

About Critical Theory of Education in Times of Populism and the Need for Sustainable Development

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Abstract

The overarching question of the article is: Should pedagogy contribute to the defence of democracy against populism and, if so, how? First the underlying concept of populism is discussed. In the second step of the argumentation the article discusses whether pedagogy must react to the current rise of populism. It is argued that populism contradicts the normative claim of pedagogy and that pedagogy must, therefore, deal with the phenomenon. The UNESCO educational programme "Education for Sustainable Development Goals", which is coordinated by educators worldwide, is then analysed and it is shown that that it is extremely questionable whether pedagogy - according to the concept - can do justice to the phenomenon. Finally, the argument for a scientific-content orientation of pedagogy will be put forward. A scientific-content orientation of pedagogy is oriented towards problem definition. It is shown how and why such an orientation of pedagogy can be a legitimate antidote to populism and at the same time the social-ecological transformation currently required. Finally, the argument for a scientific-content orientation of pedagogy will be put forward.

Keywords: Conspiracy Theory. Education for Sustainable Development. Populism.

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Resumo**Sobre a Teoria Crítica da Educação em Tempos de Populismo e a Necessidade de Desenvolvimento Sustentável****Palavras-chave:**

Teoria da
Conspiração.
Educação para o
Desenvolvimento
Sustentável.
Populismo.

A questão central do artigo é: A pedagogia deve contribuir para a defesa da democracia contra o populismo e, em caso afirmativo, como? Primeiro discute-se o conceito subjacente de populismo. Na segunda etapa da argumentação, o artigo discute se a pedagogia deve reagir à atual ascensão do populismo. Argumenta-se que o populismo contradiz a pretensão normativa da pedagogia e que a pedagogia deve, portanto, lidar com o fenômeno. O programa educacional da UNESCO "Education for Sustainable Development Goals", que é coordenado por educadores de todo o mundo, é então analisado e é mostrado que é extremamente questionável se a pedagogia - de acordo com o conceito - pode fazer justiça ao fenômeno. Finalmente, será apresentado o argumento a favor de uma orientação de conteúdo científico da pedagogia. Uma orientação de conteúdo científico da pedagogia é orientada para a definição do problema. É mostrado como e porque tal orientação da pedagogia pode ser um antídoto legítimo para o populismo e, ao mesmo tempo, para a transformação sócio-ecológica atualmente necessária.

Abstrakt**Über Kritische Bildungstheorie in Zeiten des Populismus und die Notwendigkeit nachhaltiger Entwicklung****Schlüsselwörter:**

Verschwörungstheorie.
Bildung für nachhaltige
Entwicklung.
Populismus.

Die übergreifende Frage des Beitrags lautet: Sollte die Pädagogik einen Beitrag zur Verteidigung der Demokratie gegen Populismus leisten und, wenn ja, wie? Zunächst wird der zugrunde liegende Begriff des Populismus diskutiert. Im zweiten Schritt der Argumentation erörtert der Beitrag, ob die Pädagogik auf den aktuellen Aufstieg des Populismus reagieren muss. Es wird argumentiert, dass Populismus dem normativen Anspruch der Pädagogik widerspricht und die Pädagogik sich daher mit dem Phänomen auseinandersetzen muss. Anschließend wird das UNESCO Bildungsprogramm "Bildung für nachhaltige Entwicklungsziele", eines der zentralen weltweiten Bildungskonzepte, analysiert und gezeigt, dass es äußerst fraglich ist, ob die Pädagogik - gemäß dem Konzept - dem Phänomen gerecht werden kann. Abschließend wird das Argument für eine wissenschaftlich-inhaltliche Orientierung der Pädagogik entfaltet. Eine wissenschaftlich-inhaltliche Orientierung der Pädagogik orientiert sich an der jeweiligen sachlichen Problemstellung. Es wird gezeigt, wie und warum eine solche Orientierung der Pädagogik ein legitimes Gegenmittel zum Populismus und zugleich zur aktuell notwendigen sozial-ökologischen Transformation sein kann.

Introduction and problem outline

Given a broad formal concept of democracy, it is not disputed that, in today's age, democracy is the best form of government. Leaving aside the question of what kind of governments should be categorised as democracies and which should not – Russia and China, for example, also claim to be democracies¹ –, in the following reflection the so-called western democratic model is presupposed.

The western (liberal) model of democracy currently faces challenges (for an overview see König/Siewert 2020). This paper discusses two challenges that are assumed to have the potential to disturb the very foundations of democracy: (1) populism in general and the use of conspiracy theories by populists in particular, and (2) the threat to a socio-ecological condition for a successful life for all people today, and in the future, that can be created by establishing sustainable development. The discussion will focus on the question of whether these challenges also affect education, and, if so, how should pedagogy respond to these challenges?

