

INTERVIEW

FOR A DEMOCRATIC, PUBLIC, DECISION-MAKING EDUCATION: AN INTERVIEW WITH LICÍNIO C. LIMA

POR UMA EDUCAÇÃO DEMOCRÁTICA, PÚBLICA E DA DECISÃO: ENTREVISTA COM LICÍNIO C. LIMA

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PRESENTATION

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Ruth Pavan: In the book *Educação ao longo da vida: entre a mão direita e a mão esquerda de Miró* [*Lifelong Education: between Miro's right hand and left hand*, in a free translation], both in the introduction and along the book, you have suggested that we could follow Miro's example, poetically addressed by Joao Cabral de Melo Neto in the poem *Yes against Yes* (LIMA, 2007). Besides the irreproachable approximation between education and poetry, I would emphasize that it is a Brazilian poem. How has the presence of Brazil become so frequent and pertinent in your writings – in this case, with Brazilian poetry – and how can poetry contribute to education in times of technicist views of education that are “as dominant as exhausted” (LIMA, 2007, p. 34), as you have written in you book?

Licínio C. Lima: The title of the book is *Educação ao longo da vida: entre a mão direita e a mão esquerda de Miró*; it is a metaphor that drew my attention and even made things difficult, but it filled me with enthusiasm to do research. I have a reasonable knowledge of Brazilian literature; I know the whole work by Joao Cabral. We just read and interpret things, in a way, in accordance with the moment while we are working. Probably, I would not have paid attention to that poem if I were not working with that theme at that moment. Joao Cabral says that Miro came to a deadlock, since he painted so well, his right hand was so precise, so knowledgeable, so competent, so able, and so skillful, that he could not invent anything. He had reached the highest level of competence. Then the writer, poetically regarding Miro's situation, says that the painter experienced a deadlock, a crisis, because in order to conceive new things, to keep painting new things, he would have to relearn the new, hence, he had to give up, to give up that skill, that mastering, that dexterity, that competence. He tried to do that by cutting off his left hand and putting it in his right arm. He made several attempts and, in the end, he found out he had to paint with his left hand. His left hand is unskillful, incompetent, it is not precise, it has huge difficulties, but that hand is actually willing to learn, and relearn at each line, as the poem says, and this metaphor served me well.

It seems to me that the right hand has prevailed. The right hand in lifelong education is the skillful hand to compete in the work market, in economy, in employability, in entrepreneurship, in economically valuable skills. It is just part of lifelong education, just part

of the adult education agenda, but adult education is far beyond that, because the right hand is adaptation-oriented. Functional adaptation to the world, to the circumstances, to economy, to the so-called economy imperatives, to competitiveness, etc.

Well, I praise the left hand, based on this metaphor of Joao Cabral de Melo Neto. I would say that adult education should not give up the right hand, as it has important skills, but we should counterbalance the excessive protagonism of the right hand with a left hand that is concerned with democracy, with citizenship, with participation, with a change in the social world. The left hand is more creative, more insubmissive, more critical, and is supposed to compensate for the excesses of the right hand.

I am not arguing that the left hand is against the right hand. Through this metaphor, I am criticizing the excess of protagonism of the right hand, and saying that the left hand is fundamental. In the text, I have said something that seems to be obvious, that is, adult education should be global, integrated, diversified within itself – two-handed adult education. It is ambidextrous; it uses the skills and competences of both hands to become more human, more critical, more transforming, etc. Therefore, the metaphor was pointful; it was a resource.

To finish, why poetry, and why Brazilian poetry: for several reasons. When I was young, Brazilian popular music was present in my generation, as well as Brazilian poets. My interest in Brazil started long before my trips to Brazil. I have been to Brazil several times to take courses, give lectures and conferences, and write. I have tried to learn, to know the Brazilian culture, to know Brazil, its authors, its best writers, authors working in my area, authors of political science, political philosophy. This exchange is very clear, I mean, I would not allow myself to write a book about Paulo Freire if I knew very little of Brazilian 20th century history, if I did not know what Estado Novo was, if I did not know who Jango was, what the Popular Culture Movement was, who Miguel Arraes was in Recife... I had to study all that. We should know the causes of things, right?

