

**Janina Świrko-Pilipczuk**

University of Szczecin

## *Homo Oeconomicus* as the Foundation of Educational Practices

**ABSTRACT** As a doctrine informing social change, liberalism is typically assumed to create a pedagogical context for reading and analyzing the essence and sense of educational practices. It is an official Polish transformation ideology, educational change included.

This paper claims liberalism to be a mere declarative ideology; in reality the basis for social practices, also those related to education is neoliberalism. This means that the core value and aim of education (including higher education) is to shape an identity conforming to the free market system. As a result, radical market ideologies inform educational practices and procedures, a mechanism which A. Giroux calls *the terror of neoliberalism* and states it aims at colonizing the minds and producing people with market-determined characteristics. Such a mechanism is grounded in the conception of a human being called *homo oeconomicus*.

**KEYWORDS** *HOMO Oeconomicus*, NEOLIBERALISM, PEDAGOGICAL PRAXIS

The liberal conception of an individual, both at the beginning of its foundation and later, has been tantamount to its two constitutive values, namely, economic and political freedom. These values are associated by their common goal – the

emancipation of an individual from any enforcements. The classical-liberal concept of man constitutes one of the most important sources of emancipation, of a person being the author of his/her own destiny and hence, of pedagogy and education (Lewartowska-Zychowicz 2010: 164). Consequently, the project of rational education giving access to the individual's conscious and free choice and thus his/her autonomous agency has cropped up. Significantly, this project at the same time advances taking moral responsibility for the construction and maintenance of the liberal social order; ergo, it also propounds general welfare (Lewartowska-Zychowicz 2010: 131).

Liberal ideas have best been tried by the working of the liberal concept of the child as an anomic being in need of obtaining autonomy. By analogy, modern – rational – pedagogy sensitive to such ideas, construes educational solutions for shaping the human rationality as a foundation of free choice as well as enables people to take responsibility, both for themselves and the world around them. Such an education aims at people gaining individual independence (autonomy) so as to both create and protect an equitable social order.<sup>1</sup> In achieving the latter goal, one needs to be intellectually as well as morally mature.<sup>2</sup> The objectives of liberal education translate into the functions of the human mind, an effect of understanding individual development as the process of acquiring cognitive rationality being, in turn, the basis of individual independence (autonomy). Therefore, the most important objectives of education comprise:

- drive suppression / control (Locke, Dewey);
- access to the moral law (Locke) and virtue formation (Locke, Dewey);
- ability to recognize the truth as the cause-and-effect mechanism enabling effective action (Locke, Dewey);
- autonomy understood as independence to think on one's own (Dewey) (Lewartowska-Zychowicz 2010: 148).

On the whole, liberal ideas – and *homo politicus* – oriented education has formed the foundations for shaping an independent individual, capable of free thinking and acting. This means that education can create conditions and opportunities for:

- independent objectives formulation;
- rational estimation of available resources;
- construing and justifying own views;
- pursuing individual freedom and the freedom of others (Lewartowska-Zychowicz 2010; see also: Świrko-Pilipczuk 2011).

The idea of *homo politicus* linked the development of self-reliance and individual autonomy to a person's social responsibility as regards democracy. J. Dewey emphasized that civil development in a democratic society meant defending one's individual rights as well as neutralizing social inequalities. This could be done only if an individual developed his/her wise judgment of the world and participated in law creation and observance. Such skills were part and parcel of a high level autonomy of thought and action. They developed in the course of an individual's participating, within the frames of rational education, in experience exchange so as to form social bonds based on voluntary cooperation rather than coercion and leading to the creation of a cooperating community. As a result of such education, an individual could challenge the existing order and its injustices. This is because the

<sup>1</sup> One practical realization of so understood pedagogy is the American pragmatism and paidocentrism-oriented romantic pedagogical individualism. The precise labeling of liberally-rooted pedagogical trends poses problems due to their relation both with a wider individualistic liberal orientation and the theories of education. See Rowid, Chmaj, Kunowski.

<sup>2</sup> This is visible both in the French and the American tradition.

existing order needed to be a consensus whose frames had been discussed by accredited individuals (Dewey 1963; 2005; 2006).

In liberal democratic societies education must correspond with these societies' moral ideals. Owing to its fostering autonomy and responsibility, and in order to earn the name of being truly liberal, such education should respect individual differences, develop the student's own initiative and self-reliance. It will not associate individual goals with the goals of the humanity, ergo, with the idea of progress. The most important aspect of this education type is "not that no one treats an individual instrumentally, but for no individual to allow being treated instrumentally, an essence of the *homo politicus* activity" (Lewartowska-Zychowicz 2010: 149 –150).

