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Helena Radlińska: a return to the roots and traditions in the post-modern world

ABSTRACT: The article focuses on the problem of sustainability of Radlińska's (1879–1954) scientific heritage. This involves critical social pedagogy. This concept emerged at the beginning of the 20th century and grew out of the involvement of educational work in the struggle for the independence of the country. Radlińska, combining education and upbringing with politics, and political tasks with moral premises, built a model of school and education that would participate in public life. Such pedagogy teaches how to look critically at oneself and the world. It helps in the fight against violence, ignorance, intolerance and nationalism. Together with this it teaches how to engage in dialogue with others and develops skills of cooperation and interaction. These are indispensable values and norms as well as universal educational tasks – perhaps necessary in the age of fluid modernity, in the reality of today's „global, cracked world”.

KEYWORDS: Helena Radlińska, critical social pedagogy, scientific heritage, education and social involvement.

I

More than a hundred years have passed since in the first decade of the 20th century, thanks to Helena Radlińska¹, social pedagogy began to

¹ Helena Radlińska (1879–1954) – founder of the Polish school of social pedagogy. Before 1918, she took part in underground educational and independence activities of the Józef Piłsudski camp. In 1925 she organized the College of Social-Educational Work at the Free Polish University (Wolna Wszechnica Polska) in Warsaw, the first university in the country to educate pedagogues/social and educational workers at the academic level. In the interwar period she was an ordinary member of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences, she also worked in international scientific organizations in the field of pedagogy and social work. During

emerge and develop in Poland. With time, this new idea, decidedly critical of the then common traditional pedagogy, developed its own theoretical foundations, research workshop and original methods of educational work. It would be difficult to achieve if it was not for the wide circle of people who received, multiplied and when it was necessary – protected the manner of understanding and practicing pedagogy proposed by Radlińska. They were all organized in the teaching, educational, social, cultural, cooperative movement, also in political activities, and not in dignified university walls, faculties or scientific institutes. The basis of this activity in its beginnings was – firstly – the educational work involved in the struggle for national independence and – secondly – a strong criticism of the educational concepts of the National League, positions that pushed through the slogans of school and education based on a one-sided, limited cult of the past and the narrowly treated national tradition (see Theiss 2015).

Today it is known that the ideas of the signaled socio-educational movement, called „pedagogy of national intensification” (Bogdan Nawroczyński) hide a large and important part of the answer to the question about the sources of durability of Radlińska’s ideas, their social attractiveness, as well as the visible and functional connection of these ideas with the needs and practice of everyday life, which in this case meant opting for a democratic, Polish and socialized school. It was social practice, active participation in the struggle for the country’s freedom and dialogue with the surrounding world, and not „dogmatic monologue” or „scientific orthodoxy”, dressed in the toga of academic authority, that marked the way for the development and scientific self-reliance of social pedagogy (see: Misztal 2000, p. XX, 16, 30, 71–74). Such pedagogy, just like sociology at the time, was created – to quote Jan Szczepański’s opinion – „by specific people living in a specific nation, participating in the historical experiences of that nation” (Szczepański 1973, p. 729). These were – developing Szczepański’s thought – representatives of three generations born in the years 1860–1900: the „rebellious” generation, fighters who fought for the independence of the country in the cultural and educational fields; the „generation of the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries”, which was characterized by political revival and intransigence in the pursuit

World War II and the occupation period (1939–1945) she participated in the resistance movement and secret education. In 1945–1950 she was a professor at the University of Łódź. She has published several hundred works in the field of social pedagogy, social work, adult education and librarianship, as well as the history of upbringing. See: Radlińska (2018), Lepalczyk, Skibińska (1974), Theiss (1979).

of a free Poland; and the „generation of independent Poland”, implementing dreams and aspirations for a free country (Wapiński 1991, pp. 9–11, 135–196; Cywiński 1996).

