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Education and Human Dignity in Transitional Periods

Received: 25.06.2024/ Accepted: 13.07.2024 / Published: 10.02.2025

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Abstract

Democracy is a matter of education, but not merely of methodology. For this reason, freedom and democracy depend on the quality of the members that are part of a certain society. A society will produce evil and negativity, to the extent of its members' vice or lack of values. That is the reason why societies cannot possibly remain indifferent towards the values of its members. Values are taught starting from a tender age, and the vocation of an educator is not only to provide information and knowledge but also to contribute in the growth of "good citizens". Therefore, it is necessary to revitalize people's intellectual and perceptual dimension as a precondition for the formation of the individual citizen of this digital contemporary era. Indeed, this is the main problem of this age and it should also be the main concern of educators - and not solely: for a democratic society in the digital era, the education of the citizen – its formation – is as essential as always.

Key words: education, citizenship, democracy, digitalization, human dignity, transition

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A significant principle of the democratic society is related to the concept of citizenship, which, in turn, is the source of power in the public sphere. It goes without saying that a person may be a “member of society” without being a citizen. However, if citizens as engaged individuals do not have access in the public space and are directly or indirectly kept within their private sphere, they cannot put pressure on government officials. This significant principle is expressed in Montesquieu's famous quote: “The citizen may perish and the man remains”³, which points out the lack of engagement. Montesquieu’s claim seems to define a pattern, witnessed and continuously proven viable in various ages. Any sort of despotism ensures existence and prolongs its life by relying on weak characters, characterized by conformity and obedience rather than by critical approach.

From a different, perspective, the philosopher’s approach raises the question of whom is responsible for the enhancing of a critical approach in people. In other words, who are the ones supposed to teach citizens how to access the public sphere - public life – and how to make their voice heard by true engagement. There is one single answer: solely the enlightened class of any nation can possibly offer this education. However, in case this class cannot achieve this or is not allowed to, the reasons should be profoundly investigated.

It goes without saying that such education –that of engaged citizenship - is essential for any society, as obvious in the Enlightenment philosophy that formed the basis of development in an age of change⁴, seemingly not different from the one we are going through. According to this understanding, citizenship means public freedom, participation in public life, and this is based not only on the implementation of freedom of conscience, but also that of competence. In short, a person becomes a citizen through education. A man who is not guided by civic education and knowledge remains a barbarian. Democracy demands its citizens are equipped with specific qualities: individuals who are masters of themselves, who are protective of their freedom and autonomy, and who are willing to cooperate with others. The spreading of hatred and bigotry is not democratic, and this is a principle that lies in the foundation of any democratic society.

This fundamental quality, in fact, does not needs comments, but I would like to quote a piece of advice of Alexis de Tocqueville to European politicians, which he drew from the American experience. “It would seem as if the rulers of our time sought only to use men in order to make things great; I wish that they would try a little more to make great men; that they would set less value on the work and more upon the workman; that they would never forget that a nation cannot long remain strong when every man belonging to it is individually weak; and that no form or combination of social polity has yet been devised to make an energetic people out of a community of pusillanimous and enfeebled citizens.”⁵ Tocqueville, the philosopher who pointed out the problems with democracy, additionally, considered the moralization of democracy essential: otherwise, democracy may shift to tyranny. As an example he used

³ The Complete Works of M. de Montesquieu (London: T. Evans, 1777), 4 vols. Vol. 1.

<<https://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/montesquieu-complete-works-vol-1-the-spirit-of-laws>>

⁴ Christopher Brooks, *Western Civilization: A Concise History*, 2020, < <https://pressbooks.nsc.ca> >

⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, Flammarion, Paris, 1981, V.II, f. 394

American democracy. To him, the Americans moralize democracy through religion, because religion compels people not to keep their gaze only on the earthly; that is, not to worry only about their own personal comfort. Instead, it requires people to also observe the heavenly: that is, the implementation of high spiritual values.