Besides that, this also makes sense if we consider the knowledge provided by art. Today, perspectives are very technician in our areas in Social Sciences, but especially in Education, they have forgotten, refused... We have seen a kind of scientificism that exaggerates the centrality of science, the relevance of science to solve economical, technological issues, public health problems, this and that. There have

been extraordinary contributions, but we tend to have a mythical, deified view of science, an epical discourse about science and technology, to which I have not adhered, I admit. From this point of view, I am much more Adornian, I am much more critical of science and technology.

Scientific knowledge is a central kind of knowledge; it is central in modern society, central in complex societies, central to capitalism, even more to the new capitalism, in the so-called learning societies, knowledge economy societies, etc., but esthetical knowledge, for example, artistic knowledge is a powerful form of knowledge! I have no doubt about it. There are certain novels about certain historical times that can portray a time or a social context in a way that neither a Sociology treatise nor several Sociology treatises could.

I do believe in the power of metaphor, even in academic works, and, let us say, it almost naturally occurred to me. We trip over things because we are involved with them, we are attentive to them, because we are concerned about them, and we make inferences and establish articulations. And, yes, I think that, in education, we should pay particular attention to the cultural dimension, to the esthetical dimension, to the ethical dimension – all of these dimensions have been disregarded, I guess.

Ruth Pavan: Could we say that paying attention to these currently disregarded issues has to do with what you have called *pedagogy of decision*? You quoted Saramago by saying that: “Strictly speaking, we do not make decisions; rather, decisions make us” (*Apud* LIMA, 2011a, p. 12).

Licínio C. Lima: I have studied a lot, in organizational theories, the theory of decision, the problems of rationality, etc. A great number of theories of decision are far from what, in theory, has been called *standard theory of decision*, or *theory of rational decision*. The standard theory, the classical theory of decision, which is regarded as a rational decision, says that we rationally make decisions because we strictly identify a certain problem, we anticipate all of its possible solutions; afterwards, we identify the consequences of each decision made, or option of solution, we then compare all of them, and finally make the best decision.

This standard theory itself, the theory of rational choice, has been criticized for being too rationalist, as it disregards that we have enough information to construct, estimate and anticipate every possible

solution for a problem. That does not exist! A great theorist, Herbert Simon, said this “theory of decision [was] based on an Olympic rationality”. He said that we have limited rationality, we cannot predict, foresee every possible solution for a problem. It is unthinkable! Our capacity of calculation, computation, creativity, information and knowledge is limited, and it would be unthinkable to anticipate every possible solution, let alone being sure that we will make the optimal choice based on estimates. There would be no other decision besides the optimal decision. This depends on the rationality framework; it is contingent, it depends on the circumstances, on the situation. I have studied several authors that criticize that positivist, rationalist view of decision.

Of course, there are tensions. The world is tense, contradictory; so, there are contradictions here, too. The subject constructed through education is historical; a subject with more autonomy, which is strengthened both individually and collectively, but some of these changes cannot be individually overcome. In this sense, we have to be attentive to overdetermination, to contexts that do not favor autonomous decision-making; on the other hand, we should be able to explore the margins of relative autonomy and the very limitations imposed to any social structure, because the structure needs actors to replicate it in order to remain and be reproduced. When it is not replicated, or it is partially replicated, there is naturally a breach, a gap, a way, and reinvention.

I believe that what the actors of education – teachers, students, parents, community, etc. – have stated still needs to find some space – a space of insertion, a space of decision – although we know that space is always limited and it often has to be conquered, since nobody usually gives decision power to others. Therefore, there is a fight between heteronomous rules and autonomous rules, between autonomy and heteronomy, between great Olympic decisions made by those who know, those who can, and those who have a global view. It seems that microdecisions are insignificant, but it is often in the field of microdecisions, in the field of organizations, schools, etc., that certain rules are created, certain guidelines and interpretations of the school regulations, for instance, are changed. There is some space here; if that space did not exist, this would be a kind of the end of history, the end of the actor and, much more, the end of the subject. This would be an impasse, not only from a theoretical viewpoint, but also from a human

perspective. That sentence would highlight this idea.

