

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL VALUE OF A “VAGABOND” APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present the concept of “vagabonding” as part of an experiential learning program based on critical environmental education justified by the importance of “phenomenological deconstruction/reconstruction” processes in education. The speech of a particular historical period has a regulative/normative function that puts in motion the organizational mechanisms of a “common” social structure, especially through geo-cultural oriented production of knowledge and hierarchal strategies of power. Accordingly, the body of practical/theoretical knowledge that surrounds the concept of “environment”/“environmental” is characterized by an ongoing dispute that unfolds itself in a heterogeneous field of ideological formations that comprise a multiplicity of interests and social practices, putting into evidence the contradictory marks that exist between its discursive matrices. Within the spectrum of this dispute the discourse of “environmental knowledge” unfolds (mainly) within discursive practices of “environmental education”, “sustainability” and “sustainable development”, incorporating principles and values related to cultural diversity, social justice/equity/solidarity and economic, social and ecological sustainability. In this process, critical and, more recently, post-critical theories have gained strength globally over the last decades. However, in view of academic/scientific traditionalism/conservatism and the complexity of paradigmatic transformations, critical/post-critical discourses still find themselves at the margins (periphery) of the environmental field. On the other hand, examples of local practices (in rare cases national, regional and even global) based on critical/post-critical theories are increasingly frequent, and the dissemination of possibilities and limitations surrounding these practices is imperative to the continued development/legitimation of the theoretical bases of critical education (including in the environmental field). The aim of this paper is to present an example of such practice based on the “praxical” development of the concept of “vagabonding” in an experiential learning program based on critical environmental education, at the same time aiming to reinforce the importance/necessity of “phenomenological deconstructions/reconstructions” in educational processes. The concept of “vagabonding” is supported by perceptual/sensorial experiences “for being for the environment” through a phenomenological concept of time and space within a proposal of experiential learning. After working with a group of students and professors during a semester long academic unit in an Australian higher education institution we have concluded that experiences associated with the concept of “vagabonding” have a noteworthy potential towards an “ecophenomenological” approach to environmental education. A major part of the proposal stood on “putting in suspension” the idea of comfort and performance during the experiential learning program allowing a certain corporeal strangeness/dissonance in a constantly changing environment. This “corporeal dissonance” in front of a strange and mutating environment and the development of relationships that distanced the group from the objectives of physical performance created significant openings to discuss different aesthetic, ethical and political aspects that involve human(society)-world(nature) relations.

Keywords: experiential learning, critical education, environment.

1 INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The speech of a particular historical period has a regulative/normative function that puts in motion the organizational mechanisms of a “common” social structure [1], especially through geo-cultural oriented production of knowledge and hierarchal strategies of power [2]. Accordingly, the body of practical/theoretical knowledge that surrounds the concept of “environment”/“environmental” is characterized by an ongoing dispute that unfolds itself in a heterogeneous field of ideological formations that comprise a multiplicity of interests and social practices, putting into evidence the contradictory marks that exist between its discursive matrices [3].

Within the spectrum of this dispute the idea of an "environmental knowledge" evolves within the field of environmentalism unfolding in discursive practices of "sustainable development" or "environmental education" (amongst others). In this process it incorporates principles and values related to cultural diversity, social justice/solidarity and economic, social and ecological sustainability. Furthermore, aware of the dominant rationality in the field of science, these discourses are constantly trying to legitimate "alternative" strategies for the construction of an "environmental rationality". The construction of this rationality gains strength when environmental discourses are "incorporated" by other contemporary discourses, especially those that have already been somewhat successful in gaining social legitimation, for example, discourses in the field of science, economics, education and law. The synergy between environmental discourses and other (more legitimated) discourses can already be observed in some significant social contexts, such as technological innovations, community self-management practices, socioenvironmental rights, social movements, production of scientific/technological knowledge, curriculum development, pedagogical practices and other institutional spaces for interdisciplinary dialogues. The incorporation of the environmental dimension in different social contexts has become known as the "environmentalization" of social processes [4].