For these generations of people involved in the struggle for a free country and personal freedom of its inhabitants, regardless of their nationality, property status or religion, for all of them, the main idea and task of social pedagogy created by Radlinska: „in the name of the ideal, with the strength of man, upbringing transforms the present day” (Radlińska 1935, p. 19) – was both a source of basic values, the resulting moral norm, and a tool of pragmatic conduct. Time has shown that in the wide awareness of the pedagogical community, not only social pedagogues, the idea of understanding education as a means of releasing the development potential of individuals and social groups, is the most valuable part of the heritage left by Radlinska.

The heritage, whether or not it is understood as „patrimony”, „inherited property”, or „legacy”, is a structure that remains in a continuous process of cognition, reproduction, creation, valorization. In both cases, heritage integrates, creates a community, allows to define a common past, and includes the principle of maintaining tradition (Marciniak, Pawleta, Kajda 2018, pp. 7–16). Sometimes, however, the legacy received from the predecessors, together with the commitment to pass on its value to future generations, can be a burden, an obligation, a rule that imposes on the beneficiaries the ways of understanding and using the past in building the present. Such retrotopia, formulated in Bauman’s concept, captivating „the danger of nostalgia” for „what was”, what was common, permanent, good, certain, separates today’s world from a bold, critical and constructive view of the future. It restricts creative attitudes and deforms life strategies (Bauman 2018).

In social pedagogy, the category of heritage, scientific inheritance from the past was and is treated as a development potential, present in the present, as well as a challenge for the future and the building blocks of „what can be”. It was from the living heritage of Polish Enlightenment thought that Radlinska built a project that went far beyond the future: a vision of a modern school, developed in an independent country, democratic and socialized. At the same time, she opposed the model of national education, which „in the name of a Polish school and the rebirth of the nation leads [...] the young generation towards graves and there, having lit lamps, remembers [...] the past [...]” (Radlińska 1908). In turn, the heritage of Radlińska was referred to by her closest students and collaborators, e.g. Ryszard Wroczyński, Aleksander

Kamiński, as well as other pedagogues, e.g. Adam Olgierd Uziembło or Bogdan Suchodolski, to speak in the times of the so-called real socialism, although to a different extent and degree, about a radical and critical concept of social pedagogy, which at that time also meant a „progressive” concept in Radlińska’s view. Without any camouflage, the legacy of social pedagogy was reached by the young generation, that in the period of the great systemic change of the years 1980–1990 was building „new pedagogy”, seen as an important factor of democratic changes.

In the national discourse of today’s pedagogy, conducted especially on the critical ground, there is sometimes a misunderstanding of the difference between research on the history of education and pedagogical thought and research on the contemporary role and place of heritage in pedagogical thought. Considering the history of pedagogy in too narrow meaning, focused on the question „how it really was”, removes from the field of view the links between the past and the present. It sets tasks of reconstruction and documentation of the history of education for these questions: what is heritage, whose heritage and for whom, what strategies for heritage (cf. Marciniak, Pawleta, Kajda 2018, p. 7–16)? Looking at the heritage of Radlińska from the perspective of these questions makes it possible to see in the past what is still alive and inspiring, what directs thinking and pedagogical activity towards the future (cf. Popkewitz 2012). The accusation of „thinking in the shadow of Radlińska”, of alleged „failure to go beyond Radlińska’s thinking”, sometimes directed against the social pedagogical community, is also abandoned, which goes hand in hand with the postulate of the need to „break with Radlińska”.

Today, it would be difficult to overestimate the scientific heritage of Radlińska, treated critically and as a whole, together with its social and political background as well as cultural and ethical significance. Thanks to this heritage, the idea of social pedagogy is anchored in a specific historical, social and axiological space, retains its continuity, preserves the fundamental values of the world of culture, develops bonds and enables communication in the world of theoreticians and practitioners of education. Equally importantly, this heritage has been and remains open to the problems of the coming world, to new social and educational challenges. It reveals its functionality always and everywhere, when it comes to defending and developing the values of democracy and helping others to access education and culture. Thus, the past immersed in the present, crossing the boundaries of historical cognition, can modify the way of thinking and writing about the past; it gives us the opportunity to design the future (see: Traverso 2014, p. 9–30).

