

# Critical Education vs. Education for rent: a false dilemma?<sup>1</sup>

ANDRÉS FRANCISCO OLIVAR ROJAS<sup>2</sup>

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 Traducción: María Del Pilar Gutiérrez, Departamento de Idiomas - Universidad de Manizales

## Abstract

This paper outlines the discussion about *critical education* or *education for development* concepts, explained by different authors. According to diverse conceptualizations, education for development must focus in building revealing discourses of power and their relationships between the hegemonical north, whose epistemologies meet economical logics of globalized countries, and the hegemonized south, whose epistemologies meet development models unconnected to power cores of center countries. In that sense, arise in Latin America, a dichotomy about the model development choice. In front of this, appears Martha Nussbaum's theory about education centered in humanities as a likely way out to the exposed dilemma.

**Key words:** Critical education; Education for development; For-profit education; For-humanities education.

## 1. Introduction

The world of the academy likes to put everything in crisis. Either because it is an ethical imperative, because of snobbery or idleness, the social and human sciences are constantly revising their theories that, with time, by force of use and abuse, become dogmas or propaganda.

There is a particular concept that has been used throughout the spectrum of social and human sciences: development. From the economy and politics, also passing through education, it is a category of analysis that, by the broad, is useful for the reflection of social problems. According to Solano, development "(...) is part of an incredibly powerful semantic constellation" (2011, p. 93). Within this *semantic constellation* one can glimpse the star of *education for development*, which can be associated with the so-called *popular education*, *education from the south* or *critical education*.

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2 Assistant Professor, Social Work and Social Communication-Journalism Program, UNIMINUTO, Girardot Regional Center. Master in Political Studies, Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Bogotá. Communicator social-journalist, UNIMINUTO, Girardot Regional Center. Email: aolivar@uniminuto.edu.co, andresolivar1@gmail.com

First, it is necessary to answer what is meant by *critical education*. Patiño defines educate (thus, in infinitive, not in noun, and without surnames), as “(...) adapting man to the environment in which he was born and transmitting a series of values and knowledge, typical of the society to which he belongs” (2014, p. 2). In that sense, it is assumed that education is a fundamental part of the process of socialization and adaptation of human beings to the social system. It is inferred, then, that education and educational institutions are guarantors to avoid social deviation and frame individuals for the stability of the system.

However, education is the one that ends up adjusting to the social order, not the other way around. Just as the passage from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age meant the leap from theocentrism to anthropocentrism and the triumph of reason, in our times the education that is privileged is that which forms for the technical-scientific disciplines, to the detriment of the arts and the humanities.

I intend in this essay to raise the relationship between critical education, education for income and education for the humanities, the last two categories outlined by Martha Nussbaum in her book: *Nonprofit: Why democracy needs the humanities?*

## 2. The *critical*: between utopia and reactionary existentialism

Beyond operative definitions of what *critical* means, Estanislao Zuleta (1995) said that it was criticized for “putting in crisis”. Hanging the surname *critical* to any noun (critical thinking, critical education) became commonplace in academic circles, particularly on the left. If criticism is to put in crisis, the critical discourses of the left are in charge of questioning truths that the ideological establishment is in charge of naturalizing in the construction of normative discourses. However, these critical discourses oscillate between worlds, or that has never existed, or that it is necessary to build. However, the second, valuable as it is, is not based on the principle of reality. That is to say, the worlds imagined by some sectors of the left project themselves without a practical correlate that gives them strong and deep foundations.

When speaking of education with the adjective *critical* it is necessary to think of the educational institution, in general, as a reproductive device of ideologies of the ruling class. It is based on the basis, then, that education cannot be a perpetuating mechanism of injustice, but a tool for the liberation of man.

To speak, then, of education for development, means to rethink the category *development* as it is understood from Latin America. Solano is responsible for tracing the genealogy of development, its uses and its implications in the political, economic and social order. Following this author, the definition of development of which part has a strong political support, because it needs it as “(...) the way in which we decide how and why to organize ourselves as a society with the spirit of living collectively and in harmony” (2011, pp. 94-98).

