

The Narrative Problem of the Academy

Rasoul Nejadmehr

No doubt, the academy needs to reshape its established narrative and invent a new tale for itself. Primarily, this tale needs to embrace a polyphonic narrative makeup, as Mikhail Bakhtin (1982) would say, and take shape in critical dialogue with silent or subaltern voices, as Antonio Gramsci and following him Spivak would say, and their struggles for making themselves heard in the academy and in public settings. Such a dialogue should be committed to freedom, justice, and respect for otherness.

This narrative needs to go beyond the reification of Western reason that has dominated the academy since modernity. This means the academy needs to recognize other notions of reason are valid, including perspectives from women, people of color, and colonized people, especially as objectively expressed in art and philosophy. This is what I mean by objectivity: to see the world from as many perspectives as possible on an equal basis (Nejadmehr 2009, 2017). This understanding of objectivity requires a move away from white cultural hegemony and cognitive homogeneity, toward equality of perspectives and a creative contest between them. This objectivity opens up the cognitive enclosure that the academy is currently ensnared in, where a single perspective dominates knowledge production and dissemination as well as determines ethics and practices associated with research and education. To open up the cognitive enclosure means to challenge the hegemonic white academic being the exclusive subject of knowledge. Such a process empowers marginalized people and their knowledge perspectives by making them the subject of knowledge production and dissemination. Such an approach would counteract Eurocentric and masculinist common sense underpinning academic normalcy. The very act of questioning white privilege, manifests white privilege. However, there is a subterranean problem at work in the standard tale of the academy that gives it an exclusive character. I call the discrepancy between the academy's self-image and its reality the problem of the academy. A new narrative does not, however, emerge by itself. It demands critical effort to identify obstacles and to invent conceptual tools to overcome these obstacles. That is, the academy's good intentions to overcome these obstacles is insufficient.

As a conceptual tool for unveiling this subterranean problem, I suggest a distinction between the constituted foreground of education (i.e., science education), on the one hand, and its constitutive background (i.e., scientific education), on the other hand (Nejadmehr, 2009, 2017). Whereas the former signifies planned educational actions and procedures at the school

level (lectures, examinations, assessments, teaching methods, etc.), the latter refers to the hidden background of education, which is deeply rooted in presuppositions that condition any educational action and is beyond an educator's awareness. This unseen influence frames the background against which any educational action receives its significance and becomes intelligible. In other words, explicit daily educational ideas, practices, and discourses receive meaning through a tacit and to a large extent unchosen, unassessed, and unarticulated cultural, historical, linguistic, and social background situated in an historical world. To address the academy's subterranean problem, we must shift or focus from the foreground to the background. To examine daily educational practices against a historical background is to establish a systematic view of education. This systematic approach reveals three aspects about educational practices: 1) they are not neutral or natural, but historically constructed; 2) they are not necessarily objectively developed by educators but are at work on a subconscious level; and 3) they are entangled with other social practices. That is, because the academy is unaware of these three mechanisms and therefore cannot counteract them, what the academy's narrative says it is doing (i.e., functioning as an emancipatory institution) is not what it is actually doing (i.e., re-inscribing white hegemony).

Education is a social practice within a form of life. As such, it is socially constituted in a historical framework. Education is also entangled with other social practices such as politics, culture, and economics; together, they form interrelated systems of social practices. As an educational institution, the academy is a node of aggregated educational practices. However, in the neoliberal framework, economic metrics and principles have been extended not only to education but also to all social practices and spheres of life. To educate means the "economization of subjects by neoliberal rationality" (Brown 2017, 95) and to educate is to configure human beings as market actors or *Homo economicus*, a species concerned with its own self-interests, competing for financialized human capital. By overlaying market values onto educational values, education as a human right has been transformed into education as an investment related to enhancing one's future human capital. This model has become normalized as common sense, as if it is given by nature.

In his investigations of neoliberalism, David Harvey (2006) maintains the view that thought systems cannot gain hegemony without establishing a conceptual apparatus that underpins commonsense understandings: it is a small jump from a belief that a view is commonsense to a belief that a view is inevitable or natural. Such conceptual apparatuses appeal to human beings' values, desires, intuitions, and instincts and identify possibilities embedded in the life

world for satisfying these desires and values (Harvey 2006). Today, the academy is governed by ideology of new public management and related conceptual apparatuses that glorify ranking, entrepreneurship, competition, evaluations, and efficiency. These forces make it seem as if the appearance of market mechanisms in the academy are part of a natural condition or evolution. I call this phenomenon market enclosure: the academy's insulation from society and the predominance of neoliberal market norms and values that exclude values such as equality. The academy has lost sight of its public mission and succumbed to market models, designed to deliver training and research using the same model that informs how private companies deliver goods in a market.

