

Education and the Tragedy of Culture: Pedagogical Notes on the Rationalization of Knowledge

Silvia M. Grinberg
Universidad Nacional de San Martín

We usually think of education as a space within a culture, but a space that would be outside or beyond the contradictions inherent to culture. However, to what degree is the promise of modern pedagogy still possible?¹ Up to what point do the ideals and meanings of modern culture and education bring with them their impossibility? To address these questions, we consider it essential to reflect on the junction produced between the vast field of culture and the processes attached to its transmission. Education, we propose, cannot be thought of as a sphere separate from social life, nor could it exist were it not embedded in historical clay.

It is from these questions that is important for us to revisit classical cultural philosophy and sociology authors such as Simmel, Weber, and Benjamin. Through the Simmelian notion of the tragedy of culture, we propose to update the problems implied in the rationalization of knowledge and its transmission. From our point of view, classic works have not lost their relevance, but constitute key points from which to consider problems related to the rationalization of culture and, regarding this work, related to education, and its contradictions and tensions. Through the notion of the tragedy of culture we try to update this debate by stressing the forces related to cultural production and transmission, without looking for some Eden that could give us back lost completeness. We believe this task is essential to delineate, paraphrasing Benjamin, the pedagogy of the future. The disenchantment of the world, intrinsic to that tragedy, should not necessarily mean that culture in general and the processes involved with its transmission should become merchandise, *per se*, such as has happened before and continues to happen in many of the teaching strategies today.

From here, we understand that it is possible to open new roads that allow us to escape the logic of instrumental learning so cherished by many of the educational reforms implemented during the last decades of the twentieth century. In that respect, it is important to clarify that, although the debate we propose is characteristic of capitalist societies, we carry out our thinking in and from the specificity of Latin American and, especially, the southern cone and Argentina.²

ABOUT THE TRAGEDY OF CULTURE

As Simmel described, culture is elevated through a paradox, in which,

as it grows, we need to achieve our ends by roads that become increasingly complicated and have more stops and roundabout ways. Man is an indirect being, and the more cultured, the more indirect he is...The multiplicity and increasing complications brought about by elevated lifestyles do not allow the series *desire, means, and end*. They transform the intermediary element into a plurality, in which the effective means is produced by another means, and this one, in turn, by another, until that incalculable complication appears: the shackling of practical activities in which individuals of mature cultures live.³

This occurs just at the moment when it appears that man has reached the maximum level of freedom imaginable up to that moment. From this point onward, paradoxically, free action will be rationally guided, and as such, will become all the more measurable. At that moment, it is fundamental that, when it appears that nothing constrains or limits man other than his own conscience, a hiatus is created, which tragically marks the possibility or impossibility of the promise of culture and its transmission. An action shall be free when, unrestricted by external or internal constraints, bearing away from natural chance, will be easily interpreted. The irrational elements of our actions that limit free will are part of this already not so new ethos.

The emergence of that rational subject is produced by the split between mind and matter and/or subject-object, opening the road to rational calculation and the mathematical view of the world.⁴ There is something that is external, material, exists in itself, and is thought of and represented by the mind. The individual, by creating a world of objects for himself, creates an objective world that adopts logic that separates man from his origin and/or his finality.

There is a something present, the “thing itself,” regarding which the rational, conscious subject can report, think, and extract laws of existence (the distinction between subject and object emerges here). In this same process, the subject becomes the object of knowledge. According to Simmel, man’s capacity to break away from himself and confront himself as a third party maximally strains the object against the subject to redirect him towards reintegration, but it is at this moment that such reintegration will not no longer be possible. Social and scholarly life is structured on this schism, on that particular form of rupture between subject and object, and between the object, its representation, its reproduction and its transmission.

The mission of thought shall be to produce useful knowledge, capable of understanding what the world is and to dominate it and change it; in short, to contribute to the progress of social life. From here, knowledge shall have no other purpose than itself. Conscience and reason shall be the bedrock; if you will, the conscious subject who knows he is subject and object.

This conscious subject is not only a subject who thinks. Upon thinking and being able to turn the act upon himself, he creates a new field of knowledge that is subjectivity itself, a field which is expressed in terms of psychiatry, psychology, sociology, and, of course, education. He is the subject and object of reason, who defined in the capitalist spirit through the notion of profitability, is translated into a relation of means to ends, calculation and forethought.

