

PATTERNS Lectures

IS TEACHING ALWAYS POLITICAL?
NEW CHALLENGES IN
HIGHER EDUCATION.

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**CONFERENCE
PUBLICATION**
November 2017

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Success without failure?*

*Success is not popular
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PATTERNS LECTURES

PATTERNS Lectures is a programme to support the development of new university courses in the fields of artistic research, art history, cultural theory and cultural studies. Its focus is on new artistic and activist practices, new social movements and their significance for recent cultural history in Central and South-Eastern Europe (CEE). The programme stresses critical methodology as well as innovative and interactive teaching practices. It encourages international academic exchange by enabling lecturers to go on study visits and offers guest lectures by international colleagues.

PATTERNS Lectures 2016/2017 supports 12 courses in 8 countries. The courses critically analyse the period after 1989 up to the present day, asking whether and how art contributes to society and investigating the potential and limits of art, stressing aspects of migration, nationalism, xenophobia and homophobia, and dealing with social movements and socially engaged art. The approach reflects ethical and political aspects of teaching but also encourages students to become active citizens and practice democracy.

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CONFERENCE: IS TEACHING ALWAYS POLITICAL? NEW CHALLENGES IN HIGHER EDUCATION. 24-25 NOVEMBER 2017

The final conference of PATTERNS Lectures 2016/17 dealt with the topic "Is teaching always political? New challenges in higher education". Currently, this question is more timely than ever. Within the programme of PATTERNS Lectures 2016/17 we started a passionate discussion about freedom of speech in the classroom, the role of university teachers and students as part of civil society, and the university's responsibility for engagement and democracy. This discussion served as point of departure for the conference.

In the frame of the conference we asked and discussed questions like:

- Is teaching always political? And has teaching always been political? What is the responsibility of the lecturer?
- How should the lecturer deal with political discussions, with hate speech in the class room?
- Are there limits of free speech in the classroom?
- Who should draw them, and where?
- What about the canon? How can we critically examine it?
- What are forms of non-discriminatory critical discussions?
- How do lecturers critically interact with institutions like the university, the state, art and culture?
- How should students be involved in civil society engagement?

This event brought together lecturers from different generations of PATTERNS Lectures, PATTERNS Lectures Advisors and selected guests who took part as speakers and moderators.

CONTENT

Introduction. Is teaching always political? Michaela Handke	5
To convince the indifferent. The role of academic teachers in times of growing xenophobia Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska	8
“Is teaching always political?” How to carry on? An example from Hungary: the OFF-Biennale Hedvig Turai	13
“Teaching the Conflicts” in Literary Studies and in the Classroom Ana Kolarić	16
Political education matters. How and for whom? Cristina David, Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca	21
The obligation to critical thinking and defence of democracy according to Piotr Piotrowski Izabela Kowalczyk	26
Teaching is always political. The question is: for whose benefit? Boris Buden	32
“Is Teaching Always Political?” Elke Krasny	35

INTRODUCTION. IS TEACHING ALWAYS POLITICAL?



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The curriculum is never neutral: it privileges certain worldviews, certain traditions and certain authors.¹ So we quickly moved on to experiences and questions from the classrooms: How to deal with unreasonable statements in class? Crossing the norm: where is the line? And just how much “political” is allowed if you want to keep your job? We knew then and there that we were opening a difficult chapter and that there was no moving on from here to a comfort zone where we could leave the conference with uplifted hearts and happy solutions.

We cannot call students “right-wing” and remove them from class, because it is a dead end. It will exclude a lot of students. Opposition and exclusion would not bring a solution. Demonstrating for what we believe in? Demonstrating with the students? Maybe. But how do we make sure that we do not beat fire with fire? And, searching for alternatives – what are possible forms of non-discriminatory critical discussions? We think there is no room for hate speech; however, who defines the norm in speech and where is the line? When we discussed examples of art work to showcase norms and lines, it became evident that we had different opinions on how much is too much.

Simple discourses provide easy solutions to complex questions; they are therefore easily accessible and attractive to students. But should everything therefore be discussed in depth in the classroom, or should there be limits? And, beyond civic education and encouraging critical thinking – how can one provide for enough space to also teach the content of the curriculum?

Don’t let anything problematic pass without in-depth discussion about causes and consequences and drawing clear conclusions. Be pro-active and do not leave the space dominated by one opinion only. However, for this the teachers must leave not only their comfort zone but very often also their competence zone. Not many feel themselves competent enough to initiate and lead discussions where they are not experts. What if, in the worst case, it encourages hate speech when controversial topics get out of hand in a class room? And looking at the bottom line, what in our opinion is the role of university teachers as part of civil society?

We did not reach definite conclusions, but we started a dialogue to create a forum to share stories and experiences which are similar, and which show that we are not facing isolated cases.

¹ Statements from the conference minutes in *Italics*.

TO CONVINCE THE INDIFFERENT. THE ROLE OF ACADEMIC TEACHERS IN TIMES OF GROWING XENOPHOBIA



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Answering the question, “Is teaching always political?” is easy: yes, teaching is always political. Teaching is performed by persons who have their own opinions, attitudes and political views. Every teacher passes knowledge, theories and analysis through his/her own experiences and perceptions, what Polish sociologist Florian Znaniecki called the “humanistic coefficient”. This is obvious when taking into consideration social and human sciences, but it also fits into life sciences (as proved by many on-going discussions, for example concerning the moment of the beginning of life or importance of vaccinations). So if teaching is political, teachers are also those who are responsible for formatting future generations, and for influencing other people’s attitudes and stances. This responsibility becomes more important in times of growing xenophobia. These days we can observe in Poland and other post-socialist countries as well as in the whole of Europe¹ (and to certain extent the world) that homophobic, xenophobic and racist slogans and discourses have become legitimized. This forces teachers to take a firm position against these tendencies.

I agree that teachers will not (always) be able to change the opinions of those who are already convinced (regarding “rightist” or “leftist” arguments) but they can still influence those who are indifferent. In this text I will concentrate on this aspect of the academic teacher’s role. It is of great importance because the legitimization itself of xenophobic discourses is placing them in an equal position with any other discourses. They are no longer the property of those who situate themselves on the edge of society knowing that what they say and think is not approved by society at large. This discourse has become a part of everyday life; you can hear it in the media, on the streets, at university. In this way people who have no strong opinions on politics and society have found themselves under the strong influence of these discourses. They are surrounded by them, are gradually becoming more familiar with them, and these discourses eventually cease to shock them. People appropriate them slowly and are no longer willing to oppose them. And of course, the problem is also that these discourses are attractive and easily adaptable. A university should be the place where these discourses are deconstructed and criticised. Therefore, there is a need to (try to) answer the question, “What should a teacher (or rather a human being) do to prevent the undecided joining the radical groups when these groups are no longer perceived as radical?” I will situate this question from the bystanders’ perspective and will discuss three different aspects of this problem:

¹ Although the reasons for the growth of xenophobia may be different in those countries, the patterns and results bear a strong resemblance.

1. How can teachers react to far-right/radical statements that are voiced in their classroom?
2. Why and how should teachers use (teaching) materials even if they challenge the notions of non-racist, non-sexist, non-homophobic discourse at universities?
3. How to convince indifferent people/students not to join radical movements?

During the last academic year at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw, as part of a course concerning social movements, an academic teacher invited as a guest speaker a leader of one of the LGBT organizations in Poland. The teacher created a Facebook event, as usual, to open the lecture to all students including those who were not on the list of regular participants. During the guest speaker’s talk, a few people began to disturb him with aggressive and radical provocation against the speaker. The atmosphere became very unpleasant. How did the teacher react? And how should the teacher have reacted?

The teacher decided to mediate between the radical provocation and the guest speaker, trying to listen to their arguments. But this failed as the teacher was too weak and not supported by the students who did not know what to do and situated themselves as observers/bystanders of the situation. The oppressors were numerous, and they were persuaded of their rights. While the students did not know how to behave in such a situation, the oppressors were well trained and had no moral or social problems with expressing their opinions. The guest was insulted and could not continue his presentation. Finally, the teacher closed the lecture informing the students they would meet in a week.

After this meeting one of the students wrote an open letter, first published on Facebook and then reprinted in *Gazeta Wyborcza*, one of the country’s leading journals (now in political opposition) in Poland. She expressed her regret at not reacting against this situation and also expressed her disappointment in the teacher’s reaction. She felt that the “bad guys” were given a right to talk while the guest had actually no opportunity to present his arguments as he had to defend himself, and that no one helped him. This letter resounded strongly especially in Poland where the discussion concerning the role of Poles during the Holocaust is still vivid.

After this letter the directors of the Institute put out an official statement, apologizing to the guest who had experienced a homophobic assault during a meeting with him organized in the Institute. They also wrote that even if the group attacking him was from outside the Institute, they, the Institute, are responsible for students’ and guests’ safety and comfort, as well as for the quality of the debate. They admitted to having failed to react firmly in the face of this situation of violence. They ended by stating that this event proved that academic teachers are not ready for a situation where violence appears, even if the violence is verbal only. And it concerns not only the academic space. They admitted the need for discussions about the situation and for developing rules about how to proceed in similar situations in the future. Anti-discriminatory workshops for teachers and students will take place in this Institute soon.

We have to say that this situation was exceptional. It was not provoked by the students and probably the teacher should have removed these people from the classroom and – in case of any resistance on their part – ended the seminar and called security. But what is to be done when it is one or more students who have the right to participate in the class? What should the teacher do when it is not physical aggression but “only” a verbal insult? What if xenophobic slogans or opinions are expressed by students during a discussion in the classroom? Should the teacher withdraw such students from the list of participants? Should he/she react strongly? Or maybe continue the discussion with them? Should he/she use their arguments as teaching material for

the discourse analysis and deconstruct it, showing other students on what grounds it is based and why it is dangerous for all? There are more questions and even more answers possible, as the discussions and experiences shared by the participants of the conference “Is teaching always political?” organized in Vienna in November 2017 have shown.

The problem is that all the possible reactions also have their consequences. Eliminating these students will not make the problem disappear and other students may feel confused and unsure of having the right to speak and to express their opinions (which is often the base of academic courses in social and human sciences). Discussions legitimize these arguments, at least to a certain extent. I am convinced that a teacher has a right to express his/her opinion and not to agree to using in his/her classroom statements that are false (as all racist, xenophobic and homophobic opinions are) and harmful. Knowing how difficult it is to react firmly in an unexpected and difficult situation, I think that the deconstruction of a discourse and of the arguments can be the best way to react (at least when a teacher is prepared to do so). But I also think that the teacher should not be left on his/her own. The position of the whole university and the whole academic environment should be clear here. I think that the reaction of a teacher may not change the opinions of those who expressed these statements (unless they did it unconsciously, repeating the opinions they heard somewhere), but could certainly contribute to the forming of opinions of those who are undecided. It can also help those who may have been affected by these statements (for example members of different minorities, sexual, ethnic, religious, etc.).

