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## ENTITY IN NEOLIBERALISM – SOME CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

The aim of this article is to present the issues of entity in neoliberalism from the critical point of view. The following text is a converted fragment of my master thesis entitled “*Village as a space of exclusion in education on the example of biographies of Polish and Catalan students*”, defended in 2013 at the University of Gdansk. In the aforementioned work, inter alia, the relationship between educational plans and the social position of Polish and Catalan students coming from rural areas was examined. The theoretical part of the work, among other things, shows the entity in neoliberal conditions and refers to the production of specific types of rationality, connected to the two rationalities described by Robert Kwaśnica<sup>1</sup>. I would like to start with describing the neoliberal discourse.

According to Thomas Lemke, neoliberal discourse is a political rationality, which seeks to transform “*the public domain into a market domain*”, which “*combines the reduction of state functions (welfare) and security systems that encourages the ‘individual responsibility’ and ‘self-improvement’*”<sup>2</sup>. In such context, both the individual bodies as well as corporate bodies and institutions must be ‘efficient’, ‘reduced’ and ‘flexible’<sup>3</sup>.

Using the definition established by Alain Bihr, neoliberal discourse is ideological and its aim is not only to justify neoliberal policies by concealing its class character and providing new bases for capitalist exploitation and domination, but also strengthening them, “*what can be achieved by becoming a common language of members of the dominant class and its representatives, but also by making it difficult for members of subordinate classes to understand their situation and their purpose to which they should aspire*”<sup>4</sup>. It is an integral part of neoliberal policies – the new language of the world rulers. The ideological function of a neoliberal discourse – according to Bihr – explains its content: subject matter, unspoken assumptions, doctrine statements and used notions. These

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<sup>1</sup> R. Kwaśnica, *Dwie racjonalności. Od filozofii sensu ku pedagogice ogólnej*, Wrocław 1987.

<sup>2</sup> T. Lemke, *Narodziny biopolityki. Michela Foucaulta wykłady w College de France na temat neoliberalnej rządomości*, in: <http://www.ekologiasztuka.pl/think.tank.feministyczny/kurs/f0049lemke.pdf> (access: 6.10.2013).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> A. Bihr, *Nowomowa neoliberalna*, Warszawa 2008, p. 13.

include the neoliberal apology for individual freedom, private property idealization, formalistic understanding of equality, instability approval, aversion to public services and the state itself as well as free market fetishism<sup>5</sup>.

As A. Bihr proves, neoliberal discourse is similar to George Orwell's newspeak. It indicates the use of the concepts in its reversed sense, 'replacing the meaning of a word with its opposite' (eg. the neoliberal equality as inequality)<sup>6</sup>. The term of neoliberal newspeak in a similar sense is also used by Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant<sup>7</sup>. They argue that nowadays terms such as 'globalization', 'flexibility', 'employability', 'exclusion', 'underclass', 'zero tolerance', 'new economy', 'multiculturalism', 'communitarianism' and others are widely used, whereby these terms are devoid of their original meaning and context in which they were established. Terms such as 'class', 'capitalism', 'domination', 'exploitation' and 'inequality' seem to no longer appear in the public debate; they were rejected under the pretence of inadequacy and being archaic, what is understood as a result of the new form of (neoliberal)<sup>8</sup> imperialism.

This imperialism (or more likely the hegemony of neoliberal discourse) is a form of symbolic violence, involving the imposition of communication, with enforcing the submission as its aim. The aforementioned terms used nowadays, introduced by Bourdieu and Wacquant as 'screen-discourses', are masking the effects of the neoliberal discourse 'work' and are neither analysed nor discussed. Using them makes one forget about the complexity and the reality of "*the American society of the post-Fordist and post-Keynesian era, the world's only superpower and symbolic Mecca, characterised by the deliberate dismantling of the social State and the correlative hypertrophy of the penal State, the crushing of trade unions and the dictatorship of the 'shareholder-value' conception of the firm, and their socio-logical effects: the generalisation of precarious wage labour and social insecurity, turned into the privileged engine of economic activity*"<sup>9</sup>.

Zofia Łapniewska notes that the neoliberal discourse "*refers not only to the assessment of individual and collective action in the profit and loss account, but also gives the illusion of impact on reality (freedom of decision-making preached by the neoliberals) by leaving space for small changes*"<sup>10</sup>. Numerous effects of the neoliberal discourse hegemony are described in the cited work. A new identity model is a key result.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 13-14.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 15.

<sup>7</sup> P. Bourdieu, L. Wacquant, *NewLiberalSpeak: Notes on the new planetary vulgate*, „Radical Philosophy” 2001, 105, p. 2, in: <http://loicwacquant.net/assets/Papers/NEOLIBERALNEWSPEAK.pdf> [access: 31.07.2016].

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Z. Łapniewska, *Neoliberalny dyskurs*, in: <http://rownosc.info/rownosc.php/dictionary/item/id/486> [access: 28.09.2013].

