Pure and Impure Pedagogy:
Report from an educational controversy in Denmark
Thomas Aastrup Rømer

*Connections between systems theory and poststructuralism*

On the surface, Danish school policy operates entirely in line with European regulations. I mention this because the so-called principle of subsidiarity means that education ought to be a matter of national sovereignty. But one result of post-Lisbon EU-policy is that school policy has gradually come to be defined as part of the new knowledge economy, using "learning outcomes" as the dominant educational category. Furthermore, various European bodies of policy employ a number of institutionalized methods of coordination in promoting joint structures based on the "learning outcomes" signifier. The overall effect is a structural and pedagogical harmonization of a policy area which is, in principle, a national responsibility. At the level of higher education, this process has been analysed as "the faceless masters of higher education". In Denmark, the European standardization process is supported almost uncritically by all agents involved in the development and implementation of policy and educational research.

An important question is: what are the concepts of learning underlying and supporting this policy at the national level? The support is provided by researchers advocating different combinations of Niklas Luhmann’s systems theory and post-structuralist beliefs. These researchers often share

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a formative grounding in French structuralism, and especially the works of Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault.

Luhmann’s systems theory relates to self-referential processes of operative constructivism and has a strong emphasis on media and technology. However, the theory also involves a rejection of normative and ontological questions. It is therefore no wonder that the theory is easily adaptable to any policy at hand. Systems theory first gained currency in Denmark in the late 1990s, when former Marxist structuralists had to find a new research identity after the fall of the Berlin wall, resulting in a techno-structuralist reading of Luhmann. In addition, systems theory was influenced by so-called “radical constructivism”, which claims that knowledge and learning are subjective constructions. This reference further emphasizes the loss of external reality, resulting in an explicitly stated solipsism. The result of this entire process is both a loss of normative interest and a reductionist approach to any kind of philosophical realism. Politics, ethics and reality are reduced to constructions, to structure and to technique. This technification of systems theory makes it very adaptable to the OECD regime of PISA rankings, focusing on technical skills in an overall quantitative structure. In this way, we end up with a narrow focus on rankings, evidence and methodology. The systems theory has played a key role in qualifying this outcome.

Poststructuralism, with its roots in particularly the work of Foucault, is normally considered part of a critical tradition. However, in Denmark some scholars have connected Foucault to a theory of what they call “the competition state”. This theory was originally developed in the UK, also with conceptual roots in Foucault and, to some extent, systems theory (Pedersen 2013). A competition state focuses on optimizing a nation’s labour force with regard to the global economic competition, thereby reducing education, pedagogy and science to mere means for achieving this goal. Values such as freedom, justice and Bildung are reconfigured as sheer instruments of the economy, if not relegated entirely to oblivion. The competition state originally had a critical function but has since been

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The idea of a competition state has turned into “a poststructuralist condition”, becoming part of the political hegemony for decision-makers, for the influential left-wing newspaper “Politiken”, and for the political and administrative elite. The competition state is considered an undeniable condition, and the only political choice remaining is whether competition should be left-wing or right-wing; that is, whether labour market optimization should follow neo-liberal or egalitarian principles. Nevertheless, that the “labour market” constitutes the key category, rather than, for instance, Bildung, science, humanity or justice, is never questioned.

Since 2012, Denmark has implemented sweeping reforms of both the school system and the national teacher training programme which rely heavily on these theoretical movements. As a result, schools are situated in an economic and individualized vocabulary of optimizing learning outcomes. One celebrated slogan is “to maximize learning” and this maximization is combined with a comprehensive technification of school organization and structures of learning outcomes. A frequent reference in this respect is the Australian researcher, John Hattie, who also wants to maximize individual learning within a highly structured quantitative framework. Particularly system theorists, the government, municipalities, but also some representatives from the aforementioned group of post-structuralists, have made extensive reference to Hattie. Another slogan is to “go from subject matter to learning” or to move “from teaching to learning”. Indeed, everything seems to be a matter of “learning”. Municipalities are “limitless learning municipalities”, the libraries are “learning centres”, schools are “temples of learning” and teachers are “leaders of learning”. We even talk about a “learning revolution”. Concepts from both systems theory and post-structuralism are at work everywhere, dissolving the entire educational tradition and its philosophical and practical dialogues.

1 Knowing and Learning, New

This results in a clustering of policy and adaptive/supportive layers of systems theory, post-structuralism and political economy that, facing no resistance what so ever, blends into the processes and discourses at the European level. Thus, the principle of subsidiarity is not only undermined by the methods of European coordination but also, somewhat paradoxically, by the national level itself. In this way, we have built a form of euro-national hegemony.

