BOOK REVIEW


Reviewed by Rudy Kisler, Ph.D. candidate, McGill University.

Villacañas de Castro’s book, *Critical Pedagogy and Marx, Vygotsky and Freire Phenomenal Forms and Educational Action Research* (2016), is first and foremost a work of philosophy. At its center, it deals with Marxist ideas and their connections to psychoanalysis and to educational theories. This beautifully written book is presented by its author as a continuation of an earlier work, originally published in Spanish, entitled *Giro copernicano y ciencias sociales* [*The Coperanican Turn and the Social Sciences*] (2013).

Villacañas de Castro’s guiding question is the following: How can the oft-neglected field of Marxist sociology inform theories and practices, notably action research? To better understand the potential uses of action research, the author merges two theoretical approaches that are usually kept apart – critical pedagogy and Marxist sociology. To this end, Villacañas de Castro weaves an intricate argument through the book, which consequently requires no small commitment from his readers if they wish to apprehend the philosophical maneuver he executes.

The book is divided into an introductory part and five chapters, which are grouped into three parts. In the introductory part, the author presents Marx’s concept of phenomenal forms (*Erscheinungsformen*), which serves as the book’s foundational concept. This somewhat overlooked concept in Marxist sociology describes the pre-conditions which allow class consciousness to form. The idea of phenomenal forms serves as the book’s conceptual framework, allowing Villacañas de Castro to construct his arguments for a discussion of critical pedagogy and action research.

In the first chapter, entitled ‘*Beyond the ignorant schoolmaster: On education, Marxism, and psychoanalysis*’, the author situates his discussion within the realm of psychoanalysis, using Freudian ideas as a bridge towards one of the main thinkers addressed in the book, Lev Vygotsky. The author highlights areas of compatibility between Marxist sociology, psychoanalysis, and liberal education, by means of the nineteenth-century educator Joseph Jacotot along with Jacques Rancière’s interpretation of the latter’s ideas in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). In the second chapter, entitled ‘*The pedagogical problem:
Vygotsky’s encounter with the phenomenal forms”, the author approaches the problems posed by Jacotot and Rancière’s theories by exploring Vygotsky’s cognitive approach to education. Although the author is well aware of Vygotsky’s prominent contribution to cognitive development theory and its relation to education, Villacañas de Castro identifies several blind spots in his theory and also points out some pedagogical flaws which may result from them. In view of remedying these shortcomings, the author introduces Paulo Freire’s conception of critical pedagogy. In the third chapter, ‘The pedagogical solution: Freire’s critical pedagogy and social democracy’, the discussion moves away from purely philosophical argumentation toward subjects related to education. Here, Villacañas de Castro investigates how the philosophical ideas adumbrated in the first two chapters of the book can be applied to promote ‘liberal-emancipating education’. In the fourth chapter, ‘The critical potential of John Elliott’s liberal pedagogy’, the author further explores action research by investigating key modern questions surrounding liberal education, such as the proper place of social sciences education and the effects of postmodernism on education. He discusses how phenomenal forms are to be viewed in light of emotional and cognitive factors, and proposes John Elliott’s ethical principles to bind all of these factors together.

The fifth chapter, ‘A practical case of participatory meta-action research’ is an exception in the book, in that it is the only part which consists of empirical research with originally produced data. The author describes a case study of one Master’s course in a teacher-training program. The author uses his own experience as the course facilitator to describe how he (and the students) approached the pedagogical problems that arose in this situation with action research, explaining how it allowed students to think critically about themselves as students-researchers and, in so doing, overcome some conflictual situations.

Ultimately, the prominent thinkers who appear in the book’s title – Marx, Vygotsky, and Freire – are not discussed in great detail. Instead, they are merely used to present Villacañas de Castro’s own argument, which begins with a philosophical problem in Marxist sociology and ends with action research as a potential solution. While the fusion Villacañas de Castro makes between various philosophical ideas and their connections to education provide some eye-opening insights, the most original contribution of the book comes in the form of his interpretation of thinkers less well known to non-educationalists, namely John Elliott, Joseph Jacotot, and Jacques Rancière. These interpretations are immensely useful, both for nuancing the problem presented in the book as well as for articulating its proposed solution. Indeed, Villacañas de Castro’s discussion of these thinkers gives historical depth to the discussion while strengthening the conceptual connections between pedagogy, knowledge, and ethics. Scholars and students in the fields of philosophy and history of education as well as educationalists interested in the potential of action research will find this book valuable.

REFERENCES


BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Rudy Kisler is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. His research explores the relationship between history education, identity and the material culture of heritage sites.