

Review of: Danilo R. Streck, *A New Social Contract in a Latin American Education Context*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2010. Pp. 187, hardcover \$ 85. ISBN: 978-0-230-10538-6 by Jorge Mario Rodríguez-Martínez

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Danilo R. Streck's book, *A New Social Contract in a Latin American Education Context*, is a timely contribution for those seeking to question the hegemony of neoliberal principles in the contemporary educational field. Streck develops the pedagogical and political relevance of a new instance of political participation, the "participatory budgeting," a distinctively Brazilian democratic approach to budgeting that was initiated, around 1989-1990, in Porto Alegre—the city in which the First World Social Forum took place in 1991. Streck's stimulating reflections show why Latin America is "one of the places that is looked to in terms of alternatives for this world that showed its monstrous side on September 11" (28). In this review, I shall concentrate on the significance of this book for a field situated at the intersection of philosophy of education, politics, and globalization theory.

The theoretical backbone of Streck's project is developed in the first six chapters; the seventh presents Streck's analysis of the experience of participatory budgeting, while the last brings together insights present throughout the book, to develop a set of "agendas" for the "pedagogy of the new social contract." Streck's book exhibits a rich deployment of topics whose connections could be missed in a first reading, insofar as many crucial points are not clearly laid out in the initial pages. As in many books, however, a second reading develops richer layers of meaning.

The book shows how participatory budgeting—a modality of direct democracy in which communities decide the allocation of resources—provides "a privileged space to observe participatory social processes that can lead to producing another social contract" (121). The community engages in an activity with clear pedagogical dimensions insofar as it involves learning to live in solidarity. Streck reports that the participants in this process emphasize the "broadening and building [of their] knowledge," the discovery of the power associated with participation and consensus and the importance of unity (124-30). Participatory budgeting offers an opportunity to learn citizenship in a process that constitutes a common world with a "horizon of permanence, of future" (120).

It is worth mentioning that Streck's interpretation of participatory budgeting delineates a political-pedagogical perspective that resists an easy assimilation of this experiment to the agendas of international institutions seeking better models of "governance," without transforming wanting social structures.[1] Moreover, Streck criticizes the ideological underpinnings of notions such as "competences,"

“inclusiveness,” and “participation,” insofar as these notions are oblivious to the overall acceptability of the social system as a whole.

Streck contends that since participatory budgeting involves an unrestrained social dialogue, it is possible to identify normative parameters for recasting the concept of a new social contract—an objective followed by Streck along the lines developed by Portuguese theoretician Boaventura Sousa dos Santos. Streck avowedly wants to resignify this founding metaphor of modernity from a Latin American viewpoint (55). Streck reflects upon Latin American epistemologies insofar as they embody pedagogies of survival, resistance, and relation. Within this horizon of cultural awareness, Streck focuses on Paulo Freire’s legacy. In Streck’s words: “The basic argument in this book is that in Paulo Freire we have a reference for thinking about education in a different social contract, because he incorporates elements of an emancipatory pedagogical tradition, from Hegel and Marx, passing through John Dewey and through the philosophical currents that impregnated the twentieth century up to the rereading of Christianity promoted by Liberation Theology and other liberation movements in the world” (101).

Following Paulo Freire’s idea that the “reading of the world” precedes the “reading of the word,” Streck provides an interpretation of the globalized world in which issues of inequality and gender and race oppression become evident. Following Michel Serres, Streck recognizes that the current rendition of the social contract has fostered human alienation from nature; he also concurs with Carol Pateman and Charles Wright Mills regarding the sexual and racial bias of the modern social contract. He identifies the discourses allowing the exclusionary aspects of Rousseau’s view of the social contract. Thus, Streck stresses the bias present in Emile’s formation, recalling, for example, how Emile is asked to read only Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, a book that carries out a diminished view of the savage other. Streck criticizes Rousseau’s notion of contract insofar as it is premised on an abstract subject, divested from its immersion in a network of meaningful social relations. For Streck, “[w]ithout concrete relations of caring for others, Emile could not develop the necessary civic virtues for an active political life” (84).

Streck’s task is to situate us in a “case of appropriation or re-appropriation by progressive sectors of a concept traditionally more present in the neoliberal discourse” (60). Furthermore, Streck’s appraisal of the social contract squares with his objective of defending the state as a locus to counteract private interests and promote democracy. Streck, on the other hand, performs a reading of both Rousseau and Freire that identifies a critical notion of autonomy opposed to an abstract one based on pure rationality.

Autonomy, for Freire, is created with others, in community (98). Autonomy is historical: “autonomy takes place from the beginning and only as an expression of the historicity of men and women” (94). For Freire what distinguishes the human being is her conscience that allows her in turn to “insert oneself in a different, critical way” (91).

