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Teaching the Other. The anthropology of education in the perspective of European cultural dilemmas

Abstract. *Anthropological studies on education are becoming today more popular than ever. This is being caused to some extent by the challenges multicultural societies are currently facing in many countries in Europe. The current politics of multiculturalism and the applications of integration strategies meet a strong social discontent. We speak more often of a deep crisis of the multicultural idea, at least in its current shape. This paper deals with the dilemmas caused by these debates and highlights the most significant areas of agency in the context of teaching and of integrating groups and individuals representing the “cultural Other.”*

Keywords: *anthropology of education, multiculturalism, Europe, otherness, teaching, integration of migrants*

When we speak of European culture, we usually think in the first place of terms such as: heritage, high culture, the cultural elite or cultural values. This very monolithic and ethnocentric view of European culture arises from its classic definitions; it reaches back in its origins to the antique Greek and Roman philosophical traditions and concepts. Just as many ancient philosophers pointed out, culture is what we are supposed to gain through learning and self-perfection, in the tradition of occidental philosophy. Thus there is a certain level of culture we have to achieve if we want to call ourselves humans. The definition of culture which we may see here is a processual one and simultaneously teleological. It points out and justifies

a specific direction of our existence, lying upon scientific inquires about the world around us. According to it, the human individual is being pointed in the direction that it has to head towards, that is, elitist-like cultural activities such as philosophy, art or other forms of aesthetics. This definition of culture is to be found for example in Cicero's writings. In the Middle Ages culture had been associated with religious values and theological disputes on the meaning of human existence. Christian culture was considered as a gift from God received by Man, and therefore Man was obliged to look after it by keeping the cultural values crystal clear.

The construction of culture was at that time a product of a divine order, and so was the social structure. Any attempt to raise the issue of the category of difference was in this context doomed to failure as the dominant cultural pattern had to be maintained by any means, including direct violence against those who tried to overthrow the rulers, question the position of the Roman Catholic Church or who did not obey the ruling paradigm. As religious conflicts spread throughout Europe, the differentiation of European societies was expressed mostly in terms of faith and confession. Paradoxically, the Protestant revolution did contribute to a strengthening of religious ties. As Max Weber stated in his book "Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism," the cultural ideology standing behind the social actions of English puritans in the 16th century, did contribute directly to the emergence of modern European institutions and society as we know it today.¹

European societies have built during the ages a certain (and a long lasting) tradition in the cultural discourse. This tradition consists mostly of a centralized core of cultural ideas, all associated with the historical process which had produced them during the ages in the Western context of Christianity. The emergence of the social sciences in the 19th century did not change much in this matter. The evolutionist and positivist view of culture had dominated the European thought during the whole of the 19th century and still is very much alive today. In this kind of cultural model our own culture had to be considered as the most efficient, developed and modern variant of all existing cultures around the world. As a classic evolutionist, sir James George Frazer mentioned the key factor of cultural development is the worldview shared by groups of people who are driven by it in their actions.² This very shift – from idea to agency – is the most important in understanding of how Western societies conceptualized what is culturally different. The cultural Other had to be conquered in order to put it into the rational frames of western positivistic philosophy. Culture was supposed to be implemented into those societies who did not share the same view as the Europeans. Just as Frazer stated in his book "The Golden Bough" – being savage means to differ in our thoughts and actions from the scientific point of view. Non-Europeans had to learn how to think and behave in the European manner.

¹ M. Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism and Other Writings*, New York 2002.

² J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion*, New York 1998.