In this context I think that the role of academic teachers is also to give the students the tools necessary for them to be able to think critically and be able – in the future – to deconstruct different discourses. But in order to be able to do so, academic teachers cannot base their arguments on material which only shows an easy analytical way, i.e. black and white. It is not difficult to deconstruct the anti-Semitic arguments in *Mein Kampf*. But are the students able to see anti-Semitic arguments and understand how they function in a text that seems to be ideologically “neutral”? Would they be able to understand that any text placed on Facebook, in newspapers, in television broadcast and so on, express their authors’ ideologies, prejudices and attitudes?

In the call for the conference “Is teaching always political?” organizers wrote that students from the Free University of Berlin refused to read Immanuel Kant, claiming that his vocabulary concerning indigenous peoples was racist and insensitive. I wonder what the reaction of their academic teachers was and I hope they have opposed the students’ will. Why? If we exclude from the teaching materials any historical literature, media, and art work when they present challenges to notions of non-racist, non-sexist, non-homophobic discourse at universities, there will be no possibility to teach students critical thinking and critical analysis. Excluding these materials would mean closing our eyes to the problems that exist. It would also mean that students wouldn’t be able to see that any discourse is grounded in the broad context of ideas, ways of thinking, politics, economic and social powers, etc. We need to teach students how to understand why Kant used these expressions and not to eliminate his work! If we do so, we would have to eliminate all other authors from the European cultural context (and not only those) who created before the change in the way of perceiving others (and I am not only thinking about the indigenous people, or about people of a race other than white, but also about social groups, about women, children, animals...). The role of the teacher is to prepare students to be able to analyse different texts and understand under what circumstances they were created. If we prevent students from acquiring these skills, they will never be able to react to the reality surrounding them. How can students be prepared to confront the discursive reality that exists for example now in Poland (and not only there)?

Possessing the necessary tools, students will (hopefully) be able also to think critically about the reality they have to deal with in their everyday life. In other words, Kant should not be eliminated. But the discourse he was using should be an object of an analysis, like many other texts (both written and iconographic). Students must be able to see that there is no such thing as a “neutral” discourse, both in the discourses that concern the social phenomena that may be perceived as “negative” from the “not-right-wing” perspective but also which in the “leftist” view are perceived as “positive”².

As I already wrote, I do not have any definitive advice of how to convince those who are indifferent or undecided. I think that it depends mainly on the situation, the relations with the teacher, but also on whether the students are supported and feel they can trust their teachers and their group. To present how it would be possible to achieve this, I will use two different examples: one from the world of football, often associated with far-right milieus, and the other from the academic practice developed in the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw (already mentioned in a different context).

During our Patterns Lectures seminar we hosted a guest lecture by Daniel Lörcher, responsible for the activities of Borussia Dortmund football fans. I will summarize his ideas as I think they represent some universal examples of how to teach, or rather that teaching should be much more than just being in a classroom with students.

Daniel Lörcher started by presenting the history of the Borussia Dortmund football fan club, which was quite strongly based on a racist, xenophobic way of thinking, and describing aggression in the stadium and outside of it (which led to a person’s death). Finally, the club decided that enough was enough and launched open and active programmes against racism in the stadium. It included the exact positioning of BVB, the support of positive forces, the establishment of a network of positive actors from the local establishment, numerous workshops and lectures and many other agendas. BVB has also proposed instruction courses for 1000 stewards on how to identify discriminative behaviour at the stadium and how to react to it.

From the point of view of this text the most important measure is their initiative to build a fun centre connected with a fun club where people will be able to participate in different activities, workshops, spend time with friends, etc. This centre will be a place for positive and undecided actors only where anti-racist content would be given to them “subliminally”, without persuasion, simply by the fact that these people have other options, and that these options would be interesting for them, and that they would feel accepted there. This initiative can be called educational and is regarded as preventive work with people.

The other example is a “cultural animation” programme conducted for many years now at the Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw. This specialization merges educational aspects with practical work with people, artists, non-governmental associations, etc. It is based on the assumption that a “cultural worker/ animator” is not there to tell you what to do or to impose programmes already established, but that any group/person they work with possesses their own cultural values and patterns which – thanks to this common work – can be extracted and activated.

² I can give a few examples from the Patterns Lectures course held by Nicole Dołowy-Rybińska and Anna Zawadzka in the academic years 2016-2017 and 2017-2018. One can be a symbol of the anchor – an emblem of the Polish Underground State and Home Army during World War II. These days this symbol, which initially had an anti-fascist meaning, is being appropriated by neo-Nazis, nationalist and anti-Semitic groups in Poland and can be seen accompanied by a swastika. The opposite example is from the studies on multilingualism. The multilingualism discourse is presented as neutral while it is also formulated under the influence of neo-capitalism and in this spirit the profits from it are presented.

It is based on listening to people's needs and ideas. Animators are not there to condemn others but to listen to them and understand them. The aim of this programme is to prepare students for work with local societies, in cultural institutions, NGOs, etc. This kind of openness to other people, their opinions and needs is extremely important in times of growing xenophobia. Condemning people who succumb to populist slogans will not resolve the problem. These people are often left to themselves and no one pays attention to them. Listening to them, offering them a place, a space and the possibility of doing something positive together, to show them that there are other options than those proposed by right-wing politicians and activists, is very important. Such attention could also influence these people's attitudes and turn them from the indifferent position of a bystander who observes negative behaviour thinking that it does not concern him/her into the active position of those who are ready to criticize it and to react openly to it.

What lessons for teachers can be drawn from these examples? First, that it is important to teach students and teachers how to react in situations of physical or verbal aggression, in the classroom and outside of it. It is important to establish standards and be conscious that there are limits to acceptable discussion. To make this possible, the university as an institution should also take a firm stand against xenophobia, fascism, homophobia, etc. (as did the Borussia Dortmund club). Without this, it will be difficult for teachers to oppose xenophobic discourses. Secondly, students should receive tools at the university for critical thinking, to be prepared and not be deceived by easy/radical discourses and options. Thirdly, attention should primarily be focused on those who are indifferent, both in the classroom and outside.

To conclude, I think that from the point of view of the teachers' responsibility, it is the undecided people who are the most important both at the societal level and at the university. There are people with radical views there, and those who are ready to oppose the xenophobic way of thinking. But most of the students – like most of society – are indifferent; they are not (yet) politically formed. If the “radical” groups' arguments or propositions are more interesting for them, if radicals offer them attention, understanding and time, and the university – meaning, the academic teachers – only teach them standardized subjects without thinking what the real needs of these people are, they may easily turn to those radical movements. As Edmund Burke's well-known quote reminds us, “All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing”. This phrase found its confirmation during WWII in Poland. The question whether the Shoah would have been possible if “bystanders” had opposed it is more relevant today than ever. Different groups are being marginalized, discriminated against and attacked. In this context, I think that the role of academic teaching is to convince those that are indifferent that they are responsible too. And here I think teachers should be comparable to cultural animators: they should listen, be open, but also able to think critically and to teach their students how to do this.

“IS TEACHING ALWAYS POLITICAL?” HOW TO CARRY ON? AN EXAMPLE FROM HUNGARY: THE OFF-BIENNALE



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All that has been going on around CEU in Hungary has made it impossible to avoid addressing the question of the connection between education and politics. The question previously raised, “Is teaching always political?”, should be answered with a straight yes, and this yes is becoming stronger and stronger. Nothing has resolved the CEU's situation (see our previous article¹): neither big demonstrations, nor acknowledgment that CEU actually has met the requirements set up by the government, no matter what the rationale behind them, and that continuing the teaching would be beneficial for the present government in Hungary; the uncertainty is prolonged. Academic freedom and the situation of democracy are intertwined. All these happenings have highlighted the fact that teaching is political, and education is connected to political issues. Due to the attack against CEU, quite a few eye-opening discussions about education have been going on.

One of the most burning questions in education today is how to teach in a situation when education is over-politicized and the teaching environment is not really favourable for critical thinking. What is the agency of the teacher? How much freedom is possible in teaching; what happens to academic freedom? Is there a difference between state educational institutions and privately-owned educational institutions? Does financial support mean financial dependence? These are questions that go beyond the limits of country borders and have an actuality throughout Europe, especially but not only in post-communist countries. Neither are these questions new, let alone for many of us who were part of the education system under socialism either as students or as teachers. When this issue was raised at a recent discussion, an excellent professor said that she closed the door of the classroom and taught what she was convinced of, believed in, what she wanted. Nobody really censored her. So closing the door meant creating a safe space for teaching. The time she was talking about was the period of the loosening and imminent collapse of late socialism, late Kádárism. Is this still a relevant strategy?

We might imagine that financially independent educational institutions can be freer, that there is more academic freedom there than in state institutions. On the other hand, private universities still need to be accredited according to higher educational laws and requirements. Also, while financial independence means a lot, it can be just another type of dependence, that of the market. I would like to refer to Professor Dániel Deák's lecture at CEU² when he highlighted three major points in connection with education, finances, and dependence. First, it is normal that universities struggle with financial and economic problems; however, that economy is the market economy, while here,

¹ See: „What's going on here? Is teaching always political?“, Hedvig Turai and Michaela Handke report the case of CEU in Budapest and a debate in London. <http://www.erstestiftung.org/en/whats-going-on-here/>

² See: <https://www.ceu.edu/event/2017-05-26/teach-ceu-rethinking-role-university>

in our present, economic and political pressure are interwoven. Second, Hungary made a transition from welfare state to work-fare state, and human skills and human infrastructure were depreciated. Third, due to the above, there is no vision of knowledge in society: in a car manufacturing economy there is no need for open-ended, deeper knowledge.

I cannot give a general answer to these burning issues that are the topic of our discussions here, but I can address them from my own practice, teaching visual culture and contemporary art. Visual culture is an especially important field that provides the opportunity to analyse all faces of visibility – posters, political signs, logos, advertisements out in the street, or in newspapers, in public spaces – and to put them into a wider institutional, political context. It is an intersection of many different fields of study, including marketing, communication strategies, and visual elements in all walks of life. Visual culture is also an indispensable approach to contemporary art. OFF-Biennale Budapest provided an excellent opportunity for this, to sensitize students to less obvious relations between art, politics, and education. I would like to take a few examples from this event.

OFF-Biennale Budapest is a grassroots initiative, organized for the second time in 2017. This series of events provided a great opportunity to teach about politics, art, and education. I invited two guest lecturers, Hajnalka Somogyi, the conceiver and chief curator of OFF-Biennale and Gergely Nagy, who was responsible for communication. I asked them to talk about the event, not so much about individual exhibitions or art works, but rather about how they set up the concept, how they organized the series of events, how they raised money, how they managed communication in a heavily circumscribed cultural environment. In order to enable international students to understand the whole institutional structural side of OFF, and the situation in Hungary, the guest lecturers had to explain the media situation (hardly any independent media left), the sponsoring system, the application system, the new civil law (sponsorship coming from outside Hungary should be publicly noted as “foreign support”), as well as the concept, and what it means to be political in art. Not only explicitly being political, by not applying for or accepting any state support, but doing things which are political just by doing them. They were also asked to compare the first edition of OFF with the present one. The previous context was harsh but not comparable to the present one. The context and the political environment have changed, sponsors changed; in this new situation finding suitable exhibition spaces, for example, was more challenging than two years earlier, as official spaces and institutions did not take the risk of hosting OFF exhibitions.

