

METAPHORIC DISCOVERIES

Introduction: My presentation will be about educational content, about coherence in general education and, more specifically, in teaching of history. Some tasks will implicitly be suggested for the educationalists in South-Eastern Europe (but not exclusively for them).

1. In the past decades, European institutions and organizations, political, moral and educational authorities have been intensively developing a new type of public discourse on inter-individual, inter-group, inter-ethnic, intercultural and international relations, a type of discourse that systematically propagates the ideas of human rights, democracy, non-discrimination, solidarity, multiculturalism, tolerance and culture of peace. Let us give this type of discourse a provisional name: discourse of new ethical universalism. Today, its rhetorical form is easily recognizable, suggestive, evocative and contagious. As in the second half of the twentieth century Europe has increasingly been becoming aware of the moral catastrophes it had produced in the past (and sporadically still produces them, though on a smaller scale), the new discourse on universal norms has itself become a norm. It has been given a leading role in most of the European educational institutions. Teachers, curriculum designers and textbook writers seem to have developed self-monitoring mechanisms which prevent them from saying or writing overtly what they know would clearly oppose the aforementioned normative discourse. The situation may, of course, vary from one European country to another, but it seems to me that most of them are nevertheless on the same continuum.

Yet European educational researchers and experts still report on a presence, in educational communication, of highly problematic interpretation of historical events as well as didactic transmission of dubious cultural representations. They report on prejudices, manifestations of nationalistic ideologies, stereotyped ideas about social, ethnic or religious groups, distorted pictures of neighboring countries and the like.

Anthropologists have shown that some cultural representations are more 'contagious' than others (I use the word 'contagious' in the sense that was elaborated by anthropologist, or better, 'epidemiologist' of representations Dan Sperber). The degree of 'contagiousness' depends also on the number of public sources of representations. It could be said that representations coming from many public sources are usually more influential than those coming from just one source.

So one should not jump into the conclusion that the content of educational communication in itself can decisively influence the way in which young generations of Europeans - or perhaps South-Eastern Europeans - conceive of themselves, social or ethnic groups inside their societies, their neighbors etc. What is influential is a convergence and mutual reinforcement of educational messages and other kinds of messages young generations are receiving in their societies and cultures. Problematic cultural representations mediated through schools take effect only when they interact and converge with equivalent representations that are to be found elsewhere in a society.

This, I think, is a crucial point for the meeting in which we take part. Analyzing a sample of European textbooks of history I realized that textbooks from different parts of Europe contain cultural representations that are incongruent with what I here called a discourse of new ethical universalism. However, in countries with well consolidated democracies there is little chance for problematic cultural representation mediated through schools to interact strongly and on a larger scale with equivalent representations that can be found outside schools. This may not be true of some South-East European countries where, due to turbulent changes and recent events, a strong and large-scale interaction can occur and problematic cultural representations can get an active role in legitimizing problematic political actions. (Small remark here: One should avoid a black-and-white picture, since this is a potential problem for any European country.)

How is it possible that educational institutions and educators take part in a transmission of representations that clearly oppose the normative discourse they seem to have adopted so willingly? I believe that to answer this question would be to enable the educationalist and educators from South-East European countries (and not just them) to bring more coherence into the teaching of history and social sciences. It seems to me that (post)modern Europe has at least partially forgotten the role coherence has in education. Let me remind you that the importance of coherence was emphasized in one of the early origins of educational thought, in the philosophy of Socrates that was based on principles called maieutic, principles that were meant to bring about coherence in the way people reflect on the world they live in. I shall try to give three provisional answers to the above question.

The first answer is about argumentative structure and psychological mechanisms that enable educators to convey in parallel two types of contents that so clearly oppose one another.

It is rarely the case today that biased judgments, prejudices or negative cultural stereotypes can be detected on the level of intended content of textbooks or classroom communication. Rather, we should construe them as having some sort of a parasitic status in the content of educational communication, thus escaping the educator's attention.

When problematic contents nevertheless do enter the educator's consciousness, he/she is left with a problem of coherence. I have been observing various tactics teachers of history and social sciences used in order to conceal a lack of coherence in what they were communicating to the pupils. I believe, however, many of those tactics are underlain by a very general argumentative structure exemplified by the following statements:

- (1) We do accept the principles of solidarity but one cannot show solidarity all the time.
- (2) We agree with the principles of humanitarianism but how far can our humanitarianism go in such a case?
- (3) Multiculturalism is extremely important but this minority really went too far.
- (4) One should always reject nationalism but under the circumstances that nation was really a threat to our nation.

The statements were actually produced (reported in the press), but that is not so important. What is more important is that we come across such statements almost every day (not just in educational contexts). In each of these statements, the argumentative connective "but" helps the speaker to produce an illusion of coherence, establishing in the second part - which in fact contradicts the value orientation declared in the first part - a quasi-argumentative function that seems to justify the speaker's restraint.

One should also observe the psychological function of the argumentative connective "but", no matter what description it be given in a more academic debate (e.g. "defense mechanism": either "rationalization" or, more probably, "reaction formation"). It is the first part of the statement that puts a speaker or a writer not just in a very safe position but also in a position from which he can even invest the - questionable - judgment in the second part of the statement with a feeling of moral righteousness.