II

The heritage of Radlińska, as well as the whole history of Polish social pedagogy, like any kind of historical resources, is not a monolith, it is subject to constant interpretation, variable evaluation or selection. Generally speaking, all of these works went through the following three phases: the phase of full affirmation (the interwar period, 1945–1949 and 1956/1957), the phase of different reception, not to say, „cold war” (1960–1980), the phase of „renaissance” and „ambivalence” (after 1989) (see Lepalczyk 1979; Theiss 2018). In the first case, social pedagogy was a kind of development of the yet not exhausted slogans of organic work, work from scratch and slogans of educational work engaged in the struggle for independence and social justice. This picture was dominated by the still present readiness of social pedagogy to become involved in the events taking place in the country. This happened in the groundbreaking years: 1918, 1945, 1956. The „readiness” was followed by professionalism, i.e. developed scientific research, own methods of operation, and qualified personnel.

In the second phase, i.e. in the period of real socialism, the legacy of social pedagogy meant – on the one hand – „progressive educational and social traditions” and participation in the cultural and educational transformations of the country, and on the other hand – traditions of „bourgeois pedagogy” and even, as some claimed, pedagogy which before 1939 took part in the „Nazification of the country”. This was the rhetoric of some statements from the Stalinist period (Mysłakowski, Szaniawski 1950); A little later, in the 1980s, a dangerous at that time question appeared in the circles of party university pedagogy: „social or socialist pedagogy”? Reverse positions emerged after another decade, when social pedagogy was accused of participation in the promotion and development of the socialist education system, and these attacks were led by the recent activists of the communist party (see Wojciechowski 1980; Kawula 2012, p. 13–23).

In the third stage of research and understanding of Radlińska’s heritage, which coincided with the political breakthrough of the 1990s, social pedagogy was characterized in two different approaches: as a school of democracy-building through educational activities, and also as „traditional and respected” achievements of social pedagogy classics, sometimes described as „a certain stagnation, and perhaps even conservatism” (ed. Radziejewicz-Winnicki 1992, p. 4). Shortly afterwards, at a threshold of the 21st century, the education sciences saw the emergence of phenomena and influences of a global and

unifying nature. Threats to the theory and practice of education were posed by an „activity turn”, i.e. the vigorous development of diverse „parasocial” concepts related to „animation without limits”, activation, social revitalization, etc. It was accompanied by the flow of ideas and concepts, usually imported from abroad. The measure of value was sometimes the number of quotations from foreign literature, often background texts, at the same time omitting native studies.

III

The durability of Radlińska’s heritage, its timeless significance, is determined by the „permanent core”, the corpus of this discipline (cf. Heller 2009, p. 78–80; Mendel 2014). In classical social pedagogy, represented mainly by Radlińska, Wroczyński and Kamiński, the following fundamental ideas and principles resulting from them belonged to such „invariables” of social pedagogy:

- the idea of social justice; all people should have equal opportunities for development; democratic social order provides this opportunity;
- the idea of subjectivity; the social world, the variable and dynamic structure are formed by „social forces”;
- the idea of social education; the young generation has the right to an equal start, which is provided by the universal access to education and culture;
- the idea of subsidiarity; the society has a duty to provide development assistance to all those in need, and at the same time this support cannot eliminate the individuals’, groups’ and social environments’ own efforts to solve the problem.