One such example was Szabolcs Kisspál's exhibition, *From Fake Mountains to Faith* (Hungarian Trilogy). The artist has been working on this docu-fiction since 2012. He has created two video pieces and an installation on Hungarian right-wing traditions, myths, and material culture based on the memory of the Trianon treaty. The first video piece is *Amorous Geography*, with its central motif of an artificial “mountain” in the Budapest Zoo, set up in 1912 and modelled on a mountain in Transylvania, which later came to symbolize the loss of Hungarian territories due to the Trianon treaty. The second part, *The Rise of the Fallen Feather*, is about the national, mythic bird, the Hungarian Turul. The third is a pseudo exhibition of the so-called Chasm Records. The work in its totality is a strong criticism of current nationalism, which is a basic constituent of the official politics of memory. A venue for the exhibition had to be found in the course of organizing the event, as for reasons quite obvious although not made public, no state sponsored institution hosted the exhibition. The outcome was actually rather advantageous. The Institute of Political History – this institution itself had its battle to be able to keep its premises – hosted the trilogy, and it happens to be in a building located opposite the Houses of the Hungarian Parliament. We can say that the

decolonization of official narratives and official memory politics could not take place in official spaces, and an alternative venue had to be found.

Education as a political tool was one of the major topics of OFF-Biennale. The basic concept of the event was based on Gaudiopolis (1945–1950), the City of Joy. Gaudiopolis was a Children's Republic founded in the aftermath of World War II in Budapest by Lutheran pastor Gábor Sztehlo. This concept not only wisely evoked a phase of the past that is relevant today but also emphasized the role of education in creating and learning democracy in order to create a vision of the future. This children's community “set out to learn democracy anew, [...] to become independent, self-conscious, practically trained, and theoretically qualified citizens striving for better self-understanding and self-criticism”.³ Education was the foundational concept of OFF and became one of its major topics as well.

Many art works collected or produced for the occasion of the biennale evoked examples from the past, experiments in education. These ranged from Gaudiopolis, and the island of Scharfenberg in Berlin (by Kati Simon and Zsolt Vásárhelyi), both examples of mini autonomous democracies of education and self-sustaining practices; to the Academy of Fine Arts in Budapest where at the time of the political changes of 1989–90, revolutionary events took place, and the students protested against dated academic teaching methods and the structure of the institution (*Rebels*, a photo-comic book and installation by Little Warsaw); and to the exhibition of *Pedagogical Partisan Actions* (curated by Virág Lödi). During OFF-Biennale, the gallery space of this latter exhibition functioned as a hub for ideas about the role of art in education, and it also presented two historic experiments of alternative pedagogy, alternative pedagogical practices of the late Kádár era. One, entitled *An Underground Attempt*, was conducted by historian István Rév and artist István Sinkó, the other by the acclaimed filmmaker and artist Péter Forgács. István Rév and István Sinkó conducted an extracurricular activity in an elite Budapest high-school. They taught history and social studies in a performative way, applying artistic methods. They studied social phenomena that were often taboos in the official discourse, and aimed to make students aware of and respond to the hierarchy and manipulation in education. Péter Forgács taught in a workers' district and relied on the Bauhaus tradition to carry out a complex interdisciplinary aesthetic art education. These educational, alternative experiments are ways of learning democracy and critical thinking. It was a common feature of both alternative programmes that they could carry out their experiments without any obstacles, that their activity was not censored in the late Kádárist, softening socialist regime.

OFF was itself great material for education, and OFF also considered education as prime material to focus on both in exhibitions and in its own educational programmes. OFF-Biennale was an attempt to “get off”, to get out of an institutional system, and an experiment to actually change this system. Gaudiopolis is an educational model: how to start things anew, from scratch, as well as a metaphor of the need for a new beginning. The basic question remains: how to teach and learn critical thinking in an unsupportive environment. In our region, this evokes strategies prior to the political transition of 1989. The past examples show that we have to turn to the past to step forward. But these past examples should be renewed and adapted, and new strategies are needed, as the similarities are misleading. The late Kádár era and the present are different. Whether and in what ways those alternative educational practices could be carried out and worked today, for example, could be a test of our present.

³ Gaudiopolis. Programme booklet. Budapest, OFF-Biennale Association, 2017. 6.

“TEACHING THE CONFLICTS” IN LITERARY STUDIES AND IN THE CLASSROOM



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Introduction

In this paper I explore the idea of “teaching the conflicts” (Graff, 1993) in the classroom in general, and in literary studies in particular. In the first part, I argue that both education and teaching are inherently political and ethical acts (Apple, 2004 [1979]). Then I discuss the concepts of consensus and conflict in the curriculum. In order to do this, I use works by Michael Apple and Gerald Graff as my points of reference.¹ Finally, I give two concrete examples of “teaching the conflicts”. In my first example, I discuss a syllabus for the course on modernity, modernism and literary criticism that I teach to fourth year students at the Department of Comparative Literature and Literary Theory. My second example points to the connection between a doctoral course on the contemporary feminist press and the idea of “teaching the conflicts”. This course is taught by Prof. Biljana Dojčinović and myself and has been supported by the PATTERNS Lectures (2016/2017).

Is teaching always political?

For several decades now, Michael Apple, a well-known American professor of Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Policy Studies, a Leftist and critical pedagogue, has argued that education is always an inherently political and ethical act. In many of his books, Apple has explored the relation between knowledge, teaching and power in education. Education produces and transmits the so-called “official knowledge”. Such official knowledge is usually created under the strong influence of political and economic elites. Thus, it rarely relates to the experiences and cultures of marginalized groups in a society, those who have less political, economic and symbolical power.

The curriculum is never neutral: it privileges certain worldviews, certain traditions, and certain authors. In other words, even when teachers believe *that they are just doing their job* by following the curriculum and teaching *this* instead of *that*, they are in fact transmitting “official knowledge” – as something natural and pre-given – to students. The situation is a bit different at university, where educators still have the freedom to create their own curriculum. However, university educators also suggest a list of certain authors, books and traditions to their students. They often justify their choices by referring to literary tradition and literary canon. But, as many scholars have already shown, tradition is always selective (Williams, 1965 [1961]).

Let me briefly illustrate my points with two examples. The first example comes from elementary school. The definition of a love poem in one of the textbooks intended for the classes in Serbian language and literature for the seventh grade more or less goes like this: “A love poem speaks about

emotions and feelings that occur between two persons of the opposite sex.” Putting this definition in the textbook is a political and ethical act. Deciding how to teach this definition is also a political and ethical act. Another example sheds light on the complicated relationship between teaching and exams at the university level. There are several important women writers that can and should appear in the syllabuses for courses on the American and European realism. However, if these women writers are not included in the list of mandatory exam questions, students will probably not read their work. Again, this is a political and ethical choice that professors make for themselves. Of course, some educators choose to be explicit about their intellectual and pedagogical choices, both in their writing and in the classroom. They try to always acknowledge the principles of selection instead of claiming that their (epistemological) choices are universal and all-inclusive.

So, is teaching always political? The obvious answer is: yes, it is. Yet the word *political* has to be accurately defined each time it is used. Schools and universities should not be partisan institutions. In other words, teachers and educators should not promote the politics of concrete political parties and their representatives in the classroom. However, schools and universities are political sites. As Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy argue, “[w]e are being political when we are democratically making decisions about the question, ‘How should we live together?’” (Hess and McAvoy, 2015: 4). In the humanities, and consequently literary studies, educators and students inevitably ask such questions.

Conflict in curriculum²

In his book *Ideology and Curriculum* (2004 [1979]), Michael Apple claims that curriculum puts forward consensus instead of conflict. Continuous justification for “acceptance of the distinctions and social rules” that students learn at every level of education is needed, which “requires that institutions, common-sense rules, and knowledge be seen as relatively pre-given, neutral, and basically unchanging because they all continue to exist by ‘consensus’” (Apple, 2004: 78). Apple, however, believes that conflict should be explicit in the curriculum because it was, and still is, the main trigger for change. In other words, personal, intellectual and ideological conflicts in science in general, and in social sciences and humanities in particular, cause the shift of intellectual paradigms.

Similar difficulties occur in understanding conflict in society and, more precisely, in social history. Different social movements, like the women’s movement or the civil rights movement, represent the best examples of such conflict. To put it simply, injustice and unfair laws were first challenged and disobeyed in the counterpublic spheres, like the feminist press, and in the streets. Only after that were laws changed in court. In other words, conflict often precedes consensus. However, students frequently learn only about the outcomes of these important struggles (for example, students memorize different years when women gained the right to vote across Europe), while concrete struggles and conflicts are put aside, especially if they were in any way militant and radical. The reasons for this are obvious, according to Apple: such peaceful and consensual intellectual and social history is being used to maintain a status quo in contemporary societies. On the other hand, to learn about various intellectual and ideological conflicts would in fact mean to learn about possibilities for substantial social and political changes that lead to a more just society.

Gerald Graff’s concept of “teaching the conflicts” affects both classroom pedagogy and curricular organization. He believes that numerous conflicts exist between disciplines and within them: epistemological, political, ethical. Teaching is mainly designed to hide or minimize these conflicts.

¹ One might ask why I use Western theories to talk about curriculum and literary studies in Serbia. First, some theories go well beyond national, cultural and linguistic borders. Secondly, Michael Apple’s scholarly work and political commitment are badly needed in times when the Serbian Government, led by the ruling political party (Srpska napredna stranka/SNS), proposes and adopts new laws at all educational levels, putting forward testing, efficiency, the job market and the economy, while forgetting what education is really about.

² I am referring to an early work by Michael Apple and a relatively “old” book by Gerald Graff, because both authors stick to their main arguments and ideas over a number of years and in many books, of course enriching and modifying their standpoints as political and social contexts change.

Thus, when two or more professors disagree about some concrete issues, students might often see this as a matter of a personal feud, instead of seeing it as a result of opposing theoretical and ideological standpoints. According to Graff, the best way to deal with issues and problems raised by culture wars, that is, to talk about meaning of tradition, culture, and value, is to make conflicts explicit in the classroom. There are at least two ways to do this.

First, educators can include in their syllabus articles by authors who disagree about the theoretical concepts and methodologies. This should provide students with a more complete and inclusive view of the history of literary criticism and curricular design as well. Let me mention one of the examples which Graff uses.³ Graff says that he sometimes starts his classes with a statement by Allan Bloom: "In good education we just read the books. We don't have all these fancy methodologies which come between the reader and the text." And then, in contrast with it, he puts a short statement from a review of Bloom's book by Richard Rorty that says: "We never just read the books; we always bring our own contexts and politics to reading." These very short sentences can trigger many different kinds of questions. Also, according to Graff, the controversy or conflict initiated by these sentences is an open question: it's not exactly clear who's right (Buffington and Moneyhun, 1997: 9). There are many authors who would agree with Bloom and many who agree with Rorty. There are also those who would try to overcome the conflict by framing the problem differently. All these possibilities should be open for discussion in the classroom.

