social ontologies *as they are*, with their scientific and "less scientific" (normative, persuasive, performative, etc.) elements alike. In sum, I try to see theories of education as discourses that "do" something in the space and to the space in which they circulate – not only as representative, but also as performative practices.

Speaking of theories as discourses is not a very common way of analyzing them. When we refer to discourse analysis in educational studies, we usually do so in contexts such as media coverage, policy documents, or classroom interactions. Theories are usually excluded from such discourse-analytical approach; they are *our* cognitive resources, which help us observe, categorize, classify, and connect given phenomena into significant units, and, as such, they usually occupy the position behind our lenses rather than in front of them. To analyze them as connected to other signifying practices in a way that brackets

their privilege of transparency and their claims to truth, can be seen as entering the terrain of meta-theoretical work, of aiming toward a theory of theory. While this perspective is attractive for identifying the aim of this book, I would rather avoid some of the connotations of such identification, namely those that stem from the frequent association of the prefix *meta-* with that of *supra-*. The notion of meta-theory tends to evoke a hierarchy of abstraction and generality that inevitably invites the question of the meta-meta-theoretical, and so on, *ad infinitum*. However, the Greek word μετά means "beyond," "upon," or "after," and it does not impart anything more essential or superior to that which it precedes. Such a hierarchical connotation was probably arrived at as an effect of naming (rather accidentally) Aristotle's "first philosophy" as *metaphysics*. To conclude, meta-theory may situate itself beyond theory, at a distance to its language, without necessarily surpassing it "upwards" in the hierarchy of firstness, generality, or abstraction. The discourse-analytical approach which informs my analyses and interpretations does not situate itself above, but rather aside, the theories I am analyzing, and, thus, it creates the possibility of "looking awry" (to use Slavoj Žižek's phrase 1992), in a skewed manner that brings into the focus not only the solid foundations and logical structures built upon them, but also the debris, the abandoned, the provisional, the unintended, the accidental, and the unnecessary as that which is present in the theoretical along with its conceptual constructions. Seeing theories as discourses means, therefore, that they are complex, overdetermined, and porous; they are excessive in their contents and are, at the same time, incomplete, and they involve elements that are alien to their conceptual logic, but are, nevertheless, significant.

I am also interested in the ontological rather than the ontic – in the sense proposed by Ernesto Laclau. The ontological, for Laclau, is social objectivity attainable by discursive and, in particular, by rhetorical means. To that domain Chantal Mouffe (2005) applies the term *the political*, originally coined in 1927 by Carl Schmitt (1996). The difference it makes in terms of the scope and method of the investigation is twofold. First, the contents of theories are seen in a broader context than that of referring to practices of teaching or upbringing isolated from other social actions, and education is seen in relation to how the social, including that which may be called its objectivity, is constructed. Second, it affects the way of seeing the relations between education and politics. I do not mean only how educational theories replicate or conform to the dominant political ideologies, which quite often is the focus in discourse analysis, especially in its critical variety. Such interpretations are insufficient when they conclude with identifying the instances of power in relation to which the analyzed practice appears functional; such conclusions fall easily into a "critical trap," by which I mean certain circularity, which, *if not interpreted further*, may be denounced as a logical error (*petitio principii*). I am referring to cases when we identify a given practice as functional to the dominant structures of power, while these structures, by the very virtue of being dominant, are already known to us as researchers; and, moreover, their hegemony is in fact the very

reason why critical analysis has been undertaken. In a way, much of the critical discourse analysis concerning education in late-capitalist societies is somewhat predictable in terms of how it identifies the forces that determine what we do in schools; whatever we choose to investigate can (usually rightly) be concluded with de-masking its implications in neoliberalism, which simply confirms the presuppositions (and often the ethical reasons) on which the very intention of critical analysis was based. This statement sounds like a fundamental critique of critical analysis, and in fact it could be an almost perfect example of *petitio principii*, if the identification of the dominant ideology was indeed the aim of the research. This, however, is not entirely the case. The focus of critical analysis should be, and often is, not on the final de-masking of capitalist plots behind every aspect of social life. Somewhat similar to the work of Freudian psychoanalysis (whatever the analyzed says will be interpreted in terms of her or his sexuality), the issue is not so much to "discover" such a determination as it is to *interpret* it in its particular shape – to dismantle its detailed semantics and mechanics and to re-assemble it into meaningful narratives woven around contingent details so that the whole space is marked with trajectories of their interconnections. Critical thinking would be, in this context, comparable to the hermeneutic of the present; and, as hermeneutical, it should be circular, bi- or multi-directional, as it is in such repetitive circularity that interpretation is possible.

Such hermeneutics are part of the analysis I undertake in this book. They are not intended to de-mask how politics inform the thinking of education. From my point of view, the reverse is equally, if not more, interesting: how does the thinking of education inform the political? How do educational concepts, mythologies, and rhetorics *produce* the resources and the strategies for the political construction of the social? This is not meant to say that I see these foci as competing or contradictory: this is not an either/or issue. I merely want to say that the ontological understanding of discourse, most consequently propagated by Laclau, suggests that one can see education theories as discourses active in construing social realities, as structures and processes the impact of which extends beyond that of being "implemented" in pedagogical practices. Again, the aim here is not to discover such politics of theory, because it is *assumed* on the grounds of discourse theory. The aim is to understand *how* such politics are made.

