

EXPANDING THE CONCEPTION OF PREJUDICE IN MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL NOTE

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In discussing the nature of prejudice, much of the multicultural education literature defines it as a knowledge and judgement problem. While knowledge and judgement certainly constitute significant dimensions of prejudice, there is more to this phenomenon than these two inter-related features alone. I want to propose that the meaning of prejudice in general usage, and in multicultural education in particular, be expanded to explicitly include the conception of prejudice as a violation of rights. Here the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is helpful.

Prejudice and Rights

The OED supplies two key conceptions of prejudice. The first is similar to the conventional notions advanced by most proponents of multicultural education:

- II. 2. a. A previous judgement; esp. A judgement formed before due examination or consideration; a premature or hasty judgement; a prejudgement. b. The action of judging of an event beforehand; prognostication, presaging. 3. a. Preconceived opinion; bias or leaning favourable or unfavourable; prepossession; when used absolutely, usually with unfavourable connotation.¹

This definition emphasizes judgement and the absence of examination of reality. People, according to this logic, form prejudices when they make judgements on the basis of insufficient knowledge, which is usually the result of not investigating reality. Such judgements, or pre-judgments as they are sometimes called, are typically associated with negative or unfavorable connotations. The second,

related, OED conception of prejudice reads as follows:

I. 1. a. Injury, detriment, or damage, caused to a person by judgement or action in which his *rights* are disregarded; resulting injury; hence, injury to a person or thing likely to be the consequence of some action. Now chiefly in particular phrases, as *in prejudice of*, to the (intended or consequent) detriment or injury of, *to the prejudice of*, to the (resulting) injury of; *without prejudice*, without detriment to any existing *right* or *claim*; esp. In *Law*, without damage to one's own *rights* or *claims*.²

This definition places rights squarely and explicitly at the center of prejudice. Here prejudice is conceived as a violation of right. In other words, prejudice is not merely a judgement and knowledge problem, but rather an outright denial of rights. This is not a minor point.

Shifting the focus from prejudice as a knowledge and judgement problem, to prejudice as a problem of rights, immediately brings to the fore the political nature of prejudice. It clarifies that prejudice cannot be eliminated simply by expanding knowledge. While deepening knowledge is positive and necessary, the shift implies a political orientation and approach to combating prejudice. It means recognizing and appreciating the existence of definite and specific interests in society that gain and lose from the violation of rights.

Class Roots of Prejudice

Prejudices arise from and are transmitted via the prevailing culture. It is the prevailing culture, in ideological and social form, that blocks the cognition of reality. By hindering individuals from engaging in an act of finding out and gaining real knowledge, the ideas, values, feelings, beliefs and outlook of the prevailing culture represent the first line of defense of the capitalist status quo.

Social relations under capitalism are dehumanizing and irra-

tional because one section of society – a propertied minority – exploits and oppresses the other section – the propertyless majority. In such an unequal and divided society the overwhelming majority are disempowered and marginalized; they have no control over their lives, no real say in the direction of the society. Economics, politics, education and culture are dominated by the wealthy few and thus the majority experience varying degrees of hostility, alienation and anti-social attitudes.. All this gives rise to an inevitable clash of interests between the broad masses of the people, who stand for enlightenment and social progress, and a small elite, who wield power and promote irrationalism and ignorance. It is in the objective interests of the capitalist class – the old, dying class – to render life in a dogmatic way, to prevent individuals from gaining real knowledge of their relations with nature and their relations with each other. This is how the capitalist class, as a class, fosters anti-consciousness and preserves its system of exploitation and oppression. Were individuals enabled to acquire real knowledge, particularly theoretical knowledge of society, they would become conscious of their interests and their role in affirming their rights..

The rights of all can be guaranteed and real knowledge can truly flourish only when the basis of existing social relations and ideas – the economic and political system – is renewed.

End Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., Vol. XII, p. 356, original emphasis. 2 Ibid., p. 356, original emphasis except for “rights” and “claims.”