

Liberating Education: What From, What For?

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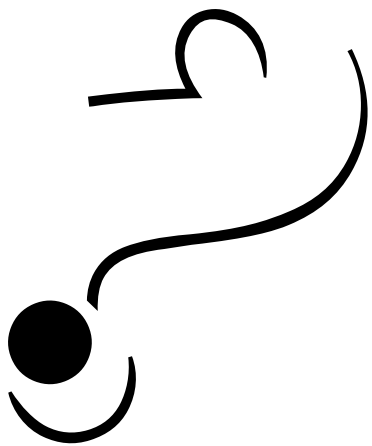


Table of Contents

Igor Cvejić, Predrag Krstić, Nataša Lacković, and Olga Nikolić	
Emancipation and/or Education: Challenges and Frictions	7

EDUCATORS AND EDUCATED

Igor Cvejić	
The Emotional Base of Educational Process: Beyond Care for Wellbeing	19

Aleksandar Milanković	
Interactive Teaching as a Component of Social Emancipation	35

Marija Velinov	
Free Yourself from Yourself: The Ethics of the Self as an Emancipatory Educational Practice	55

EMANCIPATION FOR AND FROM THE SOCIETY

Milica Smajević Roljić	
An Interpretation of the Educational Process from the Perspective of Kant's Philosophy of History and Legal-Political Theory	83

Olga Nikolić
Emancipatory and Ideological Functions of Education 101

Andrija Šoć
**Deliberative Education and Quality of Deliberation: Toward
a Critical Dialogue and Resolving Deep Disagreements** 123

Aleksandar Ostojić
**Knowledge Versus Production: Michel Serres and
Idiosyncratic Roads of Education** 147

Sanja Petkovska
**Decolonial Emancipation on the Postsocialist Peripheries
and the Future of Critical Pedagogy** 167

EDUCATIONAL TOOLS OF EMANCIPATION

Mikhail Bukhtoyarov and Anna Bukhtoyarova
**Educational Technology: From Educational Anarchism to
Educational Totalitarianism** 185

Sonja Jankov
***Social Turn and Operative Realism: Two Emancipatory
Methods of Contemporary Art Practices*** 205

Aleksandar Pavlović and Aleksandra Ilić Rajković
**Neo-National Romanticism in Serbian Education:
Comparing Romantic-National and Recent Serbian History
Textbooks** 223

Decolonial Emancipation on the Postsocialist Peripheries and the Future of Critical Pedagogy

Introduction

The second half of the twentieth century has been named, defined, and characterized in many different ways in an attempt to denote its complexity since it signified a very turbulent, one of the most peculiar historical periods known. Without a doubt, one of the most important occurrences during the century behind us, at least when talking about critical educational theory and practice, was the rise and fall of ideas and concepts of social and progressive pedagogy. Historically, these ideas emerged mainly along with the foundation and engagements of global social movements at the peak of their power in the 1970s and shared the destiny of their consequent exhaustion and withdrawal from the forefront of the social and political scene later on. A prominent contemporary political sociologist Vukašin Pavlović claimed in his valuable thematic edited volume on global social movements that their fast rise and consequent withdrawal from the historical scene represented one of the most prominent features of the epoch, making modern social and political life without acknowledging their existence, ideas, and activities hard to imagine (Pavlović 1987). The insistence and expectation that the power of education

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should influence social and political occurrences inspired by political ideas and actions of global social movements had reached its peak by the 1980s and was followed by the subsequent weakening of the significance and influential potential of the concepts and principles of social progressive thought in general. Consequently, the relevance and potential of progressive and emancipatory ideas to influence educational theory and practice of the time dramatically decreased.

The emancipatory education as an overall pedagogical approach achieved one of its most influential clarifications and massive popularization among educational scholars after the publication of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* written by Paulo Freire, which came out in Portuguese in 1968 and in English two years later, in 1970. Freire wrote this book during his political exile, and it was a summary of his educational stances which came out as a consequence of his involvement in the massive and highly successful Brazilian adult literacy campaigns. This book became an educational bestseller worldwide and provided the clearest, most vivid reasons for the adoption of an emancipatory educational approach by influencing other educational theorists, practitioners, researchers, and policymakers, and other actors on the global level. Not only did it signify the most authentic example of an education program grounded in progressive and emancipatory ideas, but it became close to a global, best-known ‘manifest’ of them. The most important principles of progressively and emancipatory grounded education are learning based on lived experience and the relation between teacher and learner based on equality, empathy, and solidarity. This relation between instructor and student based on empathy and equality is symbolically crucial for the contemporary critical emancipatory pedagogy since the two of them are considered to be partners in the educational process, unlike in the traditional forms of instruction implying subjugation and prolonged intellectual dependence of minors since the teacher is superior and learner inferior by default (Featherstone 2020).