The question of how to direct the human mind towards autonomy and morality used to be answered: via social experience and the education seen as a systematic work on the child's independent development. Still, a system's educational properties must always be reflected in the socio-economic system in which an individual dwells. There must be an organic relation between school and life. The school's alterity hinged on its liberating a student's work from any economic coercion focusing instead on the developmental functions of individual autonomy and morality. This did not translate, however, into a student's sheer unguidedness but rather required discipline, effort, disciplined thinking and prudent management. Student targeting had little to do with imposing aims on a child; neither did it equal to taming the child's antisocial nature. Instead, it involved training the child towards disciplined thinking. In this way, one could merge autonomy and discipline education as well as suggest the significance of the existence of a non-instrumental relationship between individual and social objectives (Dewey 1963; 2005; 2006).

It should be emphasized that education inspired by the liberal discourse of individual emancipation comprises disciplined, demanding and guided a process. Also, it has a clearly defined purpose and ways to achieve the latter. Hence, such education cannot be identified with a simple extension of a student's autonomy, for „not every individual-oriented pedagogy can be considered an example of liberal thinking about education. Usually, however, an individual freedom-oriented pedagogy can exemplify a tendency to liberalize education such as e.g. paidocentrism" (Lewartowska-Zychowicz 2010: 156).

Yet, the significant fact about paidocentrism is that although it represents numerous liberal values, it is on the whole inconsistent with the classical liberal concept. This is because paidocentrism granting autonomy to the child, never identifies such autonomy with the development of this child's own rationality. It first and foremost concentrates on individualism and hence, subjectivity, a category underlying this educational orientation. At the same time it remains blind to the fact that the "individual self-realization tends to (must?) be a threat to the community, and that the latter, considering its level of tolerance for difference, establishes barriers to the individual and its authentic expression" (Witkowski 1995: 142). No wonder, then, that the humanistic affirmation of an individual turns out to be too sentimental and unreal, for it ignores the problem of the subject's entanglement in various aspects of reality, while reducing the individual-society relationship to subject interactions.

The paidocentric pedagogical orientation aims at protecting the "natively" autonomous personality, transgressing any personality and authority patterns, defending the child's right to exposing its authenticity and to trusting its impulses and sensations, thus bringing about new educational interactions based on empathy and unguidedness. In this view, self-realization appears to be the most tangible value. The resulting personality functioning as an ideal upbringing pattern comprises a complete, mentally healthy, self-realizing and authentic individuality.

Inspired by the humanistic psychology, the pedagogical romantic orientation ignores the fact of an individual being capable of self-forming owing to his/her own emancipatory efforts, even in the situation of a social coercion thus recommending violence-free space. Consequently, antipedagogy boast of being able to e.g. solve oppression problems by isolating the child in an artificially created school environment, ignoring the necessity of equipping an oppressed child with the tools of critical deconstruction of the social order or ones defending him/her against violence.

The paidocentric pedagogy is a far cry from the classical liberal conviction as to the concept of the freedom and morality being conditioned by the rationality development and, in consequence, an ability to pass judgments. Nevertheless, it also refers to the liberal principle of unrestricted individual freedom, even though, at the same time, this pedagogy affects the weakening of responsibility for themselves and others. It is therefore difficult to treat such pedagogy as an example of liberal pedagogy and education, regardless of the fact that liberal ideas were indeed important for its activation as one.

In general, the classical ideal of *homo politicus* beginning to function as a discourse axis resulted in many an educational project on shaping the child's rationality and in regards to expanding its emancipation opportunities. In the process of such an education the role of the school has been established in relation to the civil rights and obligations treated as determinants of individual emancipation combined with social responsibility for others. One should note, however, that neither the American pragmatism, nor the romantic pedagogical orientation have been simple applications of the liberal thought. Rather, they constituted its peculiar developments which, according to Dewey's works, and in regard to education, must be inclusive of social inequality issues), whereas according to the romantics – of granting the child autonomy as a result of divorcing it from rationality (Lewartowska-Zychowicz 2010: 164). All in all, the idea of *homo politicus* has been a signpost in the development both of the educational thought and practice, and hence, a significant part of the discourse on individual emancipation.

