

A Politics of the Other in Education

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Abstract *This paper argues for a step back. In short sections, aspects of the other in education are addressed with a view, not just to scholarly argument, but also to displacement within that argument. This is so that the other, which simply arguing obscures, can be seen, sensed, felt. Otherness is considered by virtue of various perspectives and a new politics in education is offered, without playing by old rules.*

Keywords politics, other, education, other education, educational alternatives

Politics functioned in terms of distinctive oppositions: the left or the right. As in other areas you have the true or the false, the beautiful or the ugly, etc. Now, at a given point the energy of a situation stopped depending on the kind of dissociation. It is no longer the dialectic of the two terms that organises things, but the fact that the forms each go their separate ways, meaninglessly, senselessly. (Baudrillard, 1993b, p.113)

Introduction

There are many references to the other and to otherness in philosophical, social, political literature. The other is a topic that dominates so much. What I would like to highlight in this essay is that otherness does not need a reference. It is not necessary to position the other. That may sound commonsensical, but it may not. It is perhaps normal to position the other as other.

Many people have discussed this idea of the other as no other. Luce Irigaray. Jean Baudrillard. Jesus. The seers of the Vedas in their presentation of Atman. These are some examples.

An otherness that does not need a reference is a diffuseness. It is beyond, or outside, of language. It is not embodied in that our understanding of it must be spiritually inclined. Material fact is illusionary fiction of substance: what seems

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solid is not. The physics of the infinitesimally small tells us this. Our own bodies have more in common with air than we can mentally acknowledge.

This, all together, means that non referential otherness – the other as complete – is beyond this world as a construct of myriad and multiple meanings, beings and becomings. It cannot be left or right or of a politics of left or right. It cannot be high or low or of high regard or low regard. It is.

So where does the otherness come from? There is something that people and other beings can perhaps recognise, which is challenge. Forces of energy that provoke reactions. That we notice. Or take note of.

In education such events of note-taking are moments of otherness but not according to constructs and difference. They are ways for eyes to open; for minds to sense some sort of truth. Personal truth, truth in community, truth as eternal. The challenge causes an unveiling of self but nothing has been determined. No identity has been established. Determination and identity occur in education as a web spun by spiders of tale-telling about what is “other” and what is not; what is “true” and what is not, what is “good” and what is not. Constructs of mind, constructing realities. The other that is a politics of the other has no place here. The challenge of this politics is gut-wrenching.

It does not allow us to be something. Most of the time what we ask of life and the world is to be something. Ergo-ego. The other that is a force of challenge only allows us to recognise what is. Educationally this is to be homeless.

To have nowhere to lay one’s head is to dispossess oneself of schools and schooling, of being and becoming through the world. Education locked within a politics of the other is a spiritual event that does not know itself.

And yet, learning and other learning can occur. There are many things to (seem to) learn (given that all is anyway and is not to be or become) and that is ok. As Jeff Foster says: “After all, when the separate self is gone, what else is there to do?” (2008). Let’s have some fun.

But although learning takes place, mixing with and mixing up ideas of duality, seeming to achieve, to move, to make, engaging with education bearing the mark of a politics of the other is to not learn anything instrumental and to be educated instrumentally or have means-end goals. It wouldn’t make sense. A force of challenge is unpredictable. We don’t know which way the wind will blow just as we don’t know the future. So education of this kind is a pleasure and a bet. A roll of the dice. Other-worldly. Open, not closed. A pleasure. A life. Lived.

Outside of the Binaries

To honestly and definitely escape binaries such that politics is enacted through a spectrum and instead choose a politics that is not of a spectrum, we must forgo language. Kierkegaard was aware of this in his discussion of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling* (1985). We leap away from choices. This renders us speechless, where

things are so utterly beyond our comprehension that words cannot serve. We find silence.

Silence in Abraham's case was rather particular. It was a silence beyond emotion. Other silences have the same nature as the silence of Abraham in their emptiness (yet fullness), their diffuseness (yet strict limitations that no language of discourse occurs). Silence does not change its nature at the level of the ineffable, the absolute. As a function of the world and as a partner to language it is various (Dauenhauer, 1980; Kenny, 2011; Picard, 2002). But, as a situation it only has one nature, whether one is Abraham or a child sat behind a desk in a school. A child in a school encountering silence as a situation is challenged but not in a way that involves the challenge of the political spectrum of binary enactments. Rather the challenge is other.

