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The Meaning of Education in a Time of “Ressentiment” and Global Hatred

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Abstract

“The most important demand placed upon all education is that Auschwitz [does] not happen again” - these are the words of philosopher and sociologist Theodor Adorno, a German who gave a famous radio talk in 1966. This chapter presents and updates this important discussion with reference to selected recent global events and offers a discussion of *ressentiment*. I argue that in educational practice, it is important to understand what *ressentiment* is and how to teach about it as the learning of the unsociable-social and its counterpart, *non-ressentiment*, and the sociable-social.

A simple question is asked in this chapter: what is the meaning of education? On the one hand, this is a question that, if left too general, lacks connection with the lives in which we live. To counter this, I will reflect upon the meaning of education in the wake of two particular events, by no means unique to our times: the terrible massacre carried out by a lone gunman in Norway on 22 July 2011 and the terrible massacre carried out by a lone gunman in New Zealand on 15 March 2019. We might, on the other hand, turn to the other extreme and answer with reference to the detail of curriculum or carefully selected cross-curricula skills, such as cooperative learning in teams. This narrowing would mean we might lose the ability to move between multi-level explanations drawing upon socio-political, educational, historical, cultural, and psychological explanations.

In answering this question, I am also conscious of how the nature of knowledge seems to be in flux now more than ever before. For some, such

as those inspired by Siemens’ (2005) seminal paper, knowledge is distributed widely in different networks, some conceptual — carried in our heads — and some external in books or on the Internet, and it raises the important questions of where, how, and what knowledge is to be trusted, taught, acquired and in what settings. He proposed we turn to the concept of *connectivism* to address these concerns and wrote:

“The pipe is more important than the content within the pipe. Our ability to learn what we need for tomorrow is more important than what we know today. A real challenge for any learning theory is to actuate known knowledge at the point of application. When knowledge, however, is needed, but not known, the ability to plug into sources to meet the requirements becomes a vital skill. As knowledge continues to grow and evolve, access to what is needed is more important than what the learner currently possesses.”

Siemens’ point is simple,¹ education will increasingly be about teaching and learning that is able to connect together different sources and networks of knowledge, residing in particular places and repositories - sometimes in the heads of others, sometimes recorded elsewhere. What we need is actionable knowledge where critical thinking is still vital but of the character required to select and evaluate the pipe and the contents of the pipe. Such knowledge adds to the epistemological view that knowledge is not merely about “know this” and “know how”, but it also entails “know where” and “know how it feels”. The last mentioned is essential, ensuring that knowledge is embraced as comfortable and meets our expectations and shared norms of acceptability.

For this reason, in this chapter, I remain wedded to the ideas of connectivism and multi-level explanation but draw upon narrative knowledge that connects knowledge with lived experience communicated in the form of narratives. The turn to stories and storytelling is not uncommon in the social sciences and it represents the attempt to understand how knowledge can take many forms that can be valid and trustworthy. It is not the case that only natural science holds the golden key to truth. As Ricoeur (1984: 3) put it:

“Time becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence.”

¹In this section of the chapter, I am drawing upon unpublished ideas co-developed by Edward Schofield and me in the short paper: Keep it simple, coordinated and normal – the rush to “online-ness.”

This phenomenological understanding is circular, as life and narrative mirror each other in a creative mimesis. It also places an emphasis on the necessity of the narrative revealing the ordering of the events in what is basically a linear temporal “causal sequence” (Ricoeur, 1984: 41). However, Ricoeur ignores postmodern and hypertext-inspired conceptions of narratives that break with the temporal organization of the plot in a diachronic beginning-middle-end and disrupt the direction of causality (Boje, 2001). In my work with refugees, I found instances of narratives where a single narrative beginning was unclear, or an authorship could not be traced to a single origin. Instead narratives were multi-punctual in origin and multi-accented because of the polyphonic presence of several voices (Dobson, 2004: 131–134). It is worth noting that in such cases, causality was not necessarily absent but multi-accented and/or multi-directional. A multi-directional narrative can be defined as a narrative that proceeds forward as well as backwards in search of an origin. This reversal of the causality means that it is not cause to effect, but an effect or several effects in search of a cause and this becomes the focal point of the narrative moving backwards.

Accordingly, to understand the meaning of education in a time scared by violence, I shall tell three connected stories in this chapter.

1. The story of Norway and New Zealand in old and new; that is, before and after these atrocities.
2. The most important demand placed on all education, where I recall Adorno’s rightly famous essay, originally given as a radio talk with an openly multi-level approach to explanation.
3. *Ressentiment*,² moral, and values-based education; covering different cultural and transcultural understandings of education in a time of global hatred.

