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Pedagogies of Cruelty

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Blog Series: Social Justice and Civic Engagement

May 20, 2020

Tags: pedagogy | pedagogies of cruelty | environmental pedagogy

The term “pedagogies of cruelty” was created by the Argentine-Brazilian, feminist, anthropologist Rita Laura Segato.[1] Her development of the term has to do with the ways we must learn nowadays to get used to the cruelty of our times. This can be clearly seen in the ways governments are dealing with the SARS-Covid-19. As we have seen, politicians are telling us that this virus, whose first name is always absent, SARS- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, is just a flu and some necessary death will happen in order for the economy to go back to normal if we all want to survive.[2]

The perversity of capitalism demands an education based on violence, terror, and cruelty. One that destroys any form of solidarity or empathy. We have to learn to see suffering, cruelty, and death as normal, and even inevitable presences in our times.

Since the liturgies of the state must be liturgies of cruelty, control, and death if it wants to survive, the pedagogies of this capitalistic economic system train us that we must accept any liturgical form of cruelty necessary. In other words, necropolitics needs *necropedagogies*. Thus, we must get used to the prison system because this is necessary for our safety. We must get used to debt because there is no way to live without debt. We must get used to climate collapse otherwise we can't get all we want. We must get used to health care offered to some people and not all because the costs are too high to provide for all. We must get used to poor people dying because they have no reason to exist. We must get used to walls against foreigners because we can't accept all immigrants. We must get used to mental illness because

this is a crazy world.

These “new” pedagogies of cruelty appear as a continuation of previous pedagogies of cruelty already normalized in our social living: we have already gotten used to the notion of private property, staggering salary differences, lack of rights for workers, use and abuse of women, the need to be constantly at war, and so on.

The co-opting of the commons by private sectors have financialized health, education, and the earth, turning what is common into “resources” owned by a few proprietors. Due to that, Segato says we cannot understand the capitalism of our time without thinking about the owners of the world’s richness. The speed of the concentration of wealth is alarming, eroding the world’s entire networks of systems and balances. The case for education is the same. Turned into profit, we must now get used to education being for the few and accept its systems of cruelty. Thus, we must get used to student loans and large amounts of debt because higher education is necessarily costly. We must get used to the gap between schools’ administrators and teachers because, you know, it’s a matter of responsibility. We must get used to working for big endowments that grow off the exploitation of the earth and people because we need to offer a high-quality education. We must get used to paying adjunct teachers less and no benefits so we can compete in the market.

The same argument surfaces in Brown University’s president Christina Paxson recent article where she calls for returning to campus this Fall. She says: “The basic business model for most colleges and universities is simple—tuition comes due twice a year at the beginning of each semester. Most colleges and universities are tuition dependent. Remaining closed in the fall means losing as much as half of our revenue.”[3] In other words, school is based on profit and we, the people, not the state, not the government, must pay the price for its existence. It’s simple! We must pay the salaries of high ranking business educators too.

Pedagogies of cruelty aim at depleting any source of solidarity and any form of *vincularidad*, of connection between people, people with animals, and the earth. We must learn to cope with the pain of the other and make sure to pay attention to ourselves since this is a vicious world and we must survive at any cost. Using military strategies of deflating the power of pain of the other, pedagogies of cruelty teach us to look at the death of other and say: such is life, or what can we do, or I am sorry and move on. Who cares if the largest number of deaths due to SARS-Covid-19 are in poor areas and among minority people? Who cares if black people are dying in greater numbers? Who cares if poor white people are dying? Who cares if migrants are dying in private prisons or if black people are dying in prisons? They are all already expelled from society. What can we do?

This is the crux of the pedagogies of cruelty: to take away any sense of agency and political action from us. We are lost. Both main political parties are suffused with these pedagogies even if in different modules and intensities. We feel we have no way to go.

When we teachers go to the classroom, we come already indoctrinated by these pedagogies. To care for the students is getting more and more difficult. Both because they are not our business and because we must protect our schools so we can keep our standing. If we can fulfill the “learning outcomes” we are doing our job. The subjectivities of our students paired with their objective lives must be placed in a second plane of awareness. At the end, they are on their own as we are on our own too. We can lose our jobs at any time. Unknowingly, we reflect in some way or another, these pedagogies of cruelty in our classrooms.

Our task then is to constantly raise a sign and scream: NO! we must continue to be in solidarity! We must continue to create bonds of affection and care! We must keep the threads of *vincularidad*, of connection, of mutual belonging. We must join other groups and expand the public spaces that have been encroached on by capitalism. We must foster communities of alterity, of other forms of living, thinking and relating to life. In Latin America, there are many communities who live on the *exteriors* of our systems: indigenous, *quilombolas*, *raizales*, *palenqueras*, communities led by women in the Amazon and the Zapatistas.[4] They are the deepest target of pedagogies of cruelty, for they still hold a counter narrative to the system. However, they are the ones who can teach us how to resist, how to create pedagogies of affection, of relationality, of *vincularidad*, of production of collective means of care and a common life with other people, species, and the earth.

The task at hand is immense or even impossible. But as somebody said: Who said the impossible wouldn't be difficult?

[1] Pedagogies of Cruelty is a development of Hannah Arendt's political education in Hanna Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*. Segato understands the current form of 'capitalism of cruelty' as one that creates forms of education to keep the edifice of the system protected and moving. In her words, “the pedagogy of cruelty is the system's reproduction strategy... which is “absolutely essential to the market and capital in this already apocalyptic phase of its historical project.” in Rita Laura Segato, *Las Nuevas Formas De La Guerra Y El Cuerpo De Las Mujeres* (Argentina: Tinta Limón, 2013), 23, 80

[2] *Trump's Deadly Mistake In Comparing Coronavirus To Flu*, <https://theintercept.com/2020/03/25/coronavirus-flu-comparison-trump/?comments=1>; *Texas lt. governor on reopening state: 'There are more important things than living,'* <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/493879-texas-lt-governor-on-reopening-state-there-a>

re-more-important-things; *Chris Christie argues for reopening economy because "there are going to be deaths no matter what,"*

<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/chris-christie-reopening-economy-deaths-no-matter-what/>

[3] Christina Paxson, *College Campuses Must Reopen in the Fall. Here's How We Do It.*

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/26/opinion/coronavirus-colleges-universities.html>

[4] Eliane Brum, *The Amazon Is A Woman,*

<https://atmos.earth/amazon-rainforest-indigenous-activism-history/>

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2020/05/pedagogies-of-cruelty/>