During the Middle Ages, thought was related to God and to think of the world was to think of God. The disenchantment with that world and the rupture between the individual and the world produces that which Simmel called the tragedy of culture:

Inside this cultural structure, a rift has opened, which is imbedded into the foundation. Arising from the synthesis subject-object, and from the metaphysical significance of its concept, this rift brings forth a paradox, and even more, a tragedy. The subject-object dualism, which preconceives its synthesis, is not only a substantial dualism which concerns

both, but the internal logic according to which each of them develops in no way coincides in a self-evident way with the other....Such a path seldom takes it to consummate its totality....⁵

Thus, man sees himself as challenged and builds a world in that duality that cannot give back to him the sense of totality or completeness he had supposed he had. Paraphrasing Tolstoi and in clear harmony with Simmel, Weber would say that technical dominance over the world brings with it the absurdity of the very idea of civilization.

The growing intellectualization and rationalization do not indicate a consequential increase in general knowledge of the conditions in which we live. It indicates something different. To know or to believe that if you desire something, you can achieve it; that, in principle, there is no mysterious and unforeseeable force to interfere; that, on the contrary, all things can be controlled by reckoning. But this means disenchantment with the world.⁶

Weber charts this tragedy between the image of the peasant and the civilized man, who dies exhausted but unfulfilled, given that what the life of the spirit produces can only take a minimal part, but is always fleeting and indefinite. That is why if death makes no sense, then neither does civilized life.⁷

This process of rationalization and fragmentation is intimately connected with the disenchantment with the world that reminds us that, in order to provide meaning to our lives, we can no longer rely on magical resources. From here on out, we must resort to computation and technical resources. Thus, we return to the link between subject and object in the way in which scientific rationality is built.

It is now commonplace to point out that one of the peculiarities of modern knowledge is the possibility to extract universal laws that help us to foresee an event, or that allows the technical use of knowledge. In that respect, we must refer to some structural forms of the conscience that are manifest in subjects capable of knowledge and action. We must refer to one trait shared by different types of rationality while dealing with a potential for dominion over reality consistent with a method that involves certain skills for reflective thought and language.

In this context, reason becomes the systemizing example and the pivotal point from which man can not only know the world, but organize and establish a hierarchy of his knowledge regarding himself, and extract laws and principles of action. This occurs not only in relation to the world. The very subject becomes an object. As stated by Simmel, “an objectivation of the subject takes place and a subjectivation of the object, which constitutes the decisive factor of the cultural process...”⁸

A rupture occurs between the theoretical plane, as the formal structuring of interpretive symbolic systems of the entire world, and the method to control reality through action, as a set of theoretical criteria translated into practice, according to which the individual decides and acts. Now, how can scholastic education built in the middle of this tragedy produce consciences beyond specialization and computation?

EDUCATION AND THE RATIONALIZATION OF KNOWLEDGE

Modern teaching has been taking form during our history, in many cases attempting to become a space that can remain outside the tragedy of culture. This is

probably the image in which we are less able to believe, on the one hand, and which we are less able to offer to our students, on the other.

The long process of building modern educational systems required, among other issues, a long struggle between the already existing scholastic models and the proposed reorganization of scholarship revolving around industry and technology. Thus, the task of the school includes the organization of knowledge in curriculums by areas or disciplines, the distribution of scholastic credentials, the distinction between theory and practice in the very process of training, the rationalization of educational knowledge, and the planning of teaching. In spite of that, it is hoped that education can give back to society something of the totality and lost meaning.⁹ But it is this bond of subject/object, material/spiritual that breaks. How could the modern school, which is in some way the result of that rupture, create consciences different from those that shape it? How can a curriculum of specialists, divided into specialized fields, give back some of the lost unity?

Perhaps it was not expected that this would happen. Professional education is considered only for training individuals capable of producing and working. The processes of guiding knowledge of the various modern educational programs express that practical concern.¹⁰ Protestants, as described by Weber, were the first to guide the education of their children towards technical and industrial-commercial professions.¹¹ In fact, it is those schools where the practical orientation of knowledge is expressed with the greatest clarity. It has to do with, specifically, with freeing oneself from the world as something revealed, and building consciences capable of thinking of the world as something material that exists independently of the subject. In this manner, the rational "I" can search for its laws. The distinction between subject and object is, therefore, one of the central conditions not just for building modern knowledge, but also for transmitting it and for training of subjectivity.

