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Re-thinking Cosmopolitanism in Education: A Critical Approach

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Introduction

Since the “cosmopolitan turn”¹ has reached the discipline of education, several battle lines have been opened in the discourse. One of the major controversies which emerged in this process spins around the dichotomy between “an abstract cosmopolitanism from above and a rooted cosmopolitanism from below.”² The charge often implicit against the cosmopolitanism in the “abstract” reading is that it has an implicit, or hidden agenda that emphasizes the economic challenges and opportunities the progressive globalization presents us with and promotes positive attitudes to mobility, flexibility, and a disinterested objective detachment to the detriment of “rooted” ethical attachments to local and national cultural values. Cosmopolitanism understood in this sense then seems to be all about breaking away from traditional affiliations and detaching oneself from norms in order to enjoy more freely “a style of

life” which allows one to “incorporate the manners, habits, languages, and social customs of cities throughout the world” like a “parasite, who depends upon the quotidian lives of others to create the various local flavors and identities in which he dabbles.”³ Even if this somewhat antiquated conservative criticism of the cosmopolitan attitude might seem hyperbolic from today's perspective, some of the worry remains, and rightfully so, I believe. When authors still worry that the new cosmopolitanism has “more in common with partners in Manhattan, London, Singapore or Hong Kong than with locals or nationals that are not plugged into a network of global connectedness,”⁴ they are right at least insofar as much of the literature on the new cosmopolitanism appears indeed as not taking serious enough the challenges posed by the inherently normative dimension of cosmopolitan thought. As Marianna Papastephanou has pointed out, the critical-ethical dimension seems to remain occluded in a major part of the sociologically oriented research on cosmopolitanism.⁵

The present paper will argue that the critical dimension of cosmopolitan thought should be brought to the fore and suggests that the critique of reification, which recently received renewed interest by philosophers of the so-called third generation Frankfurt School,⁶ can serve as a vital tool for finding a solution to the rootedness vs. rootlessness debate which lies square to the established dichotomy and allows to articulate a critical approach to cosmopolitanism in education. Reification will be explained as a second-order process of forgetting a primary recognition which leads to severe pathologies on a socio-ontological level, beyond being a merely moral failure or epistemic mistake. As I have argued elsewhere,⁷ the critique of reification, if appropriately adapted, can contribute to an understanding and provide an explanation for many of the specific normative failures characteristic of today's educational institutions and practices. While reification theory is grounded in everyday experiences, it does not end with the mere analysis of our thinking, our values, and forms of action; critical theory questions our attitudes and experiences so as to reveal their inherent critical potential.

The main thesis I wish to put forth in this paper is that an interpretation of cosmopolitanism as a critique of reification is promising with regard to dissolving the theoretical conflict between the understanding of cosmopolitanism in education as an abstract universalism in opposition to a rooted particularist culturalism. Cosmopolitanism in the sense proposed in the paper is not exhausted by guaranteeing global economic competitiveness, but stands as a constant reminder that – in principle – all moral and epistemic issues, all religious and cultural convictions – no matter if they are beliefs of a minority or a majority – can and should always also be objects of reflection and critique. This understanding of cosmopolitanism as a critique of reification is one that I believe can be found already in Diogenes' famous response "I am a citizen of the world."⁸ In my view, Diogenes did not wish to affirm another substantive, cosmopolitan identity instead of the then customary way of determining one's own identity in close connection with the particular *polis* to which one belongs. Rather, the declaration should be read as resisting an acknowledgment of conventional identifications with a critical intent. In this way Diogenes accomplishes with his statement something which Emerson would have called an aversion to conformity. This aversion aims at a critique of certain norms or standards which he perceived as inadequate because they had become reified – thus stifling rather than enabling creative human activity.

