On the Importance of 'Positive Identity' to Transformative Education

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Abstract
The article seeks to highlight the fundamental importance of positive concept of identity to transformative education. The paper will claim that critical education needs to address the complex dialectical nature of identity - its immanent tensions between the individual and the collective and between liberation and empowerment. The paper will also argue that radical postmodern concept of identity can lead to suppression and reduction of identity. Through its critical examination this article hopes to re-establish the dialectical nature of positive identity and its importance for transformative education.

Key words: Urban education, critical education.

Introduction

The question of the identity is arguably one of the most significant issues in the field of critical pedagogy. It is especially important to urban educators who work in multicultural and multiclass societies. The question of Identity, the personal and the collective, carries a significant existential value which educators needs to addressed in order to successfully integrate and empower their students into their current society. In the following pages I will claim that it is important to realize that any educational project must combine two contradiction levels of operation: one, negative, which is manifested as "emancipation from" (to resist the oppressive characters of the hegemonic culture) and the other, positive, which is manifested as "empowerment toward" (the ability to understand and integrate). In order to do so I will try to highlight the importance of "positive" identity to transformative education and reveal the immanent limitations of "negative" concept of Identity, as manifested in some postmodern versions of critical pedagogy. To this end, I will present the unique stance of critical theory regarding the identity of “the oppressed,” and analyze its philosophical and pedagogical implications. My main assertion is that postmodernist critical theory’s radical pursuit of the unshackling of identity from all limitations and definitions (The ideal of "negative identity") is based on a problematic concept of identity. Beyond its theoretically problematic character, such a concept of identity has serious pedagogical and political ramifications.
Identity as a Political Concept

As is well known, Marx argued in the initial pages of The Communist Manifesto, that history should be viewed from the standpoint of the exploited public rather than that of the powerful, since only in the hands of the oppressed, whose voice was silenced throughout history, lays the key to the establishment of a true perception of reality. The positioning of the epistemological standpoint of “the oppressed” as a basis for the act of liberation has been critical for two main reasons: firstly, because it stresses the formative status of identity in the process of liberation; and secondly, because it exposes its political, formational nature.

In contrast to the tendency of liberal and progressive pedagogies to overlook the issue of identity, critical theory focuses in on the political and existential complexity of the collective identity. According to this logic, the concrete identity of the public is embodied in the complex dialectical tension between personal and group identity. Unlike the positive concept of identity held by liberal theory, which views identity as a given - independent and harmonious entity, radical critical theory emphasizes that identity must be understood as complex, political and dialectical in relation to other identities, which limit it, on the one hand, and constitute it, on the other hand. Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 1990) contended that one cannot discuss the issue of identity without relating to other identities through which, and on the basis of which, individual identity is defined.

Accordingly, identity is shaped as a border concept, which vacillates dynamically and dialectically between its internal, positive limit (what it is, namely, its ‘identity’ or 'similarity') and its external, negative limit (what it is not, namely, its difference, or 'otherness'). Such radical concept emphasizes the complex nature of identity and its forming and developing nature. "Identity", writes Wardekker and Miedema (1997, p. 57),

is not a given, but an activity, the result of which is always only a local stability. This activity is not one of balancing between the expectations of others and those of the individual himself. Rather, the balancing act is between different expectations which have each been partly internalized. Within every person there are different voices, which can be and usually are, contradictory.

As a result, public identity assumes its coherent content as a border identity realized vis-à-vis other (individual and collective) identities and other conditions, cultural and economical, that delimit and determine its actual boundaries. In this manner, the negational and restrictive character of positive identity is highlighted by the very fact that every identity is necessarily the restriction of another identity in the vast range of possible identities. Only that in a dialectical shift, this negation itself embodies the essentialness of collective identity – a concrete identity shaped, internally and externally, as a vital and dialectical border concept. It is important to note, as Lamont and Swidler (2014) argue, that such identity creation is not a onetime act, but a continuous one. Every person is creating his sense of identity on a daily and ongoing basis by constantly identifying and distinguishing himself from others.
The dialectical character of identity finds expression in the space known as ‘the politics of identity.’ The politics of identity is a concept according to which the function of politics and culture is to represent the identity of sectors that were rejected or excluded in the past from politics or culture by the majority. In this sense, the preoccupation with identity and its formation is one of the most important emancipatory and existential dimensions of critical pedagogy, which is a struggle over the limit, form and freedom of the oppressed collective’s identity. In the framework of this space, critical pedagogy struggles to minimize the potential for the oppression of institutional systems, while making an increasingly sharp demand for recognition of groups and identities and their right to be heard. This move places the question of “otherness” and the legitimacy of difference at the forefront of radical-critical discourse.