Broadly speaking, the first story considers what happened, the second why, and the last, how might we avoid that it happens again through education. All good narratives contain the how, the why, and the what if, with a clear line of connection drawing them together.³

²In talking of resentment in an applied educational sense, I shall draw upon ideas first co-developed by Dobson and Halland (1995).

³I am riffing off Aristotle (1965) in *On the Art of Poetry*, where he proposed that a narrative involved a beginning, middle, and end organized in a causal direction so that events are joined together to reveal a plot.

10.1 Story Number 1: Norway and New Zealand, the Old and the New

Both countries share the history of these terrible atrocities — first some context. Norway is a country on the edge of Europe with 5.2 million in population and it received independence from Denmark in 1814 and from Sweden in 1905. It is a long, stretched out country, a bit like Italy in shape. In the north, we find the traditional home of the Sami indigenous people who are known for reindeer herding. They have been subjected to Norwegian rule for hundreds of years, but today, they have their own Parliament, founded in 1989 with responsibilities for Sami politics, culture, language, and different funds. The Sami are also found in the neighboring countries of Finland, Sweden, and Russia. Norway is known for its social democratic traditions and the Nobel Peace Prize awarded each year in Oslo. Once the poorest country in Scandinavia, it has since the discovery of oil and gas in the North Sea in the 1970s, reversed this position.

New Zealand shares many similarities with Norway despite the smaller geographical size. It is on the periphery of South East Asia with mountains, snow, wind, forestry, love of milk products, fish, oil and gas reserves (of a lesser scale than Norway), and a colonial history. The country is founded on the *Treaty of Waitangi* (1840) and this states the principles of partnership, participation, and protection between representatives of the British Crown and the Māori people, who constitute 15% of the population. The implementation of these principles still remains the source of discussion and controversy. New Zealand only became a sovereign entity with control over its constitutional arrangements and foreign affairs in 1947, and actually waited until 1987 to become a free-standing constitutional monarchy with a parliament possessing unlimited sovereign power.

The old Norway never believed an act of terror could take place in their country. Who would even identify the country as a target? That was until 22 July 2011 on a Friday when the country was undertaking its annual summer vacation. A Norwegian parked a non-descript car outside the tall building in which the Prime Minister had his office and left. As the bomb exploded, he was driving to Utøya Island in the middle of a small lake. Now dressed as a policeman, he made his way to the island, where the annual summer camp for the Labour Youth League was taking place, and executed many people. In total, 77 people died that day. His rationale was to remove the next generation of Norwegian labor politicians who would, in his view, be responsible for immigration into the country. The day after this event in every street and

in every household, there was silence. Later, the Norwegian Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, phrased it as, “it was one Norway before and one after 22 July”. The new Norway had been born.

The old New Zealand never believed an act of terror could take place in their country. There had been extreme violence in the New Zealand Wars (Ngā Pakanga o Aotearoa) between different Māori groups and the British Crown, but for many, this was an event in the distant 19th Century (O’Malley, 2019). During Friday prayer in the city of Christchurch, on 15 March 2019, a lone gunman proceeded to attack the Masjid Al Noor and the Linwood Islamic Centre mosques a short distance away. Jacinda Ardern, the New Zealand Prime Minister, talked on the day of those wounded and the 50 who died (one would die later because of the injuries):

“Many of those who will have been directly affected by this shooting may be migrants to New Zealand, they may even be refugees here. They have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home. They are us. The person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not. They have no place in New Zealand. There is no place in New Zealand for such acts of extreme and unprecedented violence, which it is clear this act was.”

New Zealand was in total shock. In Parliament, the following week, the Prime Minister said:

“He will, when I speak, be nameless. And, to others, I implore you: speak the names of those who were lost, rather than the name of the man who took them. He may have sought notoriety, but we in New Zealand will give him nothing. Not even his name.”

For many weeks it was so, his name was not spoken in the public space. In the aftermath, gun laws were changed at a rapid pace beyond the comprehension of many outside of the country. By 10 April, the Government passed the Arms Amendment Act that banned semi-automatic firearms, magazines, and parts. By 22 July, over 2000 guns had been handed in at buyback events. The new New Zealand had been born.

10.2 Story Number 2: The Most Important Demand Placed on all Education

So far, I have told a story about what happened and as a bridge to Story 2 and how to account for the actions of the two perpetrators, I note that in both

countries, what to tell children, who should do this, and with what support was quickly raised. Advice to parents was supplied by psychologist experts in child trauma after accidents and societal catastrophes. There was also talk of how to support teachers in their first meetings with children after the event. It was summer vacation in Norway, but not so in New Zealand where schools were open on Monday. This was the challenge in the short term and professionals were available in both countries to support parents, teachers, and children. In the longer term, the attention turned to the questions: how could this happen; was there something amiss or faulty in the education of children and in the education of these two perpetrators in particular?