However, there was a significant problem in teaching those abilities to the “primitive” tribes in Africa and people in other parts of the world. The main obstacle was created here by the difference in worldviews shared by Europeans and non-Europeans. To overcome this ideological gap, there was something needed, that could explain to Westerners how the cultural Other thinks, therefore enabling to predict his behaviour in a rational manner and control him in a political sense. As many times in history, also in this case a direct force had been applied to do so. The colonial involvement of Europeans in the second half of the 19th century shows how this policy of direct compulsion towards those who differ from us did function, also in an educational sense. The establishment of the colonial rule, and colonial schooling system, affected in this sphere also the scientific paradigm. Social sciences had been applied to provide us with theories on the construction of primitive societies, their religion and beliefs, political and economic life and many other fields of human existence. Thus culture was defined mostly in terms of Western civilization. Religion, law, political power, art and other phenomena was taken into account as long they required the standards set by the colonizers. Their interest lay upon a deep cultural change of those who looked and acted differently. The acculturation process was meant to be a necessity, a civilizatory mission that had to be fulfilled in a way which without any doubt led to becoming a member of a modern society. British colonial schools in Africa or India, so called Indian Boarding Schools in the United States, or missionary schools in South and Central America, shared the belief that the savage might be converted into a being that we might recognize as one of us.

The cultural inclusion was in all of these cases the main argument in the construction of the current schooling policies. Educational institutions, such as public schools, universities and private institutions, were designed to maintain the cultural integrity of the national community. A good example of this kind of early nationalistic discourse in the context of the education of natives are the boarding schools in North America set up in the second half of the 19th century to educate the Indians in the United States and Canada. Boarding schools were perceived by their creators as one of the most significant tools in the acculturation process of Native Americans.³ They were a model solution for the growing problem of cultural diversification of the American society at the end of the century. Therefore the model of boarding schools was approved by many as a part of a broader assimilation policy towards not just Indians, but also a growing flow of immigrants reshaping the ethnic and cultural face of America in the beginning of the 20th century. The consequence was that the issue of multiculturalism was raised in the United States first in the 1920’s and 1930’s as the American society changed in its ethnic structure. The processes which took place back then in America might serve as an example of how educa-

³ D. W. Adams, *Education for Extinction. American Indians and the Boarding School Experience 1875–1928*, Kansas 1995.

tional institutions function in a specific cultural environment, where the category of difference is taken into account as an integral part of the reality surrounding us all.

A similar shift in cultural identity is being experienced by Europeans today. The opening of borders due to the Schengen Agreement and increased mobility of people across the continent has lifted the traditional view of nations and states as closed units. The presence of migrants in European societies, as well the processes of social change which occurred in Europe after 1945, have contributed to a more liberal perception of otherness and cultural diversity in general. On the other hand, many inhabitants of the Old Continent refuse to accept the fact of this transgression, still expressing the idea of a monolithic European civilization placed among other (less developed) civilizations. It might be considered by many as granted, but the phenomena occurring in the European context nowadays provide us with some striking examples of a specific cultural discourse, which affects how we define culture today, and is very similar to the aforementioned American discussions on national identity. The colonial past of the European continent, massive migration into Europe from other parts of the world and globalization processes are only a few of the problems constructing the mentioned discourse. These examples show a clear disruption in the traditional and homogenous view of what belongs to culture, and what doesn't. This symbolic crack in the European identity is being seen as a sort of a crisis situation. As in many other cases, also this time the emergence of a polarized worldview shared by many Europeans (where the old cultural order is being put against non-European extremism) may be considered only a matter of time.

The controversy raised in 2001 by Oriana Fallaci's article, and later the book "The Rage and the Pride," is an example of this worldview.⁴ Just as the Italian author and journalist attempts to show, the world today is falling into pieces. These fragments of reality affect us all in the sense that we all participate in this process of decay. Fallaci's book points out the main reasons for this situation, which are associated with the erosion of our European cultural pride. The lack of cultural values, the absence of tradition or the liberal approach toward the assimilation of migrants are just some of them according to Fallaci. Her standpoint and the reaction of her readers (who welcomed the book's theses) is showing us that contemporary European societies tend to accept a radical turn in the cultural and political ideology more than a few years back. Certainly it is just an exaggeration of the many voices visible today within the European cultural discussion, but it is a very loud and visible one.