**The concept of "Negative Identity" in the postmodern versions of critical pedagogy**

The political logic of identity reached its radical highpoint within the domain of the postmodernist paradigm. This radical theory opposed, in principle, the modernist attempt to construct a collective and public identity on the basis of general and shared elements (such as nationality, class, race, gender, etc.). These positive and non-complex elements were viewed as an unreliable product of an ideological, essentialist, and thus limiting and oppressive, reduction. By contrast, the postmodernist paradigm sees identity as being formed on the basis of the emancipatory principle of creation, negation and subjectivity and individuality. In this framework, collective identity categories are shaped as dynamic and variable categories that are operative within a particular historical and social context.

The negative attitude of the postmodernist paradigm and its deconstruction of the positive and general dimensions of identity were not technical but rather a matter of principle. In the spirit of poststructuralist insights, which rejected any show or pretense of generality or objectivity, the paradigm’s ‘post-critical’ aim was directed at a fundamental undermining of the supposedly general, consistent, and coherent status of the critical subject himself. The ideal of the liberty of identity was realized then in the image of the individual and amorphous entity that can “move madly from identity to identity, from knowledge to knowledge, from memory to memory, or from one collective to another, and to wander freely within and between different cultural spaces” (Gur Ze’ev 1999a). These ‘emancipatory’ qualities redefined the character of critical pedagogy, which began to formulate its concepts and objectives in purely negative terms. The crowning of the subject as a ‘space of struggle’ embodied the ideal of the liberation of critical theory in its entire splendor. Identity was formulated as an amorphous and contingent entity, free of external definition or restriction. Such a critical stance, the postmodernists claimed, turns out to be a powerful liberational device by means of which one can offset the tendency of identity to be fixated as an object and accept change and movement as constructive, immanent, and unthreatening elements.
The advantages of the postmodernist definition of the public identity are manifested in its ideological flexibility, in its ability to adapt itself to individual identity, and in its sharp awareness of the oppressive potential in the very pretension to define identity. The problematic side of the postmodernist concept of identity will be discussed below.

**The problem with the rejection of positive Identity**

Postmodernist critical theory rejected the modernist pretention of constructing collective identity on the basis of general and shared components. These were seen by postmodernists as evidence of the operation of restrictive power suppressing identity. The tendency of postmodernist criticism to regard all definitions in a negative light was translated into a fundamental rejection of all positive pedagogical manifestations objectively viewed as oppressive indoctrination, or part of a “normalization” project, in Gur Ze’ev’s language.⁡

From this radical standpoint, the existence of positive identity of any type indicates above all the exclusion of the identity of the “other” from discursive space. In this way, any attempt at a positive formation of public identity is viewed as evidence of the existence of an oppressive and exclusionary power whose operation must be stopped at any cost if we desire to retain a degree of freedom. A quintessential example of this can be found in postmodernist pedagogy’s attitude towards the identity category of (Israeli) nationalism. “From the beginning,” writes Gur Ze’ev

the success of the Zionist project was conditioned in its ability to overcome the multiplicity of histories and identities of Jewish communities and individuals. Zionist education mobilized a coherent and exclusive master-narrative that would erase or devour indigenous Jewish histories, which were non-productive in terms of the Zionist objectives, or would destroy those threatening or denying it” (Gur Ze’ev, 1999a, p. 74).

From a similar standpoint, Pappe ties the existence of ‘multicultural’ education in Israel to public criticism of Zionist nationalism and the alternative establishment of an open and borderless ‘critical’ identity. “Multicultural education in Israel,” Pappe writes accordingly,

is education that recognizes the demands of anyone who sees himself as being negatively affected by the Zionist entity in the past and present (including Palestinian neighbors, evacuees, and displaced persons). Such education recognizes these groups’ challenge to Israeli collective identity, which was engineered or adopted by the Zionist elite in the country, and upon which the scale of educational values in the State of Israel is based. (Pappe, 1999, p. 236).