In the rapidly changing and not necessarily untroubled era we are living, the first task of education and educators is to commit ourselves to become ourselves, to remaining faithful to our core. And this is achieved, by asking ourselves some basic – if you like, existential - questions, including what the purpose of our existence is; what is a dignified life; and how our relationship with others are built.

In order to answer these questions, education must obey the humane factor. In other words, the dignified existence of the human – the individual - must be the first objective of education. It should be clarified: not the dignity of a certain person in power, that is the “chief” - be it a despot, emperor, *fuhrer*, first secretary, any governmental authority or the similar -, but the dignity of the human, so that he is enabled to become himself. Nietzsche would shed light on this by underlining that we are, but we must become”⁶. And the process of enabling to become who they are puts the educators of the new generations in front of the most difficult and, at the same time, the noblest task.

It should also be emphasized that education has a close relationship with the past. Italian philosopher Benedetto Croce would rightfully emphasize that every past lives in the present⁷; also in the sense that people turn to the past because something in the present – or the present itself – triggers them to. Our digitalized present is not different. For this reason, our relationship with the past defines our present and the perceiving of the past for what it is, is essential for the building of a successful educational strategy.

On a different page, an educational strategy that enhances the human and the humane goes through the stimulation of criticism, that is critical approach. As a matter of a fact, the critical approach forms the basis of education also at the present as it always day. Indeed, it will continue to, even after the digital revolution the world is undergoing becomes past. In order to shed light on this aspect of education in the present, a well-established analysis from the past, which was expressed in an age of turmoil and enormous changes for a small country like Albania, will be addressed. Along with its essentiality, the Italian Albanologist Father Giuseppe Valentini clarifies how a robust critical approach is built and enhanced. In 1935, he wrote:

The critical approach has to be:

I accurate: I mean stripped from any prejudice and interest, so that facts are neither changed nor added; views are not purposefully distorted, in order to draw conclusions that sustain particular ideas, especially those of the critic.

⁶ <https://hussainather.com/2018/10/06/how-to-become-who-you-are-according-to-nietzsche/>

⁷ Rik Peters, “The Spinning Silkworm: Benedetto Croce’s History as the Story of Liberty”, 2021
<https://brill.com/view/journals/jph/15/3/article-p305_4.xml?language=en>

2 *complete*: it should encompass as numerous facts as possible, so that every aspect is meticulously remarked, what, in turn, enables diving deep in the nature of the issue.

3 *distinguishable*: that is, explicated in all levels, differentiating what is central and what is tangential.⁸

Then, Valentini adds that whoever bothers to criticize something, should, first, critically analyze himself. One should ponder on whether he possesses the qualities listed above, and while weaving and working the critique will he strive for impartiality in all aspects.⁹ The Albanologist attempts to also define those fearing criticism. He claims that they are:

- Those who have something to hide
- Those who do not live upright
- Those who don't fulfill their duty
- Those who lay a snare under someone
- Those who work in the dark, and
- Those who do not want to have their wrongdoing discovered.

Finally, he summarizes the function of criticism, maintaining that “criticism is a lantern; and like the lantern which serves to light what is not seen, criticism also serves to shed light on what is in the dark. Criticism should be an encouragement, never a whip.”¹⁰

In other words, this foreigner priest who loved Albanians sincerely suggested that one fair criticism and disdain unjust criticism as well as criticism rooted in passion,¹¹ thus, apparently, identifying the flaws of pretended criticism quite clearly. Unfortunately, this supposed criticism, which is closer in nature with defamation, is to be noticed nowadays, as well. It is particularly obvious in the activity of dilettantes who talk about everything and who use their so-called criticism as a whip to satisfy their individual egoism or for someone else's sake. They are usually accompanied by superficial cries and endless discussions that do not touch the essence of things. Unlike biased criticism, adequate criticism ascertains the rise of the human soul; this is the central lesson of the art of thought development –intellectual growth - in ancient philosophy. Hence, this criticism is to seek the reason for the existence of things and does not necessarily have a negative meaning.

