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**Crossing the Threshold in the Margins.
From the Critique of Ideology Towards Emancipatory Practice**

(promotorzy: dr hab. prof. DSW Lotar Rasiński i dr hab. Gyorgy Meszaros)

Final assessment of the doctoral dissertation

**Crossing the Threshold in the Margins.
From the Critique of Ideology Towards Emancipatory Practice**

written by Tamas Toth
under the supervision of
dr hab. prof. DSW Lotar Rasiński and dr hab. Gyorgy Meszaros

The dissertation submitted by Tamas Toth is one of the most interesting and innovative works at the intersection of educational research, philosophy and political theory I have recently read. Not only does it construe a fruitful transdisciplinary field of investigation, but it is innovative and significant in each of the disciplines that provide the cognitive and linguistic resources for Toth's project. Moreover, Tamas Toth has realized a project that combines advanced theoretical investigations with extensive, and provocatively interpreted ethnographic work conducted in socially deprived zones of three European countries. This indeed is a unique achievement.

The dissertation is well structured and is written in a clear and communicative language, although the density of theoretical comments makes the text fairly difficult to follow sometimes, especially for readers not well acquainted with Marxism, poststructuralism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis simultaneously. On the other hand, the author makes all the effort possible to bring these perspectives home for everyone, and his explanations are systematic and illuminating at least to the degree that allows the readers to follow his complex argument.

The theoretical point of departure of the dissertation is laid out in Part I ("The Discreet Harm of Ideology"), but the whole thesis is, in fact, theoretical through and through. Its conceptual structure

develops in a constant interplay between critical interrogations of Marxist, post-Marxist and postmodern theories, with a special role played by Lacan and Žižek, supplemented with extensive reports on thinkers like Baudrillard, with Laclau and Mouffe's theory of hegemony that works either as a tacit, and mostly negative point of reference, or is discussed, appreciated and supplemented with other theoretical standings. Foucault is employed here as well, with his understanding of power as a kind of bridge between Laclau and Marx, and this is not a complete list of theoretical perspectives addressed in the book. In this company, it is Žižek, with his way of negotiating between Marx and Lacan, who seems to be the most inspirational writer for the Author. The density and heterogeneity of these inspirations might seem risky and, in a way, overwhelming, especially when numerous other thinkers (like Wacquant, Wallerstein, Masschelein and Simons, Biesta and many many more) are acknowledged, but I really admire Tamas Toth for his skill and competence in using this extensive set of theories in gradually building his own, original perspective of interpreting complex social issues.

One thing must be mentioned here to avoid an easy misunderstanding that may result from reading the table of contents of the dissertation, where theoretical considerations precede the section where ethnographic studies are reported. What this layout might (wrongly) suggest is that Tamas Toth uses ethnography *after* theoretical analyses, to verify, or illustrate his theoretical argument. This is not the case, and Toth carefully explains the difference between the linear order of writing and the circular, recurrent order of thinking theoretically and doing ethnography, while it is ethnographic experience, as he explains, that constitutes the starting point and the horizon for his theoretical considerations.

The key issue here, both in theoretical investigations and in the interpretation of empirical data, is ideology, which the Author understands as 'the mystification of domination through hegemonic articulatory practices, where the hegemonic struggle over meaning fixates and cements perpetually asymmetrical relations of power'. Toth's ambition is to re-install Marx's concepts that characterize ideology (i.e. opium, fetish, manifest reality) *within* the post-Marxist framework, as structured by the thought of Lacan, Laclau and Mouffe. Foucault's understanding of domination as part of discursive reality is a bridge between these great traditions. The reason for this modification is clearly related to the lived experience of interacting with marginalized communities where one cannot not realize that poverty is *not* explicable in terms of discursive positions or rhetorical constructions of totality; that one needs to refer to economy, materiality, class and racial conflicts, and only in this context to discourse and ideology that secure, and thus co-constitute by being materialized themselves, their oppressive structural operations. At the same time, Toth is very careful in bringing Marx's theory of ideology to the contemporary landscape of social theory, attentive to semiotic displacements, fetishes and fantasies, hyperreal ecstasies and simulations. In other words, the whole argument reads like a fruitful broadening of the explanatory power of the current thought by way of reinvigorating its roots in Marx's thought, rather than its disavowal and a return to the Marxists orthodoxy – an approach we have seen in some influential critiques of postmodernism.