With this in mind, in this story, I will seek to understand how the two perpetrators came to undertake these terrible acts and what should be the purpose of education in more general terms for all. I will follow in the footsteps of Adorno's and begin with a brief retelling and commentary of a radio talk he gave in 1966 entitled *Education After Auschwitz*. There are obvious comparisons in his topic and those involved in Auschwitz. How could they have been educated to undertake these terrible atrocities, and what kind of education and societal events equipped them? A multi-level approach to explanation is required, referencing socio-political, educational, historical, cultural, and psychological factors. Reducing the cause to only individual factors would negate all the other forces that form and influence the individual.

Adorno opens with the assertion, "the premier demand placed upon all education is that Auschwitz [does] not happen again". He immediately directs attention to the question, so why were many Germans disposed to supporting Hitler? The humiliation of the Germans at the end of World War I and the hyper-inflation of the 1920s meant many were disappointed with politicians. But it is hard to simply change through political means what were in many respects the effects of a global economic depression and having lost the war. This said, these factors had a visible effect: children growing up would have seen the weakness and impotence of their fathers to put food on the family table. The ground was fertile for what psychiatrists would call replacement father figures. Hitler was waiting in the shadows and gradually occupied the political stage in this respect during the 1930s.

Hitler had an educational project. To recover the greatness of the German people, it was necessary to train the youth, and the vehicle for this was the Hitler Youth organization (*Hitlerjugend*), actually founded in 1922. The activities of this group focused on physical and also emotional resilience, and Adorno makes the point that such an education was an important foundation for educating individuals to hardness, a lack of empathy, and a willingness

for those who persecuted the Jews and other groups to treat them as objects and not human subjects. It meant they were equipped to kill them when the time came without regard for their human right to live. With this background tapestry, Adorno concludes that while the content of knowledge is important across the different disciplines, it means nothing if school children have no moral understanding of others and how this knowledge might be used to reach ends that are far from humane and noble.

In his view, students in the time of Hitler were led by strong replacement father figures and who had not been educated to think independently and critically. He was concerned that new examples of Auschwitz would take place if education failed in this educational task, where additionally acting and reacting humanely constitutes the moral compass. For Adorno, in the practice of education, we must continually raise awareness of the conditions that supported monstrosities, such as Auschwitz.

So, if this is the “premier demand placed upon all education”, how can we understand what went wrong with the upbringing of the perpetrators of the events in Norway and New Zealand? As with Adorno’s analysis, the blame cannot be placed solely upon a single factor. Seierstad (2019) has noted that both craved notoriety, as evidenced by the 1500-page cut-and-paste manifesto written by Breivik and the 74-page equivalent by the New Zealand gunman. It is further reflected in their narcissistic personality disorders — Breivik diagnosed by the court psychiatrist and the New Zealand gunman showing the same traits. They both displayed a mixture of rage against Muslim immigrants and self-pity as victims.

Breivik grew up in a wealthy part of Oslo. Already at a young age, psychiatrists had recommended that he be removed from his single mother who was mentally unstable and said at times she wished he were dead. He had sporadic contact with his father, but this ceased when he was 16. He had few friends until he embraced and was embraced by the dark web in his 20s as he became radicalized. The gunman in the New Zealand attack was an Australian who lived for some years in the South Island. He was known by neighbors to be a bit of a recluse, who despite being a loner offered to mow the lawn for neighbors. His own father died in 2010, and from 2012, he had travelled widely in Europe and gradually radicalized himself, taking contact with far-right organizations and posting on social media platforms. He too was concerned with his notoriety and used social media to live stream his terrible deeds.

From Story 2, we see a number of points worthy of note: limited face-to-face networks and finding consolation on the Internet recalls the opening

points on the changing sense of knowledge as networks of knowledge and connectivism seem ever-present. Adorno's point on replacement father figures is relevant to both gunmen and both shared the view that we were not stopping the arrival of immigrants. What we also note is the manner in which they hardened themselves to regard others as objects. They transformed their moral understandings and we are left with the last story to address the forward-looking point raised by Adorno - namely, how might we avoid through education that horrible events such as these occur again?

10.3 Story Number 3: Ressentiment, Moral and Values-Based Education

To say that the two gunmen were filled with anger and wanted to exert revenge would seem a rationale assumption, and also the task of education would be to prevent such emotions and beliefs from being formed through radicalization. Such a line of reasoning might be understood in one of two ways. It might be following Girard (1991) that what we desire is not determined by the object itself, as we normally believe, but by another person. He uses the example of fashion, where we desire a specific garment because we saw another with it on. For him, desire is mimetic, and in this context, the two gunmen were trying to emulate others before them whom they idolized.

