



The rise of populisms and the democratic crisis: Challenges for the teaching of human and social sciences today

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Presentation

The issue of democracy has always been on the horizon of educational debate, even though this debate is marked by numerous disagreements (Saviani, 2008). This issue becomes evident in the case of countries that have experienced discontinuities in their democratic experiences, marked by civil and military dictatorships, as in the cases of Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Portugal, and Spain, just to name a few Ibero-American examples. Furthermore, even in countries with a solid democratic tradition, the rise of authoritarian and antidemocratic movements has been observed, gaining increasing visibility and, in some cases, leading to the election of heads of state aligned with authoritarian populism. In this context, the human and social sciences take on a central role in the debate, considering their historical role in the school curriculum for critical formation within a democratic society project (Evans, 2011; Pagès & Santisteban, 2010; Sant & Brown, 2020; Oliveira, 2021).

These authoritarian populist movements are often linked to extreme-right movements, which have been given various denominations in the literature, such as national-populist, illiberal, radical, authoritarian, extreme, ultraconservative, fascist, neo-fascist, post-fascist (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Mudde, 2019; Revelli, 2017; Traveso, 2019). It is interesting to note that this movement occurs at a time when the foundations of democracy are being attacked in new ways. As Levitsky and Ziblatt (2018) highlight, democracies are not only threatened today by violence, as it used to happen in the 20th century; paradoxically, democratic regression begins at the polls, with the election of authoritarian figures who, legitimately elected, gradually undermine democracy from within.

These authoritarian figures and movements often perceive schools as one of the main battlegrounds for a particular model of society, undertaking a veritable campaign against 'gender ideology', 'communism', 'cultural Marxism', 'globalism', among other terminologies that often occupy a place of empty signifiers. Official curricula, textbooks, teacher training courses are questioned and revised, and new laws are proposed to prevent the 'ideological indoctrination' of teachers. In Brazil, the 'Escola sem partido' (School Without Party) movement gained prominence, openly supporting Jair Bolsonaro during his election in 2018 and inspiring various bills in different states and municipalities (Oliveira, 2020). Despite these movements aiming to combat the teaching of controversial topics in the classroom, such as 'gender', 'sexuality', 'racism', etc., research in the field of social science didactics tends to point to the relevance of this debate in the classroom, as well as its pedagogical potential (Santisteban, 2019).

Therefore, we must understand that the analysis of the conflicts surrounding the rise of authoritarian populism in the educational field is a central issue in the educational field today. This has been a relatively unexplored aspect in education journals, especially considering the role of social science education in this process. We seek to make an original and unprecedented contribution to a Brazilian journal, recognizing the political, social, and educational relevance of this theme, which is still little systematically explored in specialized literature.

If we understand that the curriculum reflects power relations in a society (Apple, 2006), we must consider that we are facing an open dispute over a particular ideal of society to be built from the school (ROSS, 2019). In this sense, we must ask ourselves about the role of the social sciences in strengthening the democratic project and the challenges that arise for their pedagogical practice.

Understanding the challenges posed in this context to the educational field as a whole, and to the teaching of social sciences in particular, is fundamental for advancing academic debate at the present moment. This includes not only understanding the realities of countries such as Brazil, Turkey, Hungary, Poland, among others, but also countries with a solid democratic tradition that increasingly witness the rise of movements within this political spectrum.

In this issue, we bring together contributions from researchers from different parts of the world because we understand that the rise of authoritarian populism is a global phenomenon, impacting national and local levels in various ways.

Starting the debate, “Populism and identity(ies): A relevant content in the teaching of Social Sciences”, authored by Noelia Pérez-Rodríguez, Nicolás de Alba-Fernández, and Elisa Navarro-Medina, indicates that the rise of populism is a problem for democracy, hypothesizing that this type of discourse connects better with the population than more democratic ones. Based on qualitative research conducted with teacher training students at the University of Seville, the authors indicate that future teachers give little importance to politics in explaining their identities. Through the results, they suggest that formative models should consider addressing politics as a relevant issue in the formation of the identities of future teachers and students in basic education.