The political level and the lack of enlightenment

This general picture is reinforced by two factors. First, the aforementioned research paradigms supporting the dominant policy are cherished at the political level. One example is the Minister of Education from the Social Democrats, who was in charge of a major school reform 2012-2014. She refers directly to exactly the kind of systems theory that evolved in the 00s. And the powerful Minister of Finance during the same period has been an active supporter of the competition state ideology. These two ministers are now gone, but they worked closely together from 2011-2015 and still have a wide-reaching and influential educational and political-economic network.

Thus, the educational hegemony is based on the idea that pedagogy should be structured and optimized in quantitative and technical learning systems to promote the country’s position in the global sphere of competition, and these ideas both support and are supported at the political level.

Second, the hegemony is enhanced by the specific nature of the previously outlined break with normativity, cultural content and educational purpose. This break means that the technified pressure on educational policy and practice is expanded, but it also means that a large number of normative traditions disappear from the agenda. In the current version of systems theory, for example, we find a break with all kinds of “universality” and humanity originating from the philosophy of Kant and Rousseau. References to European enlightenment and humanism – in their rich jumble of approaches – disappear almost completely from all the vocabularies and taxonomies of systems theory and poststructuralism. The system theorists who are most radical in
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For the system theorists, the result of all this is that we must go from “learning something” to “learning to learn” in self-monitoring and self-regulating processes. We must discard cultural purpose and content, instead entering into a kind of pure process, and this purity is even called “a whole new way of life”. For the poststructuralists, this “learning to learn” is encapsulated in the inner workings of the competition state. They say that pupils and students should be “economic and opportunist soldiers”4 Normativity, values and Bildung are, as mentioned, linked to earlier political and economic phases, or even relegated into oblivion.

*Dismantling of the national tradition*

There is another important aspect of this anti-normativity in that it rests on a break with a specific Danish configuration of a broader European educational tradition, the so-called “Grundtvigianism”5. N.F.S. Grundtvig (1783-1872), who gave birth to this movement, was a central figure in Danish intellectual life through most of the eighteenth century. Even today, his influence on both the right and the left in intellectual and political life is profound, due to his important role in the emancipation of peasants in the nineteenth century, to his broader role in national and democratic development, and as the supplier of a large body of songs, hymns and poetry. He was also the main intellectual influence behind the so-called folk high school tradition, a school without exams where democratic, poetic and national development are the main ingredients. Grundtvig

draws particularly on the philosophy of the German neo-humanist, J.G. Herder, as well as Aristotle and a very social version of Martin Luther, a combination that has given him names such as “nation builder” and “a Lutheran Catholic”.

As stated, Grundtvigianism has influenced many corners of cultural life, but in the 1970s and 80s his ideas were especially dominant among many leftist groups. Even Maoist groups hailed Grundtvig’s ideas. While this left-wing Grundtvigian tradition is still influential, e.g. in the professional charter of the teachers’ union, current manifestations are much less ideological in comparison with those in vogue during the 1970s.

However, due to the rise of the educational hegemony, this national tradition has come under intense pressure. Average placings on the various global rankings in the 1990s were explained with reference to the Grundtvigian tradition’s prioritization of musical, political and ethical values above technical skills. This criticism of the national tradition was echoed at the political level by people and ideas that were later to play an important part in the aforementioned educational hegemony. The system theorists deplored the ontology and normativity implicit in Grundtvig’s work, categorizing him as a kind of right-wing nationalist, completely unsuited to modern life. They even portrayed his idea of “popular” culture as borderline fascist and talked about a Grundtvigian “primordial porridge” and “a fundamentalist phenomenology”. The poststructuralists, meanwhile, were critical of Grundtvig’s national and romantic philosophy, relegating him to outdated political contexts. As a result, the influence of Grundtvigian ideas regarding education diminished during the 2000s and eventually vanished from educational research and policy circles, other than in historical and theological areas of research. He was gradually demonized as a right-wing nationalist who did not care about formal skills and technical knowledge.

However, Grundtvig’s influence on the cultural landscape remained intact. And it is this cultural remnant of normativity, i.e. the Grundtvigian tradition, which has now been appropriated and employed in a form of resistance movement against the technical-pedagogical domination outlined above. We are, one could say, in the midst of a kind of re-narrative of a cultural choreography of the nineteenth Century. Presumably, it is also the influence from the Grundtvigian tradition that has made EU-
scepticism so intense and politically broad in Denmark. Denmark, for example, is part of neither the Euro or judicial cooperation, due to a number of hectic referendum processes.

**Resistance and struggle**

The resistance movement is created around the legally defined purpose of the school, the §1 in the law of the "folke skole". §1 is almost forgotten among proponents of the learning ideology. The critique points out that words appearing in §1, such as democracy, "volk", culture, intellectual freedom and imagination, all of which bear the stamps of Danish educational traditions, have been instrumentalized or even forgotten by the prevailing paradigms.

