

BOOK REVIEWS

A Revolution in the Classroom

A review of *una otra mirada: ninas y ninos pensando en America Latina*

una otra mirada: ninas y ninos
pensando en America Latina

Mario Berrios and Walter Kohan
1995, Universidad Iberoamericana
Plantel Golfo Centro

reviewed by James Rogers

“Today, children”, a teacher announces, “we are going to draw a picture”. As one child excitedly imagines what he will draw, he is told that they will be drawing flowers. As he imagines the flower he will create, he is then told that a flower has a red bud and a straight, green stem. When he changes schools the following year and the teacher announces that the class will be drawing a picture, he awaits instruction. When he is told that the only guidelines are the limits of his imagination, he draws a flower with a red bud and a straight, green stem. Are reality and truth absolute, or historical and contextual, that is to say, pluralistic? In the same light, is there one or are there many ways to do philosophy?

This tale, an annex to the book, depicts the traditional and reigning learning environment as seen by the two authors. *Una otra mirada*, a highly charged examination of the history of thought and the state of child development -with special emphasis on Latin America- explores the complex nature of what it means to educate and do philosophy in the classroom. The child in the tale is every child who, like so many generations before him, is trained to believe and trust in absolutes, and to respect the vertical relationships formed not only with authority figures but also with the authoritative nature of truths. What Berrios and Kohan suggest is the need for a revolutionary approach to the relationship children have with the process of learning. Instead of the current didactic relationship of teacher/knower versus student/learner, they propose a democratic learning space in which the child’s role is participatory and dialogical rather than submissive. The assertion of these two philosophy professors is that only with the achievement of this basic educational foundation can children begin to do philosophy and gain freedom.

Drawing on a variety of thinkers, from the ancient Greeks to Nietzsche, Dewey, Freire, Hegel, Deleuze, Foucault, Lipman, and such prominent Hispanics as Paz, Marti and Batalla, the authors describe and denounce the status quo in child education. The book’s introduction (*Presentation*) expands Paolo Freire’s phrase “to think the world is to transform it”, both stating the need for transformation and hinting at the means. What follows is a detailed theoretical essay whose goal is to engage the reader in the dialogue of how to best help children to live in freedom.

The authors begin by telling the readers to question everything, to hold nothing as self-evident or absolute. Referring to education as a commodity-driven environment, the first thing the authors question is the way schools do business. Their assertion is that the primary concern of the educational system is self-legitimization and self-perpetuation, and that empowering the children with the ability to think critically and creatively would threaten their existence. Stopping shy of depicting a covert conspiracy to repress the masses, the authors suggest that the current educational framework is not viable in that its own interest overrides that of the children. Rigid regulation of the environment and obedience become the educational model, and the educators -those with the authority- rarely if ever question this for obvious reasons of self-preservation. This breeds more generations that, through mere participation, defend a paradigm which serves so few.

This book champions a structure in which students can create and build for themselves. This “democratic space”, as they call it, consists of a horizontal teacher-student relationship that eliminates the knower-learner dichotomy. The nature of this space is dialogical, a process in which all parties have something to give and something to learn. Democratic means to a democratic end. While these ideas are presented as desirable in general, it is here that the focus turns inward to the case of Latin America, where current repression carries a long and steady history. The educational systems, the authors argue, replicate the social and political structures in which they are found, which in many Latin American countries means expectations of conformity and obedience by the establishment. Such an establishment can only allow single truths, can only legitimize its own point of view, its own constructed realities.

This conceptualization and presentation of absolute truths is precisely the point of contention for these authors; no room is left for dialogue, and no legitimacy given to the “other”, or any referent party outside the dominant one. Within a democratic dialogical paradigm, everyone has a voice and everything is open to debate, including the process itself.

Reality is contextual and historical, the book argues. And only by striving to understand the questions of the other can there be any truth at all. That is the nature of dialogue and of doing philosophy—the process of accepting and listening to the questions. And everything can and must be questioned. This is the step that is presently missing, but which is becoming more and more the trend as Latin America understands education is a liberating force. Much like the goals of liberation theology, a growing source of empowerment among Latin Americans, education should enable one to confront realities that provoke dissatisfaction. Instead of having truths imposed, the dialogical process allows realities to be discovered individually and from within.

This contextual, pluralistic nature of realities allows for differences, and creates a space for the acceptance of differences. Since 1992, the 500th anniversary of the conquest of the Americas, the issue of the legitimacy of the other has been a hot one. If nothing else, this anniversary has created a space in which the long-ignored other is given recognition and a legitimate and legitimizing presence. Validation of individual experience, acceptance of the personal and intimate into shared debate is where truths are found, realities experienced. Differences are expected, and can be weighed by the participants. But their existence cannot be ignored. Citing Plato, the authors tell us that when the dialogue stops, philosophy dies. This inclusion I find to be telling: while the authors reject the absolutism of the Greeks, they recognize the importance of that voice.

After a considerable presentation of the nature of the necessary revolution, Berrios and Kohan offer Lipman’s definitions of critical and creative thinking as the primary components of the philosophical process. The presence of the two creates a hybrid environment that is part methodical and self-correcting, part expressive and pluralistic. Only when the classroom has both will philosophical thought be bred, and will children have “more than a toy in their hands”.

Heeding their own advice to act as you believe, the style of Berrios and Kohan turns tradition on its head. Instead of referring to mixed-gender plural in the masculine, as is common in Spanish, they use both the masculine and feminine, always putting the feminine first (as in the title of the book). This is a small gesture to not only defy philological status quo, but also to pay tribute to the struggle with repression that women share as a result of the same hierarchical nature of social and political structures. As this device leaps out from page one, the call for revolution hits home before it is articulated. Likewise, the capitulation of the book bucks the standards, starting with chapter zero. As cliché as it may seem, the intended impact was not lost on this reader.

The chapters of the book are followed by two annexes. The first contains the tale of the boy and the flower, and is well-placed. It serves as a fitting if not simple reprise of the book’s main points. Given the lengthy and sometimes labyrinthal development of their arguments, a simple reminder of the fundamentals certainly doesn’t hurt. The second annex traces the origins and development of philosophy for children in the U.S. and Latin America. Included also are the names, addresses and phone numbers of the institutions and major players involved in the philosophy for children movement in various Latin American countries.

Una otra mirada is an invitation to think, primarily to think about how we think. Far from a classroom how-to, this book is an analysis of the status quo and a proposal for change. In the same vein as Octavio Paz’s *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, an exploration of the Mexican psyche, *una otra mirada* explores the nature of thought and education for all children, especially those in Latin America. Also similar to Paz’s work is the occasional generalization or the precarious declaration. While the arguments mainly stay on the topic of forging a new

educational frontier, the thrust and implications of the necessary changes are fundamentally political. Given the links between education, social movements and politics in Latin America, this is not surprising. In a world where large-scale change usually depends on violent means, this call to arms is a welcome alternative. If you do not read Spanish, however, the revolution will have to start without you.

James Rogers is an Instructor in Spanish at Viterbo College, La Crosse, Wisconsin.