In the second chapter (Part II), Toth connects his theoretical position to his project of investigating the zones of urban poverty. He argues that such places are adequate sites for ethnographic research into contemporary ideological formations, and that such studies are pedagogically important, especially for teacher education. In more detail, after reporting on Wacquant's notion of advanced marginality and his typology of poverty ghettos, and after recapitulating Althusser's argument on the role of schools in the ideological apparatus of the state, Toth argues that it is the school rather than the police (as in Wacquant's claim) that plays the main role in the relations of power in such places. The dominant role of the school is rooted not only in its compulsive long-term influence on

the totality of modern societies, or in its uneasy and intense relations with the process of pedagogization, or educationalization of social problems, but also in its partial *detachment* from society. Following Masschelein and Simons, he identifies the subversive potential of the school – especially in communities of advanced marginality – precisely in its being both immersed in, and detached from the society that is. This argument makes ground for the description of “therapeutic” and “pedagogical” ethnographic research focused on the “ideologico-critical analyses of the dispositifs of advanced marginality”, with the intention to show that such places are meaningful sites for teacher education, while teachers themselves may be seen in such an ambivalent, dual perspective as both functionaries of the state and, *in potentia*, as subversive agents of social change.

In Part III (“The Emerging European Complex”), Toth introduces another theoretical context that is significant for his interpretation of education in poverty zones. It adds a geopolitical dimension to his analysis, and Toth refers to Wallerstein’s analysis of Eastern Europe as a semi-peripheral region of global capitalism here. Marginalization of Gipsy communities is thus doubled by being located within marginal (semi-peripheral) regions of the world system, which creates what might be called “exponential intensification” in the characteristic of such communities, and additionally justifies why it is such locations that should be investigated in the analysis of modern dispositifs of power. The notion of “the European complex” relates here to the fantasy of a unified, post-transformational totality, and it is described both as a composition of multiple structures and forces, and as a “complex” in the psychoanalytical, Lacanian sense: as “a commedia dell’arte in the sense that it is performed in accordance with a typical framework and traditional roles” (a quote from Lacan, p.218-19). The “semiperipheral theater” of Eastern Europe is described in terms of “(1) the disavowal of class politics and the negligence of the critique of political economy, (2) the ideologico-discursive constitution of the hegemonic frontiers on the streets (rather than in legal frameworks) and within micro-institutional contexts, and (3) the emergence of ‘advanced imaginability’ (i.e. the extension and displacement of the far-right imaginaries)”. Wallerstein’s centre-periphery framework helps to explain the persistence of old structural dislocations that turn the region into the field of old games of exploitation and domination, marginalization and pretenses to “privileged specificity”, national uniqueness, or “Christian whiteness” as a mode of being “truly European”. This perspective proves very productive, and the ethnographic material, including reports on transnational migration, NGOs activism, or legal regulations that aim at smoothing the flow of workforce and capital and are subversively used by immigrant Roma people to play seek-and-hide games with state apparatuses, plus the cases like when social workers assist Gipsy families in getting child benefits introduced by the nationalist government and intended to raise birth rates of “true Poles” so that no immigration is needed for the economy, helps us to see how *macro* dimensions of the world-systems logic are implicated in everyday lives of marginalized communities; and how these communities are getting *included as excluded* in the process.

What the Author discovers in the Roma ghettos of Poland, Romania and Hungary is, first, that they are “hybrid” ghettos (i.e. mixing the features identified by L. Waquant in the USA and France and those of American *favelas*), saturated with dense inter-institutional activities of the mainstream society (the police and penal system, education, social work, NGOs, etc) that constitute the “ideological constellation of the discursive landscapes of poverty”. Apart from the commonly observed elements like begging, shanty housing, and so on, there are interesting and less obvious elements that constitute the complex dispositif of ghettoized urban poverty, like, for instance, the imposition of the air pollution discourse on the heating economy in settlements, or the conflicts and misunderstandings around the compulsory character of the school. The data from intense contacts with the inhabitants are supplemented with reports from schools where Toth interviewed teachers, or organized meetings with teachers involved in working with the inhabitants. Discussing their failure to organize household visits (in the Hungarian case), he gathers the material that makes him