Besides all differences in the polity, (i) the essential idea for western democracies is that all citizens of a given state will decide, in an election, which parties and which politicians should get into power and rule. (ii) Furthermore, it is essential in a democracy that politics and policy are rational. It is these two points (i + ii) that Adorno cites in his conversation with Becker about pedagogy and maturity, responsibility and autonomy.²

Adorno states that democracy "is founded on the education of each individual in political, moral and social awareness, as embodied in the institution of the representative vote. If this process is not to result in irrationality, then a prerequisite must be the capacity and courage of each individual to make full use of his reasoning power" (Adorno; Becker 1999/1996). Moreover, education must contribute to the development of reason.

From the two requirements – (i) power by all and (ii) rationality of politics and policy; for Adorno, rationality can only be visible and found in discourse. Without absolute discourse or even a quantitative majority of discourse being equated with reason, a tension can result between the two components.

On one hand, if the voting of the people and the politics and policy is not bounded by rationality, irrationality could be the ultimate consequence. The best example is Hitler's *Machtergreifung* ("seizure of power"), which was facilitated by democratic voting. However, because of the fact that, in a democracy, decisions should be made by all, (i) it is not possible that only rationality – whatever that should be – and rational people – whoever they would be – should rule. On the other hand, if rationality is to be the exclusive

¹ To be understood as an indication, not as proof: former German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder described Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin as a "pure democrat".

² In German, Adorno, following Kant, uses the term "Mündigkeit" ("maturity"). There is no precise translation of this term in English.

guiding principle – referring to the history of political theory – one could argue for a Platonian state in which the philosopher-kings rule.³ However, at the same time, such a polity stands in contrast to our belief in democracy, and the right of political participation for everyone in the state. Such a state, in being ruled by philosopher-kings, would stand against the rationale that democratic decisions should be 'of the people, by the people, for the people'. Furthermore, there are countless historical examples which prove that decisions by an elite minority are generally to the detriment of society as a whole. Hence, the political rights of everyone, and the claim that every person should take decisions, are rational in themselves.

This is where the problem begins. In making an analogous argument, populists today are, for example, the populist right-wing in Germany, and, in their view, the political elite rule as philosopher-kings, only looking out for their narrow interests and not for the interests of the population as a whole. Whereas only the populist politician would act in the wider interest of the people when s/he came to power.

The argument of the critics of populism that populists used everyday language, only to come to power themselves, is not a good counter-argument. The answers to the question of who presents the better arguments, in terms of the issues to be decided politically and the better political programmes, must be the point of reference in order to decide who should gain, or remain in, power, and why. Otherwise, there is no point of reference in political debate that promises rationality, but, instead, only perceived preference decisions.

What are the consequences of the relationship between (i) political engagement by all and (ii) rationality of politics and policy in general? In particular, are there any consequences in the age of populism for pedagogy today?

Against this background, and on the assumption that the presented premises are correct, the central question of the contribution is raised. The overarching question is: *Should pedagogy contribute to the defence of democracy against populism and, if so, how?*⁴ In order to negotiate this central question, the following partial questions are dealt with in the following chapters.

- What concept of populism is used for the argument? (chapter 2)
- Do the problems of populism affect education? (chapter 3)
- Is UNESCO's educational programme "Education for Sustainable Development Goals" an antidote to populism? (chapter 4)
- How should pedagogy deal with populism? (chapter 5)
- Should pedagogy contribute to the socio-ecological transformation and, if so, how? (chapter 6)

³ Without being able to justify it here: Brennan's proposal (2016) for the establishment of an epistocracy is rejected here as undemocratic.

⁴ It is the fundamental question because here, the assumption is made that so-called Western democracy is a historical achievement. We should not fall behind this achievement. The question of its further development can be discussed but is not the subject of this article.

In the end, the argumentation will come down to the fact that it is pedagogically imperative to introduce future generations to the issues of the sciences, its arguments, procedures and to impart the relevant knowledge to pupils. The present text is itself analogous to this conclusion, as it is questioning and discursive.

2. About the concept of populism

Since it is not my intention in this paper to present my own contribution to the question of determining populism, I must establish a point of reference.⁵ For my argument, I will first take mainly Jan-Werner Müller's position of his work "What Is Populism?" (2016). In the conclusion of his work, which succinctly summarises the previous remarks, Müller puts seven theses forwards to answer the question, what is populism? I will only outline the theses that are relevant to the context here.