Based on the vocabulary of §1, the Grundtvigian criticism has gradually associated itself with a wide range of philosophical, political, scientific and theological currents. A common trait in this movement is that it regards education as rooted in social, cultural and historical processes. A group of researchers, including myself, have labelled these ideas of resistance "impure pedagogy". We refer to the opposite approach, the hegemonic ideology of learning, as "pure pedagogy". Pure pedagogy denotes a belief that educational processes such as learning goals, methodology and evaluation can be established in self-referential systems, independent of culture and politics, and that these isolated systems eventually sign up with global quantitative structures of comparisons.

Some neo-Kantian approaches endorse part of the criticism, although they tend to accept some elements of systems theory, which in itself could be interpreted as even a neo-neo-Kantian philosophy, discarding not only "ding an sich" but also the normative and pedagogical visions of Kant himself. The neo-Kantians are friendly towards impure education

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but struggle somewhat with the ontological and cultural markers found in the Grundtvigian tradition. However, they are equally dissatisfied with the lack of normativity in systems theory. Those neo-Kantians who are influenced by the humanism of Dietrich Benner, who works with the so-called "educational paradox" – i.e., the relationship between freedom and coercion – have been especially critical. Systems theory does not recognize that pedagogy should have such paradoxical character. Another line of criticism, incorporating both Kantian and Grundtvigian elements, comes from the philosopher Peter Kemp, who discusses the world citizen as an educational ideal. Kemp has been very active in the critique of pure pedagogy, which he even calls "anti-philosophical", "half-Bildung" and "extremist".

Furthermore, some of the most advanced post-structuralist approaches have also played an important role in the criticism of pure pedagogy. These dissenting voices include educationalists that are interested in the work of the Dutch educational theorist Gerr Biesta. Biesta himself has even contributed to one of the Impure Pedagogy books and neo-Grundtvigian groups are currently preparing an anthology on Biesta's philosophy. Another critical voice comes from those with an interest in the work of Lacan and Žižek. On the other hand, researchers influenced by another psychoanalyst, Gilles Deleuze, tend to support the learning hegemony.

Another group supporting impure pedagogy are psychologists influenced by situated learning theory, which has a common root in Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's theory of practice and sometimes also in the pragmatism of John Dewey. The two professors in psychology, Svend Brinkmann and Lene Tanggaard, who are part of the Impure pedagogy editorial team and both active on the international level, are important voices in this regard.

Finally, the resistance to pure pedagogy receives widespread support within a pro-Howe Søren less in therref in a symp intende num vice v

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within theological circles. Grundtvig himself was a priest and has had a profound influence on the Danish understanding of Christianity. However, he was embroiled in an essential conflict with his contemporary, Søren Kierkegaard, who focused more on existential questions and was less interested in social and political matters. Supporters of Kierkegaard therefore are often uncomfortable with arguments too strictly grounded in a Grundtvigian approach. Nevertheless, overall they tend to be sympathetic towards the critique, due to the total absence of spiritual interest that characterizes the learning hegemony and pure pedagogy. A number of Grundtvigians are also greatly interested in Kierkegaard, and vice versa, so these differences should not be exaggerated.

In connection with this effort to revive educational theory and practice, the concept of Bildung has gained a renewed function. In systems theory, Bildung was reduced to a kind of trick for shortening communication. Bildung did not have any independent significance. In the current dispute, however, the concept provides a broad framework covering all the impure approaches to pedagogy outlined above. In this new function, Bildung cannot be reduced to the German tradition, but is a broader term for discussing the relationship between educational purposes, personal development and social processes.

Summing up, the opposition to the hegemony of pure pedagogy is broadly based on existing intellectual currents in both Denmark and the rest of Europe. The resistance, one might say, is united in its criticism. If these impure ideas gain political and educational ground, any consensus on the further process, other than a common interest in establishing a more normative and educationally-oriented vocabulary, is fragile. As such, there would remain an important intellectual and practical task in establishing an educational ground for national and global citizenship.

Conclusion

In Denmark we have established a dispute between a pure and an impure pedagogy. Pure pedagogy, on the one hand, is an ideology of learning that, because of its loss of normative and ontological orientation, can adapt to almost any kind of political power. Impure pedagogy, on the other hand, which could also be called the “Bildung-group”, connects directly with
national and European educational traditions in a heterogeneous critique of the political and educational hegemony.

The question is whether the same or similar outlooks can be identified in other countries and at the European level? I do not know, in detail, the answer to the first part of this question, but if one examines the European reports surrounding the Bologna process, the EQFs and the Tuning project, pure pedagogy is certainly pervasive. There is no effort to integrate the essence or energy of European or national traditions in these papers. In this sense, Europe is its own enemy, and perhaps this is one of the reasons why so many Europeans are so sceptical towards EU in these years.

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