The latter realization of the idea of *homo politicus* becomes well visible if we consider Poland's own search for the possibilities of changing her education system after 1989. During this period Poland cherished her newly regained freedom at the same time impatiently willing to proceed towards becoming a society like other mature democracies. Also, the country was concentrated on quickly making up for the delays in all possible walks of life, starting from the realm of private property (Koralewicz, Ziółkowski 2003). This peculiar transformation period created a fecund ground for adapting for our own purposes all sorts of solutions that seemed good for already tested by other democratic societies. One should remember that, back in 1989, Poles were experiencing the transition from socialism to capitalism, a transformation intertwined with capitalism's own inner metamorphosis into a neoliberal phenomenon leading to a broader cultural change. As J. Rutkowiak put it, "we wanted to change the tram never noticing, however, that the one into which the we were jumping is no longer the subject of our desires and imaginations" (Rutkowiak 2010b: 15 ).

The complexity of the situation in our country additionally entangled in the then ongoing, economic and cultural, globalization processes resulted in Poles unconsciously and uncritically accepting practically all the basic assumptions of the neoliberal doctrine. Another reason for this to have happened was that, at the time in question, the globalization processes were still difficult to control by the Polish domestic institutions, primary groups and the state as such thus manifesting as impersonal phenomena – scattered, invisible, seemingly pluralistic, "internalizing via pleasure," and active due to their seductive rather

than coercive quality, while at the same time promoting a fairly unified vision of the world (Koralewicz, Ziółkowski 2003; Rutkowiak 2010b :14).

The pressure of so understood unarticulated superior forces was also felt in the field of education where, however, the implementation of the neoliberal of *homo oeconomicus* demonstrated to be easy, even imperceptible as regards the generally applicable, also with reference to the university, behaviourist education paradigm. It first and foremost supported the actions of and decisions made without a clear view of their basic assumptions. One very good example of such solutions is the 1999 school reform and all the teaching and organizational practices undertaken within its framework. Oftentimes such solutions were justified as necessary, almost indispensable imitation of other tested solutions. Such decisions were made, however, without any contextual-critical insight into a solution in question, and neither were the solution's effects appropriately estimated (Rutkowiak 2010b: 14; Klus-Stańska, Nowicka 2005).

The assumptions about the ambiguity of rules and lack of a clear educational strategy to be replaced with the on-the-spot education administration as well as obtaining suboptimal outcomes have become the basis for the modern functioning of EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM OF CORPORATE ECONOMICS hypothesis formulated by Joanna Rutkowiak. The arguments – difficult to challenge and numerous – for the existence of such a program in our educational practice can be found in the publications by J. Rutkowiak, E. Potulicka, D. Klus-Stańska, M. Czerepaniak-Walczak, Z. Kwieciński, T. Szkudlarek, and P. Zamojski. The 1980s neoliberal breakthrough had its theoretical basis in the assumptions by F.A. Hayek and M. Friedman, while resorting to the practical solutions implemented by President Reagan and the British Prime Minister Thatcher. “Their” type of capitalism (the “turbo-capitalism” as Luttwak calls it) was uncritically accepted to the degree that no other solutions such as the Scandinavian social-democratic education model could be considered. This, in turn, translated into the acceptance of such principles of neoliberalism as the principle of self-ownership being a legitimization of the idea of *homo oeconomicus*' autonomy, the principle of the free market as a sphere of personal development, the principle of rationality and morality as a tool for effective action, and the principle of freedom as a context for individual activities (instead of the freedom understood as a goal) (Lewartowska-Zychowicz 2010: 166–210).

From the point of view of its execution, the turbo-capitalism is based on the modern corporation mechanism, or else the conviction that: “the corporation is not a moral entity. It exists to give profit and so it should be” (Luttwak 2000: 7). In the implementation of corporate objectives the idea of „human capital” plays an important role. This idea demarcates a person as an element of economic growth bringing profit when it is invested into and educated. At the same time, limitless gains effecting from the free market play and constituting profits not for people but “going beyond” them are the most important. The ways of reducing the position of people for the gains to “go beyond” them take place primarily by provoking appropriate mental transformations. The aim is to make the idea of profit the most important goal of human life, according to the principle: I have, therefore I am, and I am what I have, ergo, the more I have, the more I am. While executing this aim –the fundamental principle of corporate capitalism – the mechanisms get activated of transforming people into the following three-faced objects:

- un insightful yet efficient producers;
- omnivorous consumers (who cherish consumption more than;
- human “waste “ to be “disposed of” (Bauman 2004) due to “its” inability to participate in the intensified “production-consumption dynamics propelling sales and constituting a genuine source of multiplying corporate incomes” (Rutkowiak 2010b: 18).

