

# fundamental education and decolonization of the mind

María do Mar Castro Varela

Education is a key topic in anticolonial and postcolonial scholarship and activism. There are several reasons for this: Firstly, education was a crucial element of imperialism, as colonial rule without an educational program, which enabled epistemic violence, is almost unthinkable. As Edward Said outlines in *Orientalism* (1978), it was as vital for colonial powers to teach the ‘other’ as to study the ‘other’ (see also Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020). Only through colonial education, it was possible to produce a colonized population that relied on and trusted European knowledge and internalized specific Eurocentric norms of knowledge production. Colonial education was part and parcel of the civilizational mission, which is why it finds itself in an ambivalent position via-à-vis mass education.

Education is a key topic in anticolonial and postcolonial scholarship and activism. There are several reasons for this: Firstly, education was a crucial element of imperialism, as colonial rule without an educational program, which enabled epistemic violence, is almost unthinkable. As Edward Said outlines in *Orientalism* (1978), it was as vital for colonial powers to teach the ‘other’ as to study the ‘other’ (see also Castro Varela & Dhawan, 2020). Only through colonial education, it was possible to produce a colonized population that relied on and trusted European knowledge and internalized specific Eurocentric norms of knowledge production. Colonial education was part and parcel of the civilizational mission, which is why it finds itself in an ambivalent position via-à-vis mass education. As Spivak reminds us, “Colonialism was committed to the education of a certain class. It was interested in the seemingly permanent operation of an altered normality.” (Spivak, 2004, p. 524) This commitment had far-reaching consequences. Postcolonial educational studies not only investigate the legacies of colonialism but also work on strategies towards the decolonization of the minds – on both sides of the colonial divide.

First promoted by European socialist leaders in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to educate the proletariat, mass education was later deployed to describe a particular form of colonial education. The *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* dated 8<sup>th</sup> April 1949 printed a speech by W. E. F. Ward, Deputy Educational Advisor to the Colonial Office, who explains that the UNESCO rejected the concept “mass education” as it had an “undemocratic flavor” (Ward, 1949, p. 326) and instead adopted the term “fundamental education”, which was not directly associated with colonial legacies. At its first meeting in 1946 UNESCO described its aim towards the fundamental education of the former colonized.

In my view, fundamental education initially distanced itself from the idea of mass education used in the (former) colonies and in its place proposed an idea of education from the perspective of the

(former) colonized. Education was expected to reach the liberated masses and enable them to become not only literate citizens but citizens capable of governing themselves and of actively participating as responsible members of independent, democratic postcolonial nation-states.

To prove my thesis, I begin with a brief analysis of the idea of mass education and then turn to fundamental education. In a second section, I will link the idea of fundamental education to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's understanding of education as "uncoercive rearrangement of desires" and conclude with some scattered thoughts on fundamental education as postcolonial *Bildung*.

## Mass Education and the Era of Decolonization

The term "mass education" is used in manifold ways. On the one hand, it is found in scholarship on socialist pedagogy where it stands for a strategy that aims for the social betterment of the proletarian classes by schooling working-class-children thereby giving them an opportunity for emancipation (see Griffiths & Millei, 2013). On the other hand, it was historically employed as another term for colonial education and currently, the idea of mass education is as part of global development politics.

To complicate matters a great variety of terms are used to describe similar endeavours – for example, "basic education", "principal education", "fundamental education", "compulsory education" or "universal education". An early implementation of universal education is to be found in Travancore (today Kerala/India), where in 1817 Rani Gouri Parvati Bai instituted the reform of the educational system in the princely state by introducing free and compulsory education, which was controlled and monitored by the state. "By the mid-1890s, the Travancore government claimed that 40 per cent of the school-age population was attending school." (Ghai, 2000, p. 11). Although free schooling and access to school for a wide stratum of the population was made possible and girls too had access to education, V. K. Ramachandran (2000, p. 67) reminds us that "in terms of educational policy," 19<sup>th</sup> century Travancore was rather exceptional as "there was no mass literacy at the end of the nineteenth century" in Kerala as such. In his view, this had to do with the princely state being feudal and not democratic. Nevertheless, it is a good example to show that the idea of universal education is not exclusively brainchild of the Europeans. In her pioneering work on literacy in Kerala, Kathleen Gough (1968) outlines how subsequently literacy in British ruled Travancore declined dramatically. A claim that Ramachandran (2000, p. 67) and other authors on Kerala doubt. Although one should be careful of resisting the impulse to romanticize pre-colonial societies, it is interesting that in Western scholarship on education and schooling, one hardly finds examples of pre-colonial societies and their attempts to boost the education rate in the general population by introducing state-controlled schools.