capable of pointing to the conditions of transformative teacher learning via teachers' "active and reflective engagement with the social environment" that is currently constrained "by how the educational apparatus is positioned in its respective dispositif and by the post-socialist struggles over the modalities of operation of the educational apparatus". These modalities are characterized through concepts such as the 'neverland syndrome,' the parallax between the glorification and infantilization, appreciation and degradation' of teachers' work, 'the atrophy of the pedagogical,' the learnification and instrumentalization of education', and 'cynical pedagogy' structured against, and despite of, what the subject knows. Some of these concepts are abducted from the data, while other ones are borrowed from other studies (e.g. from David Labaree or Gert Biesta). In their careful arrangement presented in the text, they form a convincing and operational map of the pedagogical dispositif in places marked by one may call "exponential marginality" of zones of poverty in marginalized societies.

The presented research is processual, i.e. the results of one analysis change the focus of the following ones. Toth moves from analyzing Roma settlements as places suitable for teacher education by virtue of their "informative contents" (the experience in Poland and Romania), towards seeing – as in the Hungarian study, where he was unable to persuade teachers to visit Gipsy households – the very dispositif of advanced marginality as pedagogically meaningful for teacher education. The pedagogical setting, densely rooted in social problems perceived through middle class imaginaries and discursive psychopathologization of social problems, and affected by the overlap between local politics and more general apparatuses of control, is analyzed and discussed with the teachers, and such analyzes bring promising results. The word "promising" is used here in a way that may sound paradoxical in "normal" educational circumstances. The first of those results may be seen as congruent with the traditionally understood mission of critical pedagogy: teachers are becoming aware of the schooling dispositif, that is of how schools are embedded in the interplay of external forces that shape their pedagogical practice. The second one is definitely more challenging, or subversive: it is about coming to terms with the *impotence* of education *vis a vis* the societal conditions and expectations imposed on the school. Toth calls this revelation "the pedagogy of hopelessness", clearly positioning it against the Freirean tradition, as dominant in critical pedagogy, with its "false, fetishistic hopes" (later in the same chapter Toth points to other aspects of Freire's thought, more congruent with the perspective he proposes himself). This latter perspective leads Toth to embracing the Lacanian ethical stance where it is imperative that no false promises are ever made. As in the Lacanian therapy, where it is crucial that the analyzed are "traumatized" by being confronted with the impossibility of them being "cured" of the permanent lack of fullness, teachers are confronted with the impossibility of education that would meet anybody's plans, dreams or expectations.

In the last section of the dissertation, titled "The Repressed of Pedagogy" (which a reversed and modified reference to Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" - I will return to this issue in final comment of this review), Toth develops an argument that resembles Tyson Lewis's reading of Agamben's notion of impotentiality, and directly refers to Biesta's notion of weak pedagogy and teaching as confrontation with otherness, as well as to Masschelein's and Simons' understanding of schooling as detached from social expectations. What he proposes is called "the pedagogy of the Real", and to make this notion more operational Toth follows the discussion on the locus of "the educational" in Biesta's and Safstrom's *Manifesto*: that which is characteristic of education, the educational, resides in "the tension between what is and what is not". The reference to the Real is, of course, related to Toth's re-interpretation of this intellectual movement in terms of the Lacanian ontology. This interpretation is convincing, and it opens up space for very interesting consequences and interpretations. I see its value, first, in how the somewhat abstract, and rarely operationalized pedagogically, Lacanian ontology is translated into the language of educational theory and

educational experience of all who ever worked in accountability-driven schools that deprive education of any existential importance. Second, in how those educational theories are enriched with the language that is very attentive to the problematic of subjectivity – an issue of fundamental importance for authors like Biesta or Masschelein, but thus far not theorized with density comparable to that offered by the psychoanalytical perspective.