Apparently, the postmodernist concept of public identity evidences a perfectly reflexive and liberational consciousness, but this negative theoretical approach actually fails the test of concreteness. In its faithfulness to the negational principle of criticism, and in its radical insistence upon identifying the collective purely on the basis of its restrictive and separative boundaries, it conceives identity in a one-dimensional and inadequate way, which fails to capture the positive and collective dimensions of identity. This weakness turns out to be critical since the positive dimension of identity includes important existential senses of identification, affiliation, mutual responsibility, sense of
empowerment, belonging, home and security. These positive dimensions indeed limit by their very nature the theoretical infiniteness of the subject, but, in a dialectical shift, they lend identity existential meaning, which is indispensible to any concrete emancipation project.\textsuperscript{3}

In this manner, the close dialectical relation between elements such as similarity and difference, individuality and collectivity, liberation and empowerment, which are at play in the process of public identity construction, is reemphasized. By this dialectical logic, without there first having developed a strong sense of positive identity, affiliation and self-worth, there can be no significant movement towards inclusion of the ‘other’ and the different.\textsuperscript{4} This insight has clear implications for critical pedagogy: Callan (1997) indicates, for instance, that education in the positive identity framework of patriotism is essential to the shaping of concrete liberal values, and in any case, to the establishment of a strong, autonomous subjectivity possessing a sense of self-worth. From a similar standpoint, White (2001) states that fostering through education a positive national identity while not disallowing the possibility of criticism serves as a significant and even necessary element in the formation of a coherent and concrete identity. It is important to point out that positive components of public and personal identity can and even must be negated in turn, but there is no concrete identity whose construction does not entail a double negation (an affirmation of identity), and freedom of identity cannot be based merely on the sanctification of the theoretical and negational process.

\textbf{My experience as a teacher}

In my personal and professional life, the question of identity is far from being a merely a theoretical one. For the last 15 years I have served as an educator in "Givat Gonen" High school which is located at one of Jerusalem's poorest and toughest neighborhoods. Most of my students came from low social-economic background; from poor and under privileged families. Through the years Israel has always faced waves of Jewish immigration from Europe, North Africa, Middle East and Central Asia. Most of my students, just like myself, were second generation to families that originally came from Muslim and Arabic speaking countries (especially from Morocco, Tunisia and Kurdistan-Iraq). These children are often suffering from discrimination in the Israeli society; many times they are being marginalized due to the resemblance of their family culture to the Muslim-Arabic culture. Studies (Mizrachi & Herzog 2012) show that children from these groups tend to deny their ethnic identity at school in order to avoid labeling and tagging because this can harm their chances to successfully integrate into the Israeli society. Sometimes these children try to assimilate by adopting a rough National identity as a proof of their belonging to the Israeli society.

During my pedagogical work as a high school teacher, I have often confronted my underprivileged students' tendency to express racist opinions and statements during class (especially against Muslim Arabs and migrant workers from Africa). Any attempt on my part to exclude and condemn such beliefs was treated with angry and insulted
reactions from their part (no matter how elaborated and rational my explanations were). Through my personal relationship and dialog with them, I realized that the more insecure my students were in their Israeli identity the more they had the tendency to express hateful opinions against "Outsiders". Sometimes it seemed to me that by stating their hateful opinions against outsiders, they were actually trying to express their total commitment to the Israeli society that rejected them as being inferior and unworthy. It was as if they were trying to shout: "look, we are part of you, see how loyal we are – look how passionately we hate the 'others'".

It was then that I understood that in order to empower my students to renounce their hateful and narrow-minded dogmas, one must work first to empower their sense of cultural self-worth and belonging to the Israeli collective. Only then, from a more protected and assured existential position, will they be able to open their hearts and minds to a more humanistic and democratic beliefs and methods of thinking.

**Who Can Afford to Renounce Positive Identity?**

The emphasis on the existential and political dimensions of public identity raises two disturbing questions: firstly, who can afford to renounce the advantages embodied in collective identity? And secondly, what is the pedagogical and political price entailed in such renouncement?

When we take into account the dialectical nature of identity, it turns out that when postmodern critical theory chooses to define the project of the emancipation of the subject in terms of negation and deconstruction, it reduces not only the potential for restriction latent in the positive identity of the collective, but also, and dialectically, the potential for the emancipatory power embodied in it: in this sense, post-critical theory appears to be a double-edged sword in the hands of minority groups fighting for their rights in society. This is because it denies the importance of common and collective identity as a base that unifies, mobilizes and gives meaning to political and transformative struggles. An emancipatory theory based on radical deconstruction of identity turns out to be, to a great extent, disempowering and problematic.