Such a “cookie cutter” vision of humanity constitutes a basis of the educational program on corporate economy and of the so-called “corporatized education,” the latter becoming more and more popular nowadays (Potulicka: 1994).

One task of education as regards building the above discussed social structure is to radically, competitively cherry-pick people. The point is to single out top-class future technocrats, both experts and social engineers managing the system at the drop of a hat and producers using the so-called key skills, that is, adaptation practices disallowing insight into one’s own situation. In other words, a skill, a standard, or a procedure are supposed to oust thinking, a practice emphasized in our currently realized school reform.

Consumer structuring appears to be a particularly demanding educational task for it aims at making each person, even the one reluctant to consume at first, engrossed in this practice to the point of losing control over his/her own behaviour. In order to do that, marketing strategies based on segmentation, differentiation, and positioning are applied. They are supposed to set marketing goals as well as human relations and quality. Accordingly, the segmentation principle demarcates people in education: children, the youth, parents, and teachers as significant consumers. It is these people consuming the teaching and studying products such as books, magazines, toys, computer software, and electronic equipment. All these means’ content and form is intended to shape a desired recipient. For example, the textbooks for younger children structured on the fill-in-the-gaps and multiple-choice-test rule foster reactivity and using pooled data as well as learning “the track” (the idiom of D. Klus-Stańska) and subordination and disciplining. Neither do they intensify student’s intellectual creativity (Rutkowiak 2010b: 19). Considering the oftentimes lifelong “relation” some teachers have with certain textbooks, an attitude that advances the fetishization of the latter and becomes particularly visible both at the turn of each school year, and at the elections, the extent of this phenomenon has been widespread indeed.

The principle of differentiation is demonstrably executed via educational rankings on universities, schools, classes, teachers and students issued in the media. The latter very strongly promote competitiveness of all against all, while at the same time neglecting the issues of cooperation and collaboration, significant for people’s social functioning. Not only that; the widespread competition and cherry-picking is conducted via allegedly objective tests and exams aimed at gaining the best results as regards e.g. student standardized information resources. Things are no better when it comes to the marketing positioning, performed in the educational system as position competitiveness, and rivalry-, career- and careerism-oriented relations both among students and teachers.

The above discussed principles and mechanisms can also be applied in the construction of the marginalized, with low cultural competence and physically and mentally weaker as well as the incompetent, the disorganized, the unhealthy, and those unable to operate within the neoliberal reality. The opinion persists that these people themselves are responsible for their failures due to their inherent passivity, poor motivation, and uninvolvement. For the temporary winners the existence of such people is a warning to continue their production-consumption activity, or else. The “permanent loser” ideology is being imprinted on the minds of students, especially high school graduates, too. At the same time the media toot the decline of education and education quality in the tone of utter helplessness suggestive of students obligatorily succumbing to a school’s examination requirements. This takes place regardless of the mentioned practices being overtly referred to as jeopardizing a person’s individual development and generating socially dangerous outcomes.

The intensification of the impact of the neo-liberal ideology as in the *homo oeconomicus* personality project entails, as I have already emphasized, the validation of the corporate

educational program. This is because the school is seen as a significant factor shaping young people, not only via official educational programs, but also by way of hidden curricula. The latter are present in virtually every structurally or formally vague element of education. An analysis of the educational categories within the Polish system demonstrates its learning objectives as regards values, an element fundamental for the education process and effects, appears as very hazily constructed in the documents on educational reforms. The resulting “epistemological dodge” (Szkudlarek 2004) supposed to protect the school from getting too ideologized actually produces an ideological vacuum to be filled with the objectives of the hidden curriculum, and topped with this curriculum’s fundamental value of profit and prosperity gained only after scoring high at school exams.