Honneth's Renewal of the Critique of Reification

In his 2005 Tanner Lectures on reification Honneth put forth an interpretation of Lukács' theory of reification which tries to revive key ideas and show their productivity for analyzing contemporary society.⁹ Honneth suggests a recognition theoretic interpretation which understands reification as a second order process, as a specific forgetfulness of a primary form of recognition. As is well-known, Lukács determines the concept of reification based on the analyses of alienation and of the "fetish

character of the commodity” developed by Marx. By uniting Marx' criticism of capitalism with central motifs of the theories of Max Weber and Georg Simmel in a comprehensive theory of reification in the core part of the essay collection *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (first published in 1925), Georg Lukács extends Marx' perspective significantly in a way that is essential for its adaptability to today's discussion as it allows for a multidimensional and thus more adequate description of modern societies. As Lukács shows, it is not only due to the functional logic of expanding capitalism itself that in addition to the economic sphere also other societal spheres are penetrated by the commodity logic, but the process of rationalization itself contributes to the spreading of instrumental thought and action into the social realm.

Honneth's interpretation of the notion of reification takes Lukács' analysis of the contemplative, disinterested attitude of the wage-worker towards himself and his own work as a starting point. Instead of the “official” idealistic line, Honneth points to some more moderate passages that he finds interesting in Lukács where the praxis that is destroyed through commodity exchange is described in terms of “empathetic engagement” or “interestedness.” (101) The way in which commodity exchange affects human relations is not just by reifying situational elements, but by compelling “subjects [...] to behave as detached observers, rather than as active participants in social life.” (99) He argues that it is in this contemplative attitude, which spreads from the realm of work to all other societal realms, as Lukács shows, that we forget the primacy of recognition over cognition; i.e. the genetic and categorical primacy of a compassionate and interested involvement in the world over the neutral observation of objective reality. The form of recognition Honneth appeals to in this context must not be confounded with the forms of recognition he outlines in his *Struggle for Recognition*. The form of recognition which is being forgotten in modes of reifying thought is situated at a more fundamental level as becomes obvious in the authors who Honneth draws on in order to elucidate his notion. Building on

Heidegger's notion of "care," Dewey's notion of "involvement," and Cavell's notion of "acknowledgment," Honneth's conception of recognition aims at "a wholly elementary form of intersubjective activity, but one that does not yet imply the perception of the *specific value* of another person." (123) This form of recognition "lies below the threshold at which that particular form of mutual recognition takes place in which the other person's specific characteristics are affirmed." (123)

In contrast to Lukács, however, Honneth is very careful not to classify all forms of objectification of our thought as reification. Rather, it is only "at the moment in which our reflexive efforts lose consciousness of their origin in an act of antecedent recognition that we cross the threshold to pathology, skepticism, or—as Adorno would have called it—identity thought." (129) Reification as the forgetfulness of recognition thus means specifically that "we lose the ability to understand immediately the behavioral expressions of other persons as making claims on us. [...] We may indeed be capable in a cognitive sense of perceiving the full spectrum of human expressions, but we lack, so to speak, the feeling of connection that would be necessary for us to be affected by the expressions we perceive." (129)

In the course of his analysis Honneth then extends his thesis of reification as forgetfulness of recognition from inter-subjective reification processes to the reification of our natural surroundings and of ourselves. In order to characterize the structure of the reification of our natural surroundings he draws on Adorno's analyses again. The primary inter-subjective recognition includes, as he tries to show, to respect the subjective meaning aspects that fellow humans attach to specific natural objects so that reifying these objects consists in a forgetfulness of these existential aspects of meaning which others associate with them. As for the third form of reifying self-relations, these can take two basic shapes. The primary expressivist character of our own emotions, attitudes and desires can be distorted in a cognitivist way if we understand them as things that merely have to be "detected" and then put to

use in a socially useful way. But they can also be distorted in a constitutivist way if we understand them as something to be created at will in order to fit societal functions. In these self-reifying modes we forget the primary recognition of our own desires, emotions, and intentions in the sense of forgetfulness about their being worthy of an explorative appropriation and expression which allows for the development of a self-relation to begin with.