The new narrative should not only explain how the academy problematizes specific forms of market and cognitive rationalities but also how it liberates itself from cognitive and market enclosures. The academy needs to go beyond good intentions and conduct inquiries that transcend rather than merely counteract explicit biases as often, although well-intentioned, educators merely re-inscribe the oppression they claim to oppose. Are the educators then part of the problem? Again, this is a subterranean problem, so adequate reflection and understanding demands critical distance. It demands de-familiarization of the familiar patterns of educational practices, from historical, ethical, epistemological, and ontological vistas; otherwise, these familiar patterns always escape critical reflection, remaining part of the landscape as if they were natural entities.

Historically, the academy needs to examine historically-constituted practices and heritages that have over time become "naturalized." These practices have become part of the academy's historical a priori or "second nature" and they behave as if they are unchangeable, immutable forces. To render current practices of knowledge generation and dissemination changeable, genealogical distance to the current educational paradigm needs to be created. This distance is necessary in order for the academy to critique its Eurocentric heritage, disrupt its oppressive effects, think differently, and act freely. To gain this freedom, I, following Colin Koopman (2013), suggest genealogy as a philosophical critique or problematizing of the current normative point of view. Rather than assuming established educational practices are best practices, genealogical critique interrogates them critically, philosophizing using a hammer as if it were a tuning fork, as Nietzsche would say. This critical perspective produces four results: 1) reveals historical contingency of current educational rationalities, norms, values, and practices; 2) reveals how these rationalities, norms, and practices emerged and developed into "second nature" of the current educators; 3) problematizes the present state of these

rationalities, norms, and practices; and 4) suggests alternative practices that are free from these problems.

Genealogical investigated, the pre-reflective and unquestioned background of contemporary education (i.e., scientific education) grew from the soil of Western modernity, where racial and colonial structures of superiority and inferiority were taken for granted. In addition, genealogical investigations reveal that Western heritages of racism, colonialism, and slavery persist as this heritage constitutes the tacit infrastructure of education. Therefore, the main concern becomes how the academy can shift its constitutive background. Because these implicit racist and colonial biases are embedded in the current educational foundation, we are at an impasse when it comes to equality between social groups, justice, fairness, and dialogic relations between cultures and knowledge perspectives.

Education under neoliberal rationality has dimmed cognitive inequalities under the spell of rational choice theory. Such a condition makes it difficult to establish just institutional practices much less just relationships with others, a situation that results in asymmetrical conditions for dialogue. Under these conditions (established by white academic rules), dialogue becomes intracultural rather than intercultural irrespective of the academy's good intentions. This inability to establish intercultural dialogue is attributable to the fact that Western structures of colonial and racial dominance underlie the narrative problem of the academy as well as the solution for the problem. To address this conundrum, genealogical investigations problematize this practice and move the academy to examine its colonial assumptions and tacit Eurocentric biases. These assumptions and biases could be discussed in terms of critical enclosure. Since the Enlightenment, criticism has been known as an intra-West and intra-white practice, as colonial modernity has questioned whether non-Europeans can properly bring to bear the faculty of reason.

Kant (2007b) divided humanity into educable white Europeans and the uneducable others. For Kant, human beings become humans through education, and he believed that non-Europeans had barely reached this stage in humanity's development (2007a). Similarly, Hegel saw non-Westerners as "failed Europeans" who are unable to develop a capacity for self-criticism, self-consciousness, and abstract thinking (Pinkard, 2017). They inaugurated a one-directional narrative, starting from pre-modern or non-modern ways of life, resulting in white Europeans as the peak of progress, educational advancement, and development. This story is still at work in the academy. Furthermore, this is a story of oppression as it justifies the claim that the "others" should be integrated into "us" westerners in order for them to become fully

developed humans. The normative perspective of the academy is to justify, implicitly or explicitly, the claims that the Western academy is the zenith of human progress and the peak of cumulative cognitive processes. Moreover, the defenders of this view believe that the academy's progress reflects universal achievements worthy of preserving and objective enough to shape normative perspectives of the academy itself.

Ethically, the academy needs to transcend an ethic of good and evil and embrace an ethic of collective action and transformation through dialogic processes – i.e., transformation of the academy through transformation of educational structures and institutions. To fail to include others in a dialogue concerning justice is not only ethically suspect but also dangerous. Therefore, this critique of the academy's biases is a call to action.