While this theory might seem fitting, I would question if it is a good explanatory fit in this context. The gunmen may well have been inspired by others before them, but I would suggest that this offers at best, only a partial explanation for their actions. A second approach offers, in my opinion, an additional approach. I am thinking of the concept of *ressentiment* and what it can mean for a moral and values-based education. This is not to refer to the normal understanding of resentment, it is to allude directly to Nietzsche's understanding, whereby if a person feels wronged, they can do one of two things, either live out the revenge immediately in a spontaneous form of expression summed up as:

“To be incapable of taking one's enemies, one's accidents, even one's misdeeds seriously for very long - that is the sign of strong, full natures in whom there is an excess of the power to form, to mold, to recuperate and to forget.” (Nietzsche, 1969: 39)

Alternatively, they can cultivate an emotion of *ressentiment*. This is a reactive holding-in, a planning of revenge that can eat the person up over

time and change them. To each of these actions, spontaneous revenge and *ressentiment* is allotted a moral way of thinking. With the former, it is a morality of good and bad, where the one acting out the revenge deems themselves as the good and all others are simply bad and worthy of no further consideration after the act. With the latter, it is the morality of good and evil, where the person wronged regards themselves as the good and the object is the evil one. The important point is the spontaneity versus the cultivation of the revenge, which may never actually take place.

In my work with Halland (Dobson and Halland, 1995), we proposed a pedagogy where the emotion and planning of *ressentiment* and spontaneous revenge is considered an expression of the *unsociable-social*, and it is important that children learn how to recognize and cope with both. To try and remove them is unrealistic. In a controlled classroom or community environment through role play or the like, children can develop such skills.

This is, however, only one part of the story. We also proposed that children learn the sociable-social non-ressentiment and showing no spontaneous revenge. This is the existential being with (*Mitsein*) others without actions or planned and felt resentment (Heidegger, 1962). It is to recognize the other as being part of our world.

I will close this story with three culturally contextualized examples of the sociable-social and again its central importance in a pedagogy seeking to address the question, what is the meaning of education? The point is to demonstrate that there are educational cross-cultural practices of the sociable-social and the list is much longer.

In Norway, there is a concept that refers to the importance of being gradually included into the mores of society through an education that is not simply about the content of disciplinary knowledge. It permeates all education, formal, informal, and non-formal, including morality and the values of society. The term is *dannelse* and the closest translation is the word *bildung*, meaning to be a well-formed identity able to be with others in a caring manner, without over-caring and taking from the other, a sense of responsibility and independence. Key, a well-known Scandinavian educator at the turn of the 20th century, expressed this and alluded to the taken for granted and hard to define, what in modern organizational science we might simplistically call soft skills, “*bildung* is what remains after we have forgotten everything we have learnt”⁴ (Steinsholt and Dobson, 2011: 5).

⁴In the original Swedish: *Bildning är hvad vi hafva kvar, när vi glömt allt hva vi lärt – dannelsen er det vi står igjen med når vi har glemt alt vi har lært.*

The second example concerns the concept of تَرْبِيَّة (tarbiya). If *dan-nelse/bildung* is a secular concept, *tarbiya* is central to the Muslim faith and world view and infuses the lifelong education of each individual, inside and outside the formal school setting. It concerns the training of the soul through an Islamic moral education, where earning the praise of Allah is based upon surviving in a world designed to test and develop us. We are to become what we repeatedly do, and the act becomes the habit. The example might be to avoid becoming the donkey carrying books, oblivious to their meaning, transporting without understanding.⁵

The third example is about the relationship between Māori grandparents and their grandchildren as a lived everyday embodiment of the sociable-social. My poem expresses this where the shared root of the word for grandparent and grandchild is *puna*, meaning a spring - in this context, the spring of knowledge from the past and yet to be realized in the future of the coming generation.

Ocean

between tūpuna and mokopuna
 on the porch always to be repainted
 peeling a story silver feathered silence
 strong backed and stubborn
 carried by the whistling spring to Ocean
 our Ocean
 the sail cloth stained red
 red the fish heads thrown back
 to bait the dreams of other childhoods
 of eyes turned down and precious thoughts kept for another day
 of arms moved inward in sleep
 our shelter

10.4 Conclusion

Through three stories, I have sought to explore and answer what is the meaning of education in a time of *ressentiment* and global hatred. The conclusion is that a moral and value-based education remains a central task and should

⁵Quran, Sura: 62, Verse: 4.

permeate all formal, informal, and non-formal education in school and other settings. This moral and value-based education should offer opportunities to learn about three components: *ressentiment*, spontaneous revenge and forms of *bildung*, *tarbiya*, and intergeneration communication — with deep respect for the past and the future yet to be with us. A central point made in this chapter is that merely using a teacher-based transmission model of pedagogy or a constructivism co-learning model of pedagogy is not enough. We must, as the examples of Norway and New Zealand show, engage with a model of pedagogy informed by connectivism and equipping all with the skills to connect different sources and networks of knowledge.

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