First: For Müller, there is no populism without populists.⁶ On the one side, populists stand against the democratic system. However, populists are not anti-democrats in a distinct sense on the other side. "Populists are not against the principle of political representation; they just insist that only they themselves are legitimate representatives" (Müller, 2016, p.101)

Second: Someone is a populist if she or he fulfils a necessary and a sufficient condition. The necessary condition is that the person is an anti-elitist. Additionally, the populist must be an antipluralist. Populists "claim that they and they alone represent the people" (Müller, 2016, p. 101). To put it in other words, it is central to the populist claim that they – and only they – represent and speak for the people against the elite.⁷ The populist says that the people are silent: the silent minority.

Third: "Populist can always play off the 'real people' or 'silent majority' against elected representatives and the official outcome of a vote" (Müller, 2016, p. 102). The following two theses from Müller concern the question of how to deal with populists.⁸

Fourth: Even if populists are a real danger to democracy, Müller rejects the option of disengaging them in political debate. Instead, he argues for the option of talking with populists and to "take the problems they raise seriously without accepting the ways in which they frame these problems" (Müller, 2016, p. 103).

Fifth: Even if populism "is not a corrective to liberal democracy in the sense of bringing politics 'closer to the people'", populism "should force defenders of liberal democracy to think harder about what current failures of representation might be. It should also push them to address more general moral

⁵ To find out about other theories of populism, see for example: Demiryol, 2020, p. 103ff; Jörke & Selk 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Pappas 2019.

⁶ This is a setting that could be questioned, but is not part of the topic here.

⁷ Not everybody who criticises elites is therefore not a populist. When I later (chapter 5.1) raise the question and negotiate why it can be difficult, especially for critical theorists, to discuss with populists who follow and disseminate conspiracy theories, I implicitly take up this issue again.

⁸ If one takes the truth theory of pragmatism as a basis, then these questions also belong to the question, what is populism?

questions. What are the criteria for belonging to the polity? Why exactly is pluralism worth preserving? Moreover, how can one address the concerns of populist voters understood as free and equal citizens, not as pathological cases of men and women driven by frustration, anger, and resentment” (Müller, 2016, p. 103)?

In following Müller's line of argumentation, I explore one of the background assumptions that he has not explained in developing his model for understanding and dealing with populism.

The background assumption is that democrats, in discussing any particular issue, are discussing at the same time, abstractly, the two following questions:

(a) What would be the best universal system of values within a particular society?

(b) How is that system of values to be reached?

(a) is a normative issue and (b) an empirical one. Furthermore, for both issues, modern societies have developed specific sciences to work on the issues to solve them. Even if democrats and democratic politicians are not involved directly in scientific endeavors when they are, for instance, debating, they are arguing in a scientific way in a broader sense: They give reasons for their positions, which are often backed by scientific studies. They act in a way that Kant hoped would, in the course of providing and receiving reasons, propel humanity into an age of enlightenment (compare Kant 1977/1784). And Kant's concept is based on pluralism – different positions contribute to discourse and progress – and expertise, if you like elites. Kant envisages that the experts in one field, the public, present their arguments to the public, and the public, in the debate on the arguments, forms its own, mature judgement. But this is the basis of Kant's concept of pluralism and expertise (elites), which populists oppose and which was used to illustrate Müller's background assumptions.

The important theses are that, in this way, democrats, unlike populists, work together to develop humanity worldwide and for all people, even if they also pursue their interests at the same time. Furthermore, populists act on the surface like democrats by, for example, giving reasoned arguments for their positions. However, in contrast to the (pluralist) democrats, it is not their aim to solve the particular issues and the raised questions (a) and (b) above. And because populists are structurally not interested in finding the best solution, they cannot accept their own position as being wrong. Furthermore, populist often use conspiracy theories.

Only against the background of my thesis, or instead, the disclosed background assumption of Müller, his points mentioned are plausible. For it is then understandable why the populist can act within the democratic system that is, simultaneously, rejected by the populist. It is also only in this way that a

qualitative difference between a democrat and a populist is marked. Otherwise, there would be no possibility of differentiation.⁹

Furthermore, it is that assumption which explains why the populist is an anti-pluralist. The populist does not need a political opponent with whom she or he can discuss, because the populist is not interested in the truth required to solve questions (a) and (b) above.