This is the tragedy of the specialist man and of the long process that his training requires: in order to produce something in the field of knowledge, he must dedicate himself to that branch of knowledge, remaining indifferent to all others. Thus, according to Nietzsche, "said scholar, the exclusive specialist, is similar to a factory worker....The division of work in the sciences leads, practically, to the same objective...the decline of culture, or rather to its annihilation....We have arrived at such an extreme that all questions of a serious nature — and mainly the highest philosophical problems — can no longer be discussed by men of science, as such."¹²

If, as we have said, the individual is free and autonomous and thinks about his actions, the knowledge and skills that he should acquire from education should provide him with the principles needed to calculate the achievement of his goals with the understanding of appropriate means.¹³ As it is known, the calculation of means/ends define and shows the difference in the ratio technical-instrumental.¹⁴ The possibility of having that knowledge will solve problems related to the cost of seeking a concrete objective in relation with other interests and based on a scale of priorities. This is the knowledge of the technician, who "*usually receives one thing: the goals or aims.*"¹⁵ More than a century ago, Nietzsche pointed out what he

identified as a double tendency to extend and spread out culture as well as to restrict and weaken it:

culture must spread out to the largest circle possible, which the first tendency demands. The second, on the other hand, demands that culture abandon its highest, most noble, most sublime ambitions, and be forced to serve any other kind of life, for example, the State. . . . This extension is contained in the economic dogmas of our times. As much knowledge and culture as possible, as much production and needs as possible, as much happiness as possible: that is the approximate formula. In this case, we see that the final objective of culture is usefulness, or, more concretely, a profit, as much benefit in money as possible.¹⁶

Naturally, we must question the present educational reforms and the promotion of effectiveness as a goal or purpose in itself. In effect, in Latin America, school reforms in the nineties were based on a diagnosis that demanded the improvement of school life by achieving changes toward equity, competitiveness, and effectiveness.¹⁷

TOWARDS A NEW PROMISE?

These last few years, we have seen crisis, social rearrangement, and many educational reforms. During the last educational reforms, curricula were updated based on new requirements for citizenship and jobs.¹⁸ That was the objective when organizing what became known as the teaching of competencies. For this pedagogy, becoming competent means becoming attractive merchandise in the employment market. To become attractive, students need to develop a set of new attitudes that, far from expressing a natural difference, are the result of building skills and qualities that the school must foster and develop while guiding students so they may attain them.

Within this framework, the diagram illustrating training in this new century, which includes several aspects, is called the “teaching of competencies.” First, the lack of employment is seen as a competency problem. In other words, it is believed that individuals are not able to get jobs because they do not have the training required by flexible enterprises. Second, as the State that guaranteed stability weakens, it is necessary to train the new worker as someone who continuously looks for a job and needs to learn to compete in the market. Third, the two other aspects synthesize as a third aspect, involving a *question of attitude*.

Now, if that is the main goal of education or teaching, what happens, as it is happening now, to an increasing portion of the population, when a job is not possible? Here is a serious problem in our times. The performance of knowledge and its relationship to profit is questioned by a large section of the population. It is questioned not only because education as a technical instrument is criticized, but because there is no direct relationship between education and occupation, so endorsing teaching because of its profitability is no longer possible. In other words, in a society where twenty percent of the population will probably not be able to join the formal market economy, the possibility of becoming interested in learning for the benefits that educational credentials may offer for joining the market is at least an irony. That benefit is being questioned daily in schools. It is not that young people do not care about anything or that they have become nihilists. It is that no one has

seen as clearly as those young people that there is no relationship between education and employment.

Knowledge and training are no longer useful. For the *supernumerary* mentioned by Castel, knowledge is not translated into value.¹⁹ Beyond any hypothesis on the society of knowledge, the relationship between knowledge, educational credentials, and a job cannot be supposed or maintained by itself in the classroom. We refer, in particular, to children of the unemployed third or fourth generations, for whom a future with regular work is at least a euphemism. Perhaps that is why that generation has understood, better than any other, that the relationship between education and financial profit is not direct. However, that should not be confused with lack of interest or apathy, as adults usually express it, particularly when referring to young people who attend school²⁰ in urban ghettos.²¹

As Agamben points out, a society that is baffled and has few possibilities of transmitting something to someone criticizes its young people for something it cannot give.²² We look at these young people as if they had no interest in learning or in finding something interesting in the world, something they would want to learn about. We ask them to have will power, to have interests, when they live in a world that erased any possibility of experience and of narrating the experience. That expropriation of experience is nothing new. Its calculation and rationalization are inherent to the increasing rationalization of life.

