

Pure and Impure Pedagogy: Report from an educational controversy in Denmark

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Connections between systems theory and poststructuralism

On the surface, Danish school policy operates entirely in line with European regulations. I mention this because the so-called principle of subsidiarity means that education ought to be a matter of national sovereignty. But one result of post-Lisbon EU-policy is that school policy has gradually come to be defined as part of the new knowledge economy, using “learning outcomes” as the dominant educational category. Furthermore, various European bodies of policy employ a number of institutionalized methods of coordination in promoting joint structures based on the “learning outcomes” signifier. The overall effect is a structural and pedagogical harmonization of a policy area which is, in principle, a national responsibility. At the level of higher education, this process has been analysed as “the faceless masters of higher education”¹. In Denmark, the European standardization process is supported almost uncritically by all agents involved in the development and implementation of policy and educational research.

An important question is: what are the concepts of learning underlying and supporting this policy at the national level? The support is provided by researchers advocating different combinations of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory and post-structuralist beliefs. These researchers often share

¹ Cfr. K. Brøgger, *The Faceless Masters of Higher Education: Governing Through Standards*, Dordrecht, Springer, 2016.

a formative grounding in French structuralism, and especially the works of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault.

Luhmann's systems theory relates to self-referential processes of operative constructivism and has a strong emphasis on media and technology. However, the theory also involves a rejection of normative and ontological questions. It is therefore no wonder that the theory is easily adaptable to any policy at hand. Systems theory first gained currency in Denmark in the late 1990s, when former Marxist structuralists had to find a new research identity after the fall of the Berlin wall, resulting in a techno-structuralist reading of Luhmann. In addition, systems theory was influenced by so-called "radical constructivism", which claims that knowledge and learning are subjective constructions². This reference further emphasizes the loss of external reality, resulting in an explicitly stated solipsism. The result of this entire process is both a loss of normative interest and a reductionist approach to any kind of philosophical realism. Politics, ethics and reality are reduced to constructions, to structure and to technique. This technification of systems theory makes it very adaptable to the OECD regime of PISA rankings, focusing on technical skills in an overall quantitative structure. In this way, we end up with a narrow focus on rankings, evidence and methodology. The systems theory has played a key role in qualifying this outcome.

Poststructuralism, with its roots in particularly the work of Foucault, is normally considered part of a critical tradition. However, in Denmark some scholars have connected Foucault to a theory of what they call "the competition state". This theory was originally developed in the UK, also with conceptual roots in Foucault and, to some extent, systems theory (Pedersen 2013). A competition state focuses on optimizing a nation's labour force with regard to the global economic competition, thereby reducing education, pedagogy and science to mere means for achieving this goal. Values such as freedom, justice and *Bildung* are reconfigured as sheer instruments of the economy, if not relegated entirely to oblivion. The competition state originally had a critical function but has since been

² Cfr. E.v. Glasersfeld, *Radical Constructivism – a Way of Knowing and Learning*, New York, Falmer Press, 1996.

transformed into a description of a set of political-economic conditions that everybody is compelled to accept. This means that what was originally posited as critique has now assumed the opposite function, as anti-criticism.

The idea of a competition state has turned into “a poststructuralist condition”, becoming part of the political hegemony for decision-makers, for the influential left-wing newspaper “Politiken”, and for the political and administrative elite. The competition state is considered an undeniable condition, and the only political choice remaining is whether competition should be left-wing or right-wing; that is, whether labour market optimization should follow neo-liberal or egalitarian principles. Nevertheless, that the “labour market” constitutes the key category, rather than, for instance, *Bildung*, science, humanity or justice, is never questioned.

Since 2012, Denmark has implemented sweeping reforms of both the school system and the national teacher training programme which rely heavily on these theoretical movements. As a result, schools are situated in an economic and individualized vocabulary of optimizing learning outcomes. One celebrated slogan is “to maximize learning” and this maximization is combined with a comprehensive technification of school organization and structures of learning outcomes. A frequent reference in this respect is the Australian researcher, John Hattie, who also wants to maximize individual learning within a highly structured quantitative framework³. Particularly system theorists, the government, municipalities, but also some representatives from the aforementioned group of post-structuralists, have made extensive reference to Hattie. Another slogan is to “go from subject matter to learning” or to move “from teaching to learning”. Indeed, everything seems to be a matter of “learning”. Municipalities are “limitless learning municipalities”, the libraries are “learning centres”, schools are “temples of learning” and teachers are “leaders of learning”. We even talk about a “learning revolution”. Concepts from both systems theory and post-structuralism are at work everywhere, dissolving the entire educational tradition and its philosophical and practical dialogues.

³ Cfr. J. Hattie, *Visible Learning*, London, Routledge, 2009.