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POWER IN FEMINIST PEDAGOGIES
THE CASE OF SEX EDUCATION IN FRANCE

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Abstract:

Drawing on the example of sex education in France, this paper considers the feminist poststructuralist critique of critical pedagogy and its impact on the conceptualization of relations and knowledge.

Although feminist educators showed an early interest in critical pedagogy, some of them in the poststructuralist camp expressed concerns about critical pedagogies' tendencies toward dominance and essentialism. French sex education illustrates many of these problematic aspects. From its historical links to the control of populations to its current aim at "education for equality" inspired by progressive pedagogies, it emerges as the "missing link" between liberatory education and state-controlled mechanisms of discipline. It shows how in spite of emancipatory intentions, critical pedagogy can drift toward normalization.

Poststructuralist feminists state that this tendency is linked to the fact that critical pedagogies reify power and fail to theorize adequately relations at the level of the classrooms. The specificity of the educational setting ought to be taken into account in order to understand how schools participate in the production of gender relations. That's why, instead of considering how to manage relations between already existing individuals with defined identities and differences, a feminist education should aim at a "we" that is not previous to the construction of knowledge, but which is its result. Alternative histories and oppositional knowledges would then be the conditions for new modes of being together.

Keywords: critical pedagogy, France, poststructuralism, feminist epistemology, gender relations

Before presenting my work about feminist pedagogies and power, I would like to step back a little and explain the methodological and heuristical approach this lecture is supposed to illustrate. In this paper, education can be seen as a laboratory for feminist theories: a *locus* where concepts can be put to the test. By going back and forth between theories and practice, education helps us evaluate the different paradigms in feminist thought. In this lecture, I will try to do this with the notion of "power" and the way it is conceptualized in two different feminist pedagogical theories.

On the one hand, there are feminist pedagogies inspired by critical pedagogy. Critical pedagogy, as defined in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968) consists in changing the pedagogical relationship itself (and not only the content of courses) in order to empower students. Paulo Freire criticizes the "vertical " relationship of traditional pedagogies and the "banking model" of teaching that underlies it, which considers students as passive receivers. Changing the form of teaching is thus a requisite to end oppression, because an education that encourages students to be passive socializes them to subservience (Bingham, 2008). The aim of critical pedagogy is "conscientization", that is to say the understanding of the social and political dimensions of one's biography. Once the critical consciousness is reached, the oppressed no longer allow the oppressive consciousness to invade their mind and become truly autonomous (Freire, 1996).

On the other hand, there are feminist thinkers who belong to poststructuralism, in which key concepts such as discourse, power, knowledge and truth – which are indeed central to education –

are no longer defined as they are in humanism (Adams St. Pierre, 2000). In a nutshell, poststructuralism focuses on the way meanings are acquired and change, and on their links with power ; it considers that every discourse is a structure of categories and beliefs specific to a time and place. This has consequences for both the notion of power and the notion of truth: they must be analyzed together, because truth induces effects of power.

I will take the example of sex education sessions in France[1]. I use a paper co-authored with sociologist Aurore Le Mat (Le Mat and Mozziconacci, 2013), who conducted fieldwork in classrooms in 2012[2] and I analyze official texts from the ministry that establish programs. Even if the influence of critical pedagogy in French sex education is not explicit most of the time, I will show how the methods used are similar to its principles. Besides, research has shown that conscientization theories have been recently rediscovered and used in the medico-social field in France (Mathieu, 2002).

In principle, students between 12 and 18 in France must have at least three sex education sessions per year, with no obligation in terms of duration. Volunteers among the school staff (teachers, nurses, advisors...) or people from external organizations authorized by the ministry can provide these lessons. The leitmotiv of official sex education guides is to "free speech" during these (rather short and punctual) sessions. Compared to traditional classes, there is indeed a shift in expectations, but the institutional context stays the same. Students are still in the same school, in their usual classrooms, and sometimes even with the same educators. But, for a short amount of time, rather than listening and taking notes, they are enjoined to speak up and express themselves. The shift can be explicitly signaled by discussion leaders when they introduce themselves, as noted in Aurore Le Mat's study, by saying sentences like "today I am not Mrs. X., I am Monique" or "today I am not here as your math teacher, but as Veronique, and we are going to talk about sexuality". From this point on and for the next hour, the students are supposed to talk, give their opinions and share their feelings. This is clearly stated in the official texts:

'' Sex education sessions must not take the form of a discourse or a course on sexuality. It is more about giving time and space for conversation, debates, enabling the students to ignite their own thinking, to express themselves about every topic that might concern them. Discussion leaders, however, should not limit their role to listening, but also should be able to identify students' questions, to provide clear and precise information, and to guide the group's reflection.'' (Ministère de l'Education Nationale. 2014a)[3]

Sex education is supposed to address health concerns but also gender equality concerns, with issues such as homophobia or sexual violence. In short, this is the practical and theoretical background of these sessions. I am not stating that these are the exact reflection of critical pedagogy principles but commonalities deserve to be noted:

- they tend to consider that the classroom can become a homogeneous space where vertical relations are abolished (no teachers or students, only people). In the same way, critical pedagogies identify the class as a "we", standing together in fighting domination.

- Both projects are teleological. Sex education in France is called " *éducation à la sexualité* ", which means that this education aims towards something (" à " is the same as " to "). Even if the discussion is supposed to be a spontaneous exchange, some information and principles

[1] Studies comparing French sex education with other countries' multiply. See Elisa Jasmin's article and Elise Devieilhe's PhD dissertation in the list of references.

[2] Two observations in classrooms made for a PhD dissertation in secondary schools near Lille (North of France).