Genealogical philosophical approaches can be connected to aesthetic perspectives as they move beyond the scientific perspective into the arts. As the silent background of scientific education is preverbal and beyond consciousness, we need the perspective of art to critique the way science operates. Indeed, art manifests this silent background by showing the background rather than by merely presenting it through words and propositions. Art can bring about an understanding that cannot be reached through written or spoken language, but that can be recognized, perceived, and apprehended intuitively, almost instantaneously. In other words, art “discloses” pre-propositional presence of the tacit background of education. In *Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche sees the preverbal background of life as the Dionysian abyss that works beneath the surface of life, offering verbal life vitality through the arts. Starting from such a view, he suggests we look at science from the perspective of the artist and to look at art from the perspective of life, since the problem of science (or scientific education) cannot be recognized in the context of science itself. The point that I am trying to make here is that we need a perspective outside scientific education to grasp that scientific education has a problem. Analogically, we need a perspective from outside the academy to grasp the problems inside the academy.

In addition to creating distance from the constitutive background of education through genealogical and aesthetic critique, changing the demographic character of the academy is essential for dismantling its white domination. In other words, such a task needs the critical perspective of non-whites. For a healthy academic milieu, the academy needs to embrace the complex demographic makeup that stems from global mobility and migration as well as to encourage dialogue between the different knowledge perspectives. As Charles Mills (2017) maintains, “white privilege” explains white academics' disengagement with and silence on

issues of imperialism and race. The need is not only to narrate anew, but also a new subject of the narrative, where things are seen and narrated from a new perspectives. Analogous to women's entry into the academy, the entry of people of color into it would itself be an important step towards a new narrative by opening the critical enclosure through the questioning the exclusivity of white reason and its related narratives. This change is in line with the ontological approach to education, where I suggest we need a practical engagement with education instead of a cognitive one; education needs to be practically delinked from racism and colonial legacies rather than merely being theoretically aware of the harm racism and colonial discrimination causes. Without such a transformation, teachers will continue to enact the hegemonic educational ideas and reforms, leading to new versions of the current educational paradigm.

It is not enough to bring into the light the implicit biases of educational practices. Rather, the academy needs to transform education in a way that enables the academy to act free from its historical heritages such as colonialism. The corollary questions are about perspective rather than profession. These questions demand a shift in the established cultural, educational, and epistemic beliefs, where racialized, disadvantaged, and subordinated people are the subject of education or empowered rather than to improve professional skills of educators within these cultural and epistemic frameworks, while oppressed people are the object to be shaped.

Because few oppressed people are part of the academy, the perspectives of the oppressed are mainly expressed as theoretical concepts rather than as real issues. This deficiency can only be changed by recruiting and including more people from these populations in the formal structure of the academy. Since there is no all-encompassing cognitive point of view from which the academy can address the interests of all, the academy needs to actively develop strategies for including marginalized people as students, educators, and administrators. Intra-academic criticism, although necessary, is not sufficient. To write a new narrative, there has to be an interplay between self-criticism of the academy's basic assumptions from the inside and external perspectives from the outside. Is such an interplay possible given the current demography of the academy? Obviously not.

References

Bakhtin, M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

- Brown, B. (2017). "Neoliberalism and the Economization of Rights", in in Penelope Deutscher & Cristina Lafont, eds. *Critical Theory in Critical Times; Transforming the Global poetical & Economic Order*, New York: Columbia University Press, 91-116.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979*, Trans. G. Burchell, and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kant I. (2007a). "Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View." *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Emanuel Kant; Anthropology, History, and Education*. Eds. G. Zöllner and R. B. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 227–429.
- Kant, I. (2007b). "Lectures on Pedagogy". *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Emanuel Kant; Anthropology, History, and Education*. Eds. G. Zöllner and R. B. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 434–427.
- Kant, I. (2007c). "Observation on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime." *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Emanuel Kant; Anthropology, History, and Education*. Eds. G. Zöllner and R. B. Loudon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 18–62.
- Koopman, C. (2013). *Genealogy as Critique; Foucault and the Problems of Modernity*; Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Milles, C. (2017). "Criticizing Critical Theory" in Penelope Deutscher & Cristina Lafont, eds. *Critical Theory in Critical Times; Transforming the Global poetical & Economic Order*, New York: Columbia University Press, 233-250.
- Nejadmehr, R. (2009). *Education, Science and Truth*, New York: Routledge.
- Nejadmehr, R. (2017). "The Problem of Scientific Education". *Confero*, Vol. 5, no. 1, | 2017 pp. 71-173.
- Nietzsche, F. W. (1999). *The Birth of Tragedy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pinkard, T. (2017). *Does History Makes Sense; Hegel on the Historical Shapes of Justice*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.