Ruth Pavan: In the pedagogy of decision, which involves the criticism to the “indecisive education” (LIMA, 2011b), the process of decision-making is articulated to both the defense of participation and the democratization of education. This implies the criticism to education subordinated to the market logic. According to your writings, it is not always omission, or inability to make decisions, but rather the political centralization that hinders the possibility of making decisions. The question is the following: Have the processes of subordination been intensified over the last years, particularly in terms of school education? Is it possible to detect processes of insubordination, too?

Licínio C. Lima: Yes. The past few years have been marked by something I have called *lato sensu privatization*. This would not necessarily be privatization in terms of society or juridical statute, etc. Rather, it would be the introduction of modes of management that are typical of, or regarded as typical of the private in the public management, as well as in public schools and universities. This *lato sensu* privatization process is grounded on the new public management, on the theories of new governance, on the reinvention of the government. These perspectives, over the last 30 years, have emerged as ideological elements linked to the Reform of the State, and are supposedly able to reform the State and the public management in the right way, which would be the way of efficacy and efficiency, in accordance with economic criteria, with the economic rationality.

Then, what have we seen? That education is not only a systematic object of that *lato sensu* privatization, but also of one of its central dimensions, which I have called entrepreneurial impregnation. It means that we have impregnated the education and the educational, the schools, the universities, with everything that, from a stereotyped point of view, has been associated with companies. The company is regarded today as the archetype of rational organization, the archetype of good management; outside that, everything is irrational. The market, the company, the competition, the economic competitiveness, are intrinsically associated with good management.

Well, from this point of view, I believe that the role of participation in decision-making, in autonomy, is far harder today. Among school principals, for instance, in Portugal, as well as several

teachers and educators, we have noticed that many discourses have suddenly passed from pedagogical, educational, cultural references, to managerial references – mensuration, quantification, evaluation, accountability, mission, vision. Today, the language spoken in education and in the school has a strong economic, entrepreneurial, managerial accent. There is no doubt about it. We cannot handle this kind of impregnation of the educational by the economic and entrepreneurial. It is so efficacious and strong that we cannot handle it.

In this context, criticism is the first sign of resistance, the element of unveiling. Why this obsession with evaluation now? And why evaluation in quantitative terms? And why mensuration and ranking? And why competition? I would say that criticism and deep understanding of this process are the first steps to take. To me, it seems that there are no resistances to such phenomena, no alternatives, no insubmission or, as I prefer to call them, processes of normative infidelity within organizations, if people do not have the least critical awareness of the phenomena we are talking about. If, first, they cannot handle them; if, secondly, by not being able to handle them, they naturalize and accept them, they do not have anything to which resist... All that will have consequences. We cannot be surprised, then, that people seek for shelter in the technical, in the didactical, in the technological dimension of teaching and learning.

I believe in a certain resistance and insubmission capacity. I believe in that, not only because of adherence to a political ideology; I also believe in that because of adherence to a rational critical framework that is able to unveil this. Where does it come from? What is the framework of rationality? We must deeply understand these frameworks of rationality in order to interpret and know them.

Brazil had never seen such an intense conquest of the public space, or the affirmation of agendas such as “School without Party”, or an attack to Paulo Freire, etc. Is he coming back? No, he is already there; he has not started living now, he has always been there. Conservative brains have always been there. Now, there is a moment in which there are conditions for them to emerge strongly, in an apparently concerted manner. With objective support from both inside and outside the political class, as they are not only political parties, not only political actions; obviously, they are the intellectuals writing to great newspapers and talking on big Brazilian television companies, and they often occupy relevant positions at universities.