In order not to result in the transformation of the concept of development that Solano (2009) draws up, it will be affirmed, for the time being, that the frame of reference in which

development is framed is the form of government called democracy. In addition, that modern democracy implies the use and enjoyment of individual freedoms, such as freedom of expression and freedom of the market. Then, to speak of market freedom is to speak of capitalism as an economic model and form of wealth accumulation, which privileges the market as a regulator of supply, demand and the establishment of prices.

It follows from the above, that if the form of government privileged in the West is liberal democracy, and the economic model is free market capitalism, the countries with the largest accumulation of capital and the highest levels of industrialization and technical change are the ones that guide the development model.

Latin America, with respect to the Eurocentric development model, is understood as a region *backward, premodern*, without social cohesion and destined to suffer authoritarian or populist governments, depending on the situation. The processes of European colonization, not only in America but also in Asia and Africa, left a trail of violence that leaves its shadow to this day. Radical Islam, to cite a single example, is nothing more than a monster created by the Western powers after their departure from Asia and Africa. Check a map of Maghreb Africa, have you noticed that the borders appear to be drawn with a square? This is an inheritance from the colonial past that left some limits arbitrarily sketched by the powers, ignoring that within a territory there could be no cultures, ethnic groups, clans or tribes that did not share binding values. Thus, Catholic and Muslim regions coexist in a single country, which cannot coexist in harmony, since the process of Western secularization is a fact that has not occurred in those regions of the world.

Thus, interculturality emerges as a category of analysis that makes development more complex, since coexistence among cultures can become a catalyst for development or its main fence. The case of Latin America is paradigmatic. Let us see.

Catherine Walsh (2007) raises the relationship between interculturality, coloniality and education. His thesis is that education is a device that legitimizes a Eurocentric epistemological discourse that ignores the particularities of the region:

Speaking of an 'order of knowledge' (...) enables us to go beyond educational policies or the curricular proposal, and consider how the educational institution has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the colonization of minds, to the notion that Science and epistemology are singular, objective and neutral, and certain people are more apt to think than others (p. 28).

The legitimizing positivist discourse of Western epistemology focuses on three great metanarratives, which were those that in turn gave life to Modernity as an ideological project in the West: democracy, capitalism and instrumental reason. From the Frankfurt School, at the beginning of the 20th century, the critical voice of Modernity rose up and put its finger on the wound of the catastrophes that the supposed Enlightenment brought, like the two world wars. This type of critical discourses raise the voice against the contradictions of Modernity. In the name of democracy, for example, life styles that suppose social homogeneity are imposed. In the name of capitalism, the distribution of

goods and services is left to the mercy of *laissez faire-laissez passer*, and in the name of instrumental reason, natural resources are used not only to exploit them, but also to exploit peasants and indigenous people who live on the surrounding lands, which have for them a value not only instrumental (read, to satisfy needs), but also spiritual and affective. Nevertheless, for the techno-scientific discourse that predates natural resources, this discourse of interculturality is an empty signifier.

### 3. Conclusions: democracy, humanities and beyond instrumental reason

In the face of the problem of the excesses of instrumental reason, two alternatives are posed: one, the destruction of the hegemonic model of development, or the humanization of the model. This is where the purely political character of the development variable is glimpsed, because its meaning and its use have implications in the way of living together, to guarantee minimum of harmony and coexistence. Walsh's position is similar to that of theorists like Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2009), who coined the concept of "southern epistemologies" to build a development model based on interculturality and decoloniality, that is, construction of a discourse and an ethos based on non-Eurocentric knowledge, but on ideological articulations located in the particularities of Latin America.

Martha Nussbaum (2010), on the other hand, without ever mentioning the words *development* or *development model (s)*, puts the accent on the dehumanization of education. This is where you can articulate Nussbaum's theory with critical education. I start from the fact that the position of the thinker does not have the ideological load of the theories of Walsh or Sousa Santos. Despite this, their contributions can contribute to thinking about development from the *humanization of democracy*.

