

Foreword

New authoritarianism – are we asking the right questions?

The prevailing characteristic of the contemporary world appears to be disorder, engendered by successive global crises that are progressively eroding the formerly predominant neoliberal ideology and the economic and political institutions that emerged from it. Moreover, the vacuum left by the decay of neoliberal hegemony is increasingly being filled by authoritarian politics. This phenomenon is not only occurring on the fringes of the Western world (Turkey, Hungary, Poland) or beyond (China, Russia, Saudi Arabia), but also in its heartlands (the United States, the United Kingdom, France).

At the same time, unlike in the 1930s, authoritarianism does not seem to be historically inevitable. The low level of ideological engagement among citizens (at least outside the US) and the inability of authoritarian regimes to present themselves as the only solution to contemporary problems suggest that their presence may be the result of a return to normal political order after two decades of post-political hiatus. In such context, authoritarianism might not be a problem in itself but rather a symptom of our inability to find answers to the most important problems of our time (climate catastrophe, wars and pandemics, growing wealth inequality).

From an educational perspective, the most important question seems to be whether our response to the presence of authoritarian tendencies should be based on critical analysis. The strong position of criticism, natural in the neoliberal era, may be called into question at a time when, in the face of the decay of previous hegemonic structures, a significant part of the population is engaging in some form of 'criticism' or 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (ranging from questioning the position of social elites to anti-vaccination movements). The growing depletion of social trust that might result from using critical analysis may strengthen, rather than weaken authoritarian powers. At the same time, the alternative to criticism – that is, some form of reflection and practice that would address the problems rather than their symptoms – carries the risk of ignoring the progress of authoritarian politics and passively observing its entrenchment in the social fabric.

The papers presented in this issue of *Ars Educandi* attempt to address contemporary authoritarianism from different perspectives and in different ways. The first of these, by Łukasz Stankiewicz and Karolina Stary, describes the contemporary situation as a manifestation of the decay of neoliberal hegemony, accompanied by the emergence of the phenomenon of post-truth and the growing inability of traditional institutions to control discourse. The authors reconstruct educational strategies aiming to counteract the dominance of post-truth, and based on liberal civic education or, in a critical version, the theories of Laclau and Mouffe. Both of these paths are considered problematic by the authors of the article due to their reliance on the attitudes and institutions of the decaying regime of liberal hegemony. As an alternative, they propose a programmatic educational neutrality that draws on Freire's ideas while also going against them.

The second of the presented texts: a conversation between Marta Gontarska, Monika Popow and Paweł Rudnicki concerns the reaction of Polish society to the failings of a soft authoritarian state exposed to large-scale crises (in this case, the war in Ukraine, the hybrid war with Belarus and the related refugee crisis), or – as in the case of the abortion ban – generating them itself. The interviewees describe the emerging “fourth sector” – incidental and informal activity rooted in social media that allows for the organisation of rapid, mass responses to emerging needs. This is an extremely effective formula (as could be seen during the time when first waves of refugees from Ukraine arrived in Poland), but its nature is fleeting and it does not generate the potential for deliberation, which prevents it from solidifying into permanent organisational forms or planning actions that go beyond a response to the situation at hand. The ‘fourth sector’ would thus be a new form of civic activity that is adopting an attitude towards the third sector – which suffers from a deficit of trust and is perceived mainly as a means of transferring public funds to the private sphere – analogous to the attitude of new populist political forces towards the forces representing the crumbling political status quo of the neoliberal era.

Abdellatif Atif's article also refers to the chaos accompanying the end of neoliberal hegemony. Contrary to theories that recognise populism (and, to a lesser extent, any manifestation of political instrumentalization) as threats to the autonomous ‘essence’ of education, Atif proposes a perspective based on Laclau and Mouffe's theory that treats all three phenomena as equivalent. He does not treat the encounter between populism, instrumentalization and education as a pathological process in which the rational nature of education is (temporarily and always reversibly) deformed by the pressure of populist forces, but as a relationship between forces whose aspirations and normative roots conceal their internal antagonism and contingent nature, inherent to any social formation aspiring to universalism.

Piotr Kowzan's text also refers to antagonism, understood from the perspective of the concept of schismogenesis presented in David Graeber and David Wengrow's book *The Dawn of Everything*. Schismogenesis – allowing for the constitution of one's

identity in opposition to the practices of one's rivals – is one of the basic strategies used by neo-authoritarian leaders to fill the ideas of 'nation' or 'people' with meaning. However, Piotr Kowzan, like the authors of the first of the texts described above, points to the weakness of this strategy: the emptiness of its antagonistic gestures and the archaic nature of the populists' belief that the tools of the state can control the cultural pulse of nations today. Reading Graeber and Wengrow also allows Kowzan to formulate other explanations and prescriptions concerning authoritarian power. Its weakness provokes it to acts of aggression intended to make it something more than a weak centre of control over a free society. However, its gestures make it vulnerable to ridicule, which, according to the author of the article, is a strategy that might be relevant in an educational context.

The penultimate paper, *Women's agricultural production in Guinea-Bissau as a means of strengthening their identity* by Carlos Sangremana and Mary Melo, concerns deeply rooted cultural patterns of authoritarian gender relations. The author analyses the potential for resistance and independence associated with the possibility, also customary in the community under study, for women to retain income from their own agricultural work. This activity, which involves not only cultivation but also trade, obtaining assistance or financing from local credit societies and non-governmental organisations, enables women to participate in the public sphere, rather than being confined to the private space of the home and family, where they are restricted by traditional social roles.

The diverse strategies described in the previous articles appear in a form adapted to a different context in the last text of the first part of the issue: *Rage against the machine or cooperation with the machine: resistance and resilience in AI governance* by Grzegorz Stunża. The author describes the dilemma facing civil society in the face of the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) controlled by dominant technology corporations. Its emergence offers the opportunity for a rapid increase in our ability to control the world, but it also carries significant risks, such as technological unemployment, increased economic inequality and technological authoritarianism based on intelligent control systems. From the perspective of civil society, this issue can be the basis for criticism of emerging solutions, but also an opportunity to participate in guiding the development of AI so that it can serve goals such as sustainable development and the pursuit of a more just and equal society.

As the editors of this issue, it is our hope that the texts collected herein will provide the reader with new perspectives on the contemporary world situation, and that they will encourage the reader to pose questions that may lead us to new strategies of resistance or – at the very least – new ways of coping with the changes we experience.

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