The epistemological origin of the term ‘emancipation’ as popular-

ized within the Enlightenment movement implied advanced learning capability based on the full engagement of the faculties of subjects playing an active role of historical agents, skilful and capable of critical, independent judgment, freed from socially, politically, and economically enforced authorities to further contribute to the overall advancement and development of a collective (Radford 2012: 102, 109). The massive literacy campaigns were quite popular globally in developing regions after WWII and aimed at the poorest and marginalized rural people to be reached at the peripheries and skilled in basic literacy, but were particularly successful and well organized in Latin America. The unquestionable and undisputable relevance of this book is obvious since it is considered to be a 'classic' of critical educational approaches occupied mostly with the problem of inequality (Freire and Macedo 2000: 11). Unfortunately, nowadays this entire history of critical and emancipatory pedagogy is mostly revived only at thematic commemoration conferences, while poverty and (especially digital and technological) illiteracy of marginal populations of the world's peripheries has become a topic and problem whose wider importance has mostly been neglected.

The international voices of resistance striving for political liberation and improvements of the human condition in the form of social movements culminated on the global level in the worldwide protests of 1968. Challenges imposed by the new social movements on structural and intersectional social and political inequalities caused by racial, ethnic, class, gender, and other identity differences, combined with the persistent international problems of armed conflicts, ecological problems, nuclear weapons, and related issues, however, remained vivid and actual, further elaborated and continuously re-evoked in the context of the debates on decolonization and decoloniality. The issues of perpetual oppression and inequality within general social relations, reflected in classroom relations and the knowledge production system based on dominance and hierarchy, are repeatedly unzipped whenever social, cultural, and other differences escalate and produce concrete tensions. At the beginning of the 21st century, after the explanatory framework

of globalization became mainstream both in the media and in the academy, it became obvious that emancipation could not be ripped off of its international and more broadly speaking geopolitical significance as long as the strong reasons for reviving and memorizing it still existed.

These are, in a nutshell, the politically unbalanced social and intercultural positions and relations on both the micro and macro level of the global knowledge production system. Before gaining its huge wider popularity in the context of deliberations on external problems in educational theory and practice, decolonization mainly referred to concrete political and historical struggles of former colonies and colonized peoples for establishing a self-imposed regime and proclaiming national self-determination after the overthrow of colonial rule. Lately, the meaning of decolonization was enlarged and altered, adding to the recognized political system other layers of independence in social, cultural, and other domains. After providing some further conceptual clarifications related to the two crucial notions for the argument presented, decolonization and emancipation, the discussion will be continued by listing the reasons why the overall critical educational paradigm still matters so much, and not only for the archive of the history of pedagogic ideas. Finally, the discussion will be closed by illustrating this claim with the two successful attempts of its contemporary implementation.

The Nexus Between Decolonization, Emancipation and Education

It could hardly be contested that the concept of emancipation plays a central role in the global modern pedagogical and educational imaginary (Bingham and Biesta 2010: 25). On the other hand, the education system is the main terrain of implementing and testing any kind of educational philosophy, policy/politics, program, or reform. Among other things, it remained a key mechanism for the processes of cultural decolonization, mirroring the political struggle for self-determination and national liberation of the former colonies and other territories put

under a colonial rule (Freire and Macedo 2000: 29). Standing for itself, “decolonization is most easily appreciated and measured as a series of political acts, occasionally peaceful, often confrontational, and frequently militant, by which territories and countries dominated by Europeans gained their independence” (Betts 2004: 101). The modern paradigm advocated not only for self-governed national states but also for individuals equipped with self-consciousness, awareness, and capacity for critical reasoning needed to practice rights and understand legislative procedures; thus, those skills have appeared naturally quite important for newborn independent sovereign states and the populations inhabiting them. A massive public opportunity for education was the means to train the masses of people for modern governing formations and the most important invention of modern times. Inequality, on the opposite side, was the main enemy of massive schooling and all those differences coming from coloniality were insurmountable. Coloniality was at the heart of the modernity-making project as its constitutional negative aspect, representing its “dark side” (Mignolo 2000: 20).