From this perspective, the contemporary educational strategy should focus on teaching precisely the non-malign critical approach, by implementing this very same approach. Hence, even in the digital age, the goal of educators should be “to liberate the youth from mental slavery, from the homologation that makes one another's mental slave”¹². Montesquieu underlined that the purpose of the education system in despotism is to grow good slaves. The risks of an education that nurtures “mental slavery” as the norm are to be observed in the recent

⁸ Giuseppe (Zef) Valentini, *Vepra I*, Plejad, Tirana, 2005, f. 88.

⁹ Giuseppe (Zef) Valentini, *Vepra I*, Plejad, Tirana, 2005, f. 88.

¹⁰ Giuseppe (Zef) Valentini, *Vepra I*, Plejad, Tirana, 2005, f. 88.

¹¹ Giuseppe (Zef) Valentini, *Vepra I*, Plejad, Tirana, 2005, f. 89.

¹² Giuseppe (Zef) Valentini, *Vepra I*, Plejad, Tirana, 2005, f. 20

past of Albania and not only. During the second half of the 20th century, education sought to make people –particularly the youth - slaves of the system. Although the experienced totalitarianisms are much graver than what the French political philosopher envisioned, those among us who have experienced and know how it is like to live in a totalitarian regime must reflect deeply on Montesquieu’s criticism of the despotic regime. After experiencing a regime that aimed to prepare good slaves in all aspects, it is our duty to focus on preparing good citizens. The education strategies we embrace and implement should urge the growth of citizens, enable them to become themselves and protective of their freedom, so that freedom as a concept and system is not ruined.

The importance of education in a free society is obvious in what the Enlightenment philosopher John Locke pivotally defended in his “Thoughts Concerning Education”. He famously claimed that it is education “which makes the great difference in mankind: the little, and almost insensible impressions on our tender infancies, have very important and lasting consequences: and there ‘tis, as in the fountains of some rivers, where a gentle application of the hand turns the flexible waters into channels, that make them quite contrary courses, and by this little direction given them at first in the source, they receive different tendencies and arrive at last, at very remote and distant places.”¹³

In this light, it should also be noted that the misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the concept of freedom, a problem related to the concept of authority, are addressed with freeing education. There is a widespread misconception of authority. Authority is tightly related with the creation and perception of the self. If an individual, especially an educator, is not master of his true self, this authority cannot be attained. There is no authority in enslaved minds. In other words, authority is primarily the result of the intellectual and moral integrity of the educator, as he is the one that influences the formation of the self within the young people.

As previously hinted, another objective of education is that education should focus on the present. As the saying goes, the past is gone and tomorrow is yet to come. So life is today. Surely, some might argue that in totalitarian regimes, it is also claimed that education should be related to life. Yet, in such systems education is related to that sort of virtual life the power – in totalitarian Albania the party – not with real life. The concept that education should be related to life at the present means providing people – especially the youth – with the opportunity to understand today's life. From a different perspective, education should strive to ensure participation in factual everyday life, which means tangible engagement in with everyday reality, as an essentially social presence. Indeed, if the youth does not understand or fails to be engaged in the present, they cannot possibly think of and invest in positive change, in the future.

Digitalization should particularly focus on this inclusive perception of and engagement with the present and with life. In other words, the inevitable incorporation of digitalization in

¹³ John Locke, *Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693),
< https://stephenhicks.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/locke_john-poe.pdf>

education is indeed education that urges a better understanding of today's life for a better future. However, the digitalization of education should also be in line with the principles of enabling education. That is, educators in this era should be as cautious as always not to fall in the pit of enslaving education; on the contrary, the freeing and critical approach are to be taught and urged at the cost of being the subject of criticism themselves.

This brings up another similarly vital issue: the realization of a free – better said freeing – education in the contemporary conditions. Quite frequently, the issue is addressed by demanding an overall revision of methods. It should be noted that there is no standard method that can be used in every given situation in the present, either. For this reason, it is necessary to constantly work and adapt methods that address the changing issues and demands of daily life with a *bricoleur* approach¹⁴.