In this silent space of another challenge a politics can play itself out. This politics is necessarily a spiritual politics. Spiritual by virtue of its disengagement with the politics of the world. A politics by virtue of its power. In what way is there power? In what way does this mean it is political? Politics – from the Greek *politikos* – refers to citizens. There are many states. There is the state of a nation, a place. But there is also a state of being, of mind, of understanding, of harmony. Whilst these might be turns of phrase, what they suggest is that people – citizens of a state of some kind – can experience many forms of political action. We do not need politics to be of this world and to be connected to governance. There is another politics that we can pay attention to: a politics of the other. Not where the other means another but where the other means utterly beyond our understanding because it is understood on other terms. Silence for instance. There are no doubt other others. Love, perhaps.

Education does not need to be of this world in terms of being constructed out of the binary materials (oppositions and their interplay) that we can recognise. Education could be made of the other. It could be an experience of the other; an encounter. Perhaps this is what some educationists mean when they talk about emergence and uniqueness (Biesta, 2006), the end of education and a queerness (Moran, 2012; Moran & Kendall, 2009), different rules (Thomas & Pattison, 2007). The authors in this inaugural issue: do they hint at that, speak of it? Or at least if that is not their meaning or agenda, perhaps there is something in what they say, remaining within a worldly political spectrum that includes a reference to the other. A spirituality? Of some educational kind? Attached to other education?

We do not need the word God in all of this. Spectacularly secularly, Other will do. And lest there be confusion, that is not God through the back door. It is a house that we own. Our educational house. Our sss..ss..s.school, after the S word got blown up in the last war – and that would be the war where no educationist could decide what was right and the one where everyone concurred it was too tricky to decide anyway so they shook hands and played football, so long as on boxing day

the other got properly exterminated (Condliffe Lagemann, 2002; Labaree, 2006). That would be the school that is no school. That would be the educational place of all our peace time dreams.

A Currency of Power

Above, power was mentioned. Power of the “soul” was even alluded to. The power of love, e.g. Power is important as a worldly project. Foucault has shown us why. But he wasn’t happy to stay there. He became dissatisfied; moved to power of the self in formation. He could have gone further but he died just when it began to get interesting (Foucault, 1986, 1988). Irigaray could go further. She could move to silence permanently, instead of all these flirtations: “Teaching not only consists in speaking, but in being capable of remaining silent too, of withdrawing in order to let the other be, become and discover his or her path, his or her language.” (Irigaray, 2008, p.234). Baudrillard hit the nail on the head with death (Baudrillard, 1993c). The silence of the symbolic... All of this has currency. A market place in the further reaches. What is traded there? A currency of otherness. Trust is a coin. Or maybe it is another type of coinage. A personal exchange. A look in one’s eye. A gesture. Traded. And in this market place of personal exchange, what of education?

Again, for otherness to be accessed on terms indicated here, silence must be optional as a nexus of gifts which pass to and fro. Hindus, in framing this market place of exchange, refer to their own Vedantist literature which talks of a guru passing the other from one to another like a flame is lit from a candle already alight. Education is then heritage of self, passed on generously. Education becomes not mechanism but magic. Trust, forgiveness, generosity, dreams, encouragement. Gifts with spirit. Gifts with no price: “But is not the gift, if there is any, also that which interrupts economy?” (Derrida, 1994, p.7). Gifts to open up the social. In a politics of the world these things of love are not gifts because the world does not give. It takes. The other, on the other hand, only gives, for it has nothing to lose.

What is an Other Educationist?

Where the other is itself and not othered as a relation, educationists cannot go. There is no identity, no action that makes a mark. Only forces, moulding, shaping, creating, emerging. An educationist means nothing there. So what is an Other educationist? Because not everything is equal, it – as an it – is a ladder that gets thrown away:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them - as steps - to climb beyond them. He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it. (Wittgenstein, 1990, p.189)

It is an enabler of the difference that is the other when complete and indifferent. A believer in an education which does not work for, with, because of the world and its horrible territory but with, for, because of the other and its beautiful territory of the world. (Indeed, the world can be two things at once! In its completeness.) That can be of the world and this is the heaven to earth part. Very practical. Anti-religious. Educational.

As craftsman of the educational, an other educationist is a clever person (Rancière, 1991) who knows to transcend binaries, making power of escape.

How Does This Happen?

Programmes are the enemy of otherness. Rock logic (de Bono, 1994) is its destroyer. To give birth to the Other – through the mind – is to not know or make worship of the known. Using the known is sensible but not as the known, rather as the useful, the given, the primitive sediments and sentiments which form the gift that can be destroyed (Baudrillard, 2004). A disrespect whilst respecting the audacity of the known to claim hegemony and history. When Deleuze says “We’re tired of trees” (Deleuze, 1987, p.15), he is yawning at the boring predictability of what is not other. So the Other happens through excitement and what excites. Why not? That is creative and generative. Trees are nice to climb as many Summerhillian students will tell us (Neill, 1968).