Secondly, educators can – and, according to Graff, should – ask their colleagues who practice different approaches to the text to confront their interpretations of literary works in front of the students in the classroom. For example, let us imagine that two professors, one who bases his or her interpretation strictly on an intrinsic approach to the text, and the other who favours feminist theory and criticism, talk about a poem or novel. They would do it from two entirely different perspectives and probably provide two different, possibly conflicting, worldviews in their interpretations. This should enable students to see their curriculum as less fragmented, but it should also encourage their participation in discussion.

Finally, engaging in epistemological, political, and ethical conflicts in the classroom should provide students with tools and skills for argumentation and deliberation. These are necessary for the ability to participate in political and social life and, thus, in collectively shaping society (e.g. Gutmann, 1999 [1987]). Gerald Graff is well aware that students are future citizens who will one day discuss and negotiate the conditions under which they live together. In many ways, the classroom represents a microcosm of society, and, thus, the best place for learning to "respectfully disagree".

Gerald Graff has been associated with left-of-centre stands on educational and cultural issues (Buffington and Moneyhun, 1997: 1). He is, however, often seen as "liberal". It seems that Graff's idea of "teaching the conflicts" in literary studies can be related to the more general idea of democratic education, based on deliberation. Roughly speaking, the tradition of democratic education goes from John Dewey to contemporary authors like Amy Gutmann and Diana Hess.⁴ Of course, the conceptualization of democratic education always partly changes in different historical periods and diverse contexts. Michael Apple, who is also connected with left-of-centre stands on educational and cultural issues, has been a loyal practitioner of critical theory and critical pedagogy (Paolo Freire). His works can be related to a more radical and progressive position on the Left.

³ Gerald Graff uses these examples in his book *Beyond the Culture Wars* (1993), as well as in the conversation with Ira Shor, led by Nancy Buffington and Clyde Moneyhun, available in *JAC: A Journal of Composition Theory*, 1997, vol. 17 no. 1, pp. 1-21.

⁴ See: Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (1999 [1987]), Diana Hess, *Controversy in the Classroom* (2009), Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy, *The Political Classroom* (2015).

The liberal approach in education, when based on deliberation, is often criticized for simply deliberating competing views, without challenging the *status quo* in a society. The progressive approach, on the other hand, tries to identify power relations, injustice, and inequality in order to question and, ideally, change the *status quo*. It might be said that both approaches have similar guiding principles: democracy and pluralism. However, they differ in their understanding of democracy and criticism of capitalism. By using concrete examples, I will try to show one possible way of combining insights and conclusions provided by Michael Apple and Gerald Graff.

Teaching feminist theory and criticism

I teach a one-semester course on modernity, modernism and literary criticism to fourth year students. I divided the syllabus into two parts. Articles in the reader for the first part of the semester focus on the concepts of modernity and modernism. Together with usual, must-read authors and articles, students also learn about "gender of modernity" (Felski, 1995) and feminist revisions of the dominant representation of literary modernism (e.g. Scott, 1995). Articles in the reader for the second part of the semester focus on modern periodical studies. Some authors argue that modernism began in magazines (Scholes and Wulfman, 2010), since the most famous modernist writers, such as T.S. Eliot, James Joyce and Ezra Pound, first published their literary works and essays in magazines. The discussion of modern periodicals provides me with the opportunity to challenge the usual understanding of literary history and literary canon as "the best of" from every historical period. Modern periodical studies offer a more complete picture of a historical period and shed light on various mechanisms of literary production and selection.

Many feminist revisions and rewritings of the "official knowledge" on modernity and modernism helped to produce new knowledge about women editors, women journalists, and women writers and literary critics from the early 20th century. I underline this fact in the syllabus and discussions. Let me give a concrete example. Students are sometimes familiar with the famous modernist magazine *The Egoist*, in which Eliot, Joyce and Pound published their works. However, they do not know that this magazine was financed and led mainly by women. Dora Marsden was among these important women. She was an editor and contributing editor in three related modern(ist) magazines: *The Freewoman*, *The New Freewoman* and *The Egoist*. Marsden, a feminist with rather radical views on freedom, morality and sexuality at the time, was the one who accepted Joyce's novel *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* for serial publishing in *The Egoist*. Yet, until recently, her name and important work were missing from the curriculum of literary studies.

Dora Marsden's biography opens space in the classroom for discussions about the women's movement and the feminist movement, suffragettes and their struggle for the vote, as well as the discursive nature of sexual and gender identities, both in literature and society. Usually, I connect the topics of modern and feminist periodical studies with concepts of the public (Jürgen Habermas) and the counterpublic spheres, like the feminist, socialist, and anarchist counterpublics from the early 20th century. By doing this, not only do I try to illustrate how competing ideas operated in a diverse society in the early 20th century, but I also stress how the perception of this historical period and its literary production has changed in the curriculum of literary studies over the years.

When I created the syllabus for this course, I kept in mind Graff's idea of "teaching the conflicts" and used scholarly articles that offer different perspectives. However, I always try to avoid reproducing the usual binary opposition between conservative and liberal standpoints in literary studies, and politics as well, by choosing articles that rather represent more nuanced and self-reflexive readings

from the liberal and left point of view for classroom discussions.⁵ When I decided to introduce a history of women's and feminist movement in the syllabus, I relied on Michael Apple's conclusions about ideology and curriculum in education. In other words, I aim to explain the mechanisms of hegemony and selective tradition in literature, curriculum and society. Also, I am committed to always acknowledging women's struggles, sacrifices and victories, first in the streets and then in courts, schools, professions. I try to engage students in discussion, but never to indoctrinate them.

Together with Professor Biljana Dojčinović, I teach the doctoral course "Bringing Theory, Activism and Cultural Practices Together: Feminist Press in Serbia in the 1990s and 2000s". The feminist press represents a valuable research source for several reasons: 1) as an essential document of the history of the women's movement and feminist ideas; 2) as a counterpublic sphere where both theorists and activists can discuss their ideas; 3) as a storage of essays and literary works that might have never been published elsewhere; 4) as a testimony of the strong collaboration between women in the region, in conflict and post-conflict societies. In this course, Prof. Dojčinović and I present the recent cultural and political history from another perspective, different than the official one. Also, we talk about alternative educational fields (programmes in Women's Studies that were established in the early nineties both in Serbia and Croatia, largely as a reaction to nationalism, war, and violence against women in the region) and their main tool of communication outside classrooms – feminist magazines. By doing this, we in fact aim to institutionalise theoretical, cultural and activist work by feminists and make it a part of legitimate knowledge at our faculty. Furthermore, this course underlines the pacifist and anti-war discourses by some intellectuals and activists from the nineties in order to show that armed conflict has never been the only choice.

This doctoral course is based on co-teaching. This approach is often used in an interdisciplinary context because it exposes students to different ways of thinking about a topic. More importantly, this approach puts forward both intellectual dialogue and conflict between lecturers, exposing students to different standpoints and theoretical views in a constructive manner. Such a non-hierarchical and democratic teaching practice lies at the heart of feminist pedagogy.

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⁵ For example, I put together a chapter from the book by Robert Scholes and Clifford Wulfman, "Ezra Pound, Founder of Modern Periodical Studies" (*Modernism in Magazines. An Introduction*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010, 1-25) and a chapter from the book by Jayne E. Marek, "A Distorting Lens. Ezra Pound and Literary Editors" (*Women Editing Modernism. "Little" Magazines and Literary History*, The University Press of Kentucky, 1995, 167-192). Or I combine articles about the public sphere and counterpublic spheres: Jürgen Habermas, "The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedic Article (1964)" (*New German Critique*, No. 3, 1974, 49-55) and Mark S. Morison, "Marketing British Modernism: *The Freewoman, The Egoist*, and Counterpublic Spheres" (M. S. Morison, *The Public Face of Modernism. Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception 1905-1920*, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001, 84-132).

POLITICAL EDUCATION MATTERS. HOW AND FOR WHOM?



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The conference "Is Teaching Always Political? New Challenges in Higher Education" organized as part of the Pattern Lectures programme, finished about two weeks ago and the issues discussed there are still quite fresh in our minds. More than that, we are now invited to fulfil another challenge: a collaboration between a social scientist who also has experience as a lecturer in the Department of Political Science, European Studies and International Relations at Alexandru Ioan Cuza University, where he is teaching, and a contemporary visual artist with brief experience as a teacher. We accepted the task of writing a text together, gathering in it our impressions, notes and a few (convergent and/or divergent) conclusions that stay with us after participating in the conference. It is a task that needs some special co-operation skills, which we hope will help us in future to come together more easily and find different strategies to combine our professional experience. Our aim is to arrive at the point where visual arts will be a real help in developing political education and "a deeper critique of ideology", as Ovidiu Gherasim-Proca underlined in his presentation. At the same time, visual artists sometimes need real support from social scientists in order to approach political matters with a deeper understanding of the subjects and with a clearer, wider vision of public affairs.

Is teaching always political? No, someone will argue. It would be easy to point to specific examples proving that teaching can be reduced to mere instruction, thus achieving perfect political neutrality. However, even in such cases education consists in giving a social sense to the knowledge transmitted, to its purpose and scope. The interaction between teachers and learners cannot be abstracted from its broader social environment. Instruction cannot escape the implicit value statements involved in any act of education. The uses of knowledge and extended sets of values are communicated together with theories, ideas, assumptions or practices. And given the centrality of political values, they will be literally everywhere. Even the most rigid form of technical training cannot be effective unless it re-enacts knowledge in a manner in which learning meets its practical consequences – whether we are talking about ethics, narratives about what is desirable or ways to understand your own responsibilities as part of the collective. An entire corpus of literature deals with questions referring to the general mythology of "value-free science", analysing the power structures that permeate various all-encompassing categories of knowledge production or explaining how it fails to give an accurate account of how people do learn/create/teach¹. Needless to say, different fields of knowledge show different degrees of dependence on intersubjective socially relevant value judgments. Social sciences, arts and humanities enjoy, from this point of view, a particular epistemic status.

¹ See Harold Kincaid, John Dupre, and Alison Wylie, eds., *Value-Free Science?: Ideals and Illusions*, 1st edition (Oxford: New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Robert N Proctor, *Value-Free Science? Purity and Power in Modern Knowledge* (Cambridge; Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1991).