Thus, autonomy, according to Streck's interpretation of Freire, implies the possibility of having critical distance from the world, and hence, conveys the possibility of changing

the world. Now, autonomy's historicity, in Freire's sense, articulates a position from which structures of domination can be questioned. The new social contract, therefore, is not a contract between autonomous wills, but rather the communal expression of objective criticism of the world in order to disarticulate structural oppression and construct a better world.

Crucial to this task is Freire's notion of conscientization (*conscientização*), a notion that conveys the idea that the raising of self-reflective critical consciousness allows human subjects the critical understanding of the world in order to transform it in the direction of a process of humanization. This notion embodies a critical communal praxis that, exercised in the context of social processes, opens the possibility of constructing a new social contract insofar as participants become aware of the distorted structures in which they participate. The new contract, therefore, will come, not from a reflection upon a socially detached Emile, but from the community of the oppressed (100). Streck focuses on three critical edges of this new social contract: a) a contestation of the current economic order, b) an attitude centered in providing alternatives and c) a development of citizenship democracy (61).

According to Streck, "[c]itizenship is only possible insofar as what is public exists as a space of collective construction, of common good" (119). Pedagogy becomes essential to develop "formative spaces of citizenship." Streck argues in favor of a recovery of "pedagogical memory that has been covered up by the transplantation of theories and practices" (143). The pedagogy advocated by Streck downplays the "hidden" axiological system of the market, while it tries to "develop a life ethics capable of sustaining a new social contract" (147).

Now, while deepening his view of the new social contract, Streck begins to recognize a tension that is perceptible throughout the book. Relatively early in the book, Streck himself considers that it could be necessary to go beyond the concept of the social contract (52), and in the last page, Streck recognizes that his proposal might demand transcending the contractualist idea insofar as we are situated in the terrain of the ethical. In Streck's view, there is an "ethics prior to and beyond the social contract, indicating the temporary character and contingency also of any new contract" (156). He recognizes that "[p]aradoxically, then, the education of the new social contract is also education beyond the social contract itself" (ibid). This tension is not unimportant insofar as it points to a significant point: that an ethics concerned with the perspective of the oppressed does not sit well with the conceptual figure of the social contract. Moreover, if the latter is an expression of Modern bourgeois thought, it can become an ideological straightjacket for the recognition not only of the popular epistemologies positively approached in the book, but also of the valuable projects of social construction whose regional possibilities have been cut short by the violent imposition of

particular interests. But, then, the question arises: Why struggle to keep the figure of the social contract as the core of a new mode of common life if such a figure could jeopardize the new project? To be sure, there is a concern with stability, with recognizable norms.

Streck answers this question, in short: the notion of the social contract is “adequate as it covers the relations between persons, the configuration of the institutional apparatus, and the forms of exercising power, among other aspects that have to do with human life in society and on the planet” (44). Of course, the problems intrinsic to this project could explain why the notion of the social contract is not described with more detail in Streck’s view. It could be that the precise contours of the notion of the new social contract are not available to formulation within Streck’s view. Conceding that not all problems can be covered in a book, I express my hope that Streck, or other authors, will investigate in future works the conundrum of integrating ethics within an institutionality that is always in danger of betraying those very ethics.

From my perspective, the notion of the social contract does not lend itself to emancipatory projects, insofar as it not only preserves a space of political bargaining in which non-generalizable interests have a reign, but it also unduly reduces the spectrum of the struggle for justice. It could be asked whether the notion of the social contract can provide a framework in which the cultural richness opened by Streck’s account can be accommodated: indigenous cultures, for example, advance notions of reciprocity that are grounded in cultural frameworks whose ecological dimensions do not accommodate the idea of the social contract. There are, on the other hand, a number of philosophical undercurrents that emphasize the profound ethical asymmetry which permeates ethical relationships, as is the case of Emmanuel Levinas—an important figure in Latin American thought—and also in the work of Spanish philosopher Reyes Mate, who has argued convincingly in favor of a political consideration of the memory of the oppressed.

In conclusion, Streck’s book opens a pedagogical path to explore alternative models of participatory democracy able to foster the humanization of globalization processes. It provides a multilayered opportunity to reflect upon the multiple problems arising at the intersection of education and justice in Latin America. On the one hand, it offers critical perspectives on which to think about education in a world where neoliberal pedagogical perspectives, although still hegemonic, are in crisis. On the other, this book presents those enthusiastic about the potential of Latin American alternative modes of thought a set of complicated problems that cannot be ignored any longer.

Notes

[1] See Anwar Shah, *Participatory Budgeting* (Washington: The World Bank, 2007).