

SOCIAL SCIENCES AND THE DISCOURSE OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

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Abstract

This paper explains the contemporary debates around emergence of social sciences as a discipline and the discourse of critical pedagogy embedded in it. The debates focused around understanding the historical, philosophical and methodological assumptions on emergence of the discipline and its contribution in officering the possibilities for critical teaching- learning process at classroom level is the prime focus of the paper. Exploring the nature of struggles in construction of social sciences enables one to understand the significance and scope it offers to engage critically in reconstructing and reimagining the discourse of critical pedagogy.

Keywords: *Debates in social sciences, Citizenship, Hegemony, Teaching-learning processes.*



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Introduction

Contemporary debates in education around the world have focused on the need for democratic and critical practices in school. With increasingly blurring boundaries around the world and with an increase in the multicultural textures of nations and society, educational reforms have begun to reflect concerns for democratization. India, despite having had the longest tradition of pluralism, and being the largest democracy, has been slow in effecting democratic, critical educational practices and curriculum discourse.

Indian democracy comes across the gravest and the most complicated challenges facing the global world. Indian democracy allows maximum expression of individual and group identities, it also gives space for political, philosophical, ideological, ethnic, religious, regional differences to co-exist and find expression. In such a situation, ideologies, opinions and arguments become very important as they shape public thought, perspectives and views, which shape the democracy, as people are free to choose.

Arguments play a very important role of appealing to the public conscience, because convincing is the key to support in a democracy. In such a case, it becomes important to have

an informed, analytical, critical and rational citizenry; for democracy is anything but natural. It has to be carefully constructed and evolved. Democracy has the capacity to turn hegemonic perspectives taking the form of false democracy wherein public opinion is cultured to suit a certain perspective and ideology. This is a situation that leads to altercations that come in the nature of the state with the progression of capitalism (Gramsci, 2009). He further explains how the State governs people through getting them to believe in the ruling class ideology by fabricating public opinion in favor of the ruling class. According to him, social hegemony takes on a sense of universality because it is often communicated as commonsense ideology and common culture, even though it is an expression of the power of dominant elites.

Scholars have associated construction of social sciences with the modern world and the evolution of new structures of knowledge and the rise of nation state in 19th century.

The initial and continuing hegemony of natural sciences in search of truth, the claims of philosophical quest for what is good for society and the growing influence of universities as sites of knowledge construction have determined the trajectory of social sciences in last two centuries (as cited in Batra, 2010). Hence studying the nature of struggles associated with establishment of social science as a discipline plays a crucial role in understanding the inherent paradigm shift.

Construction of Social Sciences

The struggle to emerge from the deterministic feature of the sciences and the overwhelming influence of philosophy, led social sciences to create a space distinct from hard sciences in the evolution of knowledge. Social sciences have acquired political and institutional recognition only in 20th century. However it continues to face the challenges of establishing themselves as scientific in their own right (Batra, 2010). In different ways both phenomenology and Neo- Marxist perspectives on educational thought and practice have pointed to the atheoretical, ahistorical and unproblematic view of knowledge and pedagogy that presently characterizes curriculum development particularly in the social sciences. Some phenomenological critics have charged that teaching practices in social sciences are often rooted in 'common sense' assumptions that go relatively unchallenged by both teachers and students and serve to mask the social construction of different forms of knowledge. Teachers

and other educational workers, in this case, often ignore questions concerning how they perceive their classroom, how students make sense of what they are presented, and how knowledge is mediated between teachers and students (Giroux, 1981). However, Apple, (1979) argues that a perspective that teachers, administrators, and educators do not really know

what they are doing is misleading at best as it ignores the fact that schools were in part designed to teach exactly these things. On the other hand, some Neo- Marxists have attempted to explain how the politics of the dominant society are linked to the political character of the classroom social encounter. Here the focus shifts from an exclusive concern with how teachers and students construct knowledge to the ways in which the social order is legitimated and reproduced through the production and distribution of ‘acceptable’ knowledge and classroom social processes (Giroux, 1981). Emerging from Classical Marxism in the first half of 20th century, Neo Marxists wished to explore a wide range of power relations, including gender, race, ethnicity, ideology, culture, state, whereas classical Marxism tended to majorly focus on capitalist –worker relationships and control of the means of production. It assumes the necessity of critiquing current ideology and seeking to explore dominating and oppressive relationships in society which could be based on factors other than capitalistic modes of production. It illuminates power relationships between individuals and groups of individuals, enabling the researcher and participants to critique commonly held values and assumptions. It requires the researcher and participants to be willing to become aware of how a false understanding contributes to oppression and resistance. Thus Neo-Marxist educators are not simply concerned with how students and teachers view knowledge; they are also concerned with the mechanics of social control and how these mechanics function to legitimate the beliefs and values underlying wider societal institutional arrangements (Giroux, 1981). Gramsci called this form of control ‘ideological hegemony’; a form of control which not only manipulated consciousness but also saturated and constituted the daily experiences that shaped one’s everyday behavior. If one were to point one of the most neglected areas of educational scholarship, it would be just the critical study of the relationship between ideologies and educational thought and practice, the study of the range of seemingly commonsense assumptions that guide our overly technical minded field (Apple, 1979). He further argued that social and economic control occurs in schools not merely in the form of discipline schools have or in the dispositions they teach, but control is exercised as well through the form of meaning schools distribute. In other words the ‘formal corpus of school knowledge’ can become a form of social and economic control. As schools do not

only control people; they also help control and shape meaning. Since they preserve and distribute what is perceived to be ‘legitimate knowledge’ – the knowledge ‘we all must have’, schools confer cultural legitimacy on the knowledge of specific groups. Thus curriculum design, subject content, pedagogic methods, evaluation and assessment, and the

interpretation of the school texts are all of equal importance. In the same context, Apple (1979) referred to the very nature of a vision of school as a “black box” where what is taught, the concrete experiences of children and teachers is given far less important than the overarching principles of performance and achievement.