Without a connection to the two questions (a) and (b), there is no way to distinguish between a democrat and a populist using an argument. For example, an environmental activist who stands up for environmental protection and argues against, for example, the aircraft industry as part of the elite could not be distinguished from a populist. Here we have the following problem, which I will return to later: both in terms of the distinction between democrats and populists and in discussions with populists, arguments must be made on an issue's substance.¹⁰ Without a connection to arguments saturated with content, the distinction is unfounded and arbitrary. Moreover, without a connection to saturated arguments in discussion with populists, political discourse undermines the claim to rationality (see above).

At the same time, however, a constellation of problems can now be seen even more clearly. The questions arise: How is it possible to have discussions with populists – Müller demands this in point four and five, see above – if they are not at all interested in a discourse that is oriented towards truth? How would one discuss issues with followers of populism? These questions belong to the discipline of Political science and Political Philosophy. Hence, in the following, these two questions will not be considered directly. Instead, in the following, the questions will be raised: does the constellation of problems stemming from populism affect the pedagogy of the young? If so, in which way and how must pedagogy handle the constellation?

3. On the normative fundament of pedagogy

In the next step, the question that has to be answered is whether the constellation of problems of populism has to affect the pedagogy of the young?

Initially, the question can be answered in the negative. A fundamental argument for the negative answer is that politics and pedagogy are two separate areas and pedagogy must not support a political position. A pedagogy that supports certain political positions is indoctrination.¹¹ Consequently, pedagogy must be politically neutral, and there is therefore a normative prohibition on trying to inoculate the next generation from populism.

⁹ Especially since every democrat, as well as every populist, tries to use rhetorical means to win a majority of the population over to his / her proposals, or to obtain a majority in an election. Compare also Moffit (2020) on the rhetorics of populism.

¹⁰ Here the concept of the "ideational turn" of Mudde (2017) could be taken up.

¹¹ The accusation is undoubtedly made by populists.

This position weighs heavily in terms of argumentation, because it can also claim validity independently of the question of populism. For if plurality characterizes a democracy, then pedagogy must not undermine plurality. Otherwise, it would again be conceived as indoctrination. However, the question of whether the constellation of problems of populism affects the pedagogy of the young can be answered positively. At the same time, the answer will be consistent with the negative answer just given. It will show that the answer is not a new one. Pedagogy does not need a new valuable aim in times of populism. To this end, the question of what the normative claim or the normative goal of pedagogy is must be investigated. The question that now arises is: What is the claim and what is the goal of pedagogy?

Concerning the central question of the contribution on the relationship between pedagogy and populism, Herwig Blankertz's outline of the aim of pedagogy should be recalled.

Blankertz pointed out that pedagogy, like the science in the tradition of the enlightenment, claims and advocates for contributing to a humanitarian world for all people. This is reflected in the words of Blankertz: Pedagogy is to be "put into the service of the historical effort of man to create and maintain a world worth living in" (Blankertz, 1982, p.306 – translated by H. K.). Furthermore, whoever "assumes pedagogical responsibility stands in the context of the respective given historical conditions under the claim of the absolute purpose of human maturity – whether he wants, knows, believes or not is secondary" (Blankertz, 1982, p.306f – translated by H. K.). However, this leads, first of all, to a problem. Because, quite independently of populists, the question of what a world worth living in would look like is a highly contested one. This means that pedagogy must be oriented towards the normative goal of creating and maintaining a world worth living in. At the same time, pedagogy must do justice to the question of what a world worth living in actually is.

On the normative-conceptual level, however, the problem is easy to solve. Similar to the questions that I set out regarding the distinction between democrats and populists, pedagogy must introduce the next generation to the questions or problems, positions and arguments developed to date in the various subjects, all of which can be related to the two questions already called for:

- (a) What would be the best universal system of values within a particular society?
- (b) How is that system of values to be reached?

At this point of investigation and argumentation, the new question arises: Are today's educational programs, following their normative demands, designed to work towards the goal of creating and maintaining a world worth living in, while granting autonomy to the subjects and thus not indoctrinating them?

This question will now be examined, firstly, by referring to the educational concept of UNESCO (2017) "Education for Sustainable Development Goals Learning Objectives". The selection of this pedagogical concept is not only based on the fact that it was developed by pedagogues across the world.

The concept is also intended to develop pedagogy further worldwide. Consequently, it claims to have a significant and broad impact. Subsequently, the question will be discussed as to whether this concept also offers a real prospect of contributing to efforts against populism.

