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Resistance to continuing education. Non-participation as a subversive act against the diktat of lifelong learning.

I would like to talk to you about some sections of a research, I recently finished. In my postdoctoral treatise I explored theoretical notions on resistance to continuing education. This issue is barely considered in educational science and moreover there is a lack of theory. Therefore in my research I articulate a critical theory of resistance to continuing education based on the negative dialectics of Theodore W. Adorno.

1 Starting point

The starting point for my research on resistance to education is about 20 years ago. Maybe some of you have similar experiences. In my first years as a student a message was kept repeating: “You are studying ‘adult education’ and you will get a master’s degree. But that’s not enough. You will get no job without having additional – in best case *a lot of* additional – competencies. You should add further qualifications in: presentation competencies, counselling competencies, economic competencies” And so on and so on. My first reaction was: “Why do I study for several years, when this counts nothing?” My second reaction was: “No, thanks! I’m not willing to meet these requirements! I will do my degree. I will learn a lot. I learn in different forms. But I never ever will attend additional courses!” This moment sparked my interest to do research on resistance to education. And it was fuelled by my critical view on education in the context of broader social and economic developments.

Since then I followed the issue in different forms. I cannot share all my thoughts here, but I would like to present you some findings, we can discuss afterwards. First I will give you a brief insight in negative dialectics. Second I ask, what that means for resistance theory and resistance to continuing education. Third I discuss the influence of domination on forms of resistance. And finally I stress the importance to link different shapes and different fields of resistance.

2 What is special about the negative dialectical perspective?

Now to the first point: What is special about the negative dialectical perspective? I don't know how familiar you are with negative dialectical thinking. I would like to introduce you to some basic ideas.

Negative dialectics is not an "invention" of Adorno. Instead it is a basis of materialistic philosophy since Marx, as Adorno shows. But Adorno elaborates the philosophical and epistemological grounding and some details of negative dialectics. Main points, to which I refer to in my theory, are: the negation, the indissolubility of contradictions, the non-identical and the thinking in constellations. Not to forget the also still relevant basics of critical theory: self-criticism, self-reflexion, ideology-critique and therefore radical social criticism and critique of domination. Critical theory argues thoroughly that research cannot and should not be objective. Research has to judge. Research is always political.

Anyway, negative dialectic thinking is thinking in complex interwoven conditions. It is thinking in boundaries and beyond. It is thinking in contradictions. It is the attempt to think unthinkable things. The interweaving can be illustrated using the example of the thinking person: Thinking processes and also feelings are social products and at the same time reproduce social conditions. Therefore even critical humans are part of the game and are products of social conditions and at the same time reproduce those social conditions. Therefore our thoughts are contaminated and have to be reflected critically as far as possible. In the manner of: "Don't trust your own thinking!"

But because of these interwoven conditions, because of these social limitations of thinking and because the future is seen as an open path, the thinking about a better society is done in terms of negation. We cannot be sure, what freedom will be like, but we can experience and analyse un-freedom. We cannot be sure, how equity will be like, but we know what inequity feels like.

With these thoughts about negation we are just in the middle of the negative dialectics. On the one hand negation is a judgment about social conditions. But on the other hand negation is the dialectical antagonism. Adorno points out that

positivism and positive dialectics not only underestimate the importance of negation. More importantly positive dialectics suppresses the negation, the “other” side. Therefore Adorno insists on the importance of negation. Distinct to idealistic dialectics, which entail a progress from thesis and antithesis to synthesis, Adorno elaborates that the negation of the negation does *not* lead to a new positive, but leads to a suppression of the negation. Therefore the synthesis is an instrument of domination. This is a crucial point in the negative dialectics. Because of this and because of the impossibility to think beyond our social limits, Adorno and other critical theorists insist on the importance of negation. The contradictions are not dissoluble. In our society they subsist at any circumstances.

Constellation and non-identity – two more relevant elements of negative dialectics – I will just touch briefly. With “non-identity” Adorno marks elements of society, of identity and of epistemology that are not detectable with human perception and terminology. Non-identity is part of the negation. It is a part of reality that cannot be identified, but nevertheless exists. Identifying would cut off important parts and would also be an act of domination.

To catch non-identity and to give negation and the antagonism space, Adorno evolves a “thinking in constellations”. Simplified it can be described as a stage in a theatre, which can never be illuminated completely. Instead a spotlight focusses on a part of the stage. Another spotlight focusses on another part of the stage. The combination of these pictures gives a clue of the whole scene, but there are still parts in the shadows, in the darkness. They are part of the game, but never can be seen. The whole, the entire scene can just be imagined by combining all parts. Adorno argues to be aware of these shadows and to try to fetch the whole by looking at a lot of parts. Research has to be done in the same manner: highlight and examine bits and pieces. Be aware of the shadows. And maybe, so Adornos word, the combination of numbers will open up the padlock and bear new knowledge.

All the described elements are part of a dialectical perspective. But one of the main elements I have to add: The contradiction, the negation and the non-identical are not only “the other”. They evolve simultaneously with the positive. Thesis and antithesis and all the nuances in between are not only two sides of the same coin.

They are not “both-and”. They are not first and then. They emerge deeply interwoven. With a view on the one you can see also the other. They exist “*just because of*” each other.

3 What does all this mean for the issue of resistance?

What does all this mean for the issue of resistance? Just some brief insights: In a negative dialectical perspective resistance exists *just because of* domination.