After this short look at the different forms that reification can take, I would like to turn to the origin and social causes of reification that Honneth names. The first and most general origin Honneth mentions is that the processes which allow for and facilitate the purpose of observing and cognizing our surroundings can become independent of the context in which they originated. (Cf. 130) Secondly, however, Honneth importantly sees that also “series of thought schemata” may lead to “a selective interpretation of social facts” and “significantly reduce our attentiveness for meaningful circumstances in a given situation.” (131) In this way his approach is able to incorporate ideological causes of reification which – by way of a more or less radical – de-contextualization and fixating of thought schemata give rise to reification in the sense of a total forgetfulness of prior, and meaning-constitutive recognitional structures. In response to the criticisms by Butler, Geuss and Lear, Honneth further specifies “a certain kind of lasting, routine praxis” (155) as the social cause of reification: “Subjects can forget or learn later to deny the elementary recognition that they generally grant to every other human being, if they continuously contribute to a highly one-sided form of praxis that necessitates abstraction from the 'qualitative' characteristics of human beings.” (155; emphasis C.S.)

I see two particular strengths in Honneth's interpretation of Lukács. Firstly, he introduces a helpful distinction between innocuous cases of objectification (instrumentalization, or de-personalization) and dangerous, harmful, destructive pathological processes of reification. Secondly, we need to stress that his discussion of social sources for reification does not reduce to commodity

exchange only, but is able to include other sources, such as ideologies.¹⁰ I believe that this is of utmost importance in times where education sciences themselves seem to be utterly unaware of the ideological nature of the research paradigms, slogans, and key words they uncritically import from the fields of economics or politics without paying attention to whether these are compatible with intrinsically pedagogical goals, aims and self-understandings. Lastly, I believe that Honneth's theory allows us to describe with great precision the reifying understandings of the cosmopolitan idea which lead to the problematic attitude of a mere observer of human life who reifies other people, objects, nature, and ultimately his or her own emotions and abilities. It is this attitude, I believe, which has been criticized by cosmopolitanism's critics (and which can in this way be shown to be understandable if not justified in some sense). At the same time Honneth's theory of reification might help to clarify that the core of the cosmopolitan idea is directly opposed to these reifying mechanisms.

The Critique of Reification and a Critical Cosmopolitanism in Education

If we understand reification as a second-order process of forgetting a primary recognition then we can come to see that the choice between the culturalist emphasis on the necessity of local contexts for meaning to be established and the cosmopolitan universalist abstraction is wrongly put. Instead of consisting in a selective, reifying attitude of appreciating the new worldwide possibilities of consumption, the cosmopolitan attitude can be reframed as a meta-reflexive form of boundedness in the sense of taking responsibility for resisting the reifying attitudes modern capitalism enhances. Cosmopolitanism understood in this sense could mean to remind ourselves of the primary form of recognition inherent in our relations towards every human being, toward nature, and toward ourselves, which is first constitutive of the meaningfulness of human action and interaction. The cosmopolitan attitude is then not one of abstract, merely observing detachment from all cultural or normative

boundaries, but a regaining of an interested and engaged involvement with others regardless of whether they share our background or not, with nature as well as with ourselves. In this way cosmopolitanism can mean to constantly work against and out of the naivety involved in letting the constructs, the frames of thought as well as the practices that evolve through human interaction become reified entities which take on a life of their own and start to determine human life in turn, inhibiting not only our interested involvement with the world and ourselves, but also the flexibility and openness of our thought for re-assessing our values, perceptions and meanings in different contextual circumstances. In my view, cosmopolitan education has to be about resisting being bound by reified entities, and finding, founding and finding back to non-reifying ways of boundedness.