Thus the case of the latest massacres in Norway had a deep impact on the way we view the cultural landscape in the old continent. Religious and cultural fundamentalism since Breivik's actions are no longer the attribute of the Other, but they arose within the European landscape and are deeply grounded on what is seen as a set of so called true European values. Furthermore, it was considered by their perpetrator as an extreme, but necessary act of self-defense against the growing

⁴ O. Fallaci, *The Rage and the Pride*, New York 2002.

stream of cultural and ideological otherness flowing into the truly European field of Christian tradition. Breivik's testimony had raised an important question. Are we, as modern European societies, still ready to accept the Other among us? Is it possible to get along with people, whose way of living we do not accept, or even, furthermore – do we despise their culture? Were the ideas achieved by the changes of the 1960's just a daydream dreamt by few liberals? These, and other questions, are the key issues Europe has to deal with nowadays when speaking of the category of cultural otherness. It might be obvious that we tend to face these problems through the ideological glasses of politics. It is also important, however, to look closely at the role the social sciences play in providing the answers to them.

The scientific discipline which deals with culture and cultural otherness is being mostly associated with various forms of anthropological thought. Anthropological encounters with the cultural Other build up a central figure in the discipline's dictionary. The category of cultural difference itself has made a long lasting career in this field of knowledge, since the beginnings of the anthropological reflection on man as a culturally defined being. Starting from Herodotus's opus magnum "History," we may follow a long path of attempts to picture the Other, as a Lacanian mirror reflection of ourselves (just like in the writings of Herodotus), or as an exotic exhibit in the collection of cultural curiosities (like for example in the evolutionary concepts of James Frazer) held by the man of the West in his museums of natural history. Difference makes the world richer, as anthropologists used to think. They also often like to present themselves as "agents of love," who distribute through their works the knowledge on man in his various cultural forms of living. Cultural particularism was therefore taken in anthropology from its beginnings for granted, as the natural source of ethnographic data. The Other was always someone whose ways of living are far from what we are used to perceiving as our own lifestyle – no matter if we are speaking of a geographical distance, like in the case of exotic tribes living on the peripheries of our known world, or a social difference, if we are speaking of European folklore in the 19th century. In both cases anthropology provided us with a fascinating picture of exotic rituals, behaviour or customs, strikingly different from what we know from our own cultural backyard. The more exotic the anthropological inquiries were, the more we wanted to get into the middle of the story. Anthropological storytelling became slowly a fashionable occupation among professional scholars, as well people who had no ethnographic competences at all. The explosion of interest in studying anthropology and conducting more or less anthropological fieldwork had its peak in the late 1960's due to the counter-cultural tendencies in the West. In this manner also many educators tried to apply the anthropological theories and methods in their own praxis in schools, especially when they were dealing with the problem of cultural diversity in the student's group. The distance between the teacher and the pupil became cultural, and as a cultural phenomenon it had to be minimized to achieve educational success.

Cultural distance is also, on the other hand, a kind of a troublemaking factor, to paraphrase the book title by James Clifford.⁵ The history of anthropology provides us with examples of how anthropologists in the field dealt with the problem of culture, and their own lack of cognitive resources to “think like the Other.” The publication of Bronisław Malinowski’s diaries is considered here as a turning point in the idealistic view of the essence of anthropological fieldwork.⁶ As an opposition to his other works, his diary is the reflection of a European living among exotic Others. In his own words, he disliked his object of study, using in his argumentation the worst prejudice against non-Europeans and showing his own methodological and existential frustration. On the other hand, Malinowski’s views may be considered here as typical for Westerners at that time and not too shocking at all from his perspective. It might be a paradox of history, but many Triobriand islanders are being educated in their own cultural traditions and folkways today, directly from Malinowski’s books.

Thus the example of the work of the Polish-British anthropologist might serve here as a good example of a deep methodological problem, which is specific for ethnographic research and is also present in the educational sphere. The description of cultural otherness differs in many ways from understanding it and acting (as a group or an individual) in the situation where the Other is not just simply present, but furthermore interacts with us on a daily basis. Experiencing otherness is here an act of self-identification through emphasizing differences. The main issue here is the following question – how can we construct our own identity in a culturally diverse world without producing the mechanisms of a marginalization of the Other? Is a culturally neutral education possible at all, or do educational systems tend to unify students in a cultural sense?