## Identity in neoliberalism

In the context of the pedagogical analysis, discourse reveals its main function that is influence on a specific model, as well as building a specific individual identity. Action of discourse produces an attitude to oneself, to other people and to the world itself. As indicated by Małgorzata Lewartowska-Zychowicz, “*individuals are constructed as entities within the institutional and discourse structures, they do not have a prior nor an essentialist character*”<sup>11</sup>. It leads to assumption that the neoliberal discourse has the educational value that can be seen in imprinting the individual to a specific identity model.

Joanna Rutkowiak presents the portraits of the four types of a person in neoliberal culture. The researcher mentions the personality features of the individuals living in neoliberalism – the producer, the consumer, the ‘wasted’ man and the man of resistance (sometimes passive pressure)<sup>12</sup>. The producer is a mobilised and available man, with forced features; the one is efficient, obedient and devoted to the corporation the one is employed in. The consumer obsessively absorbs everything that is produced, at the same time has the unfulfilled, unconditional desire of wanting more, a desire cleverly and intensively fuelled from the outside. A ‘wasted’ man neither produces nor consumes, “*rolls down to the bottom, with no way to recover*”<sup>13</sup>. Man of resistance is the one who makes an effort to oppose the system, tries not to submit to pressure, demonstrates one’s dissatisfaction, what could result in unmasking the status quo. Additionally, if one changes into the passive pressure, a real, but fragmentary changes in the social system<sup>14</sup> can be achieved.

Other social actors in neoliberalism are listed by Eugenia Potulicka. Apart from describing the consumer and the producer, she establishes a model of humanity in neoliberalism consisting of an entrepreneur managing his life and an employee. In this sense, a person is an economic entity, the private estate owner that tries to maintain and maximize, thus one is *homo oeconomicus*. This entity is characterised by egoism that allows one to treat other people as competitors: “*they scheme, undermine one’s work, leave traps with the intent of seeing us fall down on our knees*”<sup>15</sup>.

As indicated by Danuta Anna Michałowska, greed and envy (often fuelled by advertising), are frequently the features of the modern man. According to the re-

<sup>11</sup> M. Lewartowska-Zychowicz, *Homo liberalis jako projekt edukacyjny. Od emancypacji do funkcjonalności*, Kraków 2010, p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> J. Rutkowiak, *Neoliberalna kultura indywidualizmu a dialogowanie społeczno-edukacyjne*, [in:] *Neoliberalne uwikłania edukacji*, red. E. Potulicka, J. Rutkowiak, Kraków 2010, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 133.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> E. Potulicka, *Teoretyczne podstawy neoliberalizmu a jego praktyka*, [in:] *Neoliberalne uwikłania...*, p. 47-48.

searcher, selfish and egocentric attitudes, as well as a discouragement to cooperate and insensitivity to other people, are starting to dominate the world. A shift of the moral evaluation of these features has occurred – “*what was previously considered a fault is now a neoliberal virtue or value*”<sup>16</sup>. It is clear that in the entrepreneur man model who manages his life egoism is positively evaluated<sup>17</sup>.

On the other hand, the employee man model favours the perception of people as exchangeable goods: “*The number of reports describing the scandalous working conditions and despotism employers is increasing. The labor force is an instrument of accumulation of capital. The ideal worker is a person who becoming unnecessary, adopts a decision to dismiss without regret and does not give the employer to court*”<sup>18</sup>. Man as an entrepreneur managing his life and man as an employee are important neoliberal figures shaped by this discourse.

Referring to Karl Marx, Alain Bihr writes that capitalism by liberating the individuals from their personal relations of dependence, subjects them to the impersonal relations of dependence, making the, the entities / subordinates<sup>19</sup>. According to A. Bihr, embodiments of the subordinate entity are:

1. economic entity, meaning “*private owner of the goods, that maintain the value of exchange and aim for their possible increase through participation in the system of universal exchange of goods (the capitalist economy) and, therefore, being one of the parties that exchange them on a single or more markets*”<sup>20</sup>,
2. legal entity, meaning the entity (privileged to safety, property, freedom) that should use one’s privileges in the relations with others based on the relationship contract that respect the mutuality of commitments and autonomy of the will of the contracting parties, through which an individual acquires rights and responsibilities. Originally legal subjectivity is vested to people only during the exchange of goods, but in capitalism it is the basis for each social relation,
3. ethical entity, meaning a moral person, that is ought to be respected and who should show respect to other individuals, in various relations, which may arise between them,
4. political entity, or a citizen, privileged to participate (while maintaining the formal equality of status in relations with other units) in the law establishment and power over the country. This aspect of an individual is strongly connected with the impersonal public authority, which is the capitalistic state,

<sup>16</sup> D.A. Michałowska, *Neoliberalizm i jego (nie)etyczne implikacje edukacyjne*, Poznań 2013, p. 64.

<sup>17</sup> E. Potulicka, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 48.

<sup>19</sup> A. Bihr, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100-101.

