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Objectives

The purpose of this paper is to consider the curricular possibilities for critical educators in a context of rising populism. Recent results in democratic processes (e.g. US and the Brexit Referendum in the UK) have been seen as symptomatic of a resurgence of populism in Western societies (Zaslove, 2008). Defined as an ideological, practical or discursive division of social and political spaces into opposing groups, 'the people' and 'the elite', the rise of populism is understood by some as a democratic challenge and by others as a democratic opportunity (Canovan, 1999; Martinelli, 2016). The question some radical educators pose is how to 'react' to this rise of populism. This paper addresses this question by introducing the political analysis of Ernesto Laclau.

This paper considers these possibilities by looking at the example of Catalonia (Spain). Since 2010, Catalonia has lived an intensive nationalistic-separatist mobilization (Cramer, 2014). The Catalan separatist discourse is here understood as a legitimate political position that we identify as 'populist' only because it divides the social spaces between the Catalan 'people' and the 'established' (Spanish) 'order'. In this context, we draw upon questionnaire and interview data with secondary students (n=339) to illustrate three possible 'reactions' (acceptance, rejection and challenge) towards the 'populist' construction of the Catalan 'people'. We discuss the challenges and possibilities of these three perspectives if undertaken by critical educators.

Theoretical Framework

The role of radical educators on generating collective identities –as “the people” - is contested. For some, the project of critical education is the project of challenging hegemonic discourses that hinder the real order and political identities associated with it (e.g. Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2005; McLaren & Garamillo, 2008). Against these views, concerns have been raised about the impossibility of having access to the 'covered real order'. How do we know, Gur-Ze'ev writes, that “their self-evident knowledge is less false than that which their oppressors hold as valid” (2008, p. 69)? Critical educators who assume that students have access to “real knowledge”, including political identities, risk sliding into the stance of an “easy optimist” (Biesta, 2016; Gur-Ze'ev, 2008; Slott, 2002). If, in contrast, educators attempt to develop in students the political consciousness that might challenge structures of domination, they risk adopting a position of arrogant paternalism by assuming that they have a better world vision (Biesta, 2016; Ellsworth, 1989). To overcome these challenges, Biesta (2016) suggests a critical education project understood as a counter-practice, not “designed out of an arrogance that it will be better than what exists” but “to show (to prove, Foucault says) that the way things were was only one (limited) possibility” (2016, p. 322).

Laclau's theory of politics can shed light on the ways in which 'counter-practice' could be understood in a context of rising populism. Political identifications, Laclau and Zac (1994) argue, are the result of human subjects failing in their attempts to complete an understanding of themselves. Individuals feel obliged to assume political identities not because they provide the right answers, but because they provide some answers to our unsolved questions. Any form of education potentially produces political identifications. By creating “concrete contents”, education contributes, either covertly or openly, to the production of identities that help students, teachers, policy-makers, etc. to navigate our complex realities.

External political identities, in Laclau's account, have two main characteristics. First, they are antagonistic (Ruitenberg, 2010). Individuals do not only construct their identities in relation to, but also in “opposition” to, others”. That is, through processes of identification we establish a political frontier between the 'we' and the 'other'. Further, it is, precisely, this 'other' that allow the

existence of the 'we'. Antagonism outside the community lower unavoidable differences within the community and enhance similarities. Second, external political identities are empty. For Laclau, well-established identities, are attempts to fulfil our originary void. But in order to perform this role, these identities need to be "empty signifiers" (Laclau, 2007a). They need to be words, signs, images without meaning until "they are combined with other signs that fill them with meaning" (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002, p. 32). Particular discourses on an identity provide (contingently) the content and the meaning of the identity. When we identify with a particular identity, this identity fills our void but we fill this identity with our personal traits and practices as individuals. When an educator or a student identifies as 'the people', her discursive practices are also contingently providing content for the 'populist' empty space. "This is a process of mutual contamination", writes Laclau (2000, p. 70): political identifications are not a "purely submissive act on the part of the subject" but, on the contrary, any act of engagement "destabilizes the identity of the object" (Laclau & Zac, 1994, p.14). We are here not far from the educational project deriving from the work of Hall (1997) (Apple, 2015; Clarke, 2015). Schools can be here understood as settings of simultaneously reproduction and production of discourses on 'the nation', 'the democracy', 'the people', etc. (Darder, 2016; Mårdh & Tryggvason, 2017; Szkudlarek, 2011).

Methods

This research was conducted in 2014 at a time when 'populist' discourse on independence had become hegemonic (Cramer, 2014, CEO, 2014). The hegemonic discourse on independence had created a political frontier between the Catalan 'people' and the Spanish 'elite', between the "we" and the "other" (author, 2015, 2017). 'The people', as an empty signifier, also included discourses self-government, linguistic rights, participatory democracy and economic prosperity (author, 2015, 2017). Discourses on independence were also dominant in institutional educational resources, teachers' materials and students' accounts (author, 2015, 2017; Santisteban, 2013).