Let me move to the **second provisional answer** to the initial question. Curriculum designers, teachers and textbook writers convey to the pupils substantially more cognitive and non-cognitive contents than they explicitly express. Much of the educational content is communicated implicitly. This, of course, is to be understood as a general property of linguistic communication. If one was to make explicit everything one wished to communicate, he/she would be confronted with an extremely difficult, if not impossible task. But in contexts like educational one, it is precisely by observing this property of communication that we come to understand how two types of content that contradict each other can coexist in modern educational institutions.

As in curriculum designing and implementation and in the textbook production there is increasingly more expert control over final products, explicit communication of ideas which are not in compliance with what I called the discourse of the new ethical universalism would soon get detected and sanctioned. Implicit messages which are only accessible in inferential reconstruction, i.e. via 'private' mental acts, are much less exposed to expertise and public critique and have better chances to pass imperceptibly. There are numerous ways of implicit communication of ideas, but the most important are: substatements, presuppositions, implications, allusions, ambiguous arguments, paralogisms, rhetorical tools such as parataxis, ellipsis, metaphors, metonymies, etc.

Here is an example how a cultural presupposition can pass imperceptibly.

- (5) In 1492 Columbus discovered America.

This is an apparently 'objective' and 'neutral' statement. However, it conveys a questionable historical and cultural point of view.

If we say that at the time x someone discovered something, we in fact mean that he "found something that had previously been in existence but had hitherto been unknown to the humanity". When it occurs to us that, in the 15th century, the continent later named America had already been populated by natives ("Indians"), we can conform the aforementioned definition of the term "discovery?" to the statement (1) in only two ways. We must infer either that:

(5a) The natives had known "America?" before Columbus, but they were not part of "humanity?", so their knowledge of the continent does not count,

or that:

(5b) Until Columbus? discovery, the natives were so uncivilized they even did not know they were living in America.

Of course, both inferences are somewhat absurd and problematic. But so is the statement (1), which forces upon the addressee an Eurocentric view of world history and cultural stereotypes, developed in the time of colonialism (particularly in the 19th century, when the cult of Columbus developed in America). The hidden cultural presupposition conveyed in the statement (1) has been registered by American historians. In history classes in today?s American schools, they, as a rule, speak of the historical contact which Columbus made in 1492, and not of the "discovery of America?."

Implicit (unspoken) points of view are difficult to reject, because we often only dimly sense that they are influencing our interpretation of phenomena but we cannot describe them precisely.

Implicitly conveyed points of view are more difficult to reject than directly expressed points of view. In European culture, disputing implicit messages is often seen as an expression of aggression. Implicit components are supposed to act as a link between the participants in a conversation, as a common knowledge and a common conviction of all those involved in social communication.

Implicit points of view are all the more 'contagious' because we have to integrate them into our understanding of messages, since without that their meaning cannot be fully reconstructed.

Implicit content of a single statement can still be controlled, reflected upon and independently judged. But the educational process includes many unspoken messages that combine into larger complexes of viewpoints, values and beliefs, which are difficult to untangle.

One type of implicit messages is composed of substatements. Sometimes, substatements are conveyed in metaphors. Let me show how a metaphorical substatement in a textbook can converge with a metaphorical substatement in a newspaper, producing or reactivating a dubious cultural representation:

(6) "At the end of the Middle ages our territories were hit by a wave of the refugees pushed to the north by Turks. Refugees from Bosnia settled on the southern part of Slovenian territory."

(from a Slovenian textbook of history)

(7) "The second wave of refugees, this time from Bosnia and Herzegovina, already poses serious questions. How far can our humanity go and to what extent are we obliged as a sovereign state to help our neighbors." (from a Slovenian newspaper)

The metaphor of 'wave' conveys the images of power, force, violence and suffocation from which we have to protect ourselves. Thus it implicitly tells the addressee that firm measures are needed.

Finally, I shall move to a **third provisional answer** to the initial question.

We are often inclined to think that, roughly speaking, history is composed of two parts: telling a story (i.e. describing what had happened) and interpreting it. If materia prima of history are stories then certain among those stories are more important than the others. These are stories of the origins of collectivities in which we live. We usually call them myths. These are delicate and dangerous stories. They may legitimize, while producing collective phantasms, what from some other point of view has no legitimacy.

Here is an illustration. Slovenian society is, in the sociological sense of the term, a relatively modern society. But just like any other society, a modern society has to provide for social cohesion. Stories of origin are always constitutive part of this endeavor. One of the central Slovenian stories of origin (myths) is about our land, in the sense of the French "la terre" or German "der boden". Although public opinion in the country is definitely in favor of the European integration processes there is also - like everywhere else in Europe - a weaker discourse favoring isolationist strategy. There, the story of origin is extensively exploited, in the sense that our land is presented as a target or an object of desire for other nations. A myth became ideologically active. What has this to do with education? In a history textbook we find a sentence:

(8) "Romans conquered our territory in the first century AD"

Then, on two pages of that textbook, 13 mentions follow of our territory and our land as part of the description of what Roman were doing on or with it - all that in the period when Slavic tribes were thousands of miles away and a Slovenian nation, as a condition for that possessive pronoun "our" to be justifiably used, still had to wait more than a thousand years to be formed. This bizarre use of egocentric or ethnocentric perspective can do nothing but reinforce dubious cultural representations connected with one of the stories of origin.