Therefore, I would say this is the moment to take all those perspectives seriously, all those theories, from the intellectual point of view, from the research standpoint. The strongest deconstruction of those perspectives means not to stay on their surface; we have been to the core of the issue, and, in a way, it seems more practical and immediate to perform a political attack, the ideological attack, the attack to the agenda of values. All that is important and can be done, but scholars can neither start nor end there. The scholars want to go further. They are required to study the sources, perceive the way that things are related. This is fundamental.

Interviewer: What you have just said reminded me of your article entitled “Does education do everything? Criticism to pedagogicism in the ‘learning society’” (LIMA, 2010), in which you addressed lifelong education and criticized the idea that education does and can do everything, but stated that it can do something. Could we say that, today, there are possibilities of permanent education focused on people’s dignity and that lifelong education is a merchanted appropriation of permanent education? How can we prevent them from being confounded, and how can the idea that lifelong education dignify people prevail?

Licínio C. Lima: I suppose we are totally exaggerating the role of education, which actually is no longer the concept of education; it is, above all, the concept of education and the concept of learning, qualifications, competences, skills; exaggerating this contribution for what? To solve economic and social problems. Today, this acquisition of competences, these qualificationisms, which have few educational aspects from the normative point of view, we can say they are even diseducational, as they seem to design programs of indoctrination and training, more than education, since education has that normative, political, cultural dimension. This perspective is often found in texts published by OECD, the European Union and the World Bank.

For every social, cultural, economic, political problem, population aging, this and that, there is an educational solution. Therefore, all of a sudden, although it is not really educational, and it is more related to competences, qualifications, etc., it becomes a kind of medicine, a drug, a pill taken to solve the problem, and this is my criticism to qualificationism. From this point of view, I would say that, in the 1960s, permanent education and lifelong education were synonyms.

The concept was the same, with that idea of incompleteness approached by Paulo Freire, the idea that we are in process, hence, we will be educated until the end of our lives, because we know we are unconcluded and incomplete. When Paulo Freire says that the human being is unconcluded, he is not emphasizing a theory of deficit; he is emphasizing that, due to our very nature, we are born knowing that we are incomplete. We want to go further, to question, to know, etc. This is part of the human nature, the human condition.

Today, we have a different perspective, which is a kind of theory of deficits. The population has deficits, Brazilian people need this, and Portuguese people need that. This is badly qualified; economy and technology have taken a big leap, and now there is a gap, as they say in English; there is a mismatch between life and education, between economy and education, between new technological jobs and the individuals' competences. The starting point is the theory of deficits; that is why adult education focuses on what people do not have, on what they do not know, on what they are not able to do.

In terms of adult education, I think this is the opposite of what the theory of adult education has showed us. The adult education theory is based on what we are, have and know to develop a program. We cannot attract people to adult education by saying: "Look, you know nothing, you are illiterate, and you are ignorant. Come here because you need that". This does not make sense.

I think that the translation of the concept from the English language has prevailed, and it has become very technicist; we do not talk much about lifelong education nowadays, but, when it is addressed, it has a much more technicist meaning than it did in the 1970s, or than the French concept of *éducation permanente*. Today, we mainly say lifelong learning.

In a way, we have been searching for another concept; it is no longer the same. Today, it is a much more instrumental concept, much more directed to the needs of economy, the economic competitiveness, the adequation of the individuals' profiles to the work market, to the challenges of the so-called new capitalism, new technologies, the information and communication society, and that is the point in which a more technicist, more instrumental appropriation starts. That is why I often mention qualificationism rather than adult education. We want to qualify adults as if they were disqualified; we assume they are disqualified or have a qualification deficit.

Even center-left governments, for instance, often used this discussion in Portugal. There is a huge deficit in the qualification of the adult population in Portugal, and that is why the country has not developed as much as more advanced nations of the European Union. This is a wrong reason, is not it? There is a mismatch here – there are technological companies in Portugal, and they are rather developed, but there is a lack of qualified labor. This discourse, in a different way, has been seen in Brazil: the importance of vocationalism, of professional education, of preparation for the work market, for a developing country. All those expectations resume perspectives that Brazil had in the 50s and 60s; they have just emerged in a little more complex situation, and they had come about when the Brazilian economy was expanding. In a way, this is a criticism because, actually, I believe that education, in the end, risks to be removed from the discourses of education policies – we have talked less and less about education. For example, in texts of the European Union, education has been less and less mentioned; instead, we have seen learning, and particularly individual learning, which holds the individual responsible, and qualifications, competences. There is a project to put individual qualifications at the service of the new capitalism, the new economy. This is the perspective.

