

LIVING HUMANLY

David G. Smith wonders “how, as an educator, I can fulfill my responsibility to my own people—my own people whom I love yet who, as I do, live under an economic and epistemological dispensation which is a problem for most of the rest of the world.”¹ Smith suggests what we in the Global North lack is not information but “a simple love for life; perhaps that is our poverty.”² He worries that “men and women learn to distrust one another under a banner of ‘gender differences’ or ‘gender wars’,” that ‘children and parents are increasingly alienated from each other under a rubric of ‘generation gap’,” and “perhaps more disastrously, pedagogical handbooks are increasingly assuming a paramilitary language concerned with ‘discipline techniques’, ‘classroom control’ and ‘behaviour management.’”³ Smith concludes: “We need to work to recover our Selves in the context of everything we do, and resist those pressures to perform in ways that rob us of our dignity.”⁴ Smith’s self and dignity – certainly his capacity for critique – seem entirely intact in this essay.

Smith questions “why the language of accountability, evaluation and supervision reigns supreme,” pointing to the ambiguity of the concept of “improvement,” asking “in whose service is the improvement, in what direction is it moving?”⁵ Pushing back against top-down demands for improvement, Smith reminds that “without true reciprocity, human relationships are reduced to a power struggle, but the recovery of reciprocity implies a new way of being together whereby we put emphasis on our collective journey rather than on, say, the accumulation of knowledge *per se*,” adding: “Reciprocity means that ontology must take precedence over epistemology.”⁶

Power struggles are what happens when we forget we’re all in this together – “our collective journey” – and is reflected in curriculum studies in the primacy of the political, eclipsing the ethical, instrumentalizing the historical in service of power struggles, splitting “we” into “us” and “them.” Knowledge, Smith implies, must be more explicitly contextual and situational, informing a complicated conversation – characterized by “reciprocity” – in which the history of humanity, its past horrors, its present problems and future possibilities, requires us to participate, seeking understanding, itself an affirmation of our humanity. It is, for Smith, “a key point,” to recognize “that the human conversation about what it is to live humanly is never over, and we have a deep responsibility to protect the conditions under which that conversation can continue.”⁷

In his commentary, Bruce Moghtader adds material he did not quote, including an acknowledgement that Smith’s essay starts with a “reference to Paulo Freire, whose deep commitment to humanity is at the heart of healing the impact of the North on the South and on the North.”⁸ (Not fifteen years after the publication of Smith’s essay “post-human” public pedagogy scholars Jake Burdick and Jennifer Sandlin would

repudiate Freire’s influence⁹ in an article I felt obligated to critique.¹⁰) That “deep commitment to humanity” Smith shares, despite – Moghtader reports – his apparent disaffection with the West,¹¹ of which Freire was, of course, very much a part. Moghtader then summarizes three themes – I’m unsure why these weren’t in the quoted passages section – that Smith suggests depict the one-dimensionality of Western philosophy, “its need for abstraction and objectification,” a critique associated with the Frankfurt School and specifically Horkheimer and Adorno,¹² a critique that undermines any allegations of one-dimensionality, even now, when – as Moghtader notes – contemporary reason seems strictly instrumental, human beings reduced to human capital.¹³

The second theme Moghtader references in his commentary “concerns the need for control produced from such philosophies aimed to direct human life and education,” control also a key concern of my close colleague William E. Doll, Jr.¹⁴ As noted above, David Smith focuses on “improvement,” presumably a form of “accountability,” but the skeptical Smith wonders exactly how does improvement-as accountability-benefit human life? Smith’s third theme (in Moghtader’s words) “concerns the split between being and acting produced since the time of Descartes, its influence on human action understood (quoting Smith¹⁵) “as performance *on* life and others, rather than *with* life and with each other.” Smith’s third theme concern our “changing relationship to children and childhood; he argues for an “ontological approach of reciprocity rather technocratic epistemology” – Smith suggests (although in Moghtader’s words) that “examines children as separate from adults.” Moghtader then reports that the article “closes with an emphasis that the conversations to live humanly is never over and [that] we all have a responsibility towards the conditions under which such conversations continue.” Living “humanly” is an ongoing challenge given that we human beings are constantly capable of being “inhuman” - and not only to each other but to almost all forms of life.

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ENDNOTES

¹ 1999, 103.

² Ibid.

³ 1999, 104.

⁴ 1999, 105.

⁵ 1999, 106. There are many analyses and critiques of accountability; among the best is Taubman 2009.

⁶ 1999, 107.

⁷ 1999, 108.

⁸ Moghtader's words. For an insightful study of Freire's influence in curriculum studies – affirming curriculum studies as an international conversation – see Johnson-Mardones 2018.

⁹ In addition to the individual person, posthuman public pedagogy – Burdick and Sandlin report - also rids us of past “critical-theory approaches,” marred by their reliance on a “Freirian-style critical consciousness” dedicated to “rational dialogue

and critical reflection” (2013, 168). The post-human, I suggest, is no progressive “next step” but an acknowledgement of the species’ extinction as human.

¹⁰ Pinar in press.

¹¹ Moghtader cites 1999, 104.

¹² Horkheimer and Adorno 1972 (1944). For a review and contextualization, see Jay 2016.

¹³ For a history of the concept, see Moghtader in press.

¹⁴ See Trueit 2012; Pinar 2023.

¹⁵ 1999, 106.