DISCUSSION

Aiming toward the final assessment of this complex and extremely rich project, I want to start with saying that I simply admire it, even though while reading the book one constantly risks the loss of control over one's reading and being completely seduced by the Author. The joy of reading, which derives from the outstanding quality of the writing (not in the sense of quality as promoted by the analytical philosophy, though) really demands the readers to activate their cautious and skeptical reason. The Author cleverly uses rhetorical devices (like Žižek—style titles and subtitles) and advanced, deconstructive strategies of interpretation that frequently point to undecidables, to use a Derridean phrase, that systematically dismantle what we usually take for granted as the “foundations” of education. If I understand Tamas Toth's philosophy well, I may say that I share his negative ontology that goes beyond apparent certainties just to discover that there is nothing foundational down there, and that whatever world we want to live in, it needs to be made. For me, this is where the ontology of the pedagogical grounds: in “nothing particular” that needs to be filled with lived experience, and structured and furnished along ethical desires. For Toth, as it seems, this is also where the return to Marxist realism matters.

In this respect Toth seems to be “more Marxist” than Žižek sometimes. I do not know if I am reading this relation correctly, there are many similarities between Žižek and Toth and there is no place in the text where Toth would criticize Žižek directly. Like Žižek, he revitalizes the Marxist tradition to critique Laclau's ontology, and like Žižek he reads Marx together with Lacan. However, in Žižek the material tends to take shape of “the determination of the last instance”, with the stress on “last” as opposed to “the first”, or foundational; in Toth, the material seems to speak in a more direct way. Even though both these authors position the material within the discursive (Toth says that he wants to “return to Marx's notion of ideology *within* the post-marxist theory of hegemony”, p.13), for Žižek the material is force that is *active* by being *disruptive* rather than by determining all that is not material *per se*. Indirectly, Toth suggests that a place of departure from Žižek may be how both authors understand ideology, which is one of the most important questions in the dissertation, and he does it in a very Žižekian style – by perverting his theory by removing just one letter from the title of probably the most important book by Žižek: *The Discreet Charm of Ideology* (as a soft, seductive power that operates through fantasy and desire of totality rather than by restriction and mystification – Žižek's title is itself a perverted version of the title of Bunuel's film about bourgeoisie) turns into *The Discreet Harm of Ideology* in the title of Toth's chapter. This is where the difference is expressed most clearly, and in a most subtle way at the same time. Ideology not only anesthetizes (the “opium” metaphor) and not only does it seduce (the “charm” in Žižek); it also hurts. It works through the bodies and on the bodies, and it therefore must work as a material force. The playful trick in the title abbreviates the fundamental difference between what “within” (“within” the theory of hegemony) seems to mean for Toth and for Žižek. It seems that Toth is tempted to see materiality in more positive terms than Žižek, for whom it operates as a limit, or the Real that always remains beyond articulation of the symbolic and the imaginary. Toth seems to turn toward a more physical (?) understanding of materiality as active, determining force, and, consequently, to seeing ideology as delusion and mystification – and, to be more specific, as *inevitable* delusion and mystification. And he is fully aware of the problems this position evokes. “Can we differentiate between false and true knowledge? How is fantasy and reality connected, if

they are connected? What is an educational reality at all? And how do we know that our best intentions as teachers are not the worst illusions for the children?" (p.18). These really are most fundamental questions. I would appreciate if Tamas Toth could comment on his understanding of ideology in relation to the playful use he makes of Zizek's work – and in relation to the questions he himself formulated as above.

My second comment also relates to the aesthetic layer of the work, or to the aesthetic strategy of building theoretical arguments. What I see in Part III, where most of the ethnographic data is presented, is that theoretical interpretation of the data, deep and extensive, tends to create an almost independent, or parallel discourse to that produced with ethnographic method. Theoretical elements of the text not only intervene into the corpus of the data, and not only do they contribute to a kind of synthesis between the data and theoretical language. They do both these things, but apart from that they go beyond and cultivate their own narrative, almost like in a Cartesian ontology where (ethnographic) body and (theoretical) soul live side by side, as parallel realities that, in spite of sharing the same temporality, live without causally affecting one another. This comment could be read as criticism; as the question whether interpretation is grounded in empirical material properly, or whether one really needs theory in this kind of research, or whether theory brings unnecessary, academic-kind complexity that does help to solve the problems of the people under investigation, in a way obscuring the otherwise plain story of oppression and marginalization.