Furthermore, it is in light of the critique of reification that we can understand the difference between cosmopolitanism as an economic or cultural opportunism of a small global elite and cosmopolitanism in the sense of a moral and political endeavor that takes responsibility for making the situational and historical contexts of our own claims and demands visible, where such a re-contextualization might make it harder to spill blood “in the *name* of universality, but for the *sake* of home and property.”¹¹ Such re-contextualization might also be helpful with regard to approaching, exploring and understanding another person's, another culture's, or another nation's moral, political, and economic claims. Rather than reducing the meaning of cosmopolitanism to the pleasurable aspects of globalization that allow for ever more cultural consumption to those who (have the means to) enthusiastically embrace “the opportunities provided by the diverse societal culture which characterizes the Anglophone society of the United States,”¹² as Kymlicka rightly criticizes, the cosmopolitan virtue can then take on a more profound dimension and cut deeper to much more “bloody truths.”¹³ I hope to have given some convincing arguments for taking a new look at reification, one of the most central notions of classical Critical Theory, in relation to re-thinking a cosmopolitan outlook in education in

the course of this paper. The educational debates on cosmopolitanism have often centered on a “drastic choice between the old universalism of the grand narrative of ahistorical cosmopolitanism and the new isolationism of small narratives unable to cross divides.” (609) The critique of reification, as renewed by Honneth, provides the means to reveal this dichotomy as false and irrelevant. Neither the reifications of a universal outlook leading to an equalizing, normalizing indifference to the particular context, nor the reifications of a particularist outlook leading to an over-stylization of the difference to the other prove helpful. The distinction which should matter is that between a badly understood cosmopolitanism which means nothing but the economically inspired extension of reification on a global scale, and between a critical cosmopolitanism in the sense of a moral and political plea for responsibility towards withstanding, untangling and going beyond such reifications on a global scale.

1 Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).

2 Torill Strand, “Introduction: Cosmopolitanism in the Making,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 29 (2010): 105.

3 Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (London: Macmillan, 1982), 100.

4 Marinus Ossewaarde, “Cosmopolitanism and the society of strangers,” *Current Sociology* 55 (3) (2007): 373.

5 “Ethics and ecology remain the outsiders of sociologist's 'insiders' talk.” (Marianna Papastephanou, “Walls and Laws: Proximity, distance and the doubleness of the border,” *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 43 (3) (2011): 212.)

6 I refer here chiefly to the recent publications by Axel Honneth, *Verdinglichung. Eine anerkennungstheoretische Studie* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2005); Rahel Jaeggi, *Entfremdung: Zur Aktualität eines sozialphilosophischen Problems* (Frankfurt/M.: Campus Verlag, 2005); Christoph Demmerling, *Sprache und Verdinglichung* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1994).

7 Claudia Schumann, “Axel Honneth's Notion of Reification and its Relevance for Current Educational Debates,” *Papers of the Annual Conference of the Society for Philosophy of Education of Great Britain*, Oxford 2011, www.philosophy-of-education.org/uploads/papers2011/Schumann.pdf.

8 David Hansen, “Curriculum and the Idea of a Cosmopolitan Inheritance,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 40 (3) (2008): 289–312.

9 The English version of the lecture I will cite from is available online http://www.tannerlectures.utah.edu/lectures/documents/Honneth_2006.pdf (02.01.2013). The printed version includes criticisms by Butler, Geuss, and Lear. (Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, ed. Martin Jay (Berkeley Tanner Lectures), Oxford: 2008.)

10 This aspect is comprehensively worked out in Christoph Demmerling's 1994 study (see above). He focuses on reifying processes from the perspective of philosophy of language. In this way he succeeds to a much bigger extent than Honneth at revealing those reifying structures which derive from our conceptual and linguistic practices. The aim is to work out those pathological and obsessive distortions of the structures of our thought and behavioral structures which derive from the various self-misunderstandings of what we are doing within the realm of our linguistic and conceptual practices, especially the logic underlying the substantialist misinterpretations of the formations of our concepts and differentiations. Similar to Honneth, Demmerling finds a counter model to reifying concepts in their re-contextualization and temporalization.

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- 11 Marianna Papastephanou, “The ‘Cosmopolitan’ Self Does her Homework,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 45(4) (2011): 607.
- 12 Will Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 85.
- 13 Stanley Cavell quoted in Papastephanou, “The ‘Cosmopolitan’ Self Does her Homework,” 607.