5. philosophical entity as an individual capable of self-reflection and rationality<sup>21</sup>.

Each of the entities produced by neoliberalism has its own rationality. The first two entities (economic and legal) in terms of the Bihr's conception are assigned to Kwaśnica's concept of adaptive rationality (instrumental), while the other three (ethical, political, philosophical) I assigned to the rationality of emancipation (communicational).

Both rationalities, as stated by Kwaśnica, are characterized by i.e. sharing and implementation of disparate values that result in a certain attitude to the world and life goals. Participation in given world of values is revealed in the descriptions of the world, as well as the assumptions and interpretation procedures<sup>22</sup>.

In the adaptive (instrumental) rationality values are derived from the axiological perspective of instrumental action. The specificity of these values is determined by roots in the objective world. Therefore life goals and attitude to the world are established by the goods that prove to be necessary to maintain, as well as to continue, the human life – the both biological and social essence. The usage of the aforementioned goods should be “*a necessary condition for the duration and for obtaining satisfaction from the fact that the individual acts efficiently in the given circumstances. This part of the human world attracts one with the prospect of a comfortable, prosperous and peaceful life. The subordination gives one a sense of stability and security*”<sup>23</sup>. The reality is perceived as “*the world of objects that should be a subject to inspection and control; a subordinate for vitally important, utilitarian purposes*”<sup>24</sup>.

In this context Bihr indicates that the active presence of an individual in capitalism is based on formal and instrumental rationality. The first notion requires “*assuring the compatibility of a certain state with a set of formal rules*”, while the instrumental rationality, is defined by “*the ability to choose the right means for achieving the goal*”<sup>25</sup>. In the context of adaptive rationality, Bihr claims that the action of the entity is based on calculation, finding means to achieve the goals within the reified, abstract relations that form the capitalist society<sup>26</sup>. This issue is in accordance with the idea of *homo oeconomicus*, a specific entity formed in neoliberal discourse.

As for the rationality of emancipation, its axiological aspect comes from the communicative action. In this perspective, its values are revealed simultaneously, during the dialogue, as possibilities for emancipation. The notion is here understood as “*a search for the possibility of liberation from the previously created and thus accepted*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100-103.

<sup>22</sup> R. Kwaśnica, *op. cit.*, p. 59-60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 59.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 60.

<sup>25</sup> A. Bihr, *op. cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 100-103.

*world*<sup>27</sup>. In such conditions, the individual search for the possibility of emancipation, with its main value being one's development, meaning self-realization. In accordance to Kwaśnica it could be said the value here is opening up to new, self-centered values and significance, and a new way of experiencing the world. The key is being possible to construct alternative standards and objectives, being able to discuss them, exclaiming one's claims and demanding justifications for everything an individual finds significant. Thus those are personal, moral and universal values rather than utilitarian in terms of adaptive rationality<sup>28</sup>. These correspond with the idea of ethical, political and philosophical entity.

The world within the rationality of emancipation is described in terms of processual (significance is rooted in the past and extends the future), communal (the world is established in collective action) and communication categories, which means that the world is significant due to the communication process and in this process the understanding of the world is determined. This affects the relation between an individual and other people, one's knowledge and culture<sup>29</sup>. Rationality is therefore crucial to the analysis of the neoliberal discourse.

As pointed out above, the neoliberal discourse leaves an imprint on the individuals, shaping the subjectivities with certain rationalities. On the contrary, it generates different attitude towards their educational prospects. It is dependant, inter alia, on the social status of the individuals and the context they act in. It reveals an interesting relationship between the identity and education.

## **In conclusion...**

Nowadays the individuals grow up in conditions of neoliberal culture, what leads to the accumulation of social exclusion<sup>30</sup>, but as well as causes changes in identity, creating specific versions of subjectivities, which are then internalized and manifested via specific attitude to themselves, other people and modus operandi in the modern world. That, among other things, affects the perception of education. In such context, it could be said that education often improves the situation on the labour market, but also the ability to compete, what puts it into the perspective of instrumental rationality. It appears to me it is strongly connected with the direct relationship with the dominant discourse in which entities are constructed .

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<sup>27</sup> R. Kwaśnica, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 70-71.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> This matter was discussed in my master's thesis written at the University of Gdansk under the direction of Prof. UG, dr. Małgorzata Lewartowska-Zychowicz.

Despite the strong hegemony of the neoliberal discourse, it is essential for pedagogues and educators to critically overview the existing reality, make their students / juveniles sensitive on issues related to the negative effects of neoliberalism, unmask the shape of things, explain the process of exclusion, inequality and to carry on the dialogue in resistance to the hegemonic discourse. Summing up, I would like to quote M. Lewartowska-Zychowicz, who explains that the main reason for that is *“the pedagogical involvement of the individual and the potential emancipation that hides in the education – justified by the fact that an individual as well as education itself appear to me as being under siege”*<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> M. Lewartowska-Zychowicz, *op. cit.*, p. 24.