These ideas entered into different relationships with the environment at different times; they were part of the world from which they emerged and were heading towards this world. This created a „field of play”, a dynamic, changing space that stretched between social pedagogy as science and the outside world. Once dialog, cooperation and exchange of ideas and practical solutions prevailed in this field, sometimes the „game” was dominated by entities representing the state or political party, and the outcome of this game was a foregone conclusion. Hence, the next conclusion – thesis of these remarks: in order to define a relatively complete picture of the tradition and heritage of social pedagogy in Poland, in order to analyze in a relatively complete way the theory and methodology of this discipline of education sciences, one cannot limit oneself to the analysis of the process of development and changes seen

within the paradigm or theory. Social pedagogy is not a collection of more or less abstract assumptions and theses. To emphasize it once again – the historical and macro-social circumstances, as well as the activity of individuals or the efforts of small groups of researchers, played a large, if not fundamental role in its development. Failure to notice this important circumstance leads to a mistake of ahistoricism and/or failure to notice the place and role of historical and cultural heritage in contemporary sciences of education.

However, regardless of the historical era and development phase, two elements of social pedagogy tradition seem to be at the forefront: the idea of universally accessible education and the idea of social involvement. The first is based on the „democratic norm”, according to which everyone has the right to education, culture and development without restriction; education is an inalienable part of democratic order, it is both its component and its goal. Today we know how much it meant in the times when schooling and education remained in the hands of the invaders and national educational concepts; when at the beginning of the 1920s the illiteracy rate in the country was 33.1% (7 150 000 people) (Wroczyński 1980, p. 300–301); when, after the Second World War until 1980/1989, school was a form of indoctrination to varying degrees and intensity, as well as a means of unfair social selection.

In the classical understanding, the social involvement of science, including social pedagogy also, is determined by the place that a specific discipline occupies in the continuum between the critical and apologetic function. The closer to the critical pole, which is also linked to practice, the more visible, stronger and wider the positive engagement. On the other hand, if diagnosis and theory, and especially scientific practice, are combined with an apologetic stance, we can speak of negative social involvement of science. The factor that determines the evaluation of the social involvement of science is universal values, with the dignity of the human person and their inalienable right to freedom and self-determination at the forefront. Such a position emphasizes the subjectivity of human in democratic social order. It is moving towards the common good, solidarity between people. It recognizes and stresses the subsidiary role of the state. At the same time, basing on reality, it should be noted that: „Science does not make progress only through objective intellectual analysis and experimental skills. Scientists choose a specific research programme as much for social and political reasons as for intellectual reasons” (Dixon 1984, p. 284).

Among the various possible forms of involvement of social pedagogy, the most important, related to the essence of this discipline, was the involvement in the implementation of the submitted educational and social-educational

ideas and solutions. Involvement here meant, in this case, above-average, going beyond typical socio-educational practice, individual or collective activity, based on the ethos of service to fellow human beings. Service understood in that way was and still is a kind of ethical and pragmatic space. In this area there is a „principle of active kindness”, i.e. the universal and timeless humanitarian idea of providing aid always and everywhere, when the other person is in a bad situation and their safety and life is threatened. Apart from the signaled, social, compensatory and rescue function, „service” is present in the process of creative stimulation of existing human forces, capital and development resources of people, groups and social environments.

The term „service” in social pedagogy bridged the gap between two worlds: the world of ideas and the world of reality, theory and practice; the existing world with the designed world. The special nature of „social service” is even well reflected in the ardent words of Kazimierz Korniłowicz (1892–1939), a pedagogue and social and educational activist known in the interwar period, contained in *Tezy bukowińskie* (1926): „We serve people and ideas. That is our privilege. It is not the desire for profit, but the will to serve that drives our work. We do not sell our hardships. We voluntarily want to give and create. We are members the voluntary social services” (Korniłowicz 1976, p. 107). In the classic approach of Radlińska and Kamiński, „service” was also – which is very important – a directional goal of educating social pedagogues/social workers, and this interpretation was narrower in scope, it meant professional preparation in the field of social work. In the article *Badania społeczne i praktyka pracy społecznej* (Radlińska 1932) Radlińska presented the social service understood in such a way, being „a support for any development” against the broad background of the Second International Conference of Social Service in Frankfurt am Main (1932).