However, there is another interpretation of this supposed empirico-theoretical parallelism possible, where it appears to be a kind of an ontological claim in itself. To make it fully plausible, one needs to point to the third element of in this parallel composition, and note that numerous pages in Part III are cut across with narrow strips of photographic images. Their narrowness and fragmentarity, as well as the fact that they ignore and go beyond the margins of the text, turn them into decontextualized and as if intrusive interventions into the body of the text; or, exactly, into the body of *two texts*, empirical and theoretical. The thing that comes to mind here is that the layout of Part III visually represents the Lacanian ontology that is extensively used by the Author. In other words: What appears to be over-interpretation, or a failure to compose theory and ethnographic data harmoniously, may as well be a visual-rhetorical representation of the impossibility of "knowing" the subject (of research, here) based on the Lacanian ontology of lack, where the symbolic-theoretical, the imaginary-empirical that must be articulated in scraps and fragments of the symbolic linguistic repertoire, and the Real that – as I think – is represented by the fragmented, disruptive and as if haunting images of daily lives in the ghettos, can only be coordinated temporarily through being invested into some figures of alterity: into "the big Other" or *object petit a*; fantasy or fetish. What Toth provokes here is a reading strategy that must take responsibility for the connections one makes in the text. Whether it effects from a rational decision to represent the Lacanian ontology in the layout of the pages, or merely from intuitive search for an adequate aesthetic that would match the tone of his writing, Tamas Toth has thus produced a wonderful and paradoxically coherent message.

And one more question, finally. It refers to Toth's criticism against the two modes in which the pedagogical appears in contemporary debates, which, as Toth notes, always make it relative to something else. The "recurring syntax" of how we write of education is that we either speak of "the pedagogy of (games, poverty, logic, silence)", or "education for (justice, struggle, resistance)". As Toth argues, "the problem with this logical structure, and what this syntax itself captures in advance, is that the style of thinking in the field of education is structured around what is (and what shall be) in parentheses, and not around education per se, and even less around the educational and the pedagogical in education" (p.372). Let me recall that it is the space between these two modalities of that which is and that which shall, or should be, that Toth – after Biedta and Safstrom

– identified as the locus of the educational. Ironically or not, Toth’s pedagogy of the Real lands within one of these modalities, as a “pedagogy of something”. To be clear, what I mean by this comment is not a mere “oops!”; it is a question whether the negative idea of education (i.e. of its being free of external aims) can be expressed in a language that does not suggest a form of instrumentality. From another point of view: whether any discourse that pertains to human activity can be expressed in a syntax that does not point to ‘what is’ or ‘what ought to be’. If, indeed, we do think of the locus of the educational as that *between* what is and what ought to be, how do we frame it symbolically? Especially if that “what is” is the Real itself; a “thing” most real of the real ones, but alien to any attempt at symbolization.

CONCLUSION

As I have said in the beginning of this review, Tamas Toth’s dissertation is one of the most interesting and innovative works written at the intersection of educational research, philosophy and political theory I have recently read. Toth is an unbelievably competent thinker and lucid writer, very attentive to the complexities of current political landscapes and educational praxis in the world in which all utopian horizons disappeared, and where the search for “the real”, in a generic sense now, takes a Lacanian (or Heideggerian, to some extent) route that does not promise naive and colorful visions of the divine kingdom on Earth populated by shiny happy subjects with white teeth, neither in its religious or lay, conservative, liberal or socialist incarnations. Toth has courage to claim that hope is illusion, and, moreover, a harmful one; perhaps because when driven by hope, we may lose patience to those that lag behind and want to live their lives on their own. To put it in more traditional terms, every vision of totality is exclusionary, and I do agree with Tamas Toth that the hopeless “pedagogy of the Real” (or whatever we name it – although I really like this name) is a most important ethical stance nowadays. My critical questions posed in the final sections of my review are *questions truly*; I do not know the answers, but I do believe that they demand discussion, and this is why I ask.

In conclusion, Tamas Toth’s work fully meets the criteria of doctoral dissertations, and, moreover, it goes far beyond the expectations that are defined in the regulations concerning the doctoral degree. Toth is an innovative, independent and inquisitive thinker, an attentive and socially sensitive researcher, and his dissertation presented as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Social Sciences in Education is a uniquely valuable work that needs to be made public, and that truly deserves distinction. I hope it is published both in its present form in English, as well as in translations into the languages of the countries in which the research was conducted, very soon.

Herewith I conclude that Tamas Toth’s dissertation is qualified for the final public defense, and I conclude that his work should be distinguished as an outstanding dissertation in social sciences and education.



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