Starting from this point, political education must try to make explicit and to debate the implicit political values incorporated in our ideas. At a more personal level it will provide incentives to discuss and to confront our own social role. By doing this, the unavoidable presence of ideology can be acknowledged and its influence can be clarified. How else would it be possible to enable a broader understanding of facts and experiences beyond our own worldview? How else could different ethical standpoints be communicated or confronted? How else can critical approaches towards challenging topics appear? In some sense, recognizing the need for ideological awareness, regardless of the subject matter approached, is the first step towards thorough deliberation, bringing all participants closer to a status of epistemic equality, as required by the emancipatory purpose of education.

In our presentations at the conference, we both described the socio-political national context as a frame for some particular peculiarities and incidents that happen during the educational process. Many critical questions about freedom of speech and the role of the university in contemporary society are prompted by the pressure of political realities which, without doubt, have become increasingly worrying in many European countries. This is also the case in Romania, where the discursive frame that shapes all significant present-day conversations around the public mission of higher education is defined by several prominent trends. Among them maybe the most enduring are those that characterize the global neoliberal condition. Like in many other countries, as a result of austerity policies, Romanian higher education has been subjected to harsh market-oriented reforms, designed to decrease public spending and to increase “competitiveness”. Focusing obsessively on university rankings and reductionist quantitative measures of productivity, the “managerial turn” systematically undervalues social sciences, arts and humanities as “inefficient”, while the social problems for which they are searching for solutions become more severe. Belated anti-communist narratives fuel continuously revisionist or nationalistic attitudes with very concrete effects². A general sentiment of dissatisfaction among the middle classes nurtures obscure manicheistic drives, echoing both the political obsessions of the 1990s and the need of a younger generation to state its patriotic idealism³.

On the other hand, xenophobic and homophobic tendencies are refuelled by a new, stronger, religious conservative social movement, gravitating around “Coaliția pentru familie” (“Coalition for family”), which presents itself as a civic association of non-governmental organizations supporting traditional family values, but has managed to shift the political agenda towards public debates questioning the rights of the LGBT community and the reproductive rights of women⁴. Although it includes organisations representing various Christian denominations, the coalition benefits from the official support of the Romanian Orthodox Church, which shows an increasing interest in the religious education of young people, as demonstrated during the International Meeting of Orthodox

2 Strikingly enough, the ambiguous post-communist politics of memory, sometimes promoted through the public discourse of influential liberal cultural elites or through state-funded academic research, enables abhorrent moral rehabilitations of notorious anti-Semitic instigators or, even worse, the judicial rehabilitation of war criminals. See Alexandru Florian, “Mémoires concurrentes dans la Roumanie postcommuniste,” *Les Temps Modernes*, no. 696 (7 December 2017): 180–92; Alexandru Climescu, “Post-Transitional Injustice. The Acquittal of Holocaust Perpetrators in Post-Communist Romania,” *Holocaust. Studii și Cercetări*, no. 7 (2014): 145–57.

3 Nick Thorpe, “What’s behind Romania’s Mass Protests?,” *BBC News*, 4 February 2017, sec. Europe, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38867959>; Matt, “Romania’s Red Plague,” Blogpost, accessed 16 December 2017, <http://expatrot.blogspot.com/2017/02/romania-red-plague.html>.

4 By all appearances, the international support received by the coalition confirms the findings reported by The Observatory on the Universality of Rights work group, according to which ultra-conservative or fundamentalist organizations are coordinating at the international level through anti-rights mobilization. See Naureen Shameem, “Rights at Risk. Trends Report 2017” (Toronto: The Association for Women’s Rights in Development, 2017), <https://www.oursplatform.org/wp-content/uploads/Rights-At-Risk-OURS-Trends-Report-2017.pdf>.

Youth held recently in Iași. Their most powerful action was to raise three million signatures in order to initiate, through the participatory procedure of Citizens’ Initiative, a referendum intending to change the constitutional definition of family⁵. More precisely, the referendum is intended to replace the word “spouses” with “a man and a woman” in article 48 of the Romanian constitution which states: “The family is founded on the freely consented marriage of the spouses, their full equality, as well as the right and duty of the parents to ensure the upbringing, education and instruction of their children”.

It is worth mentioning that before this move of Coalition for Family (CfF) there was no effective broader public discussion or political reform regarding the right of LGBT+ people to marry. At the moment, Romanian law exclusively supports heterosexual, monogamous marriage. This makes the initiative a peculiar case of a public relations “pre-emptive strike” that (mis)uses the language of liberal participatory activism for strategic conservative political (re)action.

Coming closer to the topic of artistic social engagement, one of the most successful formulas to resist to such enterprises that enable the discursive production of hate against a minority – which already is confronted with discrimination in the rather conservative patriarchal Romanian society – is to use clever humour and irony. Many may feel that rational arguments have already lost ground in the confrontation with the members of this coalition, so it happens that the most visible counter-action is in fact one that uses absurd humour, memes and artistic visuals to oppose the CfF’s dry rigid discriminatory ambitions.

Consequently, at the beginning of May 2017 another coalition appeared, focusing the attention of the media for a short time. Suggestively titled Coalition for Vanilla, it ironically paraphrased its conservative counterpart. They started a petition claiming the rights of vanilla cream. The petition was signed by 3,000 people and their Facebook page got 10,000 likes in less than a day. As various media institutions invited some of the initiators – an eclectic group of artists, human rights activists, social scientists and others – they got considerable attention. Here are some fragments from the petition parodying the proposed constitutional amendments:

“(1) Vanilla (cream) is based on the free consenting mix between 6 yolks, 4 tablespoons of sugar, 3 tablespoons of starch, 500 ml of milk, vanilla. These ingredients are equal to each other. The right and duty of ingredients is to ensure the growth, education and instruction of sweets resulting from the mixture.

(2) The conditions for the conclusion, removal and nullity of vanilla shall be established by law. Religious vanilla can be celebrated only after civilian vanilla.

(3) Sweets outside vanilla are equal before the law with vanilla.

By signing this petition you agree to modify art. 48 paragraph 1 of the Romanian Constitution as vanilla cream is based on the free consent of ingredients comprising 6 yolks, 4 tablespoons of sugar, 3 tablespoons of starch, 500 ml of milk, vanilla. That is, the ingredients can only be 6 yolks, 4 tablespoons of sugar, 3 tablespoons of starch, 500 ml of milk, vanilla and no other ingredients such as cream, cocoa, chocolate, pistachios or others.”⁶

5 Ana Maria Touma, “Romanian MPs Vote on ‘Traditional Family’ Bill: Balkan Insight,” *Balkan Insight*, 28 March 2017, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/redefinition-of-family-adopted-by-romania-s-chamber-of-deputies-03-28-2017>.

6 “Petiția Pentru DEFINIREA VANILIEI,” CampaniaMea pe DECLIC, accessed 17 December 2017, <https://campaniamea.declic.ro/petiitions/petitia-pentru-definirea-vaniliei>.



Coalition for Family logo; source:
the official page of the organization:
www.facebook.com/coalitiapenturfamilie/



Coalition for Vanilla logo; source:
the official page of the initiative:
www.facebook.com/coalitiaiablanag/

One of the many initiators and contributors to this inventiveness was Claudia Ana Nicu, an artist known for her sustained online activity on social media as a feminist activist. Cristina has known her since 2013, when she substituted a friend in teaching for one semester at the National Art University in Bucharest. Claudia was a student at that time. During that short experience as educator for art students, Cristina was confronted with an unexpected situation that, in her view, caught her off guard.

Since she was in a teaching position for such a short time, Cristina had very little time for building a strategy that encourages students to think critically. She had a pre-determinate plan that had to be followed – an exact number of grades the students needed to have by the end of the semester, the number of artistic projects they had to deliver, etc. One of the reflection topics Cristina proposed to their students was: “Are you militating? What do you think of the act of militancy? Are you fighting for something? Explain the answer. Think of a project in relation to this.” When the discussion came to a homophobic incident that happened during a popular TV show and the way someone reacted to it on Facebook at the time, most of the students were quiet, only two of them made strong statements. One started by saying something like, “Ok, this is funny, but we should not laugh about such things. These are important things; we should be careful about gay people, since we all know they are psychopaths and paedophiles,” and the other immediately backed him. Cristina was not prepared for such a thing. The reaction was emotional and spontaneous. She said to him that he should not say such lies in the class, she would not allow hate-speech during their encounters and they should double check their sources, because they were misled. As a consequence, the two students stopped coming to her classes.

We can imagine that such interactions are not unusual in Romanian universities. Dealing with discrimination is an issue that the Romanian high school education system is still struggling with⁷. Thinking about this incident, we should ask ourselves how such opinions appear and what is to be done. Should we blame the lack of information or our inability as educators to enable a critical examination of political values? The romanticized view of a student being an individual open for

7 A study regarding the perceptions and attitudes towards LGBT people, carried out in 2016 in 10 high schools from 8 different Romanian counties, show alarming results: “1 in 4 high school students think that homosexuals are inferior beings; two out of five high school students (40%) believe that homosexual men should not teach in schools; almost half of the students (46.5%) would be bothered to have a homosexual colleague; 35% of the students would not agree to have a lesbian colleague; 2 out of 5 pupils (41%) think that men with more feminine behaviour should feel ashamed of the way they behave; over half of pupils (51%) consider that sex change operations are morally damaging; 61.5% of high school students say they would do anything to overcome a situation in which they would feel attracted to same-sex couples.” Irina Costache, “Un liceu sigur pentru toți. Percepții și atitudini față de persoanele LGBT în mediul educațional românesc. Rezultate cantitative”, (București: Asociația ACCEPT, 2016): 7, <http://www.acceptomania.ro/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Un-liceu-sigur-pentru-to%C8%9Bi-rezultate-cantitative1.pdf>.

new means of understanding “the other” and able to bring critical thinking on a high level, with rational and well-informed arguments, a person that due to her/his knowledge is able to show empathy for less fortunate people and to create solidarity with oppressed or discriminated fellows, may be misleading. On the other hand, this may well be the case with the teachers too, especially in highly resilient cultural environments.

At this point another important issue should be brought up: the need to develop realistic conversational instruments for the political education of educators. One possible option would be to engage systematically in trans-disciplinary projects capable of assembling specialized public and cultural actors that are otherwise separated, in order to share knowledge, personal experiences or emancipatory practices without which an adaptive response to the new challenges will not be possible at a local level. Ovidiu exemplified how such multidimensional spaces of educational interactions can emerge, referring to a project developed this year in Iași by the “1+1” Association. The project “Re-imagined communities”, brought together people with different backgrounds and roles (social scientists, artists, historians, students, teachers, activists) willing to reflect upon the phenomenology of new nationalism⁸. Faculty members and students were invited to contribute in workshops together with artists and activists. Visual documentary samples were made available for screenings and debate in class.