Let me situate these intentions against the background of the more traditional functions that one can ascribe to theory in education.[3] What I mean here are social and political functions, where theory is set against social practice, rather than those related to empirical research, where theory is seen as related to, and different from, data. The first, and a fairly commonplace, answer implies a technological understanding of the relation between theory and practice; that is, it claims that theory has the task of designing pedagogies and procedures for assessing their efficiency. Another answer refers to the hermeneutic tradition and claims that the need for theory can be understood through the notion

of understanding. This implies that the ways we educate are not necessarily derived from prior theoretical statements. Education is a practical thing performed by people who do not have to design their actions before they act. Theory, in this perspective, provides us with languages for reflection, and languages through which we can share these reflections with others, which contributes to mutual understanding. A third, perhaps less common answer, is that theory questions the realities we live in. The abstract language creates distance from the experiential domain. Access to theory makes the world relative, less familiar, and creates a space in which other ways of living and learning are imaginable.

These three uses of theory paraphrase Jürgen Habermas's formulation of the interests that constitute human cognition (Habermas 1972). Management (or technology in a broader sense), reflective understanding, and critique that brings emancipation form an epistemological framework largely consistent with the array of modern political and educational ideologies. These modalities can also be understood, not in terms of competing ideological positions that pit their power against one another, but as momentums in the cycle of human actions as well. We may see them as partial epistèmological tools, applicable sequentially – when we do things according to our knowledges; when we realize that what we have done is different from what had been planned and that we need another language to understand it; and when, as a result, the legitimacy of what has been done is questioned. Then we open space for a new design. To sum up, theoretical languages (technological, hermeneutical, and critical) may be seen as functional in relation to different aims, or to different momentums of social praxis in modern societies.

This list of classic functions of theoretical thinking can be fine-tuned and supplemented with observations made by Gert Biesta, Julie Allan, and Richard Edwards (2014). The overarching distinction they make is that between the gestures of bringing "that which is strange and not understood into the domain of understanding" (which encompasses efforts at explanation, hermeneutic understanding, and emancipation), and that of "making the familiar strange," illustrated by Foucault's notion of eventalization that "aims at a breach of self-evidence" (p. 5). In a similar tone, Jacques Rancière (2011) speaks of politics as disruptive of the "distribution of the sensible," and Jean Baudrillard speaks of the radical thought: "The absolute rule of thought is to return the world as we received it: unintelligible. And if it is possible, to return it a little bit more unintelligible. A little bit more enigmatic" (1995, no pagination). The sense of such negative gestures is both in distancing oneself from cognitive and aesthetic "police orders" in Rancière's terms and in opening the space for new articulations. As Thomas Popkewitz (2014) says, theory helps to "unthink" in order to "rethink" the world.

By the very fact of being defined against social practice, all these functions, both in their positive and negative gestures, are political. To say that education is politics (which may imply that politics is education) demands just a small modification of Foucault's claim that knowledge is power as much as power

is knowledge (Foucault 1980). The very idea of writing this book started with juxtaposing Foucault's description of modern power with the project of "the science of education" proposed by Johann F. Herbart in 1806 (Herbart 1908). Therefore, in the following section, I reiterate some of the basic tenets of Foucault's understanding of modern power, and then I juxtapose it with Herbart's notion of discipline.

As we know, according to Foucault (1995), the techniques of control established in the advent of modernity (sixteenth to nineteenth centuries) relied on surveillance, and they replaced the former, repressive regimes of power. The paradigmatic figure of that emerging technology is Jeremy Bentham's architectural project of "The Panopticon" (Bentham 1791): the layout of the building makes it possible to observe all its inhabitants (prisoners, workers, patients, students, etc.) in such a way that the observer himself remains invisible. All techniques identified by Foucault as constitutive of modern power relations – hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment, and examination – are dependent on the particular organization of space, which teaches the inhabitants to observe themselves so that they can make rational decisions about their own behavior. Because of the specific organization of visibility in the building, the inmates, not knowing whether they are being observed at a given moment or not, have to concede that they may be being observed all the time. This prompts them to internalize the gaze of the warders and turns them into their own guards. In other words, it turns them into Kantian autonomous subjects capable of seeing themselves through the eyes of the law and of making rational decisions about their behavior. In Kant, moral behavior demands rational thinking, which makes one capable of looking at one's behavior in a de-centered manner, with the eyes of another, namely of the Law. "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant 1993, p. 30). The panoptic mechanism of control invented for the sake of prison reform has spread into other spheres of the public, saturating all places and institutions with its logic. Thus, power becomes fundamentally pedagogical (cf. Ball 1990; Marshall 1996). This feature of modern power relations – the saturation of the social with disciplinary control capable of teaching people to see themselves with the eye of the imagined, normalizing agent – I call *pedagogism* (Szkudlarek 1995; 2003).

This development has had several consequences that are important for the understanding of education. The first is a kind of environmentalism in thinking about the human subject. If architectural design can be granted the power to control human behavior, or, more precisely, to teach people self-control, then deficits in human conduct can be traced back to the faults in the environment itself. The modern examination of the human is developing toward detailed and multidimensional expertise where misdoings and peculiarities of conduct are hypothetically ascribed to external sources, to the stimuli to which the conduct responds (cf. the "border case" of such an examination in Pierre Rivière's trial reported by Foucault 1982). The project of creating autonomous subjects

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