Positivism and the Teaching of Social Sciences

Examining the culture of positivism and its relationship to classroom teaching through the lens of a specific problem: the alleged ‘loss of interest in history’ among American students particularly and the larger public is one of the greatest contributions of Giroux. He viewed the ‘death of history’ as a crisis in historical consciousness itself. It is argued that history has been stripped of its critical and transcendent content and thus can no longer provide society with the historical insights necessary for the development of a collective critical consciousness. The assault on historical sensibility is no small matter. One consequence is a form of false consciousness; ‘the repression of society in the formation of concepts... a confinement of experience, a restriction of meaning’. In another sense, the call to ignore history represents an assault on thinking itself (as cited in Giroux, 1981). The suppression of history has been accurately labeled by Russel Jacoby as a form of ‘social amnesia’. Social amnesia is seen to be a society’s repression of its own past...memory driven out of mind by the social and economic dynamics of society (as cited in Giroux, 1981). One of the implications of his work tends to indicate towards the repression of the very concepts of social sciences that deal directly with the study of society for instance, concepts like marginalization, democracy, discrimination and inequality. Thus Jacoby’s analysis holds importance as it situates the crisis in history within a specific socio- historical context. Underlying the suppression of historical consciousness in the social sphere and loss of interest in history as a subject in the sphere of schooling are the true indicators of rise of science and technology and subsequent growth of the culture of positivism. Thus, this form of rationality becomes the prevailing cultural hegemony. In Indian context, the National Curriculum Framework for School Education (2000) may provide an example to examine how the culture of positivism and the view of history have influenced the process of schooling particularly in relation to educational theory and practice at the classroom level.

Discussing the basic nature of social sciences it states “In order to make the social sciences education meaningful, relevant and effective, the concerns and issues of contemporary world need to be kept in forefront. To this end, the quantum of history may have to be substantially reduced. Past developments could be studied as a backdrop for

understanding the present...Emphasis has to be laid more on the economic, political and social aspects of human environment especially the contemporary world..."

Thus the need to understand social sciences distinguished from the culture of positivism, builds the ground for exploring possibilities of critical engagement within social science curriculum at school level.

Social Science Curriculum in schools and role of critical Pedagogy

NCF 2000 and the subsequent NCERT textbooks led to a huge controversy especially over history textbooks. This was by far the most rational discourse of education faced within the history of Indian democracy. The entire debate surrounding the communal agenda of the curriculum released then threw light on the need to become more than just passive consumers of education system. In similar context, Batra, (2006) argues that it is often assumed that teachers will be able to set aside their own social and cultural beliefs and assumptions about knowledge and the learner, while teaching. Educators are not mere transactors of a text in the classroom; they are effective agents who along with the text pass on their set of ideas, values, notions and perspectives. Thus regarding the debates surrounding the curriculum, it is to be claimed that exclusion of controversial content from the textbooks that reaches the classrooms is not the final solution. It intensifies the need to see the learners and educators as not just passive consumers but active constructors of knowledge. The need to acknowledge learners and educators as capable of thinking questioning, judging, choosing, analyzing, comprehending and not just blindly memorizing and reproducing is to be given utmost attention. There is a need to strengthen agency of teachers as being active participants in teaching learning process. The attack on the secular and rational discourse of education further emphasizes the need for an education system that is comparatively reflective, analytical, and critical. Any education claiming to be logically, factually, and ideologically correct is only indoctrination, unless it includes teachers and learners actively in the construction of knowledge.

The role of social science in formal education is influenced by the process of schooling. Schools have been perceived as contexts which reproduce society often in the absence of a critical approach. As Durkheim (as cited in Shukla & Kumar 1985) suggests

education perpetuates and reinforces the essential similarities that collectively, life demands. In his view socialization and education prepares individuals in the process of formal education, to 'fit in' expected roles. The new sociology highlighted how schools tend to culturally reproduce power and hierarchies that exists in society. However, critical

theorists like Giroux, Apple & Gramsci have argued further that schools can be considered as spaces for resistance and social change. What is required in such a case is to develop in children an ability to have an encounter with such texts and be capable of asking some very relevant and crucial questions such as:

Who is favored in this text and what/who is marginalized??

What are the other perspectives on a topic in question?

What are the intentions of the author/writer/policy makers?

What inherent interest does the text/opinion cater to?

What power relation does this text/opinion reflect? Etc.

For such a purpose critical pedagogy becomes a crucial aid in establishing a democratic social order. Critical pedagogy promotes questioning of student experiences, texts, teacher ideologies and aspects of school policies that conservative and liberal analysts too often leave unexplored. Critical pedagogy establishes the need to examine schools in their historical context and as part of the existing socio-political contours that characterizes dominant views in a particular society. It tends to challenge the assumptions believing that schools function as major sites of perpetuating socio-economic inequality. A major task of critical pedagogy has been to disclose and further challenge the reproductive role schools play in political and cultural life. Critical pedagogues differ on various points in their analysis however; they are united in their belief that any genuine pedagogical practice demands a commitment to social transformation in solidarity within subordinated and marginalized groups. All critical pedagogues extensively focus on the agency of teachers as crucial as focus on curriculum. This is contrary to the trends in educational discourses in Indian context, where curriculum is the epicenter of, deliberation and debates, while teachers and their work are studied far less.

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