Additionally, we should bear in mind that emancipation originally referred to the situation of “giving away ownership” or “relinquishing one’s authority over someone” mainly associated with slaves, peasants, poor, and lower-class parts of the population whose basic rights were broadly refuted and easily alienated (Bingham and Biesta 2010: 27). Emancipation as a historical process designating liberation from the colonial rule took place for most of the colonized territories between 1945 and 1975 (Rothermund 2000: 43). Its usage was from the earliest points of reference associated with intellectual maturity, education, pedagogy, instruction, learning, teaching, and similar. A gradual dismantlement of colonial rule in the former colonies initiated the process of decolonization and the awakening of social movements who were the main supporters of these processes, considered as crucial for the overall emancipation of humanity. The postcolonial scholarship, in the centre of which was the development of self-understanding of the subjugated, indigenous people coming from decolonized countries, with

Edward Said and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak as the most prominent figures, was a crucial element for both educational emancipation and decolonization.

All the dramatic happenings that surrounded the struggle of decolonized people, both at home and abroad, caused a serious crisis within educational systems on the global level. The phenomenon of educational crisis refers to several interconnected problems that hit public schooling during the 1980s, to be generally described and understood as an overall disappointment with the emancipatory power of education, especially regarding its potential to assist diminishment of the social, racial, and gender inequalities and increase democratization (Coombs 1968; Zakin 2017). As Bourdieu successfully demonstrated along this line of problematization of standardized public schooling, bringing together students from different social backgrounds within educational systems, this practice is dominantly reproducing social and class stratification rather than dismantling it, while seriously undermining the emancipatory hopes invested in it (Bingham and Biesta 2010: 14). This institutional crisis historically accompanied a more general crisis of progressive thought that had evolved around the postmodern and poststructuralist authors and dominated the academic, intellectual, and political scene by the end of the twentieth century. Most of the postcolonial scholarship emerged out of the application of French critical theory and philosophy to theorizing about intellectual decolonial emancipation, and at some point, authors even concluded that “postcolonial studies are ideologically colonized” by postmodernism and that they needed to be “epistemologically decolonized” (Acheraïou 2011: 185).

Decolonization as a term was invented by a German economic scholar Moritz Julius Bonn (1873–1965) in 1930 but as we use the term today, it mostly designates “decolonization of mind”, or in other words, gaining the symbolic, epistemological, and cognitive independence from not only concrete but also symbolical colonial subjugation (Rothermund 2000: 1). Since the newly established former colonial

states continued to operate under the framework set by colonial and imperial powers, the regimes they formed were characterized as “incomplete parliamentary democracies”, while this state of their prolonged actual dependence has been designated as neo-colonialism (Rothermund 2000: 245, 251). Education systems and policies in former colonies remained based on mimicking the colonial educational forms and functioned mainly as reserved training pools for elites and native informants, offering small chances for true emancipation of pupils. The fact that postcolonial emerging countries were running their states on developmental aids and became increasingly indebted within the restrained independent economies furthermore meant that they were capable to provide formal education to local populations only with the help of former colonial power anyhow. All of this caused later persistent opposition of intellectuals in constant search for a language adequate for expressing and stating their voice and position, determined to create an alternative to the inherited colonial modernist epistemology and the developmental paradigm they were previously forcefully subjected to. Neo-colonial forms of ruling were supposed to remodel imperial rule into enduring partnership with colonial powers, while education, which initially had been mainly maintained by the colonizers, now had a role to reproduce the colonial mindset rather than to facilitate fully emancipated intellectual independence (Rothermund 2000: 245-248, 251).