So incredulity and joy at the structures which hold us whilst we travel and discover and a grasp of paradox; a sense of the absurd. Trees don’t win. Education isn’t arboriculture.

Is This Humanly Possible?

Take every mind born of the female. Give it the option, through education, for choice. Then we will know what is possible; including the possible that is not just human given that this is such a limitation these days.

Is This Wise?

Our investment in people through education, through the voice of the educationist, is not a wise investment for return, is it? Is education economics? An other way is against calculations of return. The wisdom of this being not in wisdom, which is a judgement – like Solomon judging the women who cried for the same child as mother – which could be a bad judgement, or a lack of wisdom if the judge, adjudicator, decider, leader is imperfect. Instead, the wisdom is of release from judgement through surrender to the challenge of forces and the instincts of response. There is perhaps a good in the right (Audi, 2005) which only the demand of the challenge will or can release.

Choosing

Within the morality of moral philosophy one thing has so far been slightly neglected: people. What are people? No-one's really been able to say yet although they have tried. Other education does a better job. How? After all the years of human existence and philosophers sitting, smoking, in French cafes, how? Other education stock-piles an approach that starts with people. Begins with their voice and this even begins at the start of their voice, when it is foetal. Such focus on the idea that people can speak for themselves; that philosophers sitting in French cafes do not know. It even tips, this respect, into voices themselves. Silent ones. Ones without language. The voice of the clouds, that bird, these things.

An education of otherness has the power to be humble. So people matter more than theories or philosophy or education even. People begin to matter a great deal. That doesn't need to mean that our education of the other is outside of the academy but it asks the academy to get down on its knees. And this time, because it has soft structures, there is no axe or gun at the nape of the neck because such an education can imagine there is music, flowers, light, dancing. I think of a wall in Poland and a washroom to the right. A big bricks wall in Auschwitz, before you get to Birkenau and there are old, striped clothes laid out in the washroom, or laid, or nervously dropped. The door of that washroom leads to that wall. Still there after all these years? It reminds me of education within walls or up against walls - what isn't other - and I think of people and the fact that they can walk and walk out and this is an other kind of education. An other kind of thinking.

A Pigeon Flew to the Shelter of a Tree

If education cannot make a person be able to watch a pigeon fly low and then allow that person to go over to the tree and stare up into its foliated bowers, see the pigeon's eye and its anxious wonder at this person there, what good is education? It has not escaped some people's notice that this world is full of marvellous things, amazing experiences, beauty beyond our senses, but that our senses can lead us to. Some people have not been damaged by their education and those are lucky people. Or they are lucky to have recovered to be able to see the pigeon occasionally. Other education does not damage. It is like a doctor who has taken a vow. Such an education is full of people who cause trouble – perhaps quietly, but surely - because they cannot bear to perpetuate the violence that they are led to (see Harber, 2004, 2008). They resist, desist and speak otherwise and in so doing speak the truth or a new truth or the old one. There is no apology for that. These people do no harm. They are other educational.

Break my Heart

There is no other education in place without people. People are for people. People who operate without people are not people. They are guards: of time, resources, life.

And as we know, education is not a prison. It is a key to any prison that people who are not people might have accidentally created. The accident implies people are worthwhile. This is for believing in and for bringing with it feelings that are good. People matter. Education matters when it involves people. Such repetition is repleting a void where people have not mattered much. People are everything that is valuable. This is not to dismiss animals and other living creatures but it is to say: without a focus on eye contact there is little educationally that can occur. Whether in language or in silence, looking someone in the eye is to be engaged in an educational event. Blindness (the myopia of the test, the plucked pupil of the dismissive assessment) is not part of what other education can mean. Seeing the world and each other is to be witness. Not of terror but of unbelievable beauty.

Institutions or People?

People.

