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PROLOGUE

FEMINIST EDUCATION AND FORUM THEATRE, A COLLECTIVE REHEARSAL FOR REALITY

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Looking back over the last 40-odd years of my life, I have spent two thirds of that time in educational institutions, studying and teaching at universities. It was during the other 16 years outside academia that I was forced to find different forms of transmitting knowledge, as I was invited to 'coach' people on issues of racism and gender relations: people who were working in public sector administrations, in professional jobs, in churches, but also in universities and schools. One of the most successful methods I employed was Augusto Boal's 'Theatre of the Oppressed', especially the method of Forum Theatre. In the following text, I want to reflect upon its usefulness for a feminist understanding of education as a form of empowering the disempowered.

Re-reading Boal's work a few years ago, when my colleague David Uzzell and I began to think about alternative forms of environmental education (Räthzel and Uzzell, 2009), I was surprised to find concepts in Boal's early writings (1985) that I had learned in the feminist movement: consciousness raising, self-reflexivity, self-empowerment, horizontal collective action.

But there is something more in Boal's approach which I think can be useful for feminist educational practices: the way his method allows us to confront power. This may seem like a strange distinction to make, as challenging power has always been at the heart of the feminist movement. For instance, the three excellent and innovative contributions to this section all talk about ways to overcome power relations and hierarchies. However, the power relations and hierarchies addressed in feminist education are predominantly those 'within': within institutions and organizations, within science as a male-dominated field, or those between group members of an institution.

Perhaps the most powerful slogan of the so-called second-wave feminist movement has been 'the personal is political'. This can be and has been interpreted in a variety of ways. It can mean that personal issues have to be dealt with in the realm of the political as opposed to being seen as issues that should be solved between

individuals. It can also mean that what is perceived as personal is the result of political decisions and societal structures. Different interpretations call for different activities. If the personal is to be raised into the realm of the political, this means for instance campaigning for the right to choice, for legislation against marital rape, against the exploitation of the female body in media representations, etc. While all these campaigns are crucial and have brought about changes that have improved the lives of millions of women, they can be fought and – at least partially – won without referring to the broader system of societal relations of production, political relations, and relations to nature. If personal issues are seen as the result of political systems, they need to be solved by transforming these systems as well.

One of the main theorists to inform the practices that tackle everyday power relations is Michel Foucault. He redefined power as circulating: “Power must be analyzed as something that circulates... And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in a position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foucault, 1980:98). However, what is often overlooked is Foucault’s emphasis that circulating power relations are related to and reproduce relations of domination: domination of power where the actors cannot be reversed, where one part of the ‘power-couple’ prevails and has to be overcome, not negotiated with (Foucault et al., 1994).

The question then becomes: how do we understand the link between everyday power networks and the broader relations of power which are sustained by these everyday relations? More precisely, how can we avoid reproducing relations of dominance while addressing everyday power relations? Burroughs draws attention to this problem in her chapter in this book section. I think Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed has something to offer in understanding the junction between everyday power relations and structures of dominance.

When I first used Forum Theatre, I was no stranger to the notion of self-empowerment. However, Boal’s Forum Theatre does not only enable people to learn from the point of view of their own experiences, nor does it only presume that as human beings, we all have the capacity to understand theories and the societies we live in. Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed offers more than that: it implies action, the articulation of conflicts, and the search for solutions that can be implemented by the ‘spect-actors’ themselves:

Theatre is a representation and not a reproduction of social reality. Forum-Theatre presents a scene or a play that must necessarily show a situation of oppression that the Protagonist does not know how to fight against, and fails. The spect-actors are invited to replace this Protagonist, and act out – on stage and not from the audience – all possible solutions, ideas, strategies. The other actors improvise the reactions of their characters

facing each new intervention, so as to allow a sincere analysis of the real possibilities of using those suggestions in real life. All spect-actors have the same right to intervene and play their ideas. Forum-Theatre is a collective rehearsal for reality. (Buchleitner, 2010)