For the issue of resistance to continuing education the relationship between domination and resistance for example means: *Just because of* the hegemony of lifelong learning, *just because of* the social expectation to improve one’s qualifications over the life course, non-participation can be read as resistance. Put differently: *Just because* in courses of continuing education active learning is expected, non-learning or silent withdrawal can be read as resistance. Resistance to continuing education therefore can be read as dialectical negation, as a judging against the expectation and in some points against the utilitarianism of learning. Because resistance can be read as the negation of domination and dominant structures, I talk about resistance to education not in terms of motives, which would overemphasise the individualistic character of resistance. Instead I contrast interests of domination with *interests* of resistance.

The expectations are the basis to discuss especially hidden acts as resistance. Doing nothing or omit activity can only be read as an act and as resistance, when acting or activity is expected. The expectations in the field of continuing education can be visualised with the discussions about lifelong learning. In recent decades our minds were successfully infected with the idea, that lifelong learning is a necessary and inescapable task for all adults. The arguments revolve around job competition, global business competition and so on. The arguments purport individual efforts to be the solution for structural social problems. And they purport learning activities to be inevitable because social and economic developments are figured as law of nature.

But nevertheless there are still many adults, who do not participate in organized courses and who reject specific learning. Usually non-participation and non-

learning are discussed as results of obstacles, exclusion and inability. This is of course an important perspective, but some aspects of non-participation and non-learning can also be “read” as a refusal of the diktat of lifelong learning, as “resistance to (continuing) education.”

Research on resistance to education is rare and the hegemonic discourse in educational science is still ignoring this issue. (One of the first studies in Europe, maybe the first even was done in the UK by Paul Willis, published in his book “Learning to Labour. How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs”). Resistance to education as a refusal of participation and learning is underestimated and undertheorized, even in critical pedagogy.

4 Domination and forms of resistance

To examine resistance we have to take a look at the relationship between domination and forms of resistance. It is no surprise that the hegemonic ideology tries to “forget” resistance to education: Resistance puts the usefulness of the commodity labour power at risk. It calls the value of education and learning into question and therefore undermines a basis of bourgeois capitalist society. And it might be the expression of interests beyond adjustment and utilitarianism.

Now, critical theory in general and resistance theories in special elaborate that the structures of domination generate specific forms of resistance. Although resistance still mostly is put up in overt, loud, visible, maybe violent action, the newer research on resistance also takes notice of silent and invisible forms as demonstrated by this conference. This is not only because the awareness on these acts rises, but also because actual social conditions use indirect and hidden domination strategies. The cue is Foucault’s “governmentality”. Because of these new forms of domination also resistance takes new shapes.

Insightful thoughts we can find in the work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello about “the new spirit of capitalism”. They are well known for their assumption that critique is grabbed by the dominant class and co-opted, because it is useful to increase productivity. With this issue we meet the contradictoriness I will come back to shortly. Also interesting is the work of Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian

philosopher. One of his findings is that resistance does not have to be a conscious act, it also can be comprehended through its impacts or potentially impacts. For example in educational contexts we could reflect on this with slightly altered words from Carl Sandberg: "Sometime they'll give continuing education and nobody will come". Other insights we can gain from the research of Stephen Ackroyd and Paul Thompson about organizational misbehaviour. They gather lots of overt, but also hidden acts of workers in companies and argue that also acts like pilfering can be discussed as an important part of labor struggles. James C. Scott in his research on peasant resistance also shows the interdependence of dominance and resistance. But in his research, the resistance is not hidden, because of indirect forms of domination, but quite the contrary, because domination practices are violent and unhidden resistance is too dangerous, potentially lethal.

But silent, hidden forms of resistance are self-contradictory. They do not articulate their protest. They can be ignored by the dominant class. And therefore they unintentionally reproduce domination. In contexts of continuing education this is eminently precarious. Resistance to continuing education leads to disadvantages – although they also might exist without resistance. But empirical studies also show that resistant people accept the negative consequences (Bolder/Hendrich 2000). But the very precarious problem is: The resistance reproduces class status, but the people think it is their own free decision. Structures of dominance run the risk to be overlooked and the illusion of individual choice is fuelled. This contradiction is dissoluble, but we have to be aware of it.

5 Resistance to continuing education as a potentially social criticism

Now, what educational science can learn from the other research fields are differentiated findings about the meaning of hidden and silent forms of resistance. And these reflexions bring my presentation to the end.

In continuing education resistance is mostly hidden. It occurs as non-participation with no comment, as silent withdrawal. Even in learning situations it occurs as silent dropout or inconspicuous inactivity, less often as overt disruption. To understand and to examine resistance to education we need to link it not only to a

critique of domination but also to resistance theories that make visible that also hidden, silent, maybe subversive acts can be read as resistance.

But nevertheless resistance to continuing education should attain more attention. Although it is actual particularly an individual act, it has to be linked to other forms of resistance and social movements. And therefore I'm very glad to participate in this conference, because it is a first step towards this interconnection. Most of resistance research is not aware, that it is necessary to offer resistance also against education, especially against that continuing education, which represents capitalist interests. But resistance to continuing education is rarely seen as a political statement. And it brings education itself and the still strong bourgeois belief in education as a value in itself into question.

But we should link theories on resistance in all social fields – also resistance to continuing education. This has to go along with a reflexive awareness of different shapes of resistance but also of the inherent contradictions of resistance. Then it might be possible not only to strengthen resistance to continuing education but also to collectivise hidden forms of resistance. And I think this is necessary. Individual micro-practices are surely not enough. In political contexts it is very important to uncover silent and hidden resistance. But especially in the field of continuing education we need a reverse development to bring up possibilities of collective and overt resistance. Moreover, in all contexts we need associations of resistance to have the opportunity to overcome the domination of capital. We need manifold forms of resistance to counter different forms of domination. But most of all we need self-reflexivity on how acts really counter domination and on the contradictories and limits of resistance.

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