[3] My translation from the French original.

must be transmitted in the end. In critical pedagogy, there is also a goal, which is " authentic consciousness ".

- Both rely on the idea that pedagogy can " empower " students. Education is not only supposed to deliver knowledge but also to deliver power. This is stated by the ministry itself: " *sex education aims at (...) developing attitudes such as self-esteem, respect, solidarity, autonomy and responsibility* " (Ministère de l'Education Nationale. 2014b)[4]. Empowerment is closely linked to the idea of " freedom of speech ", with the assumption that emancipation means taking the floor, whereas silence signifies mental blocks and domination.

Enough with the principles and ideas. What happens during these classes? Let me summarize my colleague's findings for you, focusing on the students' reactions to these sessions. I will also connect these reactions with some of the criticism that poststructuralist feminists have leveled at critical pedagogy (Luke and Gore, 1992):

- The students seem to be really confused by the shift in classroom expectations. They ask their "former" teacher: "Can we call you Monique?" but they still call her "Ma'am" and continue to talk to her as if she was still their teacher.

This strongly relates to what poststructuralist feminists call "decontextualization" in critical pedagogies. These pedagogies are assumed to be inherently liberating discourses by their supporters regardless of the location of the practices. But, as Jennifer Gore states, "*context must be conceived as filled with social actors whose personal* and *group histories position them as subjects immersed in social patterns'' (*Gore, 1992, 61) . The fact that Monique is a white middle-class woman in her forties who lives in a different neighborhood and that most of the students are racialized and/or working-class teenagers between 13 and 15, must be taken into account. The fact that these sessions take place in an educational institution is not anodyne either: Monique might be "Monique" today, but she will be the math teacher again tomorrow, and she still plays a very precise role in the school hierarchy.

- The students are supposed to "free their speech" but a lot of them remain silent. The girls in particular clearly express with their corporeal positions that they do not want to talk (arms crossed, looking elsewhere...).

Questioning the calls for "student voices" is the subject of Mimi Orners' famous text "Interrupting the Calls for Student Voice in 'Liberatory' Education: A Feminist Poststructuralist Perspective" (Orner, 1992). The idea of an "authentic voice" that must be freed in the classroom goes implies the assumption that there is a true and unified subject "underneath" the speech. It "*presume[s] students, voices and identities to be singular, unchanging and unaffected by the context in which the speaking occurs*" (Orner, 1992, 80). Yet, Orner underlines that critical pedagogues themselves admit that silence can be a form of defense and a form of resistance, "*the refusal to talk prevents others from knowing what students think or feel and using it against them*" (Orner, 1992, 88).

- Some students express how disillusioned they are with the discussion leader's guidance, and feel that her advice is not realistic and does not fit their experiences. For example, they tell the discussion leader that she completely underestimates the importance of reputation in this neighborhood and the fact that girls who go out with boys publicly take risks. Instead of starting from students' actual living conditions, discussion leaders aim at a supposedly

[4] My translation from the French original.

neutral ideal divorced from students' daily lives.

This is all the more surprising given that critical pedagogy requires starting from students' living conditions (Freire, 1968 and 1996). This may mean that French sex education does not fully apply critical pedagogy's principles. But more fundamentally, I think this contradiction reveals a real tension within critical pedagogy, between its teleological form and its demand to start from students' experiences. Critical pedagogy aims at an authentic consciousness that the teacher is supposed to already possess or at least to be able to identify. But, as Jennifer Gore states, "*when the agent of empowerment assumes to be already empowered, arrogance can underlie claims of 'what we can do for you' (...) we need to acknowledge that our agency has limits, that we might 'get it wrong' in assuming we know what would be empowering for others*" (Gore, 1992, 61-63). As Elizabeth Ellsworth writes, the teacher "*does not play the role of disinterested mediator on the side of the oppressed group (...) there are things that I as a professor could never know about the experiences, oppressions and understandings of other participants in the class. This situation makes it impossible for any single voice in the classroom – including that of the professor – to assume the position of center or origin of knowledge or authority, of having privileged access to authentic experience or appropriate language*" (Ellsworth, 1992, 101).

The most important aspect here, with which I want to conclude, is the idea that students are supposed to be "empowered" by the discussion leader during those sessions. This goes with a reifying notion of power as something that can be possessed and transmitted, rather than as polymorphous networks and mechanisms. This conception is highly problematic and explains much about the issues raised before. As Jennifer Gore argues "*these claims to empowerment attribute extraordinary abilities to the teacher, and hold a view of agency which risks ignoring the context(s) of teachers' work*" (Gore, 1992, 57). This is exactly what happens in the case of French sex education when teachers deny the importance of their position in the institutional and social world. A context-specific analysis, with power described as relations revealed in specific practices, would direct our attention to the micro dynamics of its operations at the level of the classroom. For example, teachers should admit that there is no such thing as "free speech", understood as a speech without constraints, especially in the classroom: students' voices (and silence) should rather be interpreted as effects of the regulation of the self through others (which would explain for example why silence is gendered during these sessions).

As poststructuralism mainly defines itself by questioning structuralist and humanist concepts, feminist pedagogic thought inspired by this movement is a critical point of view on education rather than a systematic prescriptive theory. It does not intend to destroy all that has been built by conscientization pedagogies, but to give tools to amend them and elaborate an accurate feminist pedagogy. From what I've discussed in this presentation, this could take the form of the following reforms:

- to abandon any teleological method in order to pay more attention to local and specific contexts and conditions,

or

- to consider that the goal of education remains the transmission of knowledge rather that the transmission of power, which would conserve that education is a mediation between students and knowledge, and not an apparatus of control that seeks to act directly upon students by exhorting them to be one way or the other.

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