

AU-Cambridge conference on education, citizenship and democratic personhood

Emdrup, April 23, 2012

My name is Anne Marie Pahuus, and it is my pleasure to introduce the theme of this conference, in my capacity as the Vice-dean for research in the Faculty of Arts, at Aarhus University. And as someone who both is - and is *supposed* to be - educated. I've spent many, many years at universities, taking exams and submitting myself and my work to the judgment of people in academic positions who have conferred me, for instance, a PhD degree in philosophy from Aarhus University. I also hold a 'Licence en philosophie' from Lyon, hence in many ways, I'm licensed to teach university students (and students at high school – in so far as I have exams that allow me to teach French and Danish too - I'm educated. But whether this qualifies me to call myself an educated person, I'm less certain. I'm active, quite often giving lectures to non-academics, and I'm teaching now and then, and I'm constantly learning - as part of the management team at Arts - more about what universities are like, but I'm not sure that what I'm doing with philosophy today, gives me the right to claim that I'm actively participating in Danish democracy. I'm a professional philosopher in Danish University management, and I have access to many public discussions and decision making forums, but this is not all there is to say about my role in the society to which I belong. What is the relation between education, formation, and democratic discourse – what are the theoretical debates in this field, how has it been conceived of over the last centuries, and what are the relevant comparisons to be made between the struggles made in this area in Europe, the Americas, and Asia?

The theme of this conference is broad – it is 'Education, citizenship, and democratic personhood'. It has been organized as an Erasmus exchange conference, between the Department of Anthropology, Cambridge University and the Department of Education, Aarhus University. The next two days we will hear paper presentations and we will engage in debates on education and the formation of citizens. The theme forms the question: how do we educate our youth, to become active citizens in a democratic society? As a teacher – and as a parent – I consider this a very important debate.

I began this introduction by telling you my own personal history – not a history of formation, but of education. If I told you about my own educational process from a sociological and personal point of view, that is for instance a perspective of social mobility or social position; it is, I must admit, a story of absolutely no movement or mobility: My parents are academics, my father is a professor of philosophy – with a degree from Aarhus University, and I am an academic, trained in philosophy myself.

The theme of this conference is not only much broader than the story of any particular student's life in rich countries with good university educational systems that may or may not be changing these years. It is not primarily about universities, but about schools and youth, and it is about children, minorities, youth in many countries and it is about more than the educational, professional or vocational life of young people taking exams – it is about what it is like and what it means to be an educated person and actively speaking and acting in the public sphere - what it

means to be not only a resident in, but a citizen in, a democratic society. It includes the formation that goes on “in everyday life” – it encompasses both formal and informal institutions and settings.

To help focus the discussion, you have all been asked to have some questions in mind throughout the conference, and you will get the opportunity to wrap up tomorrow with these questions as a common frame:

There are five questions. The first one deals with this movement from a Danish or Northern European perspective to an internationally comparative perspective and from there to a qualification of the theories we tend to use in the field of ‘dannelse’:

1. What are the connections and differences between the concept of *dannelse* (*bildung*) and anthropological notions of ‘personhood’ stemming from research in non-Danish societies? What are the implications of such a comparison for the attempt to develop more general theories of education and citizenship?

Learning to be not only acting politically but also being a democratic person involves thinking and judgment. We need to act from a perspectival understanding of who we are as positioned, included in or excluded from, forced into or liberating ourselves from the community through which we are given the chance to acquire a distinctive way of seeing things. Acquiring a good eye for what is significant is a skill we develop through successful initiation into a culture or through immersion in a community.

This process of formation and socialisation might be understood as a process of orientation determined by objective features of reality that have the property of being action guiding; or, more generally, these normative aspects of the world can be understood as natural facts that just need to be conceptualized. But if this is the case, if immersion in a tradition is a respectable mode of access to the social world, how do we make room for the new? What are the chances of new, blameless and innocent children, new generations? How do we take care of the ‘natality’ of persons – to use a concept from Hannah Arendt, how do we think of *bildung* as the ability to begin something new in action. Should we be revolutionaries or conservative – and what kind of conservatism, conservating and protecting which facts – should all people for instance be taught that the family is the cornerstone of society? Should one be willing to die for one’s country? What view should we take of our economic responsibility to strangers? Is past experience of any use in democracies that are globally interdependent on a scale that is genuinely new? These questions and many more, can be dealt with under the heading of questions two and three, which are:

2. How can we conceptualise the relation between new visions of citizens or democratic persons and the kinds of futures, worlds or states they are educated for and meant to be participating in or creating? How can we construct anthropological comparisons between them?
3. How can we grasp the downsides of the seemingly positive language of democracy and citizenship? For example, what room for manoeuvre is there for persons (such as children or ethnic or religious minorities) within collectivities to which they do not choose to

belong, and what forms of marginalization operate in the name of democratic inclusion?
What forms of politics or activism (if any) should insights on these fronts engender?

Taking on the responsibility or thinking carefully about citizenship and education, what is it we are talking about? Are we searching for objective facts about reality, is it just a love of the world and attentive care of the parts of the world that we are responsible for – or what more is there to the education process?

Do we have to change ourselves together with the understanding of the world we are actively engaging in?

How do we educate teachers and what kind of judgment should teachers be able to practice? And at how early a stage should we treat children as political human beings. Is politics for grown ups as we are told by Hannah Arendt?

These questions concerning the subjectivity and not only the objectivity of norms and values are the turning points of the last two kinds of questions to be considered through this conference:

4. How might the ambiguities of what is meant by ‘democracy’ and ‘citizenship’ present both challenges and opportunities for civic educators and those who have received a civic education?
5. Do we need different theoretical models to understand the process of civic education for, and political subjectivities of, young children, teenagers, and adults?

If the last question were to be discussed among philosophers alone, it would immediately turn into a discussion of the status of norms – whether we should consider these to be relative norms of a particular group or universal norms of all human beings. Among anthropologists and sociologists I’m less sure about the direction in which you want to take this discussion of theoretical models.

But I’m sure the discussions will be not only fruitfull but informed by rich ethnographic and interpretative material from papers presented over the next two days.

Before a round of presentations by all participants, I would like to give the floor to Susan Wright who will introduce the form of the discussion for the dialogue over the next two days, and the ideas about the organisation of the final discussion tomorrow.