In this context, students' identification with the Catalan 'people' were examined. Data was collected through open questionnaires and interviews. Students were requested to discuss the groups with which they identified and their understanding of the Catalan nationhood. (For a more detailed account, see author, 2015, 2017). Secondary students (339) responded to the questionnaire and among them, fourteen students holding different views on the 'Catalan people' were interviewed. We did not intend to obtain a representative sample but rather to examine in detail few cases. Students' discourse, as evidenced in the questionnaires and interviews, was discursively analysed following the guidance provided by Jørgensen and Phillips (2002). More detailed accounts of the findings have been presented somewhere (author, 2015, 2017). Here we use three distinctive extracts of this data (a student accepting, rejecting and challenging the discursive hegemonic construction of 'the people') to illustrate and discuss the challenges and possibilities of each approach.

Provisional Findings

We claim our independence... (Carlota)

"In Catalonia, we were independent and they took everything from us in 1714. They abolished our laws, and we stopped being independent because the Spaniards took it from us. And now we are part of Spain. We celebrate our national day each 11th of September since then and we claim our independence, because if we had it, there would be fewer injustices".

Carlota, 13 years.

Carlota can be considered an example of appropriation of a hegemonic discourse on 'the people'. The "we", in Carlota's case, is clearly represented by the Catalan nationhood. This is explicit in her use of the first-person plural. She mentions "In Catalonia, we were...". This community is implicitly considered to be cohesive. In the way she describes her political world, all Catalan people are seen to celebrate the national day and all Catalan people are seen to claim their independence. The antagonism, in Carlota's account, is kept outside. The student establishes a clear political frontier between the "we", the Catalan people, and the "other", the Spaniards. In Carlota's account, all demands are implicitly posed to the Spaniard elites. They abolished the Catalan laws. As described by Laclau, "the national minority will see all the antagonistic forces as equivalent threats to its own identity" (2007b, p. 14). Thus, if Spain is taken from Catalonia –this is the independence-, "there would be fewer injustices". Carlota not only draws a political frontier, but she also wishes this frontier to physically materialize.

I don't care... (Andrea)

"My mother is from Barcelona and my father is from Malaga. I am from B¹ but I identify myself as "Malagueña".

(...)

Each eleventh of September they celebrate that they were defeat. (...) I don't care whether or not they become independent providing they allow me and my people to live in peace.

(...)

I do not identify as Catalan".

Andrea, 15 years.

Andrea is here understood as an example of resistance to the hegemonic discourse. She explicitly manifest "I do not identify as Catalan". But Andrea simultaneously recognizes and resists the hegemonic discourse. Similarly to Carlota, Andrea implicitly presents a community in which they all "celebrate" and they all might "become independent". Andrea recognizes the political frontier of the discourse on independence as the hegemonic frontier. She accepts it. However, Andrea cannot identify with the "we" created through this frontier. She understands the Catalan people to be constructed in opposition to the Spaniards and in this frontier she places herself as "Malagueña" – a village outside Catalonia- and therefore as the "other". Andrea refuses the hegemonic discourse but she does not challenge it.

We, the people (Adrià)

"We now speak our language, Catalan, because of us, not thanks to the politicians, because politicians do not care whether we speak Catalan or Spanish. We, the people, are the ones who want our language.

(...)

I would demonstrate to demand the Catalan independence, I want it... But, I would not gain anything, because those who decide are those who are 'uppers' and although we demonstrate several times, we might help a bit, but not a lot."

¹ B is here used to represent a small village within Catalonia

Adrià represents an example of challenge to the hegemonic discourse on 'the people'. In the independence discourse, the frontier separates the "we", the Catalans, from the "they", the Spaniards. In Adrià's account, the frontier separates the "we, the Catalan people" from the "powerful other", regardless of them being Spanish, Catalan or European. If, in Laclau's theory, "difference=identity" (2007b, p.38), in the hegemonic discourse, the Catalan identity is "non-Spaniard" whereas in Adrià's account it is "non-powerful". Adrià resists the hegemonic discourse. He cannot identify with the united Catalan nationhood as hegemonically constructed because this identity includes those he perceives to be on the other side of the political frontier. He cannot identify with a group that includes his own antagonists. Adrià, in contrast with Andrea, does not accept the political frontier as his own. The way in which he constructs "we, the people" challenges the way this "we" is constructed in the independentist discourse. 'The people', in Adrià's account, are not the "non-Spaniards" but the "non-powerful" ones. Adrià not only resists the hegemonic discourse but also challenges it. He "contaminates" the empty signifier of the Catalan 'people' with his own alternative meaning. He "destabilizes the identity of the object" (Laclau & Zac, 1994, p.14).

Scholarly significance

How can Laclau's theory be deployed in critical education understood as counter-practice? First, educators can interrupt, if they consider it appropriate, the 'people'. The interruption does not imply a rejection or an acceptance of 'the people' but an attempt to replace the particular 'populist' discourse with an alternative discourse. In the examples presented, it is Adrià, who identifies with 'the people' but challenge the political frontier dividing the "we" and the "other", who destabilize how 'the people' is constructed. In line with Apple (2015), the project of critical education in a context of rising populism might be to "both understand and interrupt the Right" and its 'populist' construction (p. 172). Second, educators can guide students to decode the rules of the game. Teacher educators might assist student teachers and teachers in encouraging students to examine the emptiness of political signifiers (e.g. "the people") and its genealogical construction. Further, educators can encourage students to understand the logic of frontiers in particular political landscapes (Ruitenberg, 2009), to understand, as Biesta (2016) argues, that any political frontier is only one of unlimited possibilities of dividing the "we" from the "others".

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