The term "mass education" was used in Western publications until the 1950s, however with the end of the Nazi-Era and the beginning of the Cold War, any positive connotation was lost. After World War-II the idea of educating the masses seemed tainted. Unsurprisingly, the *Mass Education Bulletin* was re-titled *Community Development Bulletin* from 1951 onwards and *Community Development Journal* from 1966 onwards. Undoubtedly, it would be interesting to undertake a critical discourse analysis of the use of the term "masses" in educational science to show how the contempt for the term goes hand in glove with disdain of those who are seen as part of the masses. Mass education targeted those collectivities, who did not qualify for a humanistic education: the poor, the working class, the non-whites, the indigenous, for a long time also women (see Bauman 2004). *Bildung* was never meant for *everybody*. Contrary to the claim that everyone could access it, it exclusively

catered to the hegemonic classes, namely, the bourgeoisie. Without the elite education that was partly a legacy of the enlightenment, the bourgeoisie in Europe would never have been able to become hegemonic.

Especially British colonial power mobilized this model and offered humanistic good quality education to the native elites. At the same time, mass education was introduced or – as in the case of Travancore – replaced previous systems and was controlled by missionaries or colonial administrations. A quick look at the reading list published by the *Mass Education Bulletin* in 1950 illustrates that for a long time mass education was mainly literacy programs. In contrast, the white bourgeoisie and the (post-)colonial elites have always had access to the enabling function of education. While the hegemonic classes were introduced to Kant, Hegel and Rousseau, the masses would learn the alphabet and their minds and bodies were prepared to obey and toil. Thinking in the abstract and access to intellectual labour enabled members of the powerful strata of society to attain enlightenment.

In my view at the beginning of the decolonization process in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the newly independent nations aimed to create enlightened citizens that would be the pillars of emergent democracies, instead of a merely literate population. Many of the leaders of the newly liberated nation-states had studied in the former colonial metropolises: Paris, London, Brussels and some also in the United States. They had been introduced to political theories and the humanities and claimed freedom, rights and emancipation for their people. In 1945, the founding year of the United Nations (UN), “nearly a third of the world’s population, lived in territories that were dependent on colonial powers.”<sup>1</sup> The 1950s and 1960s were times of euphoria – at least, from the perspective of the free societies in Asia and Africa. In 1960 the General Assembly passed the *Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples*, which recognized the “passionate yearning for freedom in all dependent peoples and the decisive role of such peoples in the attainment of their independence”.<sup>2</sup> However, the paramount challenge of how the citizens could be prepared to take up “the decisive role” of not only being independent but being free, remained a challenge.

The publication “Fundamental Education” (UNESCO 1947) provides a stimulating insight into the ambivalent and insightful idea of education in the era of decolonization. The report edited by a Special Committee to the first Preparatory Commission Secretariat of what would later become the UNESCO is a collection of ideas, strategies and examples in the field of Fundamental Education. Newly independent nations were in transition and understandably placed great emphasis on education as a means of progress and advancement. But, as Joel Samoff remarks even when the new governments adopted socialist frameworks, they often failed when it came to transforming the common sense of the masses: “Their faith in education - to develop, to construct a desired future, to create new people - reinforced their inclination to focus their critiques on issues of access and participation rather than on content and organization” (Samoff, 1991, p. 8). The colonial and imperialist legacies of the educational systems and institutions were a huge burden for the newly independent governments and the aspiration desire for a new era was a challenge in the face of the material and the ideological situation they found themselves in. The imperial past casts a long shadow on the postcolonial present. New books had to be written, new curricula to be prepared, new schools had to be built, particularly in remote, rural parts. And who would train the teachers for their important role? And how?

Fundamental education understood itself to be much more than as a fight against illiteracy so that in its introduction the Preparatory Commission states: “The attack on illiteracy is not the whole of

Fundamental Education; other elements, spiritual as well material, appear as factors in the problem.” (UNESCO, 1947, p. 1) Furthermore, it is acknowledged that literacy is not “necessarily going to lead to democracy [...] Nazi Germany demonstrated all too clearly the way in which one of the most thoroughly literate and highly educated peoples of the world could be led into false ways and undemocratic developments” (UNESCO, 1947, p. 9). Difficult lessons were learnt from two of the harshest experiences in the history of crimes against humanity, namely, Colonialism/Imperialism and the Holocaust/Shoah, which pushed the members of the Commission to think beyond an instrumental education for the masses. The reflections on fundamental education resonate somehow with Spivak’s conception of education as “uncoercive re-arrangement of desires”. (Spivak, 2004, p. 526) Spivak too believes that to teach the subalterns, those cut from all lines of mobility, reading and writing is not enough as a “democracy to come” needs citizens with activated ethical habits. To achieve epistemic change - that would facilitate the process of decolonization - the mind of the oppressed has to be trained. “The world needs an epistemological change that will rearrange desires.” (Spivak, 2012, p. 2)