These processes of environmentalization are greatly influenced by historical discursive matrices that come from different areas of knowledge, among which critical and, more recently, post-critical [5] theories have gained force globally in the last thirty to forty years. However, academic/scientific traditionalism and conservatism as well as difficulties associated with the complexity of paradigmatic change still cast critical/post-critical proposals and practices to the margins (periphery) of the environmental/educational field. At the same time, we can observe increasingly frequent examples of local practices (and, in rare cases, national, regional and even global practices) built on solid pillars of critical/post-critical theories. A written history of the possibilities and limitations associated with these practices is essential to the continued development/legitimation of the theoretical bases of critical education (including in the environmental field) [6].

In view of that the aim of this paper is to promote the idea of "vagabonding" as part of an experiential learning program based on critical environmental education. This proposal is sustained/justified by the importance/necessity of processes of "phenomenological deconstruction/reconstruction" in educational practices. To this end, the paper will be divided into three main parts: a) firstly, we'll present theoretical elements that support the importance/necessity of processes of "phenomenological deconstruction/reconstruction" in critical educational processes; b) secondly, we'll develop the idea of "vagabonding" as part of an experiential learning program based on critical environmental education demonstrating how this can be potentially directed towards processes of "phenomenological deconstruction/reconstruction"; (c) the final considerations will be dedicated, especially, to the possibilities and limitations of this proposal.

2 "PHENOMENOLOGICAL DECONSTRUCTION/RECONSTRUCTION" AND CRITICAL EDUCATIONAL

Among the discursive matrices associated with the educational field and its diverse (con)texts, proposals and practices based on critical and, more recently, post-critical [5] theories have gained strength globally in the last forty years. These critical/post-critical proposals and practices are by and large based on calls for changes/transformations of elements that, in general, are constituted by and constituents of dominant social paradigms. In other words, these proposals/practices mainly claim for new/different ways of thinking, doing and being/existing that would entail true paradigmatic "turns".

In the environmental field, for example, "holistic" or "ontological" approaches influenced, especially, by Existentialist philosophical currents gain strength within the spectrum of critical and post-critical education sustained by the possibilities of a "corporeal turn" [7]. These approaches are built around the idea of the primacy of perception, which would imply in an integral/non-fragmentary and dialogic relationship between humans and the perceptive world. This would mean a strong connection with social justice and democratic education movements and a direct criticism of the (still dominant) approaches that, built around the idea of the primacy of reason, would be legitimating the mechanisms of production/dissemination of knowledge by reinforcing the symbolic and material structures of power, in this process naturalizing dominant social paradigms.

However, seeing that the ideals associated with critical (environmental) education still hold a marginal position in the educational field puts into evidence some of the limitations of critical theories. Men and women have socially "naturalized" a "fragmentary ontology" for centuries (mind-body; human-beings-world/nature/objective science; theory-practice) and our social structure has been built and developed

around these fragmentary principles (initially in the West/North and, more recently, globally). Moreover, there seems to be a series of “idealistic” premises commonly associated with critical approaches/frameworks, such as: (a) it is people’s ideas (or the fact that they have these ideas) that exclusively cause social behaviors; (b) all people have to do to change (transform themselves; “transcend”) is alter their ideas about what/who they are and what they are doing in the world; (c) that people are willing to listen to rational analyses about their lives and act accordingly [8]. Processes of social transformation/renovation or of paradigmatic change or philosophical “turns” depend on a complex “web” of sociological “happenings” and assuming a non-idealistic posture in this sense is one of the great challenges of truly critical theories.

