Humanizing Education in the Soviet Union: A Plea for Caution in These Postmodern Times

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ABSTRACT: In this article, the author problematizes the process of “humanizing education” in the era of perestroika and glasnost. Identifying herself as a “democratic socialist,” Kohli invites her Soviet colleagues to acknowledge the criticisms of liberal capitalism before they move headlong in that direction. In deconstructing such taken-for-granted concepts as individualism, democracy, market economy, and community, Kohli suggests that both the West and the East could benefit from re-visiting their respective revolutionary traditions at this crucial historical time.

KEY WORDS: humanizing education, participatory democracy, individualism reconsidered, postmarxist democracy

PROLOGUE

This is part of a continuing conversation with my colleagues in the Soviet Union who are grappling with the momentous changes ongoing there. In several visits to the USSR over the past four years, I have found myself in the awkward position of being one of the few defenders of democratic socialism in the circles in which I travel. This is understandable given the way socialist principles and practices were distorted by the Soviet Communist Party bureaucracy over the past seventy years. If I were a Russian or a Georgian, I too might react against anything remotely resembling socialism and head toward its perceived opposite – liberal capitalism. And it is possible that I would be in the streets demanding more freedom and more eggs. The “market” might even look attractive as a means to more consumer goods and a higher standard of living.

But I am not a Russian or a Georgian. I am from the United States and my political and philosophical commitments were shaped here. Although I understand the pull toward liberal capitalism, I can’t fully support that direction for the Soviet Union, or for us in the United States for that matter. I say this fully recognizing the privileged position from which I speak and see. I appreciate the “benefits” of the system from which I come, including our potent, if contradictory and unrealized, ideals of democracy, equality, opportunity and freedom. At the same time I also know the price paid for these “benefits.” They do not come cheaply. And certain groups and regions on this planet – especially those in the Third World – pay more dearly than others for my privileges.
With sincere and due respect to my friends in the East, who look to the West in general and to the United States in particular, for solutions—be they sought in capitalism, liberal democracy or liberal humanist educational theory—I want to offer some caution. All is not well with us. As Maxine Greene captures so eloquently:

There are vast dislocations in industrial towns, erosions of trade unions; there is little sign of class consciousness today. Our great cities are burnished on the surfaces, building high technologies, displaying astonishing consumer goods. And on the side streets, in the crevices, in the burnt-out neighborhoods, there are the rootless, the dependent, the sick, the permanently unemployed. There is little sense of agency, even among the brightly successful; there is little sense of things as if they could be otherwise. (Greene, 1986, p. 438)

The propaganda about the United States that was fed them has some basis in fact. Just as the ideals on which their modern society was based were not realized in their “actual existing” institutions and practices, neither were ours. We all have much to change, much to learn. The consequences, at the collective, individual and global levels, will be catastrophic if we don’t.

HUMANIZATION IN THE ERA OF GLASNOST AND PERESTROIKA

It is not surprising in this area of democratization, economic restructuring and openness that Soviet educational theorists and policy makers are calling for the “humanization” of education. The “dehumanizing” practices and structures of the highly centralized and heavily monitored educational system that emerged during Stalin’s regime are well documented. I need not rehearse the silencing, the repression that occurred in the name of “Grandfather Lenin.” The ideological justifications—the calls for “building a socialist future” had a tragic underside. In the name of “the people,” of “the workers,” many bad deeds were done.

They are not alone, however. We in the United States, especially we who draw on progressive pragmatism, critical Marxism and feminism, and the more recent scholarship in critical pedagogy, as I do, also have a commitment to make our educational policies and practices more responsive to human needs and capable of promoting a more human society. We lament the concentration of wealth and power in our country, the increasing gaps between the rich and the poor, and the ideological justifications that accompany these trends. We struggle to respond to officials who also, for the good “of the people,” make decisions and set policies that are, all too often, in the interests of the rich and the powerful.

At this historical moment, under these conditions in each of our situations, I wonder what it really means to “humanize” education? Are there any general principles or common understandings about the humanization process that can serve to inform our particular and different contexts? Are we talking about making the educational process more humane? If so, who and what will determine the criteria for what counts as “humane?” Are we talking about