Without any doubt, the concept of “otherness” is also an important point in the modern educational debates, where it is being put into the issue of multiculturalism and multicultural education. This specific educational and political strategy is implemented in a context of a dramatically changing level of diversity among student groups in those European countries where the system itself allows them to express their cultural identity in a pluralistic manner. Therefore the multicultural society is a model of a simultaneously pluralistic and a liberal system, in which every single group is being given access to the cultural mainstream in the name of democracy. Multicultural education in Europe is based upon the fact, or more an assumption, that European societies are pluralistic in their core ideas, whereas the set of those ideas might be as diverse as the multicultural classroom in contemporary schools in Germany, Sweden or Great Britain. This assumption takes us to the point where today’s cultural diversity of the once homogenous European

⁵ J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*, Harvard 2002.

⁶ B. Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term*, Stanford 1989.

societies is being celebrated as one of these ideas, and being put in the centre of our discussion over the future shape of our continent.

The idea of multiculturalism and multicultural education was for a long period of time the dominant element of the discussion around the concept of otherness, but not the only one. Cultural otherness was slowly gaining recognition also in relation to more subtle criteria of difference. These criteria could be made by the category of sex, age, political affiliation etc. These fields were a factor for further diversification and social stratification. Just as Bourdieu had put it, social distinction is related to cultural capital and the habitus we are given by the society. Our own creation of the social and cultural field of agency is in this case conditioned by the cultural values and ideas we share with other people. No matter if these values and ideas are an object of conflict, or an element stabilizing the social structure – they are being expressed through means given us by culture itself.

In the light of these remarks, multicultural education seems to be more a question of a processual approach. Cultural change is here a part of a particular system, as well an element of contact between various cultural systems and the phenomena of the diffusion of selected elements of those systems. The ambiguous character of this phenomena is paradoxically not always a source of destabilization. It shakes the foundations of the cultural system only if we take for granted the system's integration as the main goal set by the people who live within the system. Social praxis shows us clearly that not all participants in social life are interested in maintaining this very narrowly understood integration. People tend often more to play to their own interests within the given cultural field, which is also conditioned by the historical process it produced. In this sense, the flow of cultural content within the system and between different systems contributes to the dynamics of diversification in a very structural way. The structure of norms, values, esthetics, and beliefs is being enriched by new elements, sometimes treated as alien towards the old system. The discussion on tradition and history emerges as an almost natural cause of this process. Although constant reshaping and transforming of the cultural structure is a process we are witnessing in every possible sphere of our existence, it also takes place at various speeds. In some spheres it might occur as if nothing changes at all, and in others the change is being pointed out as a cultural revolution. This situation triggers a wide discussion on the transmission of traditional ideas, and in this field education comes to play almost instantly.

Current European educational debates might seem as diverse as the educational systems they relate to, but we are still able to bring to light the significant points of reference, common for them all. In the western part of the continent, in countries like France, Spain or Italy, education is being presented as a field of systematic actions for the inclusion of all people, who are being excluded in other fields than education. No matter if we are speaking of ethnic minorities, children from less well situated families, or children affected by other forms of exclusion – most

educational systems in Western Europe are designed to help them achieve educational success. On the other hand, in Eastern Europe education of the aforementioned categories of students is also a goal of local policies, but simultaneously more pressure is being applied to assimilate them into a certain social and cultural system. The students have clearly fitted into specific social roles, an idea which is rather absent in Western Europe, where celebrating diversity does not necessarily mean to transform the object contributing with its otherness to the diversity itself.

The Other and the concept of otherness in the educational sphere is therefore playing an important part in constructing educational programmes, like various student exchange projects, or educational reforms being postulated all over Europe and trying to include those who were once excluded from the system, like the diverse ethnic minorities. The educational concept of otherness is considered here as a key factor in changing the way we are teaching our children in a better, more diverse system. No matter if we are speaking of otherness related to migration processes, or otherness related to regional differences within Europe, this category is a constant companion of the cultural shift we are experiencing at the moment. However, this idealistic approach seems to undergo nowadays a clear downfall due to certain events, which have put a significant question mark over the view of our own societies as pluralistic, modern and democratic units of a global community.

We may ask ourselves how does anthropology and education differ in tackling the same problem – the presence of the Other in the cultural process shaping our worldviews. Is there any difference at all, or do anthropology and pedagogy go various paths, close to each other, but still separate? This question emerged in the United States in the early 20th century. Incoming migrants from Europe and Asia, the still unsolved problem of native Americans, and the racial discourse related to Afro-Americans contributed to the construction of a new approach in studying educational phenomena in relation to culture. This new perspective emerged within American anthropological circles and was supposed to provide answers to the question of a changing American cultural identity. Scholars like Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead or the father of American anthropology, Franz Boas (a German immigrant himself), did fulfil this mission with a profound assumption that cultural diversity is not a problem we have to overcome, but a natural characteristic of culture itself. The cultural patterns of Italian immigrants arriving in New York, strange rituals of American Indians, or the social marginalization of Afro-Americans were creating important issues to be solved, that is to understand how does the Other think, and how that Other's worldviews affect their actions. These issues were even more important as the United States became an economic superpower and the American society had to invent a new educational system, which could produce a new type of American citizen – aware of their cultural and ethnic background, but also identifying themselves with national values and the American culture. The anthropology of education in its American type was a very pragmatic approach,

dealing with schooling systems, educational institutions, educational ideologies and the category of difference, which was visible in all the mentioned areas.

In the second half of the 20th century similar questions were raised also in Europe, along with the processes of decolonization and the post-war social dynamics of change affecting most western European societies. The Other became not just visible in the streets of London or Paris, but also demanded participation in the social and political life of the continent. Various emancipation groups, counterculture movements, alternative communities and youth subcultures did spread throughout Europe from the end of the 1950's. Anthropology and pedagogy did also try to grasp the dynamically changing cultural landscape using old theories and methods. More and more often the question of the application of the traditional humanistic approach was raised in both the aforementioned academic fields, which both pointed out its limitations. The need for a new view of culture and otherness emerged leading to a dramatic change of perspective in the pedagogical and anthropological examinations of the adaptation processes in modern Europe. A growing social discontent was reflected in the paradigm shift in the social sciences. The finger of cultural criticism was pointed towards hegemonic ideologies and groups being the former centres of power. As European culture changed so did also the educational discourse surrounding it. We witnessed a critical pedagogy through the works of Paulo Freire or Henry Giroux which deconstructed the modernist order of things. We also witnessed how anthropology moved from its field of interest, lying upon traditional and primitive communities, towards the modern culture of the Western society. The imperative of an interpretative understanding of the Other was shared from now on by both academic disciplines.

On the other hand, the cultural phenomena occurring in contemporary Europe may lead us to the notion that this very open, pluralistic view of cultural awareness is just an ideological façade and it is shared not by the Europeans themselves, but just their intellectual elites. The controversies surrounding the presence of cultural otherness in the French educational and social context provide a significant example of how the category of difference is being constructed and perceived in a society built upon the noble ideas of the Great Revolution and Enlightenment. The eruption of street violence a few years back in the Paris suburbs was the consequence of this very differentiation. The French media discourse related to these issues was based on the argumentation provided by French citizens commenting on the events. They often expressed the view that the violence was somehow a consequence of undefined "natural" criminal characteristics of the youth and people living in the Paris outskirts and that the place itself was full of drug dealers, thieves, people living only on welfare, and not ready and willing to take a decent job. Nicolas Sarkozy, who held the position of the minister of internal affairs back then, supported this thesis in his public speeches, demanding to act more aggressively against those who fought the police and the public order and did not intend to obey the authorities. The fact that most of the rioters had an immigrant background, mostly of Algerian

descent, was the key factor in setting the distinction. Although they had parents and grandparents born in Algeria and other Arab countries, they themselves were mostly born in France and had full French citizenship. In their view, they were symbolically deprived of their “Frenchness” by the very state authorities (police and politicians) which were supposed to grant them their citizen’s rights.

France is also torn apart by the discussion of Muslim burquas and nikabs worn in public institutions, like schools. The significant question raised here is what are actually these traditional clothes? Are burquas and nikabs the symbol of a belonging to a community of those Muslims who are faithful? If so, the division of religion and state symbols does not allow them to be worn in public institutions, especially by teachers, who are state officials. But maybe they are a symbol of belonging to an ethnic minority? In this case, the French state cannot deny the manifestation of ethnic identity in a modern, democratic and pluralistic society, just like the French one pretends to be. This paradoxical situation and the problem in solving it makes the whole issue even more problematic. The question of the expression of otherness is therefore often moved here from cultural to political categories and back. This discursive pendulum might be found not just in France, but also many other European countries.

One of them is Great Britain. The British issues with otherness also tend to be focused around the question of Muslim communities in the UK and their role in the radicalization of Islam. This problem became even more important after the context of 9/11. Some of the imams living in Britain, like Abu Hamza, have called upon their followers to rise up against the British state and to replace it with some kind of an Islamic religious caliphate. This postulate, radical and dangerous it might sound, is shared by a minority among British Muslims, but Abu Hamza and similar imams are not gaining much support throughout the Muslim and Arab community in this country. This doesn’t change the fact that the demonization of Muslims in the UK is being built upon this kind of pictures. The British Other is today mostly associated with radical Islamists, sometimes born and raised in the UK, which makes the whole issue of the question of national identity a playground for radical right wing groups like the British National Party. Furthermore, similar antimuslim sentiments were visible during the recent London riots, where a small group of Muslim radicals distributed stickers proclaiming sharia law in some London districts as a form of a specific self-defence of the local community.

These and other examples of the construction and debates surrounding the issue of cultural otherness are creating in today’s Europe the most important obstacle in implementing the ideas of an educational anthropology which might be considered as a subdiscipline of both anthropology and pedagogy. Educational institutions and current ideologies of teaching consider cultural difference more often as a necessary part of the social reality, but at the same time they tend to set a strategy of cultural inclusion of the Other in an old fashioned manner. The anthropology of education

conducted by modern researchers in Europe tries to point out this paradox and at the same time it deconstructs the way otherness is being treated within specific cultural discourses. The way we conceptualize the category of cultural difference today is still affected by our view of culture as a whole – a system among other systems. This idea is also to be found in contemporary social, cultural and political discourses in European societies, which until now have considered themselves as liberal and open toward otherness. The popular view of otherness as a threat to our own culture is gaining nowadays more and more support in countries like Sweden and the Netherlands. National sentiments have become there an important part of the public discourse. The educational systems in these countries undergo now a deep change related to their ideological foundations. Facing the problem of a failed assimilation policy, the Dutch or Swedish schooling systems, although still among the most liberal in Europe, reverse their policy of a soft cultural change and often take the path of a more “hard” education of immigrants, especially when it comes to language competences. As with the example of recent debates in Germany over the rejection of idea of the so called “multi-kulti Gessellschaft” (multicultural society), this tendency makes a wider phenomena in Europe.

The anthropology of education as a relatively new discipline tries to capture the particular cultural processes of change, such as assimilation, acculturation or socialization in the context of a culture itself. Therefore it brings into discussion an attempt to understand the character of cultural shifts put against the social praxis. The structural character of the mentioned leap from idea into praxis helps us to grasp the particular problem in its essential form. In the European context, the anthropology of education is applied towards the schooling of students who do not fulfil specific requirements. If we are speaking of a migrant background, physical handicap, or social exclusion, we try to overcome these obstacles in the integration process. The anthropology of education shows us how we are able to apply this idea without implementing our own worldview in the minds of people who might not be willing to share the same ideas as we do. That’s why the anthropology of education might serve here as an example of a discipline which sets as its own goal to achieve both contributing to a practical change in cultural reality within it functions and at the same time not to fall into the trap of the ideologization of the educational sphere.

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