Later on, even the postcolonial scholarship grounded in postmodernism and poststructuralism caused only further growing dissatisfaction of the public with its achievements, writings, and acting. In a reaction to this, a few authors from Latin America and former socialist countries emerged with an attempt of reviving critical scholarship within a new intellectual current named decolonial thinking or a “decolonial option”. Soon numerous authors started following suit, and once again, started to be criticized as ineffective, merely descriptive, too vague, and not of much use for accomplishing refined analytical scholarship and securing practical results. Within the approach advo-

cated for in this paper “decolonization is not a metaphor”, i.e. it is not a pure umbrella term under which we can put whatever is convenient while overestimating its explanatory potential, as a critique of it has stated (Tuck and Yang 2012). Furthermore, the existing tendency of turning the notion of decolonization into a mere metaphor for superficial relational, cultural, and language improvements should be opposed and prevented, since decolonization is a real struggle for the land and life of indigenous people (Tuck and Yang 2012: 1). Decolonization is also increasingly shifting on the global level into an unofficial symbolical struggle for self-definition and positioning of marginalized nations and groups of people claiming additional political rights worldwide.

The decolonial option started as an open intervention into the existing body of postcolonial critical scholarship presented probably in the most representative way in the book *Learning to Unlearn: Thinking Decoloniality* written by two prominent contemporary decolonial thinkers: Madina Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo. Although it could be noted that the approach to decolonization that they have collaboratively developed has many conceptual fallacies, their definition of decoloniality requires short recapitulation. The most important conceptual innovation Tlostanova and Mignolo inspired within the existing body of decolonial scholarship remains an attribution of a decolonial impulse to the area of former socialist countries in search for equality with the Western academic centres.

The praxis of decolonization of knowledge in this context signifies the repeated efforts invested to empower the voices of “the colonial subalterns” - in other words of those whose languages, religions, social organization, and economic production have been denied and suppressed jointly by the colonial and imperial power centres. The entire conceptual apparatus developed by Tlostanova and Mignolo epistemologically operates through several core terms. The main notion of theirs is ‘learning to unlearn’, which denotes a continual reflection on the facts we have learnt and memorized, and their per-

petual critical reconsideration from time to time. In the field of educational science, this is much better known as the approach of continuous or permanent learning. The first stage implies de-learning of all the adopted modern creeds and putting them in a postsocialist context, and a subsequent phase of re-learning implies that things learned through comprehension on a higher level, i.e. while achieving a more powerful stage of positional self-consciousness, prevents them from remaining stuck into the oppressive colonial matrix of power. Among the rest of the notions important to mention are the external and internal imperial differences, external and internal colonial differences, border thinking, border consciousness, global coloniality, pluriversality, zero-point epistemology, and the colonial wound.

The learning to unlearn strategy is starting from a motivation impulse named the 'colonial wound' coming from the feeling of subjective refusal to accept subjugation and exclusion accumulated while living under the externally imposed imperial rule and domination. However, both Tlostanova and Mignolo avoid explaining this wound by identity markers such as class origin, poor social conditions for development or some kind of disability, and mostly think it is a consequence of being put and understood as inferior from the point of view of the more advanced nations. Furthermore, they both avoid thematizing the economic aspects of oppression, mostly rejecting the communist alternative in the same way they oppose modernity and postmodernity. The main argument of both Tlostanova and Mignolo is that in principle, normatively speaking, there is a potential of epistemic equity among the peripheral spaces with the central power positions which is the developmental ideal that postsocialist places should aim at. 'Border thinking' is a peripheral epistemic response of detachment from the Western epistemology, but it is still founded on it, despite this being in the manner of opposing it. 'Global coloniality' is a state in which many peripheral structures of knowledge production have found themselves after most of the former colonies have gained independence; they simply remained dependent on all-important developmental processes. The

colonial matrix of power is divided by internal and external imperial and colonial differences: while the 'internal colonial difference' is referring to the European internal others such as Romani and Jews, the 'internal imperial difference' refers to conflicting history relations among the Western capitalist empires themselves. On the other side, 'the external imperial difference' is the difference between the entire former USSR space and the Western empires, while 'the external colonial difference' in Europe is the relation to Indians and Africans and other peoples coming from the places ruled by Europeans at certain points of history, still bearing the cultural mark of this (Tlostanova and Mignolo 2012: 2-3).

The final goal of 'learning to unlearn' through constant re-learning and de-learning is to achieve a 'border consciousness' and 'pluriversality' instead of accepting the epistemological dominance of Western modernity and 'zero-point epistemology'. The zero-point epistemology is referring to an open and active negation of all the other perspectives by the hegemonic system of knowledge and those advocating it. The thought pursued by Tlostanova and Mignolo became recently quite influential mainly because it opened the floor to discuss the position of the former socialist knowledge system within the global academic structures of power, later followed by many other influential attempts to employ the concept of decolonization in the context of emancipation of the former socialist knowledge production and transmission systems and actors. With the purpose to provide additional insights, two such attempts will be summarized, distinct because they do not have the ambition to form an independent epistemological system from which the modern Western epistemological core has been extinct.

