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Forward: a personal reflection

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Although the concept has a long history, social justice has become something of a key term across a range of domains and disciplines in recent years. For those of us who work in language education, it has provided a useful conceptual tool for thinking about the structures within which we are imbricated, the roles we are ascribed and the identities to which we are able to lay claim, as well as to matters of pedagogical practice and student flourishing. From my own perspective as a queer educator whose thinking about the social is indebted to Marx, I am also aware that the concept is understood very differently depending on attitudes to capitalism, and in particular to capitalism in its increasingly fractured neoliberal guise. Thus, despite Friedrich Hayek's (1982: 82) repudiation of social justice as belonging 'not [...] to the category of error but to that of nonsense', many of the inheritors of his creed of market fundamentalism have more recently engaged with the idea as potentially useful, as the negative social consequences of neoliberalism have become ever more evident.

A cursory look at the website of the centre-right British Centre for Social Justice is instructive in this regard. Its mission statement declares that the organisation's vision is for 'those living in the poorest and most disadvantaged communities across Britain to be given every opportunity to flourish and reach their full potential' (Centre for Social Justice, 2023). It aims to do so by addressing what it sees as the root causes of poverty, which are listed as: family breakdown, educational failure, worklessness, addiction and crime and problem debt and housing. Unsurprisingly, educational failure (as the factor most directly relevant to readers of this volume) is discussed in terms of the 'upskilling' and 'reskilling' needed 'as our jobs market is rapidly being remoulded by technology and the world economy' (ibid.). No mention here (or anywhere on the website) of the depredations of neoliberal capitalism or the need for structural change – rather a predictable focus on the need to meet the challenges demanded by 'the economy' and the role of education in facilitating this. My point in raising this in the forward to this volume is that what social justice means is intimately bound up

with our political understanding of the purpose of education. As Kevin Harris (1982) put it some years ago, what capitalism requires for its reproduction is *schooling* rather than *education* – a distinction in which the former is understood as the inculcation of the values of the system and the production of school leavers and graduates with the appropriate dispositions needed to service the economy, while the latter is construed in terms of the development of human potential and the critical consciousness necessary to effect change. ‘Educated people’ he writes, ‘are a threat to an oppressive or repressive social system’ and, under capitalism, education ‘is kept from rather than provided for the vast proportion of the population’ (Harris, 1982: 23). We do not have to accept Harris’ assessment completely though, as he tends to neglect the role of teachers’ agency (despite the many constraints on it) in striving to educate their students. But it is certainly the case that the political right seeks to commandeer the concept of social justice with a view to rendering it subservient to the needs of capital. Thus, teachers and scholars whose view of education resonates more with that of Harris than that of the Centre for Social Justice have an important role to play in articulating and implementing a view of social justice in which social critique is central.

In thinking about such a view of social justice, the work of a number of scholars has been important for me – in particular that of Nancy Fraser (1995) on redistribution and recognition and, more recently, that of Donaldo Macedo (2019) on decolonising the curriculum. Fraser argues that social justice in the world today requires redress on two fronts. On the one hand, she identifies the *socioeconomic injustice* which requires a politics of redistribution. On the other hand, there is the *cultural injustice* suffered by minority groups (e.g. racial, linguistic, religious, etc.) whose marginalisation calls out for a politics of recognition. Of course, there is overlap between the two and, as Fraser points out, the distinction between them is analytical. With regard to the cultural injustice experienced by non-normative sexuality and gender-identifying minorities there has been a plethora of protective and recognition-granting legislation introduced by governments globally in recent years (e.g. decriminalisation of homosexuality, introduction of equal marriage and the rights of transgender people to change their birth certificate, passport, etc. in line with their chosen gender identification, etc.). However, very little of this social change is reflected in the pedagogical materials for use in classrooms. These remain in large part relentlessly heteronormative and cisnormative in terms of content (Gray, 2023), thereby perpetuating the symbolic violence of erasure that LGBTQ+ students endure in educational settings. Calls for recognition are therefore important, but to forget about the ways in which cultural injustice and socioeconomic

injustice articulate with one another runs the risk of our redress being co-opted by a neoliberal homo- and cisnormativity which is celebratory of diversity, individualism and choice, but which remains blind to structural inequalities of class society. The challenge, Fraser (1995: 69) suggests, is to:

see ourselves as presented with a new intellectual and practical task: that of developing a *critical* theory of recognition, one which identifies and defends only those versions of the cultural politics of difference that can be coherently combined with the politics of social equality.

Hence the argument for an approach to recognition that is both intersectional and attentive to the realities and lived experience of students from the Global South. And here the spectre of colonialism rears its head. In a recent edited volume, *Decolonizing Foreign Language Education: The Misteaching of English and Other Colonial Languages*, Donaldo Macedo (2019) and colleagues argue that the teaching of colonial languages needs to change if colonial legacies and linguistic hierarchies are to be challenged. As well as making the case for alternative forms of carrier content in language teaching materials to those currently on offer in which all mention of colonialism is erased and language spread is seen as a natural and apolitical phenomenon, many of the contributors make the case for a translanguaging approach to pedagogy. It is one in which the monolingualism associated with communicative language teaching is viewed as politically retrograde, educationally shallow and ethically unsustainable. These contributors do so in line with the manifesto recently issued by a group of translanguaging scholars (García *et al.* 2021: 211) who content that:

academic language is not a set of empirically derived linguistic features, but rather a category that emerges as part of broader raciolinguistic ideologies that overdetermine racialized communities as linguistically deficient and unacademic, even as the concept of academic language itself remains impossible to define objectively. That is, racialized populations are often perceived by the white listening subject as using non-academic language that needs to be corrected even when engaging in ostensibly the same linguistic practices that are unmarked for white subjects.

The manifesto is a powerful argument in favour of a very different kind of second language classroom, and one in which a concern with social justice moves centre stage. That said, as

Jürgen Jaspers (2018) points out, we need to be realistic about what we as educators can achieve. There is no doubt that we are well positioned to address cultural injustice by actively taking steps to accord recognition to marginalised groups in the materials we use to teach, and we can allow our students to draw on the full range of their linguistic and semiotic repertoires in the classroom as they engage in meaning making in ways which undermine the privileging of English monolingualism. When it comes to socioeconomic injustice things are a little different. Structural change also requires political activity *outside* the classroom – but the case for such activity can certainly be made *within* the classroom. Here the tradition of critical reading is helpful in encouraging students to begin to imagine alternatives to the versions of the world currently on offer in so many second language classrooms. Thinking about ways of exploring heteronormativity (but clearly relevant to so many other issues), Joshua Paiz (2022: 98) recommends posing post-comprehension questions of the following kind:

What relationships do we see represented in the text?

What do we notice about the structure of these relationships as it is related to gender, age, race, etc?

What does this suggest to us about what the text values?

How are these views supported by the graphic elements of the text?

Do the pictures that go with the text reinforce these ideas or others?

Who is ignored by this view? Who is given preference?

What would alternatives look like?

Such an approach – and it is only one of many – is representative of a pedagogy of social justice in which education (as understood by Harris) is the driving force. It is one that encourages students to think critically about the materials and ideas they are asked to engage with, and that seeks to elicit their own responses in imagining alternative ways of construing and creating the world. In the pages that follow, a group of international scholars offer a global perspective on social justice in a range of EAP and ELT contexts in which issues of theory and practice are insightfully explored. It is a much needed and welcome addition to the literature.

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