Due to the “ruling power” of school examination tests, in all possible forms, curricula tend to highlight the information element. Information replaces cognition as regards understanding and interpreting the world, a basis of people’s conscious and critical functioning in it. As a result, education hinges on dichotomous information, whereas knowledge and wisdom are in the retreat, assumed to automatically crop up somehow without a necessity to put any effort in bringing them out. The choice of information prepares people to choosing market goods. On the other hand, the weakening of the interpretive competence allows for shaping uncritical individuals unable to recognize their own dichotomization and thus happy, for they are “untrained in thinking, and get easily tired with it” (Rutkowiak 2010b: 24 ). One needs to remember that the neoliberal strategies require well-adapted individuals who can succumb to power, do not problematize reality and floats safely in it instead. Unfortunately, all the premonitory voices in regard to the above depicted situation (Kwieciński 2007) are silenced and the examination procedures remain unquestioned as well as they get incrementally organizationally and technically improved.

Teachers are tangible for the realization of the corporate educational curriculum. Alas, the vast majority of them succumb, oftentimes unawares, to the neo-liberal ideology. This is understandable if we take into account the social conditions teachers live in, their own long-term educational experience, and, above all, the process of their professional preparation. It must be highlighted that the pedagogical education very naturally encompasses the assumptions of neo-liberalism for they confirm and reinforce the solutions and ways of thinking about the education already firmly rooted in the mentality of both educators, candidates for the profession, and administrators. Moreover, changes in the pedagogical education implemented as a result of the latest higher education reform perfectly fit the educational project which corresponds to corporate interests thus fulfilling this education’s corporate economy program. As M. Czerepaniak-Walczak writes, in the process of academic education reform the existing practices get fossilized and blur to the degree that reformers (designers) of the academic education lose sight of (a) elites education, (b) significance of the foundations of knowledge, innovations and creativity, and (c) dynamics of profession and job change. Instead, as a result of the decreed consultation with employers an orientation develops towards privileging short-term interests, narrow qualifications, and the implementation of obedience and availability. In academic education, such an orientation makes the university a “conveyor-belt” institution producing ready-made, diploma-certified goods rather than the personal development space where social and civil change can occur (Czerepaniak-Walczak 2013: 37–38).

All in all, as a socially committed doctrine, liberalism creates a pedagogical context for reading and analysing the nature of educational practices. Liberalism used to be Poland’s very own, official transformation ideology, educational transformations included. Still, there is a lot of evidence for this ideology to be only declarative; it is neoliberalism that constitutes

a foundation of social practices with reality check. This translates into the functional identity as shaped by the free market system being the underlying educational value and aim, also as regards the tertiary education. In effect, radical market ideologies play the crucial role in the formation of educational practices and structures. They aim to utterly functionalize specific ways of thinking and acting. These procedures which A. Giroux refers to as the neoliberal terror aim at colonizing the mind and producing people with market-desired characteristics. Such procedures are grounded in this specific concept of a human being called the *homo oeconomicus*.

If, however, we assume that education must be committed to the development of human emancipation and self-reliance, then we set a new important path for pedagogy to follow. The direction of this path is towards the discovery and disguising of actual senses and hidden curricula respectively inside educational practices. The hope awaiting us at the end of the path is e.g. the social "significance surplus" that Laclau and Mouffe have already discussed. My feeling is that the persistent critical effort can eventuate in the successful neutralization of the neoliberal hegemony.

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## **HOMO OECONOMICUS JAKO PODSTAWA PRAKTYK EDUKACYJNYCH**

**STRESZCZENIE** Autorka przyjmuje, że liberalizm jako doktryna zaangażowana w społeczną zmianę tworzy pedagogiczny kontekst odczytywania i analizowania istoty i sensu praktyk edukacyjnych. Jest on oficjalną ideologią przemian w naszym kraju, w tym także przemian oświatowych.

Należy podkreślić, że jest to jednak ideologia jedynie deklaratywna. Realnie zaś podstawą praktyk społecznych, w tym edukacyjnych, jest neoliberalizm. Oznacza to, że wartością i celem podstawowym edukacji, także edukacji uniwersyteckiej, jest kształtowanie tożsamości funkcjonalnej wobec systemu wolnorynkowego. Sprawia to, że radykalne ideologie rynkowe dokonują zawłaszczania struktur i praktyk edukacyjnych. Zmierzają one do całkowitego sfunkcjonalizowania specyficznych dla nich sposobów myślenia i działania. Zabiegi te, które A. Giroux określił jako terror neoliberalizmu, zmierzają do całkowitego skolonizowania umysłów i wyprodukowania ludzi o określonej przez rynek jakości. Mają one swoje podstawy w określonej koncepcji człowieka – w *homo oeconomicus*.

## **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE**

*HOMO OECONOMICUS*,  
NEOLIBERALIZM, PRAKTYKA  
PEDAGOGICZNA