IV

At the turn of 20th/21st century, various new interpretations and positions in the field of social pedagogy began to emerge and develop. More or less original, developed, mature, they form a more general picture of the conventionally named social pedagogy of the „third generation” and „fourth generation”. If the first generation includes the classics of this discipline, usually faithful to Radlińska’s findings and comprehensively embracing social pedagogy, the second generation is associated with selected areas of issues, dictated by the needs and possibilities of real socialism, the third generation appears with the great system transformation after 1989, the progressing

democratization of the life of the country and the open flow of social, cultural and educational ideas, the fourth generation of social educators begins their way to and through social pedagogy in the age of liquid postmodernity, in the world of global economy and culture.

As recent years have shown, globalization does not live up to the expectations. Progressing „global turbo-capitalism” deepens „confusion and divergence”. The world seems to be losing its „moral compass”, departing from the traditional social order based on freedom, democracy and law (Bauman 2000). Tensions are growing between global capital and mechanisms and the local interests of nation states, leading to nationalism, xenophobia, religious fundamentalism, chaos, instability, fear and anxiety, alienation. The state’s social order and its integration functions are seriously undermined (Modrzewski 2017). Once again, the phenomenon of retrotopia, building the human world according to the vision and plan of the lost, happy past becomes real (Bauman 2017, p. 259 et seq.; Cohen 2017).

The circumstances outlined include thinking and scientific activity, including pedagogical research in different ways. There are rapid changes in the paradigms of the social sciences and humanities that make it necessary to think in the short term” (Malewski 2010, p. 12). Moreover, the existing theories and methods of cognition prove ineffective against the variable ontology of the objects, phenomena and processes under study. What is valuable and important is determined by the „idol of accuracy and usefulness”, which in turn makes the humanities and social sciences being described as unscientific and useless (Czapliński 2017, p. 17). There is plenty of opinions about the end of the „high theories” of science, classical works in the field of humanities and cultural research, giving way to the „contemporary scientific fantasy”, allegedly typical of the era of post-modernity and postmodernism (Eagleton 2012).

Hence, the „cracked world” (Cohen 2017) poses naive, but necessary questions about the future of the sciences of education in general, including social pedagogy. Is the tradition and heritage of classical social pedagogy still visible and necessary in the global world? Are they only „archival” matters now?

A seed of optimism flows from the creators and researchers of the „new humanities”. They see a need to broaden the „activity attitude” of humanities, understood as „recognizing and regaining agency, i.e. active participation in correcting social discourses” (Czapliński 2017, p. 10). In the place of the missing theoretical and methodological coherence, they postulate building „methodological weaves”, crossing the traditional boundaries of scientific disciplines. They stress that the „new humanities” move from a transgressive to a subversive approach; they do not focus on crossing „borders”, but recognize

and use „borders” for the purpose of, among others, „binding”, „weave”, „node” (Czapliński 2017, p. 19–22.) A special place among these solutions is occupied by the category of „weave”, i.e. the combination of incomplete methods into a new quality that builds uni-disciplinarity instead of the existing multi-disciplinarity. In this context, it is worth rereading the „old” definition of social pedagogy, formulated by Radlińska in 1951: „Social pedagogy is a practical science which develops at the crossroads of human, biological and social sciences with ethics and cultural studies (theory and history of culture) thanks to its own point of view” (Radlińska 1961, p. 361).

Therefore, repeating: Will the emerging „fourth generation” of social pedagogy, which builds new programs of theoretical and empirical research, adequate to the reality of „global, cracked” world and current social and educational priorities, remain in any way connected with its historical „permanent core”, a collection of relatively stable theorems, determining the identity of the discipline? What does „socially involved pedagogy” mean, or what can it mean today? What do the youngest researchers, no longer „grandchildren” or even „great-grandchildren” of Radlińska, contribute to the present day social pedagogy in Poland? Will eventually the possible interest in classical social pedagogy mean only a compensatory „return to the womb”? Will Radlińska remain an emblematic person, who only looks good on various banners of scientific kinship? It is hard to say. „We are not prophets, but creators” – these are the words concerning the future that Radlińska wrote in the „founding text” of social pedagogy from 1908. These words are worth repeating today.

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