4. On “Education for Sustainable Development Goals Learning Objectives” UNESCO (2017)

4.1 *Outline of the problem and claim*

The UNESCO (2017) paper “Education for Sustainable Development Goals Learning Objectives” is perhaps the most essential paper worldwide regarding education today. Even if the pedagogical programme of the paper is not identical to common pedagogical practices (in the future), it is possible, through analysing the paper, to reconstruct the current general pedagogical ideology for the following reasons. Firstly, it was commented on and reviewed by educational scientists worldwide. Secondly, pedagogies should inform themselves and direct their pedagogical practice, on the topic of sustainable development, towards this paper.

Globally speaking, the paper aims to conceptualise pedagogical processes in a way in which education could at least contribute to realising the Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations (in the further SDGs).

Not in the titles of the SDGs, but in the foreword from Qian Tang, the UNESCO Assistant Director-General for Education, is it made clear that humankind is facing a fundamental crisis for its own survival. A crisis which derives from humankind itself and is seen, above all, in the so-called civilised western, capitalist societies. Tang writes: “Global issues [...] urgently require a shift in our lifestyles and a transformation of the way we think and act. To achieve this change, we need new skills, values and attitudes that lead to more sustainable societies. Education systems must respond to this pressing need by defining relevant learning objectives and learning contents, introducing pedagogies that empower learners and urge their institutions to include sustainability principles in their management structures. The new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development reflects this vision of the importance of an appropriate educational response. Education is explicitly formulated as a stand-alone goal [...] (goal four – H. K.). Numerous education-related targets and indicators are also contained within other Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Education is both a goal in itself and a means for attaining all the other SDGs¹². It is not only an integral part of sustainable development but also a key enabler for it. That is why education represents an essential strategy in the pursuit of the SDGs” (UNESCO 2017, p. 1).

¹² Besides goal 8 of the SDGs, which is named “Decent work and Economic Growth”, and besides possibly further detail critics, I expect that critical theorists can agree with the SDGs. For instance, with the goals number two “Zero hunger”, five “Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” and sixteen “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. It is also possible to argue that the SDGs are the global attempt to realise the demands of critical theory.

Almost all scientists worldwide, working in the fields in question, agree that, in only a few years, humanity will have to undergo massive fundamental social changes if environmental changes (such as global warming and the loss of biodiversity) are to take place within a framework that allows humanity to cope with the changes (see, to give just a few examples: Foster 2009; Karathanassis 2015; Lessenich 2016; Röckstrom et al. 2009; Seibert 2017).¹³ Furthermore, because the pedagogical programme is intended to contribute to preventing the occurrence of such a development, the concept corresponds to Blankertz's identified purpose "to create and maintain a world worth living in" (Blankertz, 1982, p.306 – translated by H. K.). For if there is no massive fundamental transformation of the social-natural conditions, then the establishment of a world worth living in, for all, is no longer possible.

Does the concept also fulfil the second criterion mentioned (see above) of preserving the autonomy of the students? In order to answer this question, the pedagogical concept must first be presented and analysed.

4.2 On the core of UNESCO's concept

Concerning the role of the individual subject, and thus also the question of his or her autonomy, the concept paper first elaborates: "To create a more sustainable world and to engage with sustainability-related issues as described in the SDGs, individuals must become sustainability change-makers" (UNESCO, 2017, p.7).

According to the quote, it must first be stated that the autonomy of the subjects appears to be limited. They should become agents of change for a sustainable society, in the sense of the SDGs. This excludes, from the outset, the possible question of whether they want to be such agents of change at all.

However, this statement must be put into perspective for at least three reasons. First: It has already been pointed out that it is the task of education to contribute "to create and maintain a world worth living in" (Blankertz, 1982, p.306 - translated by H. K.). Moreover, because SDGs are to be seen as a concretisation of the formulation 'a world worth living in', the possible criticism is already invalidated here.

Secondly, there is also the fact that the subjects are given leeway to make decisions. This is explained in the concept paper: "The now well-established approach of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) empowers learners to take informed decisions and responsible actions for environmental integrity, economic viability and a just society for present and future generations" (UNESCO, 2017, p.7).

Thirdly, another reason lies at the heart of the pedagogical programme, the "Cross-cutting key competencies for achieving all SDGs" (UNESCO, 2017, p.10). The UNESCO concept importantly and

¹³ With regard to the question of the relationship between the critical theory of Theodor W. Adorno's pedagogy and the question of the threat to the basis of human life, see Kminek, 2020.

fundamentally claimed that Education for Sustainable Development "can develop cross-cutting key competencies for sustainability that are relevant to all SDGs" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 10).

Eight competencies are named: (a) Systems thinking competency, (b) anticipatory competency, (c) normative competency, (d) strategic competency, (e) collaboration competency, (f) critical thinking competency, (g) self-awareness competency and (h) integrated problem-solving competency. As an example, we have to analyse what is to be understood as 'critical thinking competency'.