When dealing with unreasonable statements in class, having in mind some general principles can be helpful. Several observations drawing from our experience and practice can be briefly summed up as part of a more comprehensive set of guidelines. Encourage women to engage in debate more frequently than usual – generally the conversation becomes more nuanced and insightful. Facilitate in-depth discussions about causes and consequences; do not let anything problematic to pass without proper conclusions about what is reasonable and what is harmful (and why). Don’t let anyone forget that freedom of speech doesn’t mean saying anything you wish, however you wish. We all live in a plural sociopsychological continuum where apparently inoffensive language can inflict harm on people with different life experiences. This is especially significant when you know for sure that such people are present during the debate. In some instances it is necessary to react firmly, though in a proportional manner. On a more theoretical level, search for the hidden ideological roots of manifest opinions and beliefs. Reveal them to be scrutinized according to universal reasonable, intersectional sets of ethical values. Always re-examine your own practice, your own assumptions.

For sure, many of the questions raised during the conference remained unanswered. Some thoughts still wait to be shared. The conference generated conversations that successfully anticipate necessary spaces of reflection and action. Nevertheless, it left with us a mixed feeling of hope and hopelessness. The gathering had the potential of a network that could become powerful if mutual support and solidarity bind it and empower it. We do hope that the two days of talks will not make the participants shy to turn to each other and ask for support or help whenever necessary. Maybe another commonly assumed goal should be to widen the circle, to question the elitist aura of the academic environment. University educators should not act as weak victims who are afraid to speak up their minds or to challenge the ideological power structures that threaten academic freedom. They enjoy an influential position in society, quite a privileged one. They have the means to defend it. They should be able to find out how emancipatory education should be defended.

8 “Comunități Re-Imaginate,” 7+1, 13 June 2017, <http://unuplusunu.org/>.

THE OBLIGATION TO CRITICAL THINKING AND DEFENCE OF DEMOCRACY ACCORDING TO PIOTR PIOTROWSKI



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Piotr Piotrowski (1952 – 2015) was an art historian who examined contemporary art in Poland and Central Europe. He argued that academics, intellectuals, and artists have an obligation to promote democracy: to be sensitive to social and political changes, to analyse these processes and react to them; to defend democracy, civil liberties and rights. In all his intellectual activity he proved that teaching and writing art history is a form of political engagement. He emphasised such issues as disagreement, rebellion, contestation and agonism.

In 2014 he and some friends from his academic circle established a civic educational initiative, the Open Academy, in Poznań. About 500 Polish intellectuals signed the accession to it. It was an informal initiative for freedom of education, scientific studies and scientific debates without ideological oppression. This initiative was a response to attacks on Gender Studies in Poland and to the restriction of artistic freedom among others (in 2014 the play “Golgotha Picnic” was cancelled in Poznań). At the same time it was a warning against the radicalization of political life in Poland and the dominance of right-wing opinion aiming to restrict civil rights, as well as the domination of the Catholic Church in Polish public life.

Unfortunately, the Open Academy died with Piotr Piotrowski in 2015, though it remains as an idea in our mind. As he predicted, later political changes in Poland have shown new and more radical tendencies to the restriction of democracy.

The political situation in Poland is in fact quite dangerous, because such foundations of democracy as the constitution, the constitutional court, and an independent judiciary are being weakened and the ruling Law and Justice party¹ is trying to take control of the media, science, education and culture. Anti-immigrant feelings are growing, and nationalist views that were marginal a few years ago are now stronger and still gaining strength. As Józef Piniór stated in 2016: “Indeed, we are in the most ground-breaking and yet the most dangerous historical moment. (...) The Law and Justice party is realizing the transition to ethnic nationalism in conjunction with a mono-religious society, which means realizing nationalist politics. This formation is affecting the state profoundly for the first time in history and is demanding to re-format Polish society. If they can do that, Poland will become the backwater of Europe, the latter being a community of political nations, not ethnic and religious ones.”²

1 The Law and Justice Party, Polish: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość abbreviated to PiS, is a right-wing national-conservative, Christian, populist political party founded in 2001 by the Kaczyński brothers (Lech and Jarosław). The party won the parliamentary election in 2015 with an outright majority. It is currently the largest party in the Polish parliament.

2 “Piniór: O co toczy się spór z Kaczyńskim?”, rozmowa z Józefem Piniórem przeprowadzona przez Cezarego Michalskiego, “Krytyka polityczna”, 28.01.2016, <http://krytykapolityczna.pl/kraj/pinior-o-co-toczy-sie-spor-z-kaczynskim/2016/>, transl.: IK

Why is this situation so bad and what are the reasons for it? To answer this question, it is worth reflecting on Polish history after 1989. In 1992 Piotr Piotrowski already asked the crucial question about the situation of the societies of Eastern Europe after the fall of communism. Already at that time he pointed out: “It would be naïve to think that societies are free after the fall of the Berlin Wall, although they are liberated from Soviet domination. Together with the disappearance of the Soviet state apparatus, old demons are reviving: nationalism, xenophobia, intolerance; much more threatening for our freedom than the presence of soldiers with red five-pointed stars on their military caps.”³

So Piotrowski noticed that the biggest dangers for a young democracy are lack of tolerance, nationalism and xenophobia, which started gaining strength throughout Central Europe. These prophetic words written in the early 1990s may be interpreted in regard to the heightened activity of extreme right-wing organizations in Poland, but also in other European countries, which while allegedly defending their homeland and traditional values, express ever stronger prejudice against otherness (symbolic in this context were repeated attempts at burning down Julita Wójcik’s “Tęczą” [Rainbow] at Plac Zbawiciela in Warsaw, chiefly on the occasion of the Independence Day celebrations; other examples are acts of violence against immigrants throughout our region).

In the early 1990s Piotr Piotrowski believed that only utopia and rebellion can protect society from enslavement. He evoked a famous sentence from *The Rebel* (French: *L’Homme révolté*, 1951) by Albert Camus: “I rebel, therefore we exist.” He underlined the grammar of this sentence: the subject is singular and the object plural.

“For Camus, rebellion is a proof of solidarity with other people,” Piotrowski wrote, “It is the requirement *sine qua non* of the process of human liberation, of the way from enslavement to freedom; it is the constitution of humanism.”⁴ As he predicted, the meaning of rebellion would become increasingly present in artistic strategies. Utopia, on the other hand, would shape a new vision of future and a “third way” demanded in this article after Joseph Beuys. Utopia sparks our imagination and forces us to make the effort of changing a paradigm. Thus we need utopia to challenge ourselves and create new reality⁵.

In this text Piotrowski also clearly defined the priorities of scientists’ as well as artists’ attitudes to society. He wanted to create such attitudes as rebellion and disagreement; he was convinced that the duty of an art historian of contemporary art as well as that of a contemporary artist is engagement in the “here and now”, in issues of surrounding reality. He also wrote: “Art springs from connections with reality, also this concrete reality (though not only with it). It is something more than a reaction to reality. It is, broadly speaking, the transformation of contextual, local, political, social, formal or psychological factors into universal ones.”⁶

The economic and ideological divisions of Polish society exacerbated at the turn of the century, especially in the context of accession to the European Union in 2004. Divisions between upholders of democracy, openness, the European Community and liberal values, and defenders of national

3 Piotr Piotrowski, “W poszukiwaniu alternatywy; odpowiadając Beuysowi”, “Obieg”, 04/05 (36–37), 1992, p. 14, transl.: Izabela Kowalczyk.

4 Albert Camus, *Człowiek zbuntowany*, (Paryż: 1958, przedruk: Kraków: Oficyna Literacka 1984), za: Piotrowski, “W poszukiwaniu alternatywy”, p. 11.

5 Piotrowski, “W poszukiwaniu alternatywy”, p. 14.

6 Ibid.

tradition, Polish and Catholic identity were becoming more and more clear. Aggressive and hateful utterances and even actual deeds of so-called “real Poles” have been enacted with such vehemence that the present situation is termed a cultural war⁷. There has also been pressure by people and groups related to right-wing parties and to the radical wing of the Catholic Church not to display controversial art. As a result, many exhibitions have been closed or cancelled and some works were destroyed. Upholders of democracy, civil rights and freedom of art have remained a minority and even constitutional rights have been violated (such as freedom of assembly in the case of the ban of the Parade of Equality in Warsaw and the ban of the Equality March in Poznań in 2006). In this situation the only possible attitude is to “ring the bell” summoning people to defend democracy.

Piotrowski, who became a supporter of radical democracy at this time, wrote: “While it is difficult to critique liberal democracy in Poland, since even the country’s constitution does not fully commit to it [he meant the issue of the separation of church and state], its proponents must defend themselves and its principles against the ideological force of the consensus.”⁸ He asked, “How can there be a discussion of radical democracy in Poland, if even its opposite, liberal democracy, has not been fully realized here? Moreover, conservative and right-wing groups have often attacked the principles of liberal democracy.”⁹

Texts by Piotrowski tended toward analyses of art in political context. He started to define art strictly as a political activity. He wrote in his 2007 book:

“Art as public activity is by nature political activity in the broader sense as well, because the public sphere is defined by politics: politics understood as the conflict between power and the citizen, between different wings of power, between different groups of citizens divided by gender, origin, and economic interests, and also between followers of different ideological systems. There is a conflict between emancipatory tendencies and conservatory ones.”¹⁰ The art in these processes is not their expression or illustration; it is an active actor.

Also significant in this context is the title of a book by Piotrowski, where we can find the words quoted above: *Art after Politics*, as well as an earlier article published under the same title in the catalogue for the exhibition *Negotiators of Art Facing Reality* (2000, curator: Bożena Czubak)¹¹. In this article, Piotrowski described two artistic traditions of relations between art and politics in Central Europe before 1989: autonomy of art on the one hand and the alternative culture opposed to official institutions. The idea of autonomy of art was important for conceptual artists in Central Europe, such as Jarosław Kozłowski, one of Piotrowski’s close friends. This notion here had a specific meaning as a defence against the politics of appropriation of cultural life and artistic creation by the totalitarian authority for its own ideological aims¹². This quite simple division was transformed after the introduction of democracy. This period, the reality of the nineties, forced us

7 Cf. Wojciech Józef Burszta, *Kotwice pewności. Wojny kulturowe z popnacjonalizmem w tle* [Anchors of Certainty. Cultural Wars against the Background of Pop-nationalism], Iskry, Warsaw 2013. See also the Founding Manifesto of the Open Academy, 2.07.2014, <http://e.czaskultery.pl/otwarta-akademia/manifest/1679-manifest-otwartej-akademii> as well as the earlier Declaration of the Founders of the Open Academy “Against a Religious State”, (Authors: Prof. Przemysław Czapliński, Prof. Izabela Kowalczyk, Prof. Roman Kubicki, Prof. Piotr Piotrowski, Prof. Krzysztof Podemski, Dr Błażej Warkocki, Prof. Marek Wasilewski), 23.05.2014, <http://e.czaskultery.pl/otwarta-akademia/oswiadczenia/1683-przeciwno-panstwu-wyznaniowemu>.

8 Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-communist Europe*, Reaktion Books Ltd., London 2012, p. 264.

9 Ibid.

10 Piotr Piotrowski, *Sztuka według polityki. Od Melancholii do Pasji*, Universitas, Kraków 2007, p. 8, transl. IK.

11 Piotr Piotrowski, “Art After Politics”, In: *Negocjatorzy sztuki wobec rzeczywistości/ Negotiators of Art Facing Reality*. Catalogue of the exhibition, Ed. Bożena Czubak, Centrum Sztuki Współczesnej Łaźnia, Gdańsk, 2000, p. 139-147.

12 Ibid., p. 139.

to redefine the position of the individual against the system, in other words, to verify modernist mythology with the notion of universalism. Thus the political context of art should be understood in another way. As Piotrowski stated, “Modernism did not differentiate art according to sex, race or origin. There was just one art, thus there was no necessity for individual negotiations or the individual establishment of one’s own position because of one’s sex, race, origin. Practically no negotiations with the surrounding reality were necessary; a declaration was enough. Now [in the nineties] this is not possible any more.

The fall of the totalitarian point of reference generated pluralisation of the subject and the awareness of its individualism.”¹³. It creates awareness of the differentiation of society according to world-view, economic position, gender, sexual orientation, education, origin and other factors. This situation is linked with revealing the different political interests of individual groups. However, the Polish government, as the author wrote, regardless of whether it declares itself to be right or left wing, has tried to hide this differentiation. Right-wing governments in particular have the ambition to manage or even appropriate public life and tend to limit open society and civil liberties such as freedom of speech and freedom of art.

The conclusion of these considerations is that post-communist societies are uneasy in accepting their own differentiation; Polish society in particular was created by the ruling authorities after 1989 as a kind of monolith. This lack of respect for diversities is starting to become a serious danger for democracy – it was the main warning of this and other texts by Piotrowski. “Soon any ‘Other’ and his language shall become ‘alien,’”¹⁴ as the art historian wrote prophetically, pointing out at the same time the danger of a new authoritarianism – the domination of one group over the others.

The researcher also paid attention to the different motives behind Polish art of the 1990s that criticizes systems of power and reveals the double standards of Polish society (especially that part of society that didn’t feel at ease in the new neoliberal reality). He pointed out the focus in the works of critical artists on political discourses of the body, its aestheticization in media culture, the power of multinational corporations, as well as oppressive educational models. The new post-1989 social reality, with Poland entering a phase of accelerated capitalist development and consumer culture becoming the order of the day, affected artists’ interests. Piotrowski noticed that Polish art of the 1990s focused on the issue of the body in the context of repression by the system. He emphasized the meaning of artworks referring to women’s rights, especially in the context of the abortion ban functioning in Polish law since 1993. For example, on Alicja Żebrowska’s work “Original Sin”, where she presented her own vagina, Piotrowski wrote: “The carnality of women, transvestites, sexual minorities and all those that break with the patriarchal order, or the positioning imposed by this order, are exceptionally vulnerable to oppression. It does not require much effort to find such systems functioning in the so-called ‘new Poland’, that is after 1989. In the most general terms, the reactionary anti-feminine policy, including not only the current, strongly restrictive law banning abortion and a specific discourse condemning contraceptives, but also the almost sick obsession of some conservative politicians who want to introduce a ban on prenatal tests and the so-called ‘family models of the functioning of the sexes’, resulting in the discrimination of women on the labour market, makes Żebrowska’s art political par excellence.”¹⁵

13 Ibid., p. 141.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., p. 143-144.

From today's perspective, it is frightening to realize that since this text was written, the situation in Poland hasn't changed for the better. On the contrary. The Law and Justice party's current policy tries to introduce new restrictions in the field of women's issues; for example removing the subsidy for contraceptives, the announcement of the cancellation of the anti-violence convention, and even attempts to tighten anti-abortion law in 2016, which triggered a wave of protests unprecedented in scale (see e.g. In Our Cause on 9 April, the Black Protest and the Polish national women's strike on 3 October 2016). The massive scale of the demonstrations bringing together very different people across the country showed the government that it only takes a spark to invoke a rebellion and ignite the masses.

Piotr Piotrowski's words from the article "Art after Politics" can well be applied to the current policy model. He points to the lack of respect for the principles of an open society, including equality of sexes, respect for minorities, for "aliens", freedom of expression, and religious neutrality of the state. "It seems that the principle of a modern, or rather post-modern, democracy based on the respect of minority rights by the majority is alien to successive governments. What is preferred here is a specific classical form of 'people's power': the dominance of the majority."¹⁶

It was the reason for Piotrowski's defence of democracy, although he was a critic of liberal democracy and a supporter of radical democracy. In his strong speech entitled "In defence of democracy with tooth and nail"¹⁷ given on 31 January 2007 in Poznań on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of The Poznań Society of Friends of Sciences, he mentioned among other things the trial of Dorota Nieznańska. Her video-installation "Passion" (2001) referred to the double meaning of the word "passion", which can be understood as suffering or as devotion to something, being "passionate" about something. The installation was accompanied by a video that showed a man training his body at a fitness centre. The meanings of this work referred to the question of "manliness" (therefore the image of male genitals was evoked), which has to be trained, exercised to meet the established patterns. The reference to Christ's passion offended the Catholics who – instead of asking about the meaning of her work – accused Nieznańska of offending their religious feelings. She was put on trial in 2002. After lasting a year, the court in Gdansk sentenced the artist to six months' community service for offending religious feelings. The Court of Appeal overruled this sentence and a new trial started in 2005 that finished in 2009 with an acquittal.

During the above-mentioned speech Piotrowski said: "We, people of the corporation [The Poznań Society of Friends of Sciences] should be very sensitive to social and political processes. We should analyse them and talk about them. We should defend such values as democracy and freedom, defend them with 'tooth and nail', as our ancestors defended their nation and independence with 'tooth and nail'. I wish that this lecture, given to this esteemed faculty, will be received as a voice for the necessity of leading public debate on freedom and democracy."¹⁸

It seems that lack of the debate to which Piotrowski called has led Polish society to its current situation, in which the foundations of democracy are in danger. However, he also wrote and talked about this danger in the context of all Central Europe. In the book *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe* he underlined that democracy was "formally adopted by all the countries in

post-communist Europe, failed to meet the expectations invested in it and realized only in part the dreams of freedom". He named this situation "unfulfilled democracy"¹⁹. In 2012 he spoke to Edit András about Hungary: "In terms of Hungary, you know better than me, but what's going on right now in Hungarian politics is very important for all of Europe. We all worry about this because if this right-wing policy were successful, both Eastern and Western Europe would be in trouble. Hungary can be a model. I give you an example: in Poland, the Law and Justice party, nationalistic and anti-liberal, is watching the Hungarian scene and using it as a model for its own 'right' way. This is why I am saying that it's dangerous. Artists have a very important role to play; their critique of the regime is not only important for Hungarians, but for all Europeans."²⁰

All Piotrowski's books, articles and lectures give evidence of his political engagement. He wrote: "It is up to intellectuals and artists, who cherish freedom as an ideal, who feel the discomfort of unfulfilled expectations, the discomfort of unfulfilled democracy, to argue and agitate for democracy. Intellectuals and artists who see their place in the agora, in the midst of public debate, are guided in their behaviour by agorophilia."²¹ According to his ideas, I want to underline the importance of the awareness that teaching entails a kind of responsibility towards society. Thus it cannot simply be the transfer of knowledge; it should also involve the teaching of critical thinking, open-mindedness and responsibility for others. The humanities as well as art should place freedom at the centre of their interest, because "[t]here can be no democracy without freedom", and "freedom as a human right is non-negotiable; one either has it or not"²². Piotrowski still emphasized the notion of critical thinking. He said in one interview: "First of all, I am quite convinced that a critical way of thinking is our obligation. If you live in a particular place, you have to think in a critical way in order to improve that place, and this is also how it is with democracy. Being critical is an obligation for every intellectual, not just for scholars, art historians, and artists. No, we all have to think critically. Democracy is not a gift, it is not a given, we have to fight for it every day because there are always enemies. Critical ways of thinking can be used to disarm those who are against democracy. It is the condition in which intellectuals exist."²³

16 Ibid., p. 145.

17 "Tooth and nail" (in the original: nails and beak, *unguis et rostrum*) was the watchword of The Poznań Society of Friends of Sciences in the 19th century; it was linked to the defence of the nation's independence.

18 Piotr Piotrowski, "Pazurami i dziobem w obronie demokracji", *Armix*, no. 15, 2008, <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/artmix/1729>.

19 Piotr Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, Reaktion Books Ltd., London 2012, p. 287.

20 "Provincializing the West: Interview with Piotr Piotrowski", written by Edit András (Budapest), 9 October 2012, "Art Margins", <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/5-interviews/691-provincializing-the-west>

21 Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy*, p. 288.

22 Ibid., p. 264, 265.

23 "A Way to Follow. An interview with Piotr Piotrowski", written by Richard Kosinsky, Jan Elantkowski, Barbara Dudás, (Lublin), 29 January 2015, "Art Margins", <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/interviews-sp-837925570/758-a-way-to-follow-interview-with-piotr-piotrowski>

TEACHING IS ALWAYS POLITICAL. THE QUESTION IS: FOR WHOSE BENEFIT?



Boris Buden,
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Of course, teaching is always political. But it is always also historical. Not only does it actively participate in historical transformations; its particular institutional forms, social role and normative standards constantly vary in the course of historical development. So too is the political meaning of teaching generally a matter of historical contingency, even when it claims, as it all too often does, some supra- or trans-historical *telos*. This simply means that we cannot talk of the political meaning of teaching regardless of its particular historical condition. In other words, our answer to the question of whether teaching is always political depends on the concrete historical position not only of those who teach or are being taught but also of those who ask this question or, on the other side, are supposed to give an answer to it, for the subject questioning and the subject answering don't necessarily share the same historical condition. Often they don't share the same historical temporality either.

So it is in our case: the question is asked from the West; the answer is supposed to come from the former East. Indeed, the divide seems to have survived the fall of the Iron Curtain. It has done so in the guise of cultural difference that also implies a temporal meaning. At stake is the notorious "belatedness" of the post-Communist East. The argument goes like this: having been suppressed for decades by so-called Communist totalitarianism, the societies of Eastern Europe were hindered in their "normal" historical development, which is why, after 1989, they must catch up with the West, where this development has been fully accomplished. Even the revolution of 1989/90 was explicitly defined as a "catch-up revolution" (*die nachholende Revolution* as it was originally coined by Jürgen Habermas). This cannot but essentially influence the way we think of the political meaning of teaching. Not only are its particular articulations always different, depending on the specific historical situation of each society, there is also this radical gap between historically relevant political teaching, the one taking place in Western universities and educational systems, and a "belated" one in the educational institutions of a "catching-up" society. The latter has not the same historical relevance, is of secondary political importance and often assumed to happen on a level of historical development that has already been abandoned in the more advanced western societies.¹ In other words, it generates historical progression only insofar as it repeats someone else's past; concretely, if it deals with political problems that have already been solved somewhere else. This then necessarily implies cognitive superiority of one side over the other. As a consequence, the relation between the teaching in the West and the teaching in the East itself assumes the form of a relation between the teacher, that is, the subject that possesses knowledge and its disciple, the subject that has yet to acquire this knowledge. To put it simply, the West is supposed to

1 A typical example is the task "to develop civil society" based on the assumption that in the post-Communist East what is called civil society, which is believed to be indispensable for a properly functioning democracy, hasn't been sufficiently developed - an assumption that tacitly implies that in the West there is no reason for politically motivated teaching to identify with such a task, since civil society has been fully developed there.

teach the East. Is this teaching also always political? Of course it is, for it is based on a power relation. Moreover, it is designed according to a very clear ideological paradigm. In terms of its political teleology all teaching in post-Communist Eastern Europe is a teaching for democracy, or more precisely, for liberal democracy. It is instrumental in transforming a "closed" society of the totalitarian past into an "open" society of a bright democratic future. One might even call it "westernization", having in mind a learning that follows the political principles of parliamentary democracy, freedom of the press, human rights, rule of law, private property, etc., all of which are today considered "western values", effectively meaning that these principles have become essential properties of the normative identity block called "West". So teaching and learning in this context always already presupposes a movement through culturally defined spaces. But it also presumes a movement through time.