Therefore the starting point to critical approaches would be necessarily associated with the idea of a “phenomenological deconstruction/reconstruction” [9] that potentially helps the individual to comprehend (through corporeal experiences) the mechanisms of force and structures of power that classifying/categorizing/legitimizing certain knowledge over others constitute the background setting for creating/inventing the idea of “reality” [1][2][8]. The phenomenological (corporeal) acknowledgment of the socially organized hierarchical systems of power coupled with an authentic/genuine “dissatisfaction” of people towards the dominant ideology can potentially drive paradigmatic/philosophical “turns”, including those that urge for educational/pedagogical approaches based on holistic/ontological frameworks.

3 A “VAGABOND” APPROACH TOWARDS PROCESSES OF “PHENOMENOLOGICAL DECONSTRUCTION/RECONSTRUCTION”

Seeing as a historically constituted phenomenon the field of leisure comprises a dialectic relation with society. This means that the same society that influences the developments of leisure as a social field (especially through disputes between social actors) is also questioned when it is confronted by the values that rise in leisure experiences. Understanding that leisure (as a social phenomenon) does not comprise a homogenous set of knowledge there is a multiplicity of interests that rise in leisure experiences, revealing the disputes surrounding the constitution of leisure as a social field as well as some of the discursive matrices that are behind these disputes.

In addition to the social call for leisure as a constitutional right and for the effective use of a time and space that can be chosen and that are not predetermined by social conditions, the consumption of leisure is also a strong evidence of the growing valorization of the field in the last decades [10]. The first decades of the twentieth century are marked by important renovations surrounding cultural manifestations as well as a fast growing industry that opened great new possibilities for the production and consumption of all kinds of material and symbolic assets. This was a milestone for the “leisure industry”. What followed was a growing dependence of people for the consumption of leisure as a “product”, especially after the popularization of television and the consequent enhancement of the use of propaganda [11].

This historical cultural dependence is also guaranteed by the capacity of the leisure industry (as of other industries) to adapt in front of new social phenomena, always opening new possible markets. This is evidenced, for example, by the very convincing propaganda directed towards the acquisition of special equipments for experiencing leisure activities. The “commoditization” of leisure put together with a created need for consuming that is associated, in the main, with an essentially capitalist way of life instigates a greater valorization of the utilized product than the lived experience. This creates an emblematic way of life associated to a determined social group that has in its universe the possibility of acquiring/consuming certain products that are not available to everyone. Indeed, this is one of the great contradictory expressions that exist in contemporary society: a life style that is accessible to only a few, but that is reference to a great many [12].

Another important issue surrounding leisure activities that reproduce the values of the leisure industry or that aim to “compensate” the stress of everyday life in general by creating in nature a supposedly “alternative” space associated with ideals like beauty and well-being is the consequente “running away” from daily life. This approach consolidates preservationist ideals and individualist behavioral changes commonly based on calls for environmental awareness that, in general, do not take into consideration the political roots of environmental problems, the transformation of a reality that is complex and the broader context of collective change[13].

However, if at the one hand leisure (as a social phenomenon) is susceptible to the (capitalist) ideals of production and consumption and, by not questioning these dominant social paradigms, contribute to

its legitimation, on the other hand leisure activities also have the potential to question the relations of production and consumption that constitute some of the main pillars sustaining the leisure industry [14]. Therefore the “intentionality” of the individual involved in the activity becomes a determining factor, defining intentionality as a corporeal-mundane and existential behavior where the signified world is constituted [15]. On a more optimistic point of view in front of the possibilities that open up with this last note about the participant’s intentionality, we can comprehend leisure as a “social practice”, which could be defined as a cultural element capable of promoting the consciousness of individuals through the experience of diversified cultural contents in a constructed time and space and having intentionality as fundamental dimension [16].

This possibility constitutes the backbone of pedagogical frameworks (including in environmental education) based on leisure activities, and it is based on this perspective that the idea of “vagabonding” can be a potentially interesting strategy directed towards the construction of processes of phenomenological deconstruction/reconstruction. It is important to point out that the idea of “vagabonding” is being developed by a group of researchers (including myself) associated with the “Education, Environment and Sustainability Faculty Research Group” at Monash University (Australia) and, in a more historical context, by Monash professor Phillip Payne.