Ruth Pavan: Finally, I remember that your writings are always explicit in defending a radically democratic education. This position has been recurrently resumed and re-contextualized in your works, especially pointing out the impossibility of neutrality in the educational action. In one of your texts, you have stated: “Despite everything, the democratic invention still has a place in our present, in both West and East, through struggles, protestations and revolts [...]” (LIMA, 2005, p.80). This shows an important position, by recognizing the possibilities of reinvention of democracy and distancing from a fatalist view, so praised by conservatives, but the sentence starts with “despite”. More than a decade later, it seems to me that “despite” is even more needed in the current context. What does it mean?

Licínio C. Lima: “Despite” points out that the situation is not easy. In fact, in our area, in education, as I said before, we have seen a *lato sensu* privatization, a kind of entrepreneurial impregnation. Education tends to disappear from the discourse in several countries. It has disappeared from the public discourse, from the political discourse;

we do not talk about education anymore. We talk about qualifications, competences, and skills. Therefore, this situation is anything but favorable. It is not easy.

On the other hand, it is also true that here and there, less than we would like, occasionally, there is insubmission; there are critical dimensions, groups that have made a difference. Let us say, there are sectors of the youth that are critical, they seek for alternatives, this is not very clear. For instance, the Bologna Process in Europe; some of the strongest criticism, some of the most intelligent things were said by university students in Europe. There are asymmetrical power relations here; there are the rulers and the ruled; there are agendas with a huge transnational strength, in a global scale. The situation is not easy. There is that impregnation, which we do not even notice; therefore, if we do not notice it, we will not fight it. There is all that, but there was a great poet and singer of revolutionary songs after April 25 and even before, who would say: “There is always someone to resist; there is always someone to say no”. He was talking about the time of the Salazar dictatorship. He was Manuel Alegre; that is a poem by Manuel Alegre: “There is always someone to resist; there is always someone to say no”. It is not possible to imagine a completely overwhelmed society coming to an end, a decisive stage, the announced end of history, with no criticism, no debates, no social fights, no union fights... Even in Portugal, now, these days, with the government alleviating a number of important things, trying to make social policies differently from the previous government, etc. There is a social dynamics.

We think, we act, we reflect; therefore, “despite” points out the situation is not easy, but we would not expect a revolution to happen either tomorrow or the day after tomorrow. Changing is difficult. Those who criticize these ideas, those who have critical, militant agendas, the activists against this state of affairs, they will not enjoy an easy life. In several cases, they are clearly a minority in social institutions, it seems obvious to me. For example, here at the university, we often think like that. A small minority of professors have some strange ideas that seem right to us, but not to the others. This group, as a minority, is strong enough to affirm some ideas, and sometimes we even achieve something by means of our critical activity, activism, etc. etc., but we do not have many illusions. Most of us have become numb with productivism, papers, articles, daily life, tensions, and pressures.

Besides, there is another sector with a differentiated project

for the university, a project of a more entrepreneurial and managerial university, a university that is more competitive in the world market, a university like the one they intend to build in Europe. This is the university we have criticized. This university that gives up several aspects of criticism, its role in the social change. This university aims to be regarded as useful to power, to technological applications of science, to patent registration, etc.

In the end, all that will have its place in a university. This should not take the lead and become the prevailing feature, because, if it prevails, we know what will happen to other knowledges, those knowledges that are already in crisis – philosophy, social sciences, education... Many of those knowledges do not have immediate application, and some people think they are excessively present at the university today. This is clear in Europe! That is why “despite” has been increasingly reinforced.

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