

Liberatory Education for Autonomy*

JOHN SARGIS

The goal of liberatory education is to provoke the student to question all taken-for-granted values, ideas, norms, beliefs, etc. of her experience that are the given presuppositions comprising the dominant social paradigm. The space this educational act opens up, as rupture, emancipates the learner from the domination of what has been taken-as-given. This shift is neither a turn, reverse, nor a side track, but a permanent break with the power with which these presuppositions are deemed desirable and plausible. A critical examination and subsequent discarding of those unquestioned perspectives is requisite in order to provide new experiences that affect change and at the same time gives new meaning to freedom and autonomy. Genuine learning transforms the learner who is changed cognitively, that is, from a spectator/reactor into a different thinking and acting person. Former values are put out of play by not allowing (holding in abeyance) their predefined principles of the what and how the student experiences the heteronomous values of the dominant social paradigm which code a false consciousness that fits snugly with the market economy and representative 'democracy' and throws them into the poverty of mis-education and de-politization. To be educated for individual and social autonomy is to be self-organized and responsible, to comport oneself in agreement with authentically chosen values and norms, to realize one's intentions, desires, and the weight of one's history, and as such autonomy can only appear in the experience of mutual reciprocity and respect, and a new conception of what it means to be human. An autonomous person can make sense of and re-make an otherwise objective world thrown at him in a free, self-sufficient and authentic way. Thus an autonomous person cannot be manipulated into making clouded judgments, but is engaged in breaking with the repressive grasp the routine handed down values of ordinary everydayness. An example is the universal learning one undergoes, when learning how to tie one's shoes. The given is that the shoes were always tied for the learner and no other value was conceivable. Then comes a day when someone gives to the five year old child its untied shoes in order to teach the child how to tie them. The child is now confronted with a problem, a new experience that incites her/him to solve the problem. Her/his previous experience does not offer a solution to the problem now faced. After some imitation and skill acquisition requiring a reconstruction of reality in manipulating the shoe laces, the task is eventually completed —the knot is tied, the child is changed. The same is experienced for instance when the child learns new skills. The child will never go back to using the value system of the previous reality. The child now knows what it previously did not know. An intentional break occurred in the child's experience thus provoking the child to use its intellectual (cognitive) and psychomotor skills to solve the problem. Now the child can choose to be a learner (free) verses a reactor (slave).

Adolescence is a good time to begin educating for freedom and equality, that is, autonomy, because adolescence is the time period when young people begin physically changing and forming their own ideas (their personality vs. ego) about society, community, freedom,

work, equality, justice, etc. in the way society is organized. Adolescents are no longer stuck in childhood whose logic is applied only to concrete and controllable objects. The adolescent is open to more abstract ideas and formal structures of thought needed to analyze concepts like social justice, civic duties, poverty, inequality, etc. in their individual and socially shared plans for change, who can judge for his/herself on an equal level with adults. The adolescent can come into contact with critical experience as it relates to the way the adolescent lives it and the realities of other selves in society, to the ways we use language, and to the way we act in the world through power awareness, that is, how decisions are taken in societies' institutions, work places, schools, and households and how these are tied together in the fabric of the dominant social paradigm. The adolescent can move more readily from the oppressor class to the side of the oppressed by an upsurge of questioning and critique. As Hannah Arendt has emphasized, "men establish themselves as question-asking beings by posing questions of meaning."^[1]

Educators must understand that in the educational act the perceptual synthesis required for any learning to take place must be accomplished by the student in an environment free from the ambiguous values, beliefs, morals of the dominant social paradigm that oppress and dominate. If thoughts and principles at each moment are only the result of external causes, then the reasons given by the teacher or student are invalidated, because it is consciousness that constitutes things, truths, values, etc. The moment we are aware of how consciousness constitutes things, truths, values, etc. we must take up the tasks of knowledge and action to connect with further quality experiences or slide back into the dubious, defective, but yet conditioned postulates of teachers, clergy, cops, parents, experts, pedagogues, etc. of not knowing where we are taken or from where we have come. It is not a question of reducing human knowledge to sensations of this or that, but to use knowledge to uncover those heteronomous values, beliefs, and morals that keep us in bondage to the System through the idle chatter, inactive curiosity the System depends on in order to maintain social control. When we take the System for granted as given, thinking is forgotten and the momentum to learn lost. The student is deprived of spontaneity, self-determination and autonomy. In the educational act, expressing oneself in acts, understanding and self-determination reappears against the background of the dominant social paradigm. Prejudices are revealed as established unquestioned values, beliefs, morals, etc. This insight provides consciousness the links that make explicit the originating source of all genuine meanings —autonomy.