## Deconstructing Fundamental Education

“... some of us remind ourselves that the legacy of the European Enlightenment is Doubt. Hope (or lack of hope) and sentimental nationalism (or sentimental postnational globalism) are where much of our world stands now” (Spivak, 2012, p. 1). In 1997 Spivak founded *The Pares Chandra and Sivani Chakravorty Memorial Education Project*, a non-profit organization, which provides primary education of quality for subaltern children. The purpose is to expand the horizons of young people who have been deprived of any benefits from the modern state. By setting up schools and giving sustained training to local teachers, who operate them with the help of local supervisors, the project tries to develop rituals of democratic habits in a large sector of the Indian electorate. It can be claimed that Spivak’s project provides fundamental education in the sense it was imagined by many newly independent nation-states. The aim is to insert the subaltern into hegemony, not through consciousness-raising or empowerment training – as introduced by international NGOs operating in the Global South - but through activating habits of democracy. Spivak believes that without an ethico-political education of both the elite as well as the subalterns, decolonization will regrettably fail.

As the subalterns are unable to access the state, undoing of subaltern spaces means inserting the subaltern into hegemony. In her book, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012) Spivak tries to come to terms with the challenges of the postcolonial situation. The compilation of texts address a wide array of topics and highlight her intellectual trajectory and the double-binds her theorizing encounters. Aesthetic education is the linchpin of the different meditations pursued in the volume. “The chapters themselves are in praise of learning the double bind-not just learning about it.” (Spivak, 2012, p. 1) In the wake of the traces of double-bind, the idea of “ethical imagination” (Spivak, 2004, p. 550) is cautiously spelt out. Following Spivak, it is the humanities as training of the imagination and judgment that prepares the mind to deal with complex ethical and political dilemmas. In light of these considerations, Spivak warns against the trivialization of the humanities and romanticization of pre-colonial indigenous knowledge. The hegemonic classes believe that digitalization and statistics will save us - a tragic faith. Information is not knowledge. Spivak repeats again and again that education is to train the subject to deal with the ambivalences and contradictions of global politics. According to her literature trains the reader’s imagination “to enter other people’s worlds.” (Spivak, 2006, p. 22) Digitalization and instrumental knowledge do not prepare subjects to address issues of ethical and political justice. The complex and contradicting

global realities cannot be understood by people whose minds are ensconced in a binary logic: female/male, black/white etc. and those who follow the prediction of unambiguous algorithms.

A significant challenge lies in how to negotiate the legacies of Enlightenment like democracy, justice, and emancipation without reproducing the inherent violence that constitutes the core of Enlightenment (see Castro Varela, 2014; Dhawan, 2014). Nativist denunciations of the legacies of Enlightenment and the search for pure, uncontaminated non-Western knowledge systems are a risky option as they feed nationalist and ethnocentric fantasies. Despite the white, bourgeois, masculinist bias, we cannot escape the Enlightenment. Spivak, therefore, proposes an “affirmative sabotage” of those Enlightenment principles “with which we are in sympathy, enough to subvert!” (Spivak, 2012, p. 4). Affirmative sabotage is a strategy that turns instruments of colonialism into tools for decolonization. Instead of searching for uncontaminated indigenous knowledge (Said, 1993, p. 228-229), the complicity of institutions of teaching and learning in global injustice needs to be urgently analysed. Furthermore, educational science has to shed light on the epistemic violence it helped to unfold. Current fundamental/basic education promoted by international bodies like the UNESCO in the name of doing good end up being part of the problem so long as it does not understand its contribution to ethical activism (see Watras, 2007).

The ‘uncoercive rearrangement of desires’ which entails the remapping of subject formation at both ends of postcoloniality – subaltern spaces in the former colonized countries and the white, male bourgeoisie in the West –, is the heart of the project of decolonization. And yet: “The task of the teacher is as crucial as it is chancy, for there is no guarantee that to know it is to be able to act on it.” (Spivak, 2012, p.139)

## Concluding Remarks

If fundamental education is reduced to basic education and literacy programmes, decolonization will not be achieved. Only if “fundamental” is read as critical und interruptive is there a chance for epistemic change. An ethico-political subject constitution is enabled only if the teacher educates her\_himself. It is literature and abstract thinking that opens the necessary path of thinking against our intuition.

Postcolonial education requires the will to think the ‘other’ rather than to study the ‘other’. It depends on the constant training of the imagination – pushing the imagination, learning to learn from below. Only then will teachers in times of crisis be able to challenge hegemonic structures and allow themselves to imagine a postcolonial *Bildung* that knows how to play the double bind (see Castro Varela, 2019). The outcome is open-ended. Education is a risk and always (partly) fails. In Spivak’s (2004, p. 529) words: “The pedagogic effort that may bring about lasting epistemic change in the oppressed is never accurate, and must be forever renewed.”