The UNESCO paper understands the term 'critical thinking competency' as "the ability to question norms, practices and opinions; to reflect on own one's values, perceptions and actions; and to take a position in the sustainability discourse" (UNESCO, 2017, p. 10).

This definition of 'critical thinking competency' is extensive. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that a person does not have a critical thinking competency if she or he does not think at all. Otherwise, everyone fulfils the criteria of this competency.

For instance, a person who questions the norm that, at least in Germany, airlines do not have to pay taxes for aircraft fuel has this competency, as do many people who fly very often and far, and many people who would argue for the right to eat apples or meat from the other side of the world. Such a person may argue that charging a tax on aircraft fuel would be a wrong decision, giving the reason that it would destroy jobs. To fly a significant distance is also good practice for the reason that it will, in many cases, bring money into poor regions in the world, as well as allow us to import apples and meat into Germany. Furthermore, mainly due to the last reason, such a person takes a position in the sustainability discourse for the reason that the import of apples and meat into Germany will help the people who export these goods economically (compare SDG 8). Therefore, this person fulfils all criteria for the 'critical thinking competency', while, in contrast, a person with the contraposition will argue that it is not sustainable, because these practices, in their current form, destroy the 'natural' basis of our life. Such a person will also fulfil all criteria. Moreover, as a consequence, there can be no question of the UNESCO paper's programmatic approach in the autonomy of the individual subject being curtailed and/or geared towards indoctrination.

However, against the background of the analysis, another problem has emerged. The definition of the 'critical thinking competency' – which was only chosen for example – is so broad that practically every adult fulfils the competency. If all adults fulfil the competency, new pedagogical methods and contents are not necessary, as is proclaimed in the UNESCO paper. It is to say that more or less everybody develops competence during socialisation. Hence to fulfil the UNESCO definition of the competency pedagogy is not necessary at all.¹⁴

¹⁴ With this analysis, I have shown a way of a critical theory of education for today, which is not new. It is to immanently criticise – compare Adorno 1973a; Gruschka 1988 and Gruschka 2002 – the pedagogical objectives and practices. In contrast, Kopnina

I want to sketch out an interim conclusion. What we have seen until now is that the analysed UNESCO paper sets, on the one hand, some ambitious goals. With, and through, education, issues such as hunger and poverty should be fundamentally solved for humankind. To solve these issues, pupils should develop competencies, which can easily be understood as a contribution to democracy, enlightenment and empowerment of the oppressed.

On the other side, the definition of the competencies, and thus the concrete operationalisation of the goals of the pedagogical concept, does not necessarily urge a fundamental shift of social structures in general and individual behaviour, in particular. For that reason, the pedagogical concepts of the UNESCO support anything at all. Supporting anything at all has a considerable consequence for the context of the discussion here, which is discussed in the following section.

4.3 On the relation of competencies and populism

One might first think that the educational programmatic of the UNESCO paper is a countermeasure or even an antidote for populism. Because the programmatic supports anything at all, there is neither construction of an elite or an education to an elite, because knowledge is taught, which legitimises an elite. Nor is an antipluralist view of the world taught. As I have analysed it, the opposite is the case: the paper of the UNESCO supports anything at all.

So, everything is fine? The answer is no for two reasons. Moreover, if the following two reasons are taken into account, then the conclusion will be different.

Firstly, an education that supports anything at all paves the way for the attitude that every position is equally valued, which is itself untrue, so populist positions, conspiracy theories, racism and so on are validated.

Secondly, it is obvious that it is not a plausible position to say that, to be a democrat pluralist, you have to accept everything. For instance, for a person who wants to gain recognition as a democratic person or recognise another person as a democratic person, it is necessary for that person to fundamentally have the willingness to give up a political position. This is different from accepting anything at all, because it implicitly means a political discourse that is truth-orientated (see above). Furthermore, with the principle of truth-orientated, it is implicitly claimed – roughly speaking – that true statements about the world can be made. That again is in contrast to supporting anything at all.

Hence, we face a new issue. As a question, it is: What should be the manner of educational practises if, on the one side, it is not possible to teach and support anything at all and if, on the other side, we have to teach in a way in which different positions are right to correspond with the assumption that pluralism is necessary for democracy?

(2020) has presented a critique, which is being approached from the outside. She sets a certain normative standard for the paper and criticizes that the aspect of environmental protection is too weak.