Pursuantly, the question arises of course as to who can afford to treat the issue of identity, in all of its existential and political meanings, as if it were an item of clothing that can be changed and used for one’s amusement? Postmodernist critical theory sees in the play (movement and intersection) of identities and narratives a vision of the subject’s emancipation. However, a sober look exposes the cynical side of the ideal of amorphousness and free movement. In my view, such post-critical philosophy is interested in the collective only theoretically, while in fact it has no genuine interest in the condition of the populace and the likelihood of its empowerment in reality. In this way, radical theorists can allow themselves to dismiss in the stroke of a pen the formative implications of national identity and call for the establishment of education that is anti-nationalist, ‘diasporic,’ ‘emancipatory,’ and ‘free of truth claims,’ and which is oriented to a multi-narrative, multi-interpretative view of reality. Only that their pure intellectual stance is formulated from a safe and already strong existential and material
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confidence, after they have already took advantage of all of the possible (spiritual and material) dividends from positive identity.

The liberty and empowerment of my students from the neighborhood, in contrast, do not involve their ability to deny or ‘free’ themselves from the collective national identity, but rather demand an ability to acquire and master it, to enter it, and enjoy the fruits that it offers to those who take part in it. One must always remember that only the powerful class, has the privilege to declare themselves as having "no identity", since they define their identity as a universal one, while simultaneously denying the underprivileged right to their own distinct identity - As bell hooks (1990, p. 28) points out “it's easy to give up identity, when you got one.”

Beyond the political unfairness, postmodernist theory’s cynicism toward the question of collective identity is a recipe for an impractical pedagogy. A pedagogue who wishes to pursue the empowerment and emancipation of his student's identity must respect the existential and formative power of positive identity in order to change it; he therefore cannot assume that the project of empowerment will be easy and carried as a harmonious, smooth and flowing theoretical movement between identity and difference. The liberation of identity, on the one hand, involves a willingness to learn and to deal with the variety of political, social, behavioral and emotional manifestations of identity in praxis. In this framework, the process of the ‘emancipation’ of identity is taken as a pedagogical and existential project of the first degree – a project that can only be conceived as a difficult and exhausting physiological task aimed at real and fateful change in a person’s life. Accordingly, liberation movements must be empowered to no less a degree than the forces of oppression that they seek to eradicate. Teachers, who wish to empower their student identity and beliefs, must take a crucial part in their life. They need to prove themselves worthy of the children trust by attending their actual needs in praxis, and in the long term. Only then will the children be willing to consider their teachers’ opinion and rationales.

On the Problematic Nature of ‘Victim Identity’

Another problem that stems from the deconstructive tendency of postmodernist criticism has to do with the formation of ‘victim identity. Critical pedagogy assumes that the content of the public identity is determined in its being delimited and restricted by other identities in a given discursive space. This orientation, which stresses the power relations involved in the shaping of the public identity, has led critical theory to base collective identity on its negative boundaries, that is, on the dimensions of difference and otherness embodied in it. The postmodernist concept of identity seemingly reflects an acute and reflexive political consciousness, but this consciousness, which is based primarily on recognition of the negative limits of identity, turns out to be, once again, problematic. As a result of this negative perspective, the discursive space in which identities are formed is conceived as a vast oppressive space where there is no room for positive self-determination, and where identities take on their value, as well as their right to exist, purely on the basis of
their oppression. Such orientation, in which oppression is transformed into a positive aspect of identity, is realized as ‘victim identity’ – a non-concrete identity whose positive content is endowed purely on the basis of its limitation. The non-dialectical logic of ‘victim identity’ turns out to be problematic from a both political and pedagogical point of view.

From a political perspective, the non-concrete logic of ‘victimhood’ is problematic because it blurs the nature of power relations in praxis. According to this line of reasoning, the concept of ‘victimhood’ dulls one’s sensitivity to real victims in the world. When ‘victimhood’ is itself turned into an immanent and essential component of identity, the concept of oppression is emptied out of concrete content and is rendered pure abstraction (since, by this logic, we are all victims). In the framework of such abstraction, the concrete boundaries of oppression are blurred, and the ability to deal with its manifestations in praxis is lost. Such a theoretical position has serious political and moral ramifications, since as soon as its advantages are internalized, the position of the victim becomes a comfort zone from which one can commit additional injustices. In such a political and cultural space, in which the ‘victimized’ identity of a group becomes a main focus of power, there is no possibility of concrete reflection, guilt or responsibility.