The idea of “vagabonding” is anchored in perceptive/sensorial experiences with/for/in the environment through a phenomenological conception/notion of time and space and having experiential learning at the centre of the framework. Towards that end, the idea does not simply comprehend “getting rid of” objects/equipments used to “bring comfort” or to “improve performance” in corporeal experiences in nature; it comprehends also “getting rid of” or “putting in suspension” the very idea of comfort and performance in experiences with/for/in nature allowing a certain “strangeness” and a certain “corporeal dissonance”[9] in experiencing different environments. This “discomfort”/“dissonance” in a “strange” environment and the emergence of relations that distance themselves from objectives associated with performance tend to create interesting openings for the discussion of aesthetic, ethical and political[17] aspects surrounding the relations between human-beings (society) and the world (nature).

In fact, the choice for the term “vagabonding” is justified by the aesthetic, ethical and political aspects associated with notions of a “vagabond” time and space which involves relevant issues about people “being-ones-with-others-in-the-world”. In the social field of leisure, for example, the notion of “vagabonding” can potentially question the idea of a “vagabond time” as a non-productive time, shining a light on significant historical issues such as the industrialization of time and of leisure and the “productive” use of a “free” time in front of the globalization of a “fast life”. At the same time, by putting in evidence social/environmental justice ideals, a “vagabond” approach can potentially provide critical elements for the development of more just and equal societies.

However, considering the praxical (theoretical-practical) nature of educational processes, if the idea is that a “vagabond” approach can potentially contribute to the aesthetic, ethical and political “deconstruction/reconstruction” of human-nature relations, the experience must be constantly rekindled with discussions/practices that point out the relevant theoretical/practical developments that surround the historical background of these relations. This can be accomplished using different strategies, such as: a preparatory period before the experiential program with readings, group discussions and “familiarization” activities involving the praxis of vagabonding; the realization of activities during the experiential program that stimulate perceptive/sensorial/creative experiences surrounding aesthetic, ethical and political aspects of human-nature relations; these activities can be proposed by any participant of the program; activities realized after the experiential program that allow the remembering of key points that emerged during the program, including critiques/auto-critiques of the overall development of the program and possibly going back to some of the initial readings for potentially different interpretations.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Firstly, it is important to point out that the idea of “vagabonding” does not aim to replace other/different sportive or recreational leisure activities (including in nature), especially acknowledging that these can potentially develop different issues that are out of reach for proposals based on the idea of “vagabonding”. However, understanding that, in general, there is a historical process of “sportivization” [18] of leisure activities as well as a strong association between these activities and the leisure industry, the idea of “vagabonding” aims (especially through phenomenological deconstructions/reconstructions) to shine a light in the relations of power that are behind these

processes, thus questioning certain socially naturalized paradigms that get in the way of critical developments through leisure activities.

As previously pointed out, the comprehension of leisure as a social practice involves acknowledging the individual's intentionality as a major element in creating meaning for these practices. However, considering the social nature of human-beings, the individual's sociocultural experiences are essential in the constitution of the "background setting" that will sustain his intentionality. In other words, the limits surrounding an individual's intentionality are largely dependent on his sociocultural experiences. Therefore, the greatest contribution of experiential programs based on the idea of "vagabonding" is the potential "broadening" of this "background setting" making it possible for the individual to (perceptively/environmentally) incorporate a notion of time and space that can work in favor of deconstructions/reconstructions of socially naturalized elements.

On the other hand, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of proposals that aim to transform/transcend socially naturalized elements. Naturalization processes are corporeal, which means that the idea of a naturalized concept implicates that the individual reproduces it without questioning it or even knowing there is something to be questioned about it. Therefore, to presume that by getting in contact with or even experiencing a new concept the individual will necessarily change his behaviors can be a dangerous step towards idealistic educational proposals. On the other hand, to acknowledge these limitations when developing educational proposals can be an interesting step towards the potentially critical.

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