

# Counter Education and the Example of Socrates

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## **De omnibus dubitandum**

(Question everything)

Humanist educators resolved to do this in the late 18th century, when they tried to realize their enlightenment project. But many of their followers today are demanding this resolve, or are drawn into a dogmatic relativism, within postmodern and other discourses. This trend is manifested even in the most advanced versions of current Critical Pedagogy. [1] As long as they take for granted the autonomy of oppressed collectives, the possibility of an 'agency', the 'real' interests or 'the voice' of the marginalized ---plus their eagerness for critical dialogue 'among differences'--- [2] they cannot, they think, but manifest 'enlightened' education.

The foundations of the Enlightenment's educational project were its uncompromising demands for the realization of the potential autonomy of the subject, [3] disenchantment, and overcoming the oppressive dependence on the teacher, on tradition, and on fear.[4] But those would-be 'enlightened' educators today who succeed in manipulating their pupils didactically, ensure their political control over them, and in so doing they betray the supreme ideals of Enlightenment. In this they add themselves as another link to the long chain of educational postures that includes Christian

missionaries, Jewish mahzirim b'teshuva, and other soul seekers. Today, however, is there perhaps no other practical educational route for the cause of humanism, which apparently cannot be delivered except by deception, temptation and manipulation(?). Could it be that the intention to deliver coherent and enlightened education leads to impotency, and has no chance of becoming a realistic alternative (to conservative schooling) within the present circumstances?

||The Sophists||

But is this fundamental dilemma really new? As representatives of so-called 'progressive forces' against the conservatives of the time (Ancient Greece), the sophists had an important educational message; they claimed to educate towards emancipation from earlier convictions and old values, proven to be unworthy. As one who instructed and cultivated future successful politicians, the sophist taught his pupils to become 'enlightened', efficient deceivers, who could live simultaneously in two parallel worlds. One was the arena where the relations between teacher and pupil were revealed and realized. The other was the arena of the future relations between the politician and his audience.

The manipulative potential promised to the politician basically depends on the keeping of an important secret: the secret which is reserved to the level of relations between him and the people whom he has not committed to the widely accepted objective truth. Only in this case is the stage set for the knowledge which he has obtained from the sophist, and for the activation of his skills to convince his naive audience by efficiently manipulating 'shared' self-evidence, truths and values. As the sophist's

disciple, the pupil has to choose between a political career, or becoming a sophist himself: but certainly not a philosopher. The sophist has a vested interest in preventing his pupil from philosophizing, however much he may hide this from the pupil. The apparently honest relationship between the sophist and his pupil is only a sham which serves the sophist's agenda. He actually deceives his pupil no less than his pupil will deceive his audience when, as a skilled politician, he meets the crowd.

The sophist tries his best to introduce into his pupil a magic potion which will detach him from the quest for counter-education, the wish to question self-evidence claims, the wish to struggle ---as a philosopher--- against the violence of hegemonic, stereotyped education and the comfort it can supply or promise.

The sophist is, of course, unable to share this secret with his pupil and remain his teacher, and, as a true sophist, he must mislead his pupil time and again, becoming ever more enslaved to his meaningless 'educational' project. As a supposedly 'enlightened' educator the sophist represents disillusion from the traditional realm of self-evidence claims. Indeed he is committed to try dissolve such claims. His teaching and his 'educating' are both aimed at destroying the remaining objective significance of the old myths, values, and truths. Yet at the same time his existence is conditional on the successful reproduction of the current order of things, especially in its political dimensions.

Thus as a self-declared 'enlightened' educator the sophist collides with some traditional truths and values and develops a scepticism towards them, but he dare not suggest a total radical critique or self-critique. He dare

not question the longing for fame, glory, and political power as criteria for success of the rhetor. So the sophist does not confront his pupil's acceptance mindedness across the board [6]: certainly not insofar as it guarantees interest in his sophistical teaching and looks towards future success in politics. He refrains from revealing his hidden vested interests ---especially his dependence on them and on the reproduction of the current order. He hides his conservatism towards the order of things in which manipulative teacher-pupil relations are possible and even demanded.

||Socrates v. the Sophists||

Socrates was a teacher who re-defined teacher-pupil relations. His educational stand implied that he might teach his pupil something valuable only as one who knows that he 'knows' nothing (i.e. with finality). This stand is not an obstacle in his search, but on the contrary, a step in his permanent quest for the answer to the great question: What is the good? This search can be realized only by fulfilling our questioning 'dialogical essence' as human beings. We must accept the fate of the dialogue ---i.e. follow it where it leads--- and this is synonymous with accepting the fate of the Other, who will be influenced by the dialogue.

Socrates needs very special pupils, pupils indeed who do not yet exist.

In a certain sense Socrates' stand is similar to that represented by the sophists, since he too does not know anything which would count as 'the final truth', yet he refuses to abandon his teaching. Socrates, however, does not pretend to be a teacher who knows with finality; nor does he teach by establishing monological relations between teacher and pupil. In fact,

he is not really a teacher in the conventional sense. The difference between him and the sophists, however, is even greater. The sophist does not sell his pupil 'generalised truth', only specific practical knowledge about future success in life. He does this without caring about its essence, its goal or its meaning.

So-called 'enlightened' and enlightened education collide here: the sophists and Socrates are both obliged to educate the pupil and prepare him for worthwhile life, yet they operate within opposing concepts of the good life. The sophist is committed to the current world of facts. He is an ally of present reality even as a teacher of critical thinking. Socrates, on the other hand, lives in the light of the not-yet-here, the aim of which may be called the 'Utopian axis'. By negating present reality in the light of Utopia, Socrates could struggle for redemption already in this world, without positive knowledge, separate from truth, whose existence continues beyond the current horizons. His irony manifests itself in his daily life, not solely in the dialogues. It was manifested in his political involvement, fulfilment of his duties and rights realized and conceptualized as any free citizen of Athens. His political involvement led him more than once to a clash with the authorities. At the same time, Socrates lived as an active philosopher, and the political dimension in his life was not reduced by his conviction that the truth was unknown to him. This was because of his quest for transcendence and truth, the commitment to love in his fellow human and that which is beyond mere life, a commitment that produced the morality of counter-education which is still valid for us today. Socrates lived and died for the love of wisdom in a

world where received knowledge cannot be but false or partial. But he also knew how not to search and for the sake of what he should search for transcendence. On such an excursion, according to Socrates, one can only transcend oneself with, and for, one's fellow human beings and for one's own sake.[7]

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, "Toward a nonrepressive Critical Theory", *Educational Theory* 48, 4, (Fall 1998) pp. 463-486.

9 Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of education*, New York and London 1992, pp. 134-135.

3 Waiter Benjainin, "Program of the Coming Philosophy", *The Philosophical Forum* xv: 1-2 (Fall-Winter 1983-84), p. 42.

4Immanuel Kant, *Education*, The University of Michigan Press 1960, p. 12.

5 Kant too favoured disciplining which treated the young as an object of manipulation and conceived them as unsuitable for the truth, equality, and respect for what they are.

See:

Kant, *ibid.*, p. 36.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing has the same concept of discipline and asserted that the entire human history was a preparatory lesson for critical education in his generation.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race*, London: Anthroposophical Publishing. Co. 1927.

6 Plato, "Euthydemus", in *Early Socratic Dialogues*, translated by Trevor J. Saunders, Penguin Books, 286, p. 341.

7 Plato, "Laches" 200-201 in Trevor J. Saunders (ed.), *Early Socratic Dialogues*, translated by Iain Lane, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1987, p. 115.

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