Not having profit as the first and last rationale for education does not necessarily imply apathy or laziness. Perhaps it is the opportunity to build backwards, “against the grain” as Benjamin would say.²³ Perhaps it is the chance to bring political debate, questioning, and the struggle for meaning back to the classrooms. In other words, perhaps it is an opportunity to revitalize the educational experience recovering the search for meaning in the field of education. Thus, in the classroom, we may find a space in which to ask about our lives. We may build a small agora in which to “brush against the grain” — one of the conditions of life that is not natural, but is the result of relations of struggle and power in which, paraphrasing Benjamin again, the enemy does not stop winning.

We may develop educational practices that require more than just reading certain ideologies as they are presented in certain texts. To accomplish this, we need to develop analyses that illustrate how certain representations emerge and become legitimate fetishes such as the competencies and the capacity to be educated and/or to become employed.²⁴

The above requires classrooms created to conceptualize and to explain the problems of the world. To work with concepts and to debate in and with concepts is probably the challenge of schools that have been told they had to stop teaching to guide learning. Giving speech back to the classrooms does not imply searching for the final meaning, but recognizing that we are thought about, we think, and we live through words. Rather than accepting the strength of facts, which all education of means entails, we try to develop facts into theories, consider them, and question them. Again, following Benjamin, we are redeeming the past by giving it speech,²⁵

by explaining problems, and by debating with and through a historical experience, by “taking possession of a memory as it flashes in an instant of danger.”²⁶

For those young people whose social, financial, and political lives have left them precluded, for those whose condition as workers and as citizens has been questioned, education could become a space for them to understand and to act against the strength of facts.

As Bernstein said, when you acquire strength from order, you also get strength from disorder.²⁷ It is precisely by working with and through concepts, in the possibility of conceptualizing, thinking, and thinking about ourselves in the world that we acquire the tools to transform it.

Schools cannot promise jobs. However, it is precisely now, when knowledge has been separated from instrumental logic, from cost and benefits, that knowledge can become a space for questioning and for struggle. In short, we refer to the imperative need to restore the prominence of speech in the classroom and to transform experience into an opportunity to recreate some educational promise.²⁸

1. The notion of “promise” is taken in the sense given to it by Hannah Arendt, *La Condición Humana* (Buenos: Paidós, 1996), 265.

2. The region was deeply affected by the growth of unemployment and by extreme poverty toward the eighties. In the case of Argentina, the neoliberal Educational Reform implemented in the nineties produced what resembled a sclerosis of the educational system. The provinces were thus left behind in many aspects, including the financial aspect.

3. Georg Simmel, *Schopenhauer y Nietzsche* (Caronte: Argentina, 2005), 17.

4. Regarding this question, we must consider the effects of the philosophy of conscience or the representation that allows us to delineate some of the mechanisms on which we are acting. It also allows us to see the process of schism between subject and object, which we must consider based on its principles and then ask ourselves how it is restructured in our society of pretence, a society able to transpose this opposition in the virtual world. How can we think about this distance, this rift, and the two planes in the virtual world?

5. Georg Simmel, *Sobre la Aventura. Ensayos Filosóficos* (Barcelona: Ediciones Península, 1988), 220.

6. Max Weber, *Ciencia y Política*. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1980), 38.

7. According to Simmel, “there, where life has become sterile and absurd, all development toward completeness, a development that is possible, is only a schematic development, which can’t extract objective content, sustenance and encouragement from things and ideas. As a sick body, it can no longer metabolize food into the materials from which a healthy body develops and becomes stronger. Individual development may extract only good social conduct from social norms, only unproductive enjoyment from the arts, and only the negatives of daily ease and plainness from technical advances.” Simmel, *Sobre la Aventura*, 214.