The emphasis here is on acting out and finding solutions. I'd like to illustrate the usefulness of the method by describing one instance in which I used it, during a seminar with employees in an office for cultural integration, part of the city council. The employees were a mixed group in terms of ethnicity, age, and gender. My task was to teach them about racism. What they expected was to learn what racism is, how it works and how to address it. But somewhere between the lines was also the hope that such a seminar would help them to work better together to fulfill their task of 'integrating' migrant communities into the host society. I started by asking what they thought the main problems in their work were; the answer was cultural differences within their working group. Gender relations, they replied, weren't a problem at all. Thus, I started with developing the notion of culture theoretically: how we are all immersed in and brought up within different cultures, and how this determines the ways in which we think and act, even when we're convinced that our thoughts and actions are the result of rational thinking. A heated discussion followed, with some arguing that we could liberate ourselves from the cultures we came from and act rationally, with others arguing the opposite. The discussion went on endlessly, with no tangible result. I sensed that there was a gender difference in the argumentation, and so I proposed that we take a break and try something else: all proponents of the 'rational decision' opinion would go and stand in one corner, with those supporting the 'cultural influence' opinion in the other. To everyone's surprise, all of the women stood in the 'cultural influence' corner, and all of the men stood in the 'rational decision' corner.¹ The groups were mixed in terms of ethnic background and generation.

This triggered a discussion about gender relations, specifically the ways in which men are brought up to be different from women across boundaries of national cultures. But more importantly, it also elicited a discussion about gender relations in their department: without prompting, the women started to criticize that the men always talked too much during meetings, were unable to listen, and tried to take the most interesting jobs for themselves. It's doubtful that this would have occurred if I had simply told them that one of the ways in which our thinking is influenced is through the fact that women and men are brought up differently, in all modern nation-states. So why did this simple movement of bodies in space have such a powerful effect? Why did it change the subject people wanted to talk about? Perhaps it was because nobody had tried to convince anybody of anything; instead, the movement of bodies created a reality, something that could be considered as a fact beyond individual belief. What remained to be done was to come to terms with this fact. This physical

demonstration of a difference between what men and women thought, irrespective of their age and ethnic background, was also powerful because it could not be attributed to anybody's 'false consciousness', 'misinterpretations' or 'being biased'. No specific person had voiced an opinion; the whole group had just demonstrated to themselves an issue they did not even know they shared – and likely would not have, if it had only been discussed.

This power of 'reality' (I write reality in quotation marks because we know that reality is always only experienced through our concepts and interpretations) is also what gives Forum Theatre its educational power, its capacity to create convincing knowledge. It is convincing because people produce it themselves, even in opposition to their own ideas and convictions, the things they think they know.

After the surprising outcome the movement of bodies had produced, everyone was much more tuned into doing a Forum Theatre exercise than before, when some of the more knowledge-oriented participants had been quite suspicious of 'playing around', instead of having solid lectures about real knowledge.

After explaining the method, I asked the participants to think of a conflict at their workplace which they wanted to resolve. Feeling much more free to articulate work-related issues, many were able to contribute a story. We created four groups who played out a particular situation. While one group was performing, the others would be the spect-actors, who could change places with one of the actors in order to try to resolve the conflict. However, during the first group's performance, it became apparent that with each change of places, the conflict worsened. At times there was such a level of anger that I feared the situation would get out of hand. After several rounds, I stopped the performance and suggested that we proceed to the next group and to come back to the first one later. But the same thing happened with every group. At the end of the day, everybody was devastated – including me. I had been paid to help these civil servants to solve their problems, but I had only succeeded in making them worse. Aggressions had surfaced that the participants had never experienced at their workplace before. The fact that they were 'only acting' had opened the door for people to complain about each other in a way they would never have dared to do in their usual working relationships. No solution was found for any of the conflicts. I conveyed Boal's message that it was not a problem if no resolution could be reached; we had tried, and that was the main objective, to go through the process. Nobody was really convinced by this soothing message, including myself. I ended the session by pointing out that we still had half a day left tomorrow, and that I was absolutely sure that we would be able to find solutions during the remaining time.

And miraculously, the next day each group re-enacted their conflict with a solution that satisfied everyone: the people who had experienced the conflict, as well as the spect-actors. I don't know if people had sat together in a pub afterwards and thought

things through or if they just thought about it personally at their homes.