Research Methodologies for Studying Decolonial Emancipation: From Hermeneutics to Geo-Comparative Politics

The general problem with decolonization is duality in the core of this notion: it represents at the same time a theoretical and a meth-

odological notion, therefore these aspects are often mixed in usage and are hard to separate. A definition of decolonization often appears tautological, leading to sometimes confusing, contradictory, and conflicting applications across different branches of research in social sciences and humanities. In combination with emancipation, on the other hand, decolonization could simply be defined as a complex attempt of finding a scholarly way for improving the damage coming as a result of all kinds of subjugations, marginalizations and all the other inequalities certain groups are facing.

These debates on decolonization mostly remained limited to the circles of critical social science and critical pedagogy and never became central, thus the impression remained that a scientific base of decolonial emancipation in educational theory and educational research is at the same time saturated and unfinished. Speaking of educational systems' learning outcomes that could be observable and measurable, we see that trying to capture and purposely balance the socially and culturally grounded inequalities in education cannot produce solutions that can simultaneously bring standardized individual and visible collective improvements. Rather, this duality between subjective and collective level seems to bring these two dimensions into perpetual tension: the hierarchical organization of society and social relations remaining strong on the one hand, versus inequalities attributed to the differences caused by identity issues and national, gender, ethical, class, and other social predispositions with incurable consequences (Gross 2010: 9). Most of the social and political phenomena related to the concepts of decolonization and emancipation are inseparable from the attempt to find solutions for the problem of reducing inequality with the help of education and learning. Two indicative and valuable examples will be provided: firstly, the basics of Chela Sandoval's critical and emancipatory decolonial pedagogy, and secondly, the summary of the opus of a contemporary comparative and global education scholar Iveta Silova.

The best advancements of the decolonial emancipation within educa-

tion after Freire mostly occurred a few decades ago, outside of the educational theory and pedagogy strictly speaking, within the third wave of gender and women's studies. Postcolonial and third world feminism research, despite having had a notable reception in the context of former socialist states, was not of much practical use for teaching and learning problems. Although preserving emancipatory discourse and terminology while moving forward to relatively well-refined current postcolonial theory is the biggest value of emancipatory decolonial ideas born in this framework, it is outdated in terms of giving too much space to hermeneutical tradition and avoiding dealing with the challenge of social structures. Chela Sandoval in her famous book *Methodology of the Oppressed* (2000) where even the title is a rephrasing of Freire, is a great example of why even later on both emancipatory and decolonial pedagogy had to be pushed forwards. This book is anything but just one more attempt in line, it is considered as a greatly influential international attempt of pursuing decolonization by theoretical means. As Sandoval openly states, her basic assumption was to understand the "decolonial impulses as transformative effects of oppressed speech upon dominant forms of perception" (Sandoval 2000: 67). Her main level and aspects of targeting inequality was solely and explicitly only the symbolic domain of language. Sandoval took postmodern continental philosophy as her overall approach but avoided dealing with too much critical examination on how her theory might be practised in schools, by pedagogues, teachers, or even university professors. Her focus was on the inner consciousness of the individual subjects themselves, and the procedure of emancipation is understood by her to happen entirely intersubjectively, resulting in the achievement she named as the 'oppositional consciousness'.

Through the alternative apparatuses of analysis and decoding which came out of epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of postmodern globalism, it is assumed that access to a different consciousness will solve and improve social relations in real educational situations. These concrete steps did not also include the precise ac-

companying teaching method, and we could assume it could even take the form of reflexive and meditative training that does not take the shape of a collective and systematic education program and curriculum. Despite being widely popular and well known, this conceptualization of emancipatory decolonization is mainly descriptive and had little chance to significantly influence educational science and practice, because it is not easy to realize how to transfer the skill described as intersubjective quality to anyone else. Since its importance lies mainly in the field of gender studies or critical gender pedagogy, it did not affect much of the most prominent and famous critical education scholars facing the practical problems of education in the global era.

On the other hand, from a slightly different disciