Grounding Cosmopolitan Education: Theory and Practice through the Prism of Particular Culture, Heritage and Language

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1. Cosmopolitanism with Roots: Oxymoron or Pathway to a Culturally Situated Meaningful Encounter with the Other?

This paper wishes to stress and later suggest a response to the tension that might arise when a cosmopolitan oriented education encounters a specific educational setting: to be a cosmopolitan is to care for the other, as detached from you that other might be; to be acculturated (one of the goals of educational systems) is to have roots, to be embedded in a specific culture, history, nation and people. To use Hansen’s terminology, this paper will relate to the tension between “openness to the new” and “loyalty to the known” (Hansen, 2011: 1).

In the first part of the article, I will briefly present a critique of the colonial, elitist and Eurocentric aspects in “classical” accounts of cosmopolitanism. This critique will revolve around the attempts to promote Enlightenment ideals such as homogenization of cultures, global governance and shared rational morality. Then I will relate to the alternative - a revised cosmopolitanism, titled “rooted cosmopolitanism,” which acknowledges the local attachments as essential to our ability to nurture a cosmopolitan perspective (Appiah 1996, 2005). Moreover, it claims that “the outward-bound cosmopolitan perspective requires and involves the very roots it claims to transcend” (Kymlicka 2012, 1).

In the second part of the article I will ask to join this emerging discourse about “cosmopolitanism with roots” by relating to it through an educational prism.

Following Hansen’s account of cosmopolitanism (2011), I will claim that the formation of a cosmopolitan orientation, asks for acculturation. One must have a foundation to rely on when encountering the new, although such an encounter might change it. Furthermore, without a
deeply felt commitment to the local there can be no genuine sense of obligation to the universal - and vice versa (Appiah, 2008).

Relying on some aspects of McLaughlin’s “openness with routs” (1996: 147), I will claim that cosmopolitan education can be sustained from the prism of a local culture, heritage and language. A pedagogical move that asks to nurture openness to the new by strengthening certain aspects of loyalty to the known, might allow one to better understand others by better understanding one’s own culture. Discovering the cosmopolitanism as a result of delving into one’s own culture, might also connect one to this ideal from a deeper and more natural place.

Instead of viewing cosmopolitanism as an ideal “one size fits all” top-down political, cultural, financial or moral project based on universal reason (see Kymlicka’s critique: Kymlicka 2012: 1-7), I suggest treating cosmopolitanism as an educational endeavor which is deeply rooted in various cultures. The underlying assumption is that many cultures have developed a unique moral grounding for life in a constant tension between “self” and “other.” I believe that this culture-specific moral grounding should not be ignored. On the contrary, it can imbue the cosmopolitan ideal with local meanings, and thus help in creatively tackling the tension that might arise when educators ask to introduce cosmopolitan-oriented education, which is usually perceived as initiation to a global community of rootless citizens, into a specific educational setting.

In order to exemplify my claim, in the third part of the paper, I will present an educationally oriented reading of the social doctrine of the Jewish thinker and Kabbalist Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag (1884-1954), who’s writing -- mediated by centers for the study of Kabbalah that claim to be Ashlag’s successors – have now reached millions.
Although in recent years scholars have devoted some scientific account to Ashlag’s kabbalistic doctrine, only one of them awarded little attention (and only in Hebrew) to Aslag’s quasi neo Marxist social doctrine (Huss 2010).

In a number of books and assays that were written (only some of them published) in the early 1930s and 1940s, Ashlag aspired to provide a social commentary along with a pragmatic alternative that would allow the founding of a just universal society, which will not eradicate local traditions and difference (Ashlag, 2005).

Throughout my presentation I would like to focus on the main principles of Ashlag’s “communistic altruism,” on his moral demands from the Jewish people whom he considered to be the “true proletariat,” and his suggestion for an educational endeavor that would set the stage for the emergence of a cosmopolitan society which will be supported by all religions (Ibid).

References


2. Cosmopolitan Education and the Need for a New Trans-religious Imaginary: A Muslim perspective

This paper argues that cosmopolitan education requires cultivating trans-religious imaginary that would enable educators and students to bond with groups and belong to spaces beyond their immediate vicinities in their nation states and communities of faith. Yet, it is indeed a challenging task to do so, especially in cases of confessional religious education. In the case of teaching Islam, to educate for cosmopolitan capacities and sensibilities seems a far reaching goal, as in many countries, Islam as a school subject is rendered as a version of 'character education' that focuses on the religious norms, civic virtues, and personal qualities needed to function as a disciplined citizen, while presenting it as individualized and depoliticized faith (Agbaria, 2012). Moreover, it is particularly challenging because it requires theological moves without which it would be impossible for religious education of Islam to be more deliberative, more open to critical reflexivity, more accommodating of otherness, and more proactive in line with values of justice, solidarity and care.

The development of a trans-religious imaginary depends thus not only on curricular policies and politics, but also on accomplishing theological moves that would naturalize and co-opt the religious discourse on society and cosmopolitanism. In this regard, this paper focuses entirely on charting, from a Muslim perspective, the theological moves needed to transgress and transcend central dogmas of religious education towards the inclusion of cosmopolitan knowledge, skills and values. Specifically, I will present three moves. First, I will reclaim critical and dialogical voices in Sunni Muslim conceptualizations of education. Second, I will underscore new perspectives with regard to what does it mean to be a part of a Muslim nation and a Muslim minority. Third, I will point to the increasing salience and influence of Muslim reformers who
have been reengaging with the main objectives of Shariah (Maqasid) to re-articulate new common interests (Masaleh) that they seek to preserve not only within the boundaries of the nation state but also in an interconnected and interdependent world (see more in Mandaville, 2014).

Accordingly, this paper will be organized into three parts. The first part introduces the challenge of cosmopolitan education in religious studies at the school level. Here, from a Muslim perspective, I will highlight some of the tensions that might emerge when we educate pupils to be religious and cosmopolitan, both. In the second part I will introduce the three moves outlined above that are needed to reform Muslim religious education in order to be more inclusive to cosmopolitan capacities and sensibilities. In this part, I draw on major works in Muslim educational thought (see more in Waghid, 2011), in the doctrine of the Jurisprudence of Muslim Minorities (Fiqh al-Aqilliyyat) (see more in Parray, 2012), and in the doctrine of the Jurisprudence of the Goals of Islamic Law (Fiqh al-maqsad) (see more in Ramadan, 2004). The third part is a discussion that seeks to explain how these moves would enable a new Muslim trans-religious imaginary that would make cosmopolitan education possible.

References


3. From contemplative pedagogy towards cosmopolitan education

Cosmopolitanism, “the concern for the world as if it were one’s polis” (Benhabib 2004, p. 174), has recently become a matter of great scholarly interest across the humanities, social sciences, and education. This presentation proposes however that there is a paradox involved in big words such as “cosmopolitanism” that evoke a disembodied “view from nowhere” (Nagel, 1986) and the fact that eventually any lived cosmopolitan ideal is lived from the embodied first-person perspective. This paradox might be overcome if our pedagogical perspective will embrace both perspectives: a radical turn inward and an appeal to universal ethics. This paper finds this dual perspective emerging form the recent “contemplative turn” in education (Ergas, 2014a; Eppert, 2013), and demonstrates it based on its socially engaged Buddhist case (Gyatso, 2000; Loy, 1996).

A cosmopolitan approach to education needs to stem from at least two perspectives: a third-person perspective that provides an ethical vision of the good (Alexander, 2001), and a first-person perspective that captures the friction of life as it is lived experientially. Remaining solely with the former leaves us with lofty accounts of “humanist education” that do not take into
account “the very human aspects of our inhuman actions” (Todd, 2009, p. 3). In other words the challenge this paper proposes, is how can we establish an educational practice that is grounded in an unbiased exploration of being human as a glorious yet concomitantly a regretful condition.

One possible way for grounding cosmopolitan education in this dual perspective stems from a recent contemplative turn in education. This turn is manifested in a rapidly growing incorporation of contemplative practices (e.g., meditation, yoga, tai chi) across educational settings (Barbezat & Bush, 2014, Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Lin, Oxford & Brantmeier, 2013; Roth, 2006). Most notably this turn has been growing based on the scientific study of mindfulness practice (Black et al, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2005) and its applications within education (Davidson et al, 2012). While mindfulness has been “secularized” its sources lay within a Buddhist approach presented in contemporary times as socially-engaged (Gyatso, 2000). Here we might find both the ethical vision of the good, and the friction of life, based on the pedagogical mechanisms of mindfulness practice (Ergas, ahead-of-print). All Buddhist schools of thought begin with the premise of the First Noble truth - dukkha (Gethin, 1998) - a dis-ease with life. This dis-ease, as Buddhist accounts suggest, leads to “the very human aspects of our inhuman actions”. Mindfulness supposedly turns away from the world, as an investigation of one’s own mind-body-heart. Yet, Buddhism proposes a radical constructivist approach in which our mind is viewed as co-creating lived reality (Loy, 1996). Following this perspective, no serious cosmopolitan curriculum can be formed without a direct inquiry into the subject’s mind. Mindfulness and other contemplative practices insert the mind into the equation of education so that the sources of our “inhuman actions” become known to us to enable the cultivation of more compassionate and ethical living that comply with many accounts of cosmopolitanism (Noddings, 2005; Nussbaum 1996).
References


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