Education must have two purposes: one, sharpen the intellect to stimulate critical thinking and two, provide tools to access goods and services. The first dimension is humanistic, the second is technical, and both are fed back, they are not excluded. Critical thinking is the ability to question truths that are irrefutable, so it must be a crosscutting mechanism throughout the educational process. I start from the premise, together with Nussbaum, that the arts, the humanities and the social sciences are essential for the formation of critical thinking, and that the excesses of instrumental reason are due, primarily, to the gradual dismantling in the curricula of subjects linked to the arts, humanities and social sciences.

Patiño relates (2014), an observation of the Viceroy Caballero y Góngora about the education of his time:

(...) The whole plan is directed to subsisting the useful exact sciences, rather than the merely speculative, which, unfortunately are sterile, because a kingdom full of very precious productions to use; of mountains to be cleared, roads to open, swamps and mines to be drained, water to direct, metals to be purified, certainly need more researchers who know and observe nature and manage

the calculation, the compass and the rule, that of those who understand and discuss the being of reason, the first matter and the substantial form (p. 261).

It follows that since the eighteenth century there has been a discussion around the usefulness of knowledge. Discussing the usefulness of knowledge means defining what content are useful for the individual and for his or her surrounding world. In this sense, if we stick to the needs of today's world, the paradigm of economic globalization requires national economies to overcome the export model of raw materials and move to the model of production of goods and services that tends to technological change, which succeed, in successfully inserting developing economies into the process of globalization. That is, to go from exporting coffee, oil and bananas to producing and exporting state-of-the-art technology.

In this way, if we stick to this imperative, the formation of human capital will focus on disciplines of the basic sciences and engineering. Does a *software* developer need to recite Pablo Neruda's General Song? As former president Mariano Ospina Rodríguez said, "nobody has found gold mines in the Parnassus".

The question is not to lose democracy as a frame of reference, our form of government. This democracy requires enlightened citizens to function, since they are the ones who choose the political class, who will then make decisions that interest and affect everyone. If corruption exists in a democracy in which there exists, poorly enough, informative pluralism and surveillance of the media (some) and citizenship, how would it be in a society where all citizens turn their backs on the public thing?

The merely technical, instrumental training aimed at the productivity of income, numbs the intellect and nullifies critical thinking. As Nussbaum says:

Young people from all over the world, from any country that is fortunate enough to live in a democracy, should be educated to be participants in a form of government that requires people to be informed about the essential issues they will have to deal with, either as voters or as elected or appointed officials (...). In my opinion, cultivating the capacity for reflection and critical thinking is essential to keep democracy alive and on alert. The ability to think appropriately about a wide variety of cultures, groups and nations in the context of the global economy and the many interactions between groups and countries is essential for democracy to be able to deal responsibly with the problems we suffer today as members of a world characterized by interdependence (2010, p. 29).

Note that Nussbaum does not propose the opposition to globalization / identity, as can be deduced from Walsh or Sousa Santos's statements, in which concepts such as decoloniality imply talking about a hegemony-antihegemony relationship, projected from the North's political and epistemic power relations towards the South.

The arts and humanities develop a fundamental ability for critical thinking: argumentation. Within philosophy, for example, it is rhetoric the one that teaches how to use language to persuade audiences. Therefore, we could expand here on how literature and cinema help us to know other worlds and cultures, and how that knowing forces put myself in the place of

the other. Nobody undressed with more precision the human condition, than William Shakespeare in his tragedies.

Understanding the arts and humanities as mere accessories, typical of an elite as well as unemployed, has contributed to the gradual process of dehumanization and exacerbation of instrumental reason. You cannot have critical thinking if you are unable to understand what is happening in your world. Critical education happens, then, to sharpen the intellect and generate empathy. From there one can speak of a truly human development.

Watch the movie *El abrazo de la serpiente* (Embrace of the Serpent), and notice how art has the ability to generate empathy and knowledge of context, as well as aesthetic enjoyment.

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