From a pedagogical perspective, the problematic nature of the ‘victimhood’ concept is embodied in the fact that it exchanges the ideal of positive empowerment and growth for an ideal of weakness and desistence. Consequently, people's claim for power and recognition is derived from the weakness of their identity and its limitation in praxis, namely from the fact that they are recognized as oppressed. This problematic position turns liberational discourse into rhetoric of piteousness, which is meant, paradoxically, to empower identity. This movement is fundamentally anti-pedagogical, since ‘victimhood,’ and the weakness it entails, is transformed into a source of positive power. Such an ideal of identity is damaging to the project of emancipating and empowering oppressed groups, since when lack becomes a foundation of identity, and the main source of that identity’s power, the project of (positive) empowerment actually becomes an obstacle! In such an anti-pedagogical constellation, positive and empowering values, such as responsibility, self-respect, pride, capability and independence, become weights around the necks of oppressed collectives. Under such rational the oppressed collective will, paradoxically, do everything in its ability to guard its inferior position in order to preserve the advantages that such a position affords it. This position is clearly anti-pedagogical since it negates the positive basis of empowerment and emancipation.

Some Short Concluding Thoughts

It emerges from the discussion above that the main problem with the postmodernist concept of identity is that in its radical pursuit of a conceptualization of identity in terms of negation and deconstruction it preferences the personal over the public, the individual over the collective, difference over similarity, and emancipation over empowerment.
This radical position is indeed highly political and reflective, but it is non-dialectical, and hence, conceives identity and its potential emancipation in an oversimplified way.

In the domain of pedagogical praxis, this conceptual oversimplification, which separates theory from educational realities, has a number of disturbing manifestations. Firstly, it holds a cynical and patronizing attitude towards the existential dimension of positive identity. Secondly, it fosters a sense of victimhood and piteousness, which undermines the ideal of pedagogical empowerment. And in the final account, it actually neglects the fate of the oppressed in the name of their emancipation in theory. A deep examination of the dialectical nature of public identity, on the other hand, shows how complex and fragile is the process that critical theory must undertake in attempting to reconcile the conflicting aspects of identity; how unstable, on the one hand, and how inspiring, on the other hand, is the unlikely merging between the individual and collective, diversity and identity, difference and equality, objective and subjective, emancipation and empowerment.

References


1 See for example: Orner 1992, p. 74; also the ideal of "diasporism" in Gur Ze’ev (2004).
“Normalizing education,” writes Gur Ze’ev, “manufactures the subject as something and prevents him from being someone. Normalized people are always suspended between ‘them,’ the ‘others,’ and ‘we,’ or the ‘self.’ Denied them is the possibility of struggling for the realization of the infiniteness intrinsic to them in their affinity with the otherness of the “other.” Gur Ze’ev, 1999b, p. 11.

Nietzsche, the great prophet of the individualist orientation and the critique of generality, emphasized that identity-based social relationships are inevitable. Human beings, Nietzsche exhorts, are not isolated beings, but rather “stand in countless human relations by their birth, position, education and country, their own circumstances and the importunity of others” (Schopenhauer as Educator, 33). Every act of liberation is “(f)or one's self only, in the first instance: and finally, through one's self, for all” (Ibid., 35).

Rorty (1997, p. 1) open his book by stating that: “National pride is to countries what self-respect is to individuals: a necessary condition for self-improvement”.

“Consider the irony,” writes Henry Louis Gates (1990, p.36), “precisely when we (and other Third World peoples) obtain the complex wherewithal to define our black subjectivity in the republic of Western letters, our theoretical colleagues declare that there ain’t no such thing as a subject, so why should we be bothered with that? In this way, those of us in feminist criticism or African-American criticism who are engaged in the necessary work of canon deformation and reformation confront the skepticism even of those who are allies on other fronts, over this matter of the death of the subject and our own discursive subjectivity”.

The view according to which “the recognition by the teacher and his students that the nationalist versions of reality, Palestinian and Zionist, are only one possibility among many existing ones, in the past and in the present, options that do not result from historical ‘material,’ but rather from the current standpoints of the researcher.” See: Pappe 1999, p. 236.

The act of liberation of the ‘self,’ Nietzsche stressed, is not an easy movement between spaces of cultural, art and identity, but rather an agonizing and heroic act. See: Beyond Good and Evil, p. 48, 120.

In accordance with this radical logic, Allen claims, for example, that critical pedagogy customarily thinks in terms of the oppressed, but is not heedful of the fact that in the identity game all of us also (and primarily, in fact) belong to the oppressed group: “The trick, then, is to dig into the specificities of a particular oppressor–oppressed relationship. For instance, even though elite white capitalists oppress white middle-class men, like myself, we are nevertheless the oppressors of white middle-class women and white working-class people. Moreover, all of us white folks are the oppressors of people of color of all economic classes since race operates as a caste system in the US”. see: Allen, 2004, p. 123.

Sykes terms the culture that emerges from this non-concrete position “therapeutic culture.” See: Sykes 1992, p. 23.