Inspiration from abroad

SOUTH AFRICAN INSPIRATION

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Travel insights: From a visit of the Conference EduTech Africa 2019. About the problems of post-colonial search for identity

Michal Černý

To speak of the South African Republic or the problems and perspectives of its educational system in the context of social pedagogy would be an inadequate generalization in this small space, yet we still find it interesting and possible to try to draw attention to certain meaningful perspectives and problems that are associated with this sphere. As a certain conceptual catalyzer, we choose the important Conference EduTech Africa 2019[1], which was held from October 9-10, 2019, in Johannesburg, which we had the opportunity to attend. We believe that even though all of the notions below will have the character of comments, contemplations and sketches, they can be useful for further reflections, examples, or ideas.

Apparently, in German-speaking environment, the key philosophical publication facilitating comprehension of segregation is the work of Hannah Arendt (1996), *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, which associates the emerging of a segregated society where the mechanisms of mutual communication and solidarity are associated with the collapse of colonialism. Ever since the end of the 19th century (but massively from the end of the long century), West Europe began to lose its privileged position in the world with distinct nationalist motivation and emergence of new countries. However, new countries became a phenomenon into which we project our experiences with the formation of new nations during the second half of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, i.e., the process of cultural and social emancipation, which however has a strong continual character. Yet, Arendt completely the other perspective, namely, the impact of decolonialization on the newly emerging countries.

In this context, the South African Republic may be viewed as an exemplary case of a country of movements that are significant for this process. First of all, it is a country with multiple phases of colonial history (Beck, 2000; Feinstein, 2005). Having gained independence by referendum as late as 1961 (but its own president only since the 1980's), the country had in fact been an autonomous state under the British Commonwealth already since 1934. The fight for the abolition of racial segregation began in the 1980's and climaxed after many bloody social traumas with general elections in 1994, when the governing of the country was taken over by the African National Congress, eventually with Nelson Mandela assuming the office of a president (see biographies by Samson (2018), Mandela (2011), Boehmer and Lodge (2008)).

Mandela is still a great theme in today's South Africa – many streets, town squares, business centers are bear his name and statues are built to commemorate him. Nevertheless, interviews with the local population indicate that it is not a matter of notoriously repeated manifestation celebrating a concrete person. Rather, it is a matter of the need to keep recalling him as a phenomenon that is associated with a certain set of values or virtues that the society feels as inadequately discussed and applied in practice. In this respect, we are dealing with an ethos that is literally ontoforming, not merely as a reminder of a historical personality with all his ups and downs. In this context, it may be perceived similarly, to some extent, as the phenomenon of Václav Havel in the Czech environment.

Both Mandela and ANC managed to tie onto the reforms of de Klerk, the last white president of SAR, and let equality of opportunities into the public sphere (Glad & Blanton, 1997). Precisely this equality of opportunities, which is sometimes accentuated as being firmly ad indisputably anchored in the

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[1]   More information is available at https://www.terrapinn.com/exhibition/edutech-africa/index.stm

Czech educational system and considered adequate for a just society. The example from SAR demonstrates that this may not necessarily be the case.

Formal abolition of apartheid was certainly not followed by adequate social, educational, or economic reforms. Accustomed to an externally enforced supervisory culture (Foucault, 2000), the majority was unable to transform itself fast enough. The results are clearly evident – racial segregation is a still ongoing trend rooted in the basic economic situation of the black and white population. This segregation leads to a natural escalation of the differences between the poor and the wealthy and, by extension, between those who have and those who don't have access to education, power, and money.

The situation in SAR is specific in that it is an Anglophone country. While some authors claim that the cyber space is accompanied by new colonialization (Gunkel & Gunkel, 1997; Macedo, Martins, Cabecinhas, & Macedo, 2013), because the external sources and value structures change the access to information (therefore the social status) as a form of interaction among people, the situation here in the SAR is different, because modern technologies can be consumed without any barriers. Thus, online environment gave the population the opportunity of full integration in the cyber space and digital economics, but this challenge quickly became a strongly exclusive – rather than inclusive - force.

At the Conference, a certain apprehension was noted to the changes that industry 4.0 and modern technologies bring (Stock & Seliger, 2016). According to one of the lecturers, about 80 % jobs in the SAR could already nowadays be replaced by technologies (similarly as in other African countries). This apprehension can be felt not only in the way that people speak of this challenge, but also in the way in which concrete innovative steps are being relatively effectively and quickly implemented into the curricula, e.g., into the work with the frequently accentuated 4C concept (Communication, Collaboration, Creativity, and Critical thinking) (Happ, 2013, Jefferson & Anderson, 2017) or programming. Africa is changing and has to transform its educational model, if it wants to succeed. The desire for success was without a doubt resonating very strongly throughout the Conference.

