

Educational Utopias - A Philosophy of Intercultural Education

Sejny is a town on the Polish and Lithuanian border and has, like so many villages and towns in this area, a multicultural heritage extending back four hundred years. At the end of the C19th the town was 78% Jewish. The other 22% consisted of Poles, Lithuanians, Russian "Old Believers", Orthodox, Evangelicals, Tartars and one Spaniard! Now it is 90% Lithuanian and 10% Polish. The inexplicable cruelty and destruction of such a complex multicultural identity is the story of much of C20th Europe.

In 1990 The Borderland Foundation was set up by a group of artists and intellectuals from Warsaw led by Krzysztof Czyzewski, and twenty years later is a unique, mature and powerfully impressive force both locally and internationally. Everything the organisation does aims to promote an ethos of "borderland" and intercultural dialogue.

The Foundation is presently housed in the old Jewish quarter of Sejny. Indeed the offices, library, research centre, museum and performance spaces presently occupy the Synagogue, Yeshiva and Old Jewish Gymnasium, three neat buildings sitting in a row along the high street. As Bożen Szroeder, teacher and director from the Foundation said;

"We must live with it forever, not just abandon it. We must always be in the White Synagogue. And we must not shy away from telling the extreme stories associated with it."

I was present at the invitation of the Foundation to participate in two meetings. The first was a meeting of intellectuals and academics from around the world. Entitled "The New Agora Symposium" we spent two days discussing and rehearsing two central concepts and ideas arising from Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game* (and the name given to the second meeting).

"The Pedagogical Province of Bridge Builders" (a concept under construction) was approached from various angles during the symposium. But in many respects the debates returned to a series of concentric and overlapping concepts; the tasks for a pedagogy of the provinces is to teach critical reflection, but to do so in a specific way. As pedagogues we need to use, understand, exercise and analyse the power

being continually rehearsed between students and teachers, institutions and society and between cultures. We need to teach and be aware of “technocratic themes” (ie: we must teach accounting and management) but place the emphasis on (in the words of Professor Tadeusz Sławek) “accountability and not accounting”. Our teaching always needs to investigate the way The State recognises and funds education. We need to teach how not to choose the easy way out. And to quote Tadeusz on Henry James, “it is easy (and best avoided) to rejoice in the pretence of prosperity”. In this reflection on the symposium I wish to thank Tadeusz for his conceptualisation of this work.

What more can be said about the "Pedagogical Province of Bridge Builders"? Bridge Builders are teachers and not just architects and engineers. They are cultural animators and artists who place their learning and abilities at the service of those who need to build bridges; bombed bridges (as in Mostar) between one culture and another or from “the known self” to “The Other”, from internal to external or internal to internal to external to external.

I would say that the "Pedagogical Province of Bridge Builders" is also about using and reaffirming the need for Utopianism as a tool. I was deeply grateful to the conference for inviting me to lead a section of the symposium in order to explore how theatre and image can allow us to explore the real and utopian and explore Utopianism as a direction and not a place. I also talked at some length about the medieval Vice Figure's relationship to The Joker and other Bridge Building dramatic based pedagogies.

Should we teachers and pedagogues work from the hinterlands and the provinces as opposed to the “centre”? After all these years I am convinced that each one of us must find out what it means to be in the hinterlands. It may be an intellectual position of scepticism in relation to centres of power but it might also be a geographical place too. If this pedagogy aims to de-mechanise the process of learning (machines like to repeat outcomes) we need to be profoundly serious in describing and rehearsing it. We need to decline the offer to fit people into the system. I was struck by Tadeusz's quote from Dewey “on contemplation as a dramatic rehearsal”. It doesn't take any effort at all to turn the quote around and find a description for what many of us are most interested in doing; “dramatic rehearsal as an act of contemplation”. Tadeusz concluded his intervention with a spectacular series of concluding remarks which

have had a profound impact on my own reflections and thinking. He began by quoting from Finnegans Wake:

"Knock, knock. War's where? Which war? The Twwinns. Knock knock. Woos without! Without what? An apple. Knock knock. (330) "

If Joyce's language unsettles and creates a topsy-turvy sensation this is perhaps prolonged by the fact that the word "knock" in English describes a gesture made by a jester with his hand. The disrupting element re-enforced by the actor not just the language. Of course there is much to unearth and discuss here as carnival inhabits a similar terrain. If someone knocks at the door it can be an invitation to the occupant to leave the house. As those who do the knocking we pedagogues and cultural animators must accept the panic that this action often generates in the occupant. We must also accept that we are involved in a "wooing process" and that the gentle hand that is responding to our wooing asks, "where do I go now? How do we begin?"

The second part of the week (The Glass Bead Game) was an encounter between artists, academics and cultural policy specialists – participants in a series of "Laboratories of Intercultural Practices" from Azerbaijan, Bulgaria, Great Britain, Greece and Spain. A spectacular series of projects and investigations were presented and discussed in depth and moves to formalise the network discussed. I will post more about this in a day or two.

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