Nonetheless, education goes beyond involvement with the present and life. It should also rely on the philosophical thought, why not the metaphysics of mystery and morality. Albanian publicist Branko Merxhani shed light on this aspect of education, claiming: “First, let's study our own issues and let's teach our people the rules to progress. And before we learn to think, we must learn to love. We must learn to trust.”¹⁵ Morality is not the mere declamation of moral principles and rules. In fact, morality is a tension, an ongoing tension with one's self, the other and the community. We do not live in isolation, but in society. “He who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is sufficient for himself, must be either a beast or a god,”¹⁶ Aristotle famously claims. This is why it is important to perceive morality as a constant tension. And this brings about the dialectic of the Other and of understanding – sympathizing with - the Other. The Other, whoever the label stands for in a given situation, has an impact in our change and improvement.

In terms of the dialectics with the other, education is closely related to values. Education is not indifferent to the values that a society is supposed to endorse. The issue of values becomes particularly critical in periods of transitions, as the one the region underwent after the fall of the totalitarian regime or the digital transformation it is going through now. It is mostly in these transitional periods when people focus more on the previously mentioned question: “How to live in a dignified way?” It goes without saying that these are also periods that favor philosophies on the human and on better understanding his role in this world. Values should be considered in terms of their individual dimensions, as much as in terms of their communal dimensions. The form a value takes will inevitably impact social relationships.

In other words, the endorsed values will inevitably influence the construction as well as the character of the changing community. The school, as a concept, stands for a community of superior values. As a matter of a fact, the issue that should be addressed, while attempting to

¹⁴ A. Lotteri et al. “The holistic bricolage research approach and disaster-risk reduction” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction*, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijdr.2023.104031>

¹⁵ Branko Merxhani, *Vepra*, Plejad, Tirana, 2003, f. 47

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Politics*, http://www.constitution.org/ari/polit_01.htm.

build a community in which social peace prevails is how to live in peace with people who, after all, the individual did not choose to be co-members of the society he happens to be part of.

Solidarity is the republican virtue that makes possible the balancing of the natural inequalities of people in function of the common good. The actuality and strength of this attitude is obvious in the following words of the exiled anti-communist Isuf Luzaj, which were particularly directed to the youth. “If a government or state blocks the path of a young individual for merely a critical statement, a rebellious book, or a freedom-demanding gesture, that state is ruled by the evil. The ruling evil is supported by the wicked, and when they command, the honest people of that country are sent to jail, whereas bloodthirsty robbers are put on the altar. Turn your head and look at the 20th century in dictatorial states... Solidarity develops in parallel with justice... Justice works by eliminating privileges that are in report with merit, which is, in turn, measured by the social BENEFIT of the fulfilled functions”¹⁷.

The opposite of this extremely unpleasant condition is the principle of affirming oneself by acknowledging the value of the Other. In this context, compassion is the value to be endorsed. To clarify, compassion refers to the acceptance of the Other, without nurturing inimical feelings. It stands for the welcoming of the other, and, hospitality stands for the making of the Other part of the personal livelihood.

This principle that is similarly viable in the digital era emphasizes, once more, that fact that the methods of education should progress in line with time and context. It is necessary to create a sustainable and fruitful form of education. This is not achieved solely with the ethical-practical coherence of the educator; it requires logical coherence – which implies an almost ideal coherence - thanks to which, the educator knows how to become a point of reference for multi-faceted development. Education should aim at life, so that life is in accordance with the ideal of man as the construction unit of every society. This means that the educator is not passive; within, he encompasses an active living, which makes education as responsive to contemporary needs as possible.