## References

- Bauman, Z. (2004). *Wasted lives: Modernity and its outcasts*. Polity  
Castro Varela, M. do M. (2014). Uncanny entanglements: Holocaust, colonialism and enlightenment. In N. Dhawan (Ed.), *Decolonizing enlightenment: Transnational justice, human rights and democracy in a postcolonial world* (Vol. 24, pp. 115–138). Budrich.

- Castro Varela, M. do M. (2019, October 16). *Ambivalente Botschaften und Doppelbindung—Warum Kulturelle Bildung das Verlernen vermitteln sollte*. KIWiT – Kompetenzverbund Kulturelle Integration und Wissenstransfer. [https://www.kiwit.org/kultur-oeffnet-welten/positionen/position\\_13120.html](https://www.kiwit.org/kultur-oeffnet-welten/positionen/position_13120.html)
- Castro Varela, M. do M., & Dhawan, N. (2020). *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung* (3rd ed.). UTB.
- Dhawan, N. (Ed.). (2014). *Decolonizing enlightenment: Transnational justice, human rights and democracy in a postcolonial world* (Vol. 24). Budrich.
- Ghai, D. (2000). Social development and public policy: Some lessons from successful experiences. In D. Ghai (Ed.), *Social development and public policy: A study of some successful experiences* (pp. 1–45). Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230374232\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230374232_1)
- Gough, K. (1968). Literacy in Kerala. In J. Goody (Ed.), *Literacy in traditional societies* (pp. 133–160). Cambridge University Press.
- Griffiths, T. G., & Millei, Z. (2013). Education in/for socialism: Historical, current and future perspectives. *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 11(2), 161–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767724.2013.783312>
- Mass education reading list. (1950). *Mass Education Bulletin*, 1(3), 58–60.
- Grata, P. T. (1953). What is fundamental education? *Educational Theory*, 3(3), 276–280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.1953.tb01060.x>
- Ramachandran, V. K. (2000). Human development achievements in an Indian state: A case study of Kerala. In D. Ghai (Ed.), *Social development and public policy: A study of some successful experiences* (pp. 46–102). Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230374232\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230374232_2)
- Said, E. W. (1978). *Orientalism*. Vintage.
- Said, E. W. (1993). *Culture and imperialism*. Chatto & Windus.
- Samoff, J. (1991). Socialist education? *Comparative Education Review*, 35(1), 1–22.
- Spivak, G. C. (2004). Righting wrongs. *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 103(2–3), 523–581. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-103-2-3-523>
- Spivak, G. C. (2006). *Conversations with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*. (with S. Chakravorty, S. Milevska & T. E. Barlow). Seagull.
- Spivak, G. C. (2012). *An aesthetic education in the era of globalization*. Harvard University Press.
- UNESCO. (1947). *Fundamental education: Common ground for all peoples; report of a special committee to the Preparatory Commission of the United Nations*

*Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, Paris, 1946. Macmillan.*

Ward, W. E. F. (1949). Mass education in the colonies. *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 97(4792), 326–338.

Watras, J. (2007). Was fundamental education another form of colonialism? *International Review of Education*, 53(1), 55–72. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-007-9033-4>

## Recommended Citation

Castro Varela, M. do M. (2020). Fundamental education and decolonization of the mind. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, 3(7). [https://doi.org/10.17899/on\\_ed.2020.7.10](https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2020.7.10)

## Download PDF version

Do you want to comment on this article? Please send your reply to [editors@oneducation.net](mailto:editors@oneducation.net). Replies will be processed like invited contributions. This means they will be assessed according to standard criteria of quality, relevance, and civility. Please make sure to follow editorial policies and formatting [guidelines](#).

### maría do mar castro varela

María do Mar Castro Varela is a professor of Pedagogy and Social Work at the Alice Salomon University in Berlin and lectured at the University of Basel, Switzerland; the Zurich Academy of Arts, Switzerland and the University of Innsbruck, Austria. She holds a double in Psychology and Pedagogy and a Ph.D. in Political Science. Her research interests besides Postcolonial Theory lies in Gender and Queer Studies, Critical Migration Studies, Critical (Adult-)Education and Trauma Studies. In 2015/16 she was a senior fellow at the Institute for Human Sciences (IWM) in Vienna and in 2017 she founded the bildungsLab\* in Berlin ([www.bildungslab.net](http://www.bildungslab.net)).

1. See UN: <https://www.un.org/en/sections/issues-depth/decolonization/index.html> Accessed on 20 March, 2020
2. See UN: [https://www.undocs.org/A/res/1514\(XV\)](https://www.undocs.org/A/res/1514(XV)) Accessed on 20 March, 2020