In his *The Open Society and Its Enemies* Karl Popper presented the difference between the so-called open and closed societies as a difference between a tribal society and "our civilization", which is, according to Popper, "still in its infancy"². The condition of infancy means that "this civilization has not yet fully recovered from the shock of its birth - the transition from the tribal or 'closed society', with its submission to magical forces, to the 'open society' which sets free the critical powers of man".³

This describes perfectly the condition of a post-communist society in the process of transition to capitalism and democracy - it is a post-tribal society in a state of shock, which is just another name for its transition from infancy to maturity. And it is a society caught in a heroic struggle against those "reactionary movements, which have tried, and still try, to overthrow civilization and to return to tribalism."⁴ Another word for this tribalism is in fact totalitarianism. Popper himself defines his book as a contribution to the "perennial fight against" totalitarianism. The major enemies in this fight are those social philosophies that sabotage the transition, which he calls historicism.

In the preface of his book about the concept of temporality in modern anthropology, Johannes Fabian quotes Karl Popper's famous remark on historicism, or more concretely, of history as a misuse of time: "The historicist does not recognize that it is we who select and order the facts of history".⁵ According to Fabian, the problematic element in this assertion is not the constitution of history but the nature of the "we": Popper's "our civilization" as opposed to "tribal" or "closed society".⁶

Fabian points at the fact that liberalism actually follows the logic of classical anthropology that played the crucial role in the establishment of a historical differential between cultures, which is the basis of all developmentalist theories or theories of modernization: a non-European culture was seen not only somewhere else, but also as existing in another time. More precisely, the time-consciousness of anthropology denies what Fabian calls "coevalness". It does so by placing the referent(s) of anthropology in a time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse. "Coevalness", on the contrary, is a recognition that the referents of anthropology inhabit the same time as the present of the producer of anthropological discourse. Fabian's "coevalness" shouldn't be mistaken for synchronicity (German *Gleichzeitigkeit*) in terms of physical time. Rather it is an active occupation and sharing of time. At stake is a social relation that creates

2 Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013, xli.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other. How Anthropology Makes its Objects*, New York, Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1983.

6 Ibid., x.

shared temporality. As such it is not and cannot be merely a matter of a cultural praxis, however transformative or progressive this could be. Rather it should be a matter of socially transformative praxis, of a praxis that not only implies coevalness, but creates it as its effect.

Applied to our question on political teaching we might say that in our concrete historical context teaching becomes political when it questions the still existing East-West divide, or more precisely, when it does not comply with the anthropological difference that is implied in this divide, the difference between the civilized West, its perfectly developed liberal democracy and its fully matured political subjects, be it of individuals, political institutions or civil societies on the one side and the yet-to-be-properly civilized East, its “tribal” social structures and its underdeveloped political subjects who got stuck in their infancy and irresponsibility on the other. In this context teaching becomes political when it claims “coevalness” in Fabian’s sense, that is, when it refuses to participate in the civilizational project of an education for maturity and responsibility imposed by the West, meaning the teleology of the so-called Western standards, norms, values, etc. For behind this telos there is an interest in domination. If “education for maturity and responsibility” is propagated in the interest of domination and thereby turns into an endless process, about whose possible conclusion the educators alone decide, then the call for “maturity and responsibility” no longer serves, as Robert Spaemann writes, “to enlarge the circle of the mature, but rather the circle of those who are for now declared immature”.⁷ A teaching that ignores this problem is also political. However, its political effects facilitate and perpetuate domination and exploitation. At this point one cannot but remember those words of Adorno, from his radio talk on “Education for Maturity and Responsibility”, which obviously still hold true: “[I]n a world as it is today the plea for maturity and responsibility could turn out to be something like a camouflage for an overall keeping-people-immature”.⁸

So the answer to the question of whether teaching is always political or not is a wrong question, since the only possible answer to it is a trivial affirmation. Even when it denies its political stakes, teaching will still serve someone’s political interests. It is therefore better to ask about a teaching that sees its goal in challenging the existing forms of hegemony and domination. Only such a teaching can truly make of young people mature and responsible political subjects.

According to Adorno, the “only real concretization of maturity” lies in an “education for protest and for resistance”.⁹ He ended his talk on education with a warning – which remained literally his last public words, since he died a few weeks later – a warning that might serve as the final answer to our question. It is precisely in the eagerness of our will to change, Adorno argued, which we all too easily suppress, that the attempts to actively change our world are immediately exposed to the overwhelming force of the existent and doomed to powerlessness. Thus “anyone who wishes to bring about change can probably only do so at all by turning that very impotence, and their own impotence, into an active ingredient in their own thinking and maybe in their own actions too”.¹⁰

7 R. Spaemann, “Autonomie, Mündigkeit, Emanzipation. Zur Ideologisierung von Rechtsbegriffen”, *Kontexte* 7, 1971, 94–102, here p. 96. Quoted in Sommer, *Identität im Übergang*, 133.

8 T.W. Adorno, *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970, 143; T.W. Adorno and H. Becker, “Education for Maturity and Responsibility”, *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1999, 21–34.

9 T.W. Adorno and H. Becker, “Education for Maturity and Responsibility”, 30–31; translation amended.
10 *Ibid.*, 32.

“IS TEACHING ALWAYS POLITICAL?”



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Gender studies are held to be the source of political trouble, they report.
Gender studies are widely accused of causing the problem of gender, they report.
There is, in fact, a large number of students who tend to fully believe what the government says about homosexuality.
Quite a large number of these students say out loud that homosexuality is a disease, they report.
Right-wing extremists are a menace, they report.
Right-wing extremists appear on campus, they report.
Right-wing extremists carry out concerted actions on university premises, they report.
Right-wing extremists disrupt lectures, they report.
Right-wing extremists threaten lecturers, they report.
An anti-Semitic billboard campaign was launched against George Soros, the philanthropist founder of the Central European University in Budapest, they report.
Reports, and more such reports.
On and on they go.
They seem never ending.
How did such a crisis arise?

I heard these reports and others, similar to those I have mentioned above, during a two-day conference held in Vienna in November 2017. I heard them in lectures and over coffee, in public presentations and in private conversations. Gathered at the Studio Building of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, the guest speakers addressed the question *Is Teaching Always Political?* All of them, regardless whether they had travelled from Bucharest or from Bratislava, from Budapest or from Belgrade, from Bihać, Iasi or Poznań, to share their insights on the political realities of teaching in their local contexts, started from their experience of having designed and held courses as part of the PATTERNS Lectures series. These courses are specifically dedicated to critical investigation and to themes otherwise underrepresented, marginalized, or silenced completely. Some of these courses train students to become visual activists. Others encourage students to work with deprived groups or communities who are discriminated against. Still others enable the students to learn more about how to self-organize and take civic action. Yet the sense of crisis looms large. One might be led to believe that the reports that were shared were the expression of political depression, of failure, of giving up. Far from it. Speaking out about these conditions of crisis we find ourselves in as educators in lecture halls, in seminar rooms, in studio spaces, in workshops with our students is part of finding a voice of resistance. Speaking out in a conference is a way of political consciousness-raising with the means available to and the forms specific to academia.

While most of the academic conferences I have attended in the past were dedicated to presenting novel research or scientific insights, this particular conference, even though adhering to the

conventional format of lectures, presenters, moderators, questions and answers, focused on shared concerns in teaching politically. We heard stories from the class room, stories about anxieties and difficulties, stories about conflicts and trouble, stories about struggles and loss, stories about resignation and despair, stories about failure and misunderstandings. We heard stories that touched the core of what the politics of teaching are. We heard stories that made us understand what the challenges of teaching politically actually are. We heard stories that were raw and touching. We heard stories that were honest and saddening. We heard stories of teaching that conventionally are not shared in academic settings even though teaching is what we do.

Listening intently to what was being said, I found myself thinking about my own experience as a university educator. And it became very clear to me that we have to understand jointly how we can understand much better what teaching and learning can and could do in times of crisis. The most frightening alliances between right-wing populism, far-right extremism, authoritarian governmentality, and accelerated neoliberal capitalism give rise to hate speech, sexual and racist harassment, toxic masculinities, cruel misogyny, and unevenly distributed precarity. We live in an age of dispossession. We live on a most vulnerable and damaged planet.

We urgently need a much better and much clearer sense of what kind of teaching is needed in such time of crisis:

how to teach in times of crisis

what to teach in times of crisis.

And, maybe even more importantly, we have to teach ourselves to learn together with our students:

how to teach how such a crisis is produced

how uneven growth is produced,

how poverty is produced,

how inequality is produced,

how racism is produced,

how hatred is produced,

how discrimination is produced,

how the political conditions that lead to right-wing populism and far right extremism are produced.

There is a need to say the questions out loud even though one might be afraid to confront oneself with them.

There is a need to write down these questions. Once they have been written down, they talk back, they demand answers, they become drivers in suggesting:

that everything that is produced can, in fact, be changed,

that everything that can be changed depends on those who want to change it,

that those who want to change it have to learn and to understand that they want to change it, and

that such change is possible.

A very long time ago, I started to think like this. Or, I should have written, a very long time ago, when I still attended university, I learned that it is possible to start thinking like this. It might not have been the objective of the courses I took. In fact, I am quite certain that thinking and making change politically was not the objective of most of the courses I took.

Yet, the books I discovered,

the texts that formed part of reading assignments,
the literature I read,
the art works I looked at,
the performances I experienced,
the plays I attended,
the lectures I attended,
the seminars I took,
the thoughts I shared with others,
the conversations I had between classes,
made it possible for me to learn such thinking.

Not all teaching is equally useful to thinking change.

Not all teaching is equally important to making change happen.

Yet all teaching might potentially contribute to new beginnings of making change.

Perhaps the most important thing is to not give up believing that teaching can lead to the beginnings of new ways of thinking. Teaching politically then starts from the assumption that new beginnings through learning are possible.

Therefore, teach we must.

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