
From a critical theorist’s point of view, *Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development* is a testament to Michalis Kontopodis’s impeccable scholarship in matters of pedagogy and human development. It seeks to disrupt the dominant analytical paradigm in developmental psychology and, as such, presents a rallying cry for those with deconstructive intentions.

In a practical sense, the book is light and compact, easy enough to fit in a satchel or jacket pocket, and has a word count that is not so immediately overbearing that it puts the reader off. However, this is not to suggest that the account is any less informed; on the contrary, I would argue that it provides a more sophisticated account by confronting the very notion of what it means to ‘be informed’.

I found this book to be a rather engaging and noteworthy lesson in ‘perceptual semiotics’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 23). Kontopodis dares, unlike most researchers, to challenge the great divide in P/psychology by considering natural and human kinds in, radically, the same terms – what Bruno Latour (1993: 94) would define as ‘generalized symmetry’.¹ From this perspective, knowledge of the subject is not based on a hermeneutic distinction (e.g. Martin and Sugarman, 2001), but is instead the result of overcoming an inherent flaw, or ‘crisis’, as he puts it.

The most innovative concept here is mediation – that existence of any kind, whether natural or human, can only be observed in relation to one another. As such, capacities for agency, knowledge and meaning cannot be regarded as the sole property of human kind. What might traditionally be conceived as psychological activity – located in somewhere (usually the brain or the mind, depending on who is talking) – becomes just that: an activity of (re)assembling such contingent relations (Brown, 2011).

Therefore, to interpret a ‘personal drama’ (Kontopodis, 2014: 9) as ‘something psychological’ and nothing more is to overlook the fact that P/psychology is affected by its own crisis of consciousness – namely, that practitioners are unable to decide on whether their claims should indeed be natural or human. As it stands, then, psychological culture is situated between materials and concepts, and it is this notion of ‘being in the middle’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 2013: 313) that I feel Kontopodis articulates so well.

Perhaps a better term to describe a psychological crisis, particularly in the 21st century, would be ‘undecidedness’ as opposed to ‘inherentness’. It is true that we currently live in undecided times – that virtual technologies have awarded us greater personal freedom, but also greater responsibility for this freedom – an ontopolitical project that Kontopodis views...
as neo-liberalism. Indeed, as he goes on to explain, it would appear that the critical issue facing pedagogy today is not one of gaining access to knowledge, but of how to organize this knowledge into something meaningful. The demarcation of sensibility and intellect contradicts any prospect of a ‘lower’ and ‘higher’ knowledge, thus reducing pedagogy to (what seems like) an endless struggle of becoming-accountable – never quite learning or teaching, but only disciplining oneself in relation to the ‘outside world’, and being ‘blessed’ with the ability to make a choice but with this choice having to be calculated.

In response to this dilemma, Kontopodis sets out to examine the consequences within deprived areas of Germany and the USA, and he does this by drawing on a range of ethnomethodologies, including Foucaultian genealogy and actor–network theory. However, I found the most inspiring and novel aspect of the work to stem from a collection of diaries submitted by a group calling themselves the Freedom Writers.

Their activities help us to understand that, by engaging in the rules of narrative and the art of meta-reflection, both students and teachers are granted access to a shared world, democracy is formed and new minds are manifested. Participants are able to transcend the boundaries of ‘usual’ thinking by thinking about ‘the conditions of this “usual” thinking’ (Kontopodis, 2014: 60).

In conclusion, this book is a radical and exciting approach to power within the context of education. It presents a way of seeing that, depending on the reader’s perspective, could pose either a threat or an opportunity. Based on what I have learnt from Kontopodis, I am enthusiastic about the latter. Although its theories and methodologies are somewhat dated, the feelings that they invoke are very current, and I believe the key feature of this instalment is to encourage a shift in our analytical gaze. Only by discarding the past and future can we realize the potentialities of the here and now. Far from posing a threat, this is a unique opportunity to revaluate the moral fabric of existence – to emerge from the middle, a new beginning, with perhaps a more harmonious end.

Note
1. Based on the principle of ‘generalized symmetry’, it should be acknowledged that humans are simultaneously ‘natural’; however, I invoke the term deliberately here – as opposed to, say, ‘non-human’ or ‘more-than-human’ – because the dialectics of nature are fundamental to the construction and validity of psychological knowledge.

References

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