This question will be discussed below concerning the question of the pedagogical handling of conspiracy theories. The discussion with conspiracy theorists is even more demanding than with populists who do not use conspiracy theories. Consequently, the answers given when dealing with conspiracists also equally apply in dealing with populists.

5. On the pedagogical handling of conspiracy theories

5.1 *The structure of conspiracy theories*

Arguing with populists is perhaps a delicate matter, especially for critical theorists. For it is precisely critical theorists who make statements on an abstract level that agree with the statements of populists. For example, both populists and critical theorists probably agree in a formal way with the statement that many political decisions (with which social structures are reproduced) are not in the interests of a large part of the population. The difference is that critical theorists postulate that exploitation and the associated injustice and alienation is objectively in nobody's interest. The populists distinguish between the people and the elite in terms of the problems.

Why is it so extraordinarily difficult to argue with a populist who conveys and/or believes in conspiracy theories? Two answers to the question should be outlined here. The first thesis is that politics, which is orientated towards rationality, which means in our time towards science, have structural similarities with conspiracy theories. Science and conspiracy theories are not satisfied with the directly perceived. Both assume that behind the phenomena lay structures and facts which they seek to explain. Conspiracy theories, therefore, not only contain false and untrustworthy theses, without any logical argument, but ask questions, in principle, like science. However, and this distinguishes theories of science from conspiracy theories, scientists assume the possibility of fallibility of their theories; conspiracy theories, however, do not.

In consequence, conveyors of conspiracy theories fulfil the formal rules for a reasonable and scientifically structured discussion. Of course, in a discussion, the premises and arguments of a position, here of a conspiracy theory, have to be proven. At that point, a structural dilemma begins. On the one side, as a person and/or pedagogy of reason and enlightenment, one has to argue against the conspiracy theory. So, it is not possible to avoid the discussion if one does not want to violate the rules of discourse (compare Habermas 1984, 1987). On the other side, starting the discussion regarding the conspiracy theory validates the topic as worthy of discussion. Furthermore, and this is the second thesis, a conspiracy theorist can be strengthened in his/her feelings and views due to them regarding themselves as one of the few who knows the truth, like Galileo. So again, we have a structural analogy of (history of) science and conspiracy theory on the dimension of the subject, the scientist and the conspiracist.

5.2 *On the pedagogical handling of conspiracy theories*

What can, and should, a general educational approach to populism, and conspiracy theories in particular, look like?¹⁵ Two (A and B in the following) comparatively abstract answers are to be presented, which deal with the question from different perspectives.

A – At least in public discourse today, all actors claim that their statements are true. Moreover, because everyone claims that their statements are right, there is no other pedagogical procedure than that of science, the most elaborate form of truth-finding: all statements must be checked.

First of all, whether arguments are logically consistent has to be checked. Secondly, what must be checked is whether the individual statements of arguments are also correct. Thirdly, the preconditions and presuppositions of the statements are to be brought into consciousness and checked for plausibility. This can also involve normative preconditions; for example, a specific denomination and the norms and values derived from the denomination and interpretation of faith. For example, it can be investigated whether, for example, air travel contributes to man-made climate change and whether it supports the local economy in the so-called Global South. If both are true, then it is a different question of whether one considers air travel to be the right thing to do, or which aspect one gives priority to. Resultantly, there is a new problem.

Fourthly, arguments and positions are to be reflected upon, which would falsify the arguments and positions. The thesis advanced here is that it is this fourth approach that is currently most neglected both in science and in public-political discussions. This approach is particularly emphasised here for the following reason: It is often the motivation, and often the effect, of conspiracy theories to question and shake fundamental orientations. Using the strategy of asking when and under which conditions the conspiracy theories themselves would be refuted has the potential to show that conspiracy theories lack an argumentative basis. For an assertion necessarily includes the possibility that the assertion must be refutable.

B – Besides the just explained, rational argumentation must be strengthened through a pedagogy that places the teaching of scientific problems, scientific argumentation and scientific problem-solving at its centre (compare Gruschka 2009). In this way, on the one hand, you have pluralistic views in the discussion, because there are different views within science. So, the demand for pluralism is fulfilled. Furthermore, on the other hand, this way of organising education processes makes scientifically binding reasoning necessary. So, the two aims – compare i + ii above – are reached: To say anything at all will be excluded, and the demand of truth-orientated argumentation is fulfilled. Moreover, at the same time, the claim of plurality is met.

¹⁵ In Kminek (2018, p. 88) there is an analysis of an empirical case of a student's statement that can be considered a creationist statement. Creationism is not identical with conspiracy theories. And yet both share that both creationism and conspiracy theories represent a hermetic world view.