Changing society requires no less a radical break with the given hierarchical values and the presumed inevitability of the current organizing of society. But no less importantly involves praxis—critical reflection and action upon a situation shared by others with common interests and needs. Contemporary consumer society is organized heteronomously around authoritative/coercive values consistent with the market economy and representative "democracy" (the "System") as the main component and force of the dominant social paradigm. Breaking with these predefined values means rejecting them as routinized, homogenized, mystified sources of the culture and institutions in which everyday life is structured. However, to exist autonomously as a group of self-directed, self-reliant, and intersubjective people integrated with society and nature must take on a radical collective questioning concerning the legitimacy and permanency of the dominant social paradigm in order to identify new emerging needs that are in opposition to the attitudes, skills, beliefs and values that must take place for a consumer society to be successful. In order to abolish, overthrow and replace those currently prized and conditioned values producing social roles promoted by the market economy and representative "democracy", schools must help

students identify the organizations of oppression and come into contact with the struggle to change society. The values of consumer society take for granted a certain concept of nature and human nature that justifies how society's institutions are organized. For one thing, the System needs individuals who are malleable, reactive, flexible, presumptuous, and do not question, draw inferences, frame propositions, construct arguments, that is, being able to reason beyond what inanity or idle curiosity with which to get involved, who are stubbornly resistant to critical thinking and experience, who are formalized consumers having little intelligent decision-making deliberations, that is, those who support and reproduce values consistent in conditioning others to the System. It is no wonder then our societies are failing—societal institutions are not built upon freedom and equality, but the values that go hand in hand with the market economy and representative “democracy”. There is a way and urgent need to educate for autonomy by placing into question the obedience and respect for authority society and its institutions demand. If teachers start in on practicing liberatory education in terms of not only their subject areas, but as well as questioning the values of the dominant social paradigm, they can begin making a break with it. When teachers agree or give consent to go along with the System they cave in to mystification and support the misinformation that unquestioning adherence to values create. People can absorb all kinds of conditioning, but as Sartre has pointed out, it is only when we are able to consider another way organizing society that is better for everyone, we find the barbarity if our lived situations unendurable. This is why teachers are so important, because what the teacher decides how s/he will think about these issues and the curriculum determines how s/he will direct the articulation of the student's potential.

In order to establish a democratic ethics is it imperative to discard current thinking on what freedom, equality, and human nature mean.

From the inclusive democracy perspective the elites of the market economy and representative “democracy” have concentrated political and economic decision making power that destroys the democratic distribution of power across every sector of society, i.e. the equal distribution of economic, political, social and power, and equality in the ecological sphere. The decision-taking process is relegated to the few who do not affirm the autonomous values of a just society based on fraternity, freedom, and equality. A just society must be an autonomous society — a self-governing society where anyone can put into question any institution, any authority and participate with others in determining their own future.

The rationale behind the ID transitional strategy holds that Systemic change requires a rupture with the past which extends to both the institutional and the cultural level; such a break is only possible through the development of a new political organization for Systemic change while building a clear anti-systemic consciousness at a massive scale.

From the inclusive democracy perspective the movement towards an autonomous society is urgent, and as Takis Fotopoulos stresses, “democratic Paideia needs a new kind of rationalism, beyond both the 'objectivist' type of rationalism we inherited from the Enlightenment and the generalised relativism of postmodernism. We need a democratic rationalism, i.e. a rationalism founded on democracy, as a structure and a process of social self-institution.”^[2]

* – This is the text of a talk given by John Sargis on the occasion of the presentation in Athens of the book (to which he is a contributor) [*Globalised Capitalism, The Eclipse of the Left and Inclusive Democracy \(in Greek\)*](#) ed. by Steven Best, (Athens: Koukkida, May 2008).

[1] Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Thinking*, Vol. 1. (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1978), p.62.

[2] Takis Fotopoulos, “[From \(Mis\)education to Paideia](#)”, *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 9, No.1 (March 2003), p. 35.