I'll use the example of one conflict and its solution to demonstrate how the method enabled a specific understanding of the conflict, which then also enabled its solution. A woman and a man, the first with an immigrant background and the second without, worked in the same office space on the same task. The male colleague complained that the woman was never in the office, that she was always off socializing with people from her immigrant community during working hours instead, pretending that this fell under her job assignment of developing networks with the community and listening to their needs. In turn, the woman complained that her colleague kept griping that he had so much work, working even during the evenings, when in fact this 'work' amounted to attending parties with prominent politicians, eating and drinking.

On the second day, the conflict was resolved in the following way: the woman promised to take her colleague into her community, so he could talk to people, listen to their needs, and experience their ways of life, while the man would take her to the 'parties' so that she could speak to the politicians herself, and experience that politics are indeed made in these kinds of settings. The ease with which this simple solution was reached caused us all to wonder why it had not been possible to do so right away. We began to analyze the situation in terms of the power relations that were represented in the daily conflicts of the two protagonists, but did not have their origin there. It became possible to talk about ethnic and gender relations in society at large, about the images of the 'Other' lying at the bottom of the man's suspicion about what his colleague was doing out there in her community, about the feelings and realities of exclusion that fueled her suspicion about her colleague's work with powerful politicians. We discussed that they had occupied precisely those power vs. powerless positions that society had assigned to them, not only in terms of their ethnicity, but also in terms of their gender. We also discussed that the solution that seemed so simple would perhaps not turn out to be so easy in practice. Anxieties, images of the 'Other', exclusionary practices – in short, societal power relations as they are reproduced in daily personal encounters – are not easily overcome by just getting to know each other.

However, what was appreciated by all participants was that a dynamism of mutual recognition of each other's position as well as a process of self-reflection had been initiated that might enable all employees to approach not only their problems at work, but also the problems they faced within their daily job of 'integration,' in a more productive manner. They could begin to avoid individualizing conflicts: instead of explaining them on the basis of individual traits (she is lazy, he loves parties), they could trace their conflicts back to the societal and institutional contexts (after all, they were working in a state office) within which they had been brought up and were acting.

There are a number of ways in which Forum Theatre facilitated this connection

between everyday power relations and societal structures of domination. First, playing theatre provided emotional freedom, and allowed people to express views they would not have dared to express in an ordinary discussion. Similarly, while these expressions at times produced anxiety, they were not as destructive as they would have been outside of a 'play,' because they did not have to be taken seriously (see Burroughs in this section). Second, the seriousness of the play was equally important, and manifested itself in the inability to create an imaginary solution. Nobody who replaced an actor succeeded in finding a solution that attained consensus, because the other actors would act as the 'reality principle' and prevent that solution from materializing. That is why this method can be described (as Boal did) as a collective rehearsal for reality, the emphasis being on collective and reality. Third, the fact that different people – different members of the collective – did not succeed in finding a solution during the first round took the 'blame' away from specific individuals, and opened the door for discussing the external origins of the conflict, i.e. the societal and institutional context within which the conflict between a few people in a small office could be understood. Forum Theatre sets knowledge free through bodily practices (including the brain) that go beyond mere personal opinions: for instance, the de-individualization of conflicts; the existence of prejudices even when people think they are free of them; the recognition of conflicts and tensions that are difficult to articulate. This knowledge creation, undertaken by the participants themselves, generates the desire for more knowledge, for broader contexts and broader visions. This is where the 'teacher' comes in, and where I departed from the strict Forum Theatre method. Spect-actors and the teacher know different things: the former know their contexts and the difficulties of their daily working life as well as the societies they live in and come from, and the latter know theories that can hopefully provide an explanation for these contexts and provide a framework for future learning and solution-finding. The Boal method can thus complement feminist education practices by providing the possibility to connect internal power relations with relations of dominance in society at large, and practical knowledge with theoretical knowledge, which are both equally indispensable.

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It was remarkable that the gender division was so distinct, which helped trigger discussion about that very subject.