Simultaneously, however, while the 4C principle is well-known in western educational systems, in the African environment it is often perceived differently. The 4C concept makes sense in a society with a predominant culture of guilt, not shame (Dodds, 2000). In other words, in a culture where the capability of autonomous decision-making is strongly present. In the SAR, however, creativity is far more associated with copying and catching up with what is visible in the western world and with the absence of intellectual property protection as well we major social problem, as if the freedom to be creative did not have its own prerequisites for existence, as if the whole society was expecting the beginning of a new world, as the Greeks were waiting for the dawn of philosophy hundreds of years ago.

Namely, creativity is not and cannot be mere copying of external forms and technologies. Rather, it must be something new – not only as a process of adaptation limited to a change of the logo and mode of the use of an instrument. For instance, the practical aspect of the matter was visible at the Conference in the exposition area where it was quite evident that most of the companies have no attitude at all to the reality of copyright issues. For them, creativity was understood as capability to adapt to the British (American, European) standards. This approach to creativity can be noted, for example, in the outfits of regular service workers who often wear suits and ties even in places where one would normally not expect it.

The result is that one feels like visiting a trade fair somewhere in Europe or U.S.A. a few years ago. Domestic products do not look bad until the attentive visitor realizes that he has seen them somewhere else, except under a different name or with a slightly different layout of pushbuttons. Unless the companies change their approach in this respect, even though Africa might at first sight appear to be catching up with Europe, it will eventually find itself in an innovation and commercial trap, like China in the commercial war with the U.S.A. today.

Naturally, this profound grip of externality, the presence of an external source of authority, impacts on many other dimensions of life. It leads to a situation those who used to be the victims of apartheid practice discrimination themselves against the white minority that is perceived as being more influential, valuable, and important than others. This experience is apparent everywhere – at the Conference, in the hotel, or in the shops.

Simultaneously, the Conference cannot differentiate between the corporate and non-profit sector. Thus, the theme of education and educational trends of often addressed by people whose main interest is to sell a product or service, without real desire to help in the sphere of education. This situation of further aggravated by the fact that participation in the trade fair requires the payment of certain fees, so that lectures can be bought (not distinctly marked as such). Therefore, intensive discussions take place in the U.S.A. about the problem of eduTech influencers amongst teachers who are paid by corporations. Although most of the teachers start with enthusiasm, they eventually act in the interest of concrete companies, while the educational reflection is completely omitted. The absence of a functional inclusive system leads to the emergence of corporativism and corporativistic conduct, as the corruptions scandals of some leading politicians show (for instance, the resignation of president Zuma), but also the overall approach to the setup of relations between corporations and the public space (Koelble, 2018; Shubin, 2018).

If we consider that this one of the biggest events of its kind in Africa and the approach that these societies have to the copyright law, we can say that local educational systems face major problems that they are not as yet able to assess at this point, because this form of corporativistic cooperation has so far been bringing more benefits than problems. However, experience in this respect is relatively relentless.

In essence, one could say that the problem primarily has a colonial background (Butt, 2013; de Sousa Santos, 2002; Hsieh, 1997) which has the form of a profound external structure of the society that copies British models without any internal depth, which leads to the formation of a very unstable society living in a culture of shame and under constant supervision (Dodds, 2000). The only way to go for a society that was unable to find the direction to inclusion is to hold together with the aid of a strong, ever-present army that creates an illusion of a functional and safe country.

The key point of the matter is that such a society cannot stay divided. The symbols of a divided society are barbed wire and electric fences that can be seen on every corner. If Jan Patočka (1992) claimed that the victory of a modern society was the fact that we no longer have to carry weapons when going to town, it means that SAR has not as yet reached this stage of modernity. Without it, however, the environment of the society will bring freedom to every man, as only freedom allows the existence of a public space that is accessible to everyone where everyone can realize the project of his life and design.

In order to make this possible, we believe that it is necessary to find a way of grasp one's own identity and turn it into an instrument of social cohabitation in the context of multiculturalism. Yet, the easier and more intensive it is for the SAR to maintain relations with the world around, i.e., with the considerably poorer and more troubled Africa, as well as with the western mentality and modern technologies, the harder it will be to cope with its reality. In this context, we believe that the education has to play the central role in this process. Schools that abandon the prism of nationalism will become the catalyzers of real changes (Šíp, 2019). Only then may the 4C logos that resonated everywhere at the Conference acquire a new functional meaning arising from the understanding of one's identity, rather than an external perspective.

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Michal Černý
Faculty of Education, Masaryk University in Brno