Education in the Centre of the World

If there is no world as we perceive it as such, in that the physical world that we rely on to be reliable, is actually, technically, not there as we perceive it, then education is not of this world. Why? Because there is no world other than one of our imagination and the education that takes place in such a world inevitably, literally, exists in our imagination. Such a situation is liberating. It means education is a complete lie. It means we can start over again with a different fantasy, a different version. Our existence can be, through education, constant, continual, unprejudicial reinvention. Science backs this up, not theory. Against such a wild situation that postmodernism nudges us towards by virtue of the actuality of incredulity (Lyotard, 1984) – now as a laboratory condition - we come upon the limitations of the human sense as encased in a physical body that is as much a lie as the world it inhabits. All of this lying means we must be practical and so pragmatism has an advantage with its ability to calm us down. Something has to because if Baudrillard is right – and he is – we are a) going to die and b) don't know the truth or have a grasp on what is meaningful because we have come to be programmed to believe the lies that tell the lies of the liars about the lies (Baudrillard, 1993a). Unless, that is, we are vigilant. An other education is then a pragmatic attempt to find some actual meaning in the face of ourselves, because we value ourselves and where love is (degrees of...) we value others also. We must watch out. For ourselves and for others. Such is an other educationist and such is the experience, surely, of a student being educated through otherness: bullshit detection abilities gained to render life meaningful, to make education purposeful, pointed, useful and worth the effort (Postman & Weingartner, 1971). To make navigating a world that doesn't really exist in the way that we are told possible and the journey not liable to dissatisfactions or disillusionment. To be

realistic. To be in touch with the symbolic as in the symbol of what really is, not what is symbolised as shown (Baudrillard, 1993c). Lofty ideas.

Silence?

Yes, of course. It can play a role.

We Rely on Our Friends

And in other education we rely on our friends. To not be impatient. To not judge us based on what seems, but to wait. To try to understand because that kind of thing is worth the effort. Worth the human exchange. There is always another point of view. Things are never what they seem. Such a cliché but true. Bullying is ludicrous – so far from where we are. Hurtful behaviour is a mistake, unimpeachably impossible as deliberate act. What a loving atmosphere it sounds. But they say that where this kind of thing gets acted out it's quite rough seeming; not exactly gentle. People swear, storm out, get angry. But, as the Hindus say, it's a line drawn in water. Why? Because other education is democratically inclined. It has resources, sources, mechanisms, technologies (Fielding, 2010; Gribble, 2001). It makes sense. I mean that: it makes sense.

Fit for Purpose?

Don't get me started. Can a building, divvied up into pods that each contain a salaried, trained dictator and lots of little people being passive, who muck around between moves, chivvied by bells and locked within the same environment day after day, be fit for purpose? What purpose? What humanity? What world? Ha ha ha ha ha. A wall and a washroom.

Reason as the Gap between Reasons

As mentioned above, there is no actual binary system that can offer much in the way of otherness as a thing in itself. The presence of a system requires an abnegation of the other as an other that is not othered. It needs comparison. Is not comparison immature? Isn't it based on jealousy or something similarly weak? Can't we do better? How? Reason as the gap between reasons for action, thinking, feeling is unmotivated. There is only one thing that lacks motivation and it is unconditional love (Templeton, 2000). To act, think and feel through such love is to experience, in these times, something different. It is something other. Let us not forget that anything other is going to be misunderstood. If it stands fast, by the way; if it refuses to back down and presents itself on its terms of otherness despite ridicule, scepticism, disinterest, then we can surmise it operates with some kind of power that is other. That is love. Who said "God" was mainstream.

Where is the Other?

Distinct from the possible misogyny of the womb as the source of illusion which some say is Plato's cave (Irigaray, 1985), is the idea that the other, that is not illusion, is spiritual and not the real world of the anti-shadow. There is nowhere to climb out to; neither male or female. Neither high or low. There is no form and yet, perhaps this takes us back to Plato because surely there is something complete, somewhere, in whatever form. Irigaray suggests that India doesn't do "complete" (Irigaray, 2005, p.21). Should we listen to India or Irigaray - who may be very wrong about India, having "borrowed" ideas from that deep direction, as so many do (Coward, 1990; May, 1996; Vitsaxis, 1977)? All the layers and filters of self with their taint and agenda, when we could just know for ourselves instead. Just think; do the work... Without the other?

Should we wish for this Complete so that the other can appear? This is not where the other resides. Look at that place where this "conversation" cannot occur. There is the other. It is completely paradoxical. You say one thing but it means something else. That takes bravery. Creates silence. For education, through knowledge, through the mind in communion with other minds, that it might be a risk (that leads to nothing): it all takes guts. Gut-wrenching. Remember? The other is where the brave live.

Education in the Other

Well, people are limited. So small. Education must be practical. It must be useful. There is nothing about education so limiting than that it is perceived as being practical and useful. That has a very nice place in educational talk, but to always be practicing to use what is already to hand? Discovery is a tough task because it causes disagreement (Kuhn, 1962) but an education which can serve me, you, them, us and not that we follow what tells us, them, you, me what we ought to know... Well, that is an education for people and it is an education transcending what is not other, to go somewhere other.

So What is a Politics of the Other in Education?

It is dancing. It is dancing, in control. As a throw-away line: "We have no alternative but to invent another logic" (Irigaray, 2008, p.238).

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