For instance, such an education process would discuss different ways of proving 'Pythagoras' theorem' as well as the right arguments on both sides regarding the issue of Brexit, in particular, and, more generally, the reasons for and against supranational integration, which is a political issue raised by Müller (2016) in his essay.¹⁶

This does not guarantee that such pedagogy will immunize students against populism or even less so that such pedagogy will guarantee that students will abandon a populist attitude already adopted. But the latter in particular need not be claimed as a claim of pedagogy. As Freyenhagen (2020) demonstrates, it is also possible to carry out actions that one believes to be right without having the hope that the actions will contribute to desired consequences.

6. On the pedagogical handling of the current crisis of humankind

The thesis is that the problems to which the SDGs and the educational concept of UNESCO want to tackle will not allow a dignified life for all people today, and in the future, if the problems are not solved. How pedagogy can contribute to the problems and their solutions is dialectical.

Educators often tend to want to save the world and postulate that they can achieve this. Educators should abandon this idea. Educators not only overtax themselves, but it is also not possible, in principle, to do justice to the idea. This is because pedagogy always aims at the education of the individual subject. One view is that there are the social structures that determine the actions of each subject. Each subject can indeed help to change the social structures, but the possibility of change is to be considered so small – historical and singular exceptions confirm the rule here – that pedagogy and, consequently, the pedagogues should not attach great importance to the possibility. Nevertheless, the influence of pedagogues can be significant. Through educational work, it is possible for a single subject to change his or her actions and attitudes, which would have consequences for social structures; however small they may be. Moreover, educational work can contribute to creating the environment for social change. Therefore, it is argued that the purpose of education is to create a relaxed, empathic engagement.

Furthermore, the claim has to be rejected for the reason that the alternative is that our (political) problems are entrusted to the following generation or generations. This should not be the case, because in this way we – the adults – would dispose of their / our responsibility.

However, on the other side, we have to develop education processes, because the education processes up until today have, at least, not prevented unsustainable development. That is true, even if there are much more influential factors.

¹⁶ For critical theorists, this didactic consideration is not new. It is conceived in analogy to Adorno's approach in his lectures, compares, for example, Adorno 1973b.

So now the question is how can we teach the next generations about the issues of sustainable development in a way that they are not exploited and put under pressure, because we have been unable to solve the problem by ourselves?

My thesis is that we have to answer this question again in the way that education processes have to focus on the scientific problems of sustainable development. Furthermore, if educational processes were to focus on the scientific problems, it would be the knowledge that is passed to the pupils and not contentless competencies, in contrast to the educational pragmatics of the UNESCO concept. To pass knowledge to the pupils would be the necessary condition to solve the sketched problems (climate change, biodiversity, for example).

For example, the consumption of meat can be discussed controversially. I only want to bring individual problems into consciousness: Industrial meat production offers people work (SDG 8) and an income (SDG 1). Because more people can now afford to eat meat economically, inequality is also reduced (SDG 10). At the same time, however, industrial meat production also contradicts the SDGs. It is not only questionable whether meat consumption from the keeping of animals in moderation is healthy (SDG 3). The increased methane emissions contradict SDG 13 (Climate Action).

7. Conclusion

To contribute, through education, to the creation and safeguarding of a dignified life and the strengthening of democracy is not new for educators in the tradition of critical theory. As previously recalled, the task was addressed by Theodor W. Adorno in the conversation with Helmut Becker. In contrast to Adorno's and Becker's time period, the issue today is not the question of the contribution of education to fulfil the claims of democracy. The issue of today makes it necessary that education has to contribute to countering populism in order to defend democracy. Even if the effect of pedagogy is uncertain, and though it must remain uncertain in order to preserve the right to autonomy of future generations, this does not lead to an arbitrariness of pedagogical goals and demands.

Moreover, democratically, the path of a transformation of the social-natural conditions must be taken, which also preserves the possibility of a good human life on earth for future generations. For the destruction, that has already occurred, of the necessary foundations of life of the social natural conditions of people today and of future generations restricts their ability to make decisions. This restriction systematically limits them in the exercise of their autonomy. If there is no fundamental transformation of the social natural conditions, the living conditions, and thus the possibilities of exercising autonomy, will be further restricted.

A pedagogy that introduces the next generation to scientific problems, scientific argumentation and procedures and conveys the state of knowledge can contribute to achieving the goals without a guarantee of success.

In view of the dramatic, problem situations, the question arises as to whether educators, as lawyers for the currently growing and forthcoming generations, have an obligation, by virtue of their profession, to take political action to defend democracy and protect the natural conditions of society.

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