Gustavo González-Valencia, Neus González-Monfort, Núria Arís Redó, and Antoni Santisteban, in “Competencies of the Democratic Culture of the Council of Europe: How is it interpreted from teacher training”, focus on the process and challenges of building a democratic culture, emphasizing the role of supranational institutions, the European Commission, and the European Union. The objective of the work is to analyze the incorporation of these Competencies for Democratic Culture (CDC) indicated by such institutions as necessary for building a democratic culture in teacher training programs, indicating the existence of a general framework that promotes the incorporation of CDC in the analyzed course.

In “Teaching to Forget – History Teaching and the Far Right”, Karla Saraiva and Fernando Seffner analyze how the far right seeks to transform history teaching, shifting it from academically accepted historiography to glorious narratives in the format of a national novel. They specifically discuss the productions of Brasil Paralelo in the form of public history and challenge this version through an ethnographic study of school culture, demonstrating the existence of similarities between historiographical forms and methods of dissemination proposed by the far right, but also pointing out some differences.

José Luis Zorrilla Luque, Adriana Razquin Mangado, and Carmen Rosa García Ruiz, in “Democratic Memory in times of populism: Historical thinking and emotions in training teachers”, point out how there is a recurring denial in Spain of violent and traumatic events that occurred during the Spanish Civil War and Franco’s regime. The authors investigate how future teachers perceive historical and democratic memory, focusing on the controversies that arise and manifest themselves in the form of hate speech that hides or omits past events. For the authors, introducing such debates into teacher training is strongly linked to discussions about emotions.

Francisco Thiago Silva, in “Education and the anti-Nazi-fascist struggle in Brazil: implications for the field of curricular studies in the voices of master’s and doctoral students”, seeks to understand the main implications and consequences that the rise of the far right in Brazil has caused in education, based on the perception of master’s and doctoral students who took a course in curriculum and teacher training in a Postgraduate Program in Education at a federal university in the Midwest region of Brazil, in the period from 2.2022 through the application of a semi-structured questionnaire. In the work, the author points to the possibility of the existence of a ‘fascistized curriculum’, marked by an authoritarian and monocentric character throughout its pedagogical architecture, and not centered on science. Faced with the results, the author considers it imperative to elaborate and practice a ‘critical and socially anticapitalist and anti-Nazi-fascist curriculum’.

Touching on a central theme of contemporary educational debate, Patricia Gómez Saldivia, Antoni Santisteban Fernández, and Sixtina Pinochet Pinochet, in “Social representations of social science teachers in training on freedom of expression”, start from a case study, through research conducted with teachers in training in the area of citizenship education and history in Chile, to investigate how social science teachers perceive the issue of freedom of expression. It was noticed that the representations of these agents relate to constitutional rights, indicating hate speech as a limit to freedom of expression.

“Survivors and castaways: reflections on Philosophy and Sociology in High School in the context of contemporary sociopolitical disputes”, by Gustavo Louis Henrique Pinto, Patrícia da Silva Santos, Elisângela

da Silva Santos, and Marcos Alfonso Rucinski Spiess, seeks to problematize the determinants of the permanence of the disciplines of Philosophy and Sociology in High School in Brazilian education, in the context of a democratic crisis and the advance of authoritarianism in the last decade. More specifically, the authors turn to the survival of Philosophy and Sociology in the Federal Network, emphasizing the adverse political context for this permanence and the persistent threat. In the authors' interpretation, there is low institutionalization and fragmentation of the presence of Philosophy and Sociology in Basic Education, reinforcing the delegitimization of scientific knowledge and the Human Sciences.

Focusing on a more specific element present in the contemporary Brazilian educational debate, Inaê Label Barbosa and Amurabi Oliveira, in "The 'Combat against 'Gender Ideology' and the impact on the teaching of human and social sciences", examine the rise of conservative movements in Brazilian society and its impact on education, something that has been shaped at least since 2013 in the authors' interpretation, gaining prominence with the impeachment against Dilma Rousseff in 2016, and the subsequent election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. According to the authors, teachers of human and social sciences are especially impacted by these actions, as gender studies are constitutive of their disciplinary fields and, at the same time, have their scientific character denied by such movements, indicating that they encompass something that should be private and, therefore, taught by the family and not by the school.

We hope that the set of works can contribute to the debate, situating the teaching of social sciences in the contemporary discussion about the crisis of democracy worldwide. Enjoy your reading!

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