8. Georg Simmel, *Cultura Femenina y Otros Ensayos* (Barcelona: Alba Editorial, 1999), 145.

9. Images such as that of Emilio’s and Kant’s pedagogy, or even the moral education of Durkheim, in spite of their many differences, have hope in common.

10. Regarding this matter, it is possible to examine some of the changes in the field of the education in modern times having as a central point the processes of reorientation of knowledge as described by authors such as Ernst Bloch, “La Actividad Docente y el Libro,” in *Entremundos en la Historia de la Filosofía* (Madrid: Taurus, 1984); Emile Durkheim, *Historia de la Educación y las Doctrinas Pedagógicas* (Madrid: Ediciones de La Piqueta, 1986); or Basil Bernstein, *Pedagogía, Control Simbólico e Identidad* (Madrid: Editorial Morata, 1988).

11. Max Weber, *La ética Protestante y el Espíritu del Capitalismo* (Madrid: Istmo, 1988). See, among others, Yolanda Ruano de la Fuente, *Racionalidad y Conciencia Trágica. La Modernidad según Max Weber* (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1996).
12. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer como Educador* (España: El club diógenes, 1999), 56–57.
13. Regarding this matter, Weber says, “Rationality is conditioned by the ability to calculate technically decisive factors based on exact calculation. This means: based on the peculiarity of Western science, particularly on the sciences of nature, which are mathematical and experimentally exact. The development of these sciences and of the technique that depends on them received and keeps on receiving decisive impulses that are linked to their financial use as premiums. Technical use of scientific knowledge... through components such as: one, no doubt, the rational structure of law and management; and also people’s skills and disposition in certain types of practical-rational way of living...an ethos.” Weber, *Ciencia y Política*, 85.
14. See, among others, E. Terrén, *Educación y Modernidad: Entre la Utopía y la Burocracia* (España: Anthropos, 1999).
15. Weber, *Ciencia y Política*, 55.
16. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sobre el Porvenir de las Escuelas* (Barcelona: Editorial Tusquets, 2000), 52–53.
17. A key material regarding these arguments is the document from the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, *Educación y Conocimiento: Eje de la Transformación Productiva con Equidad* (Santiago de Chile, 1992).
18. We refer to the processes of curriculum reform that were conducted in clear agreement with the proposals made by the “Secretary’s Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills” (SCANS) and the document “What work requires of schools?” of the international credit agencies. The Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA) has had great influence in Argentina and in Latin America in spreading these ideas.
19. The notion of supernumeraries refers to “the useless to the world, those who live in the world but belong to it. They occupy the position of supernumeraries. They tread water on a no man’s land, not integrated and unable to become integrated...” Robert Castel, *La Metamorfosis de la Cuestión Social Una Crónica del Salariado* (Barcelona, México, Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1997), 215.
20. Although the ideas expressed here might be valid in other areas, we refer specifically to the schools attended by people who live in the poorest sections of Buenos Aires, Argentina, and its surroundings. We found ourselves developing research on “Teaching devices and the creation of subjectivity in marginal urban settlements” (“Dispositivos pedagógicos y producción de subjetividad en emplazamientos urbano marginales”) for the Secretary of Science and Technique, Universidad Nacional de San Martín.
21. Loic Waquant, *Parias Urbanos* (Buenos Aires: Manantial, 2001).
22. Giorgio Agamben, *Infancia e Historia* (Argentina: Adriana Hidalgo editora, 2001).
23. Walter Benjamin, *La Dialéctica en Suspense: Fragmentos Sobre la Historia* (Santiago, Chile: Universidad ARCIS y LOM ediciones, 1996).
24. We refer to the reasoning that unemployment happens when people are unemployable because they are incompetent; that is, they have been poorly trained, or their training is outdated. Among others, see María del carmen Feijoo, *Argentina: Equidad Social e Educación en los Años 90* (Buenos Aires: IPE, UNESCO, 2000).
25. Susan Buck-Morss, *Walter Benjamin: Escritor Revolucionario* (Buenos Aires: Interzona Editora, 2005).
26. Benjamin, *La Dialéctica en Suspense*, 51.
27. Bernstein, *Pedagogía, Control Simbólico e Identidad*.
28. Regarding this matter, see Walter Benjamin, *Iluminaciones IV: Para una Crítica de la Violencia y Otros Ensayos* (España: Ediciones Taurus, 2001).