Another objective of education is all-inclusiveness. Publicist Isuf Luzaj maintains that “the reconstruction of the structures of spiritual powers for the creation of the new scientific morality, will require more work, art and patience, than the economic reconstruction, which, in a democratic state, could be carried out in a few years of sound and ingenious work”¹⁸. He expects the youth –and not only - to be guided by empowering and improving high ideals, such as goodness, beauty and, truth. He also provides his own example of thought direction. His thought travels along Cartesian lines, and he studies social institutions, considering the impact they have on human character. The human character can be negatively affected, in case education is politicized or the of any agenda; this is why immense care should be taken in order to not let education become a tool of any sort of propaganda.

¹⁷ Isuf Luzaj, *Rindërtimi i fuqive shpirtërore*, Ombra GVG, Tirana, 2005, f. 72.

¹⁸ Isuf Luzaj, *Rindërtimi i fuqive shpirtërore*, ombra GVG, Tiranë, 2005, f. 20.

This, once again, emphasizes Nietzsche's concept of "becoming who we are", referring to our human ability to develop and achieve our virtuous ideal self¹⁹. Also for Luzaj, this is achievable, due to the fact that social experience is a permanent renewal of concepts, norms and values. Concepts, norms and values cultivate spiritual power, and, in turn, their adoption forms the basis of a peaceful existence, which withstands hatred and violence, which, in turn, lead to social immorality. Human dignity cannot be understood without this spiritual power, which is truly embodied morality, not merely the reflection of set qualities. This also implies one of the primary issues regarding the debated negative influence of digital and AI tools, which tend to distance the youth from this all-inclusive education, by mutilating their thought, creativity and fantasy.

As pointed out in the beginning, education should be considered in close relation with the past, including tradition; however, the maintaining of an impartial critical approach is equally essential when benefitting from the past. This relationship should be analyzed in the light of the well-established ideas of the masters of thought. From a different perspective, the most pressing issue is to prevent the youth from idleness and vanity. In relation to this issue, the iconic Albanian thinker Mid'hat Frashëri claims that "vanity is the most widespread vice, the most common disease: it is the seed from which future faults and sins will stem"²⁰. Taking these into consideration, the familiarization of the youth with the great masters of thought and their time-resistant ideas should be regarded as a professional principle by educators and administrators alike. This would diminish the possible negative impact of digital and AI tools in instilling indolence, passivity and vanity within the youth. Knowledge on the masters of thought along with the benefits of the digital age would shed light on the youth's path towards an age of genius.

To conclude, the concept of engaged citizenship, being the foundation stone of any civilized society, demonstrates particular immediacy in transitional periods of any sort. This can be achieved by the creation of an educational culture that ensures societal development. As Branko Merxhani claims: "We should call on the youth and advise them not to waste their power in vain; not to get involved in the intrigues of politics, which in our society is still juvenile, very delicate and complex. Everything in relation to our future - the state, independence and even our political preponderance - will be attained and strengthened with the solution of the education issue more inclusively and the entering of the education currents in their normal and progressive paths"²¹. Taking this into consideration it was maintained that a freeing education, based on the enhancing of critical thought, is essential in the era of digital transition as it was during political transitional periods after the fall of former totalitarian regimes, such as in the case of Albania. Debunking thus the myth of imposed authorities, the contemporariness factor of education, more precisely, engagement with the present and real life, while benefitting from past tradition and aspiring for a better future, was defended. In addition, it was claimed that the

¹⁹ Ryan A. Bush, "When Nietzsche said 'become who you are', this is what he meant", 2023. <https://psyche.co/ideas/when-nietzsche-said-become-who-you-are-this-is-what-he-meant>

²⁰ Hysen Matoshi, "Kthimi i Mid'hat Frashërit", 2018. <<https://institutistudimevelumoskendo.al/kthimi-i-midhat-frasherit/>>

²¹ Branko Merxhani: Vepra, Plejad, 2003, f. 67.

embracing of an educational model refined by spiritual and moral values not only empowers the individual to “become who he is” but also contributes for the achievement of peaceful coexistence. These elements are proposed as the fundamental theoretical basis for an education strategy that truly serves to overcome the value crisis that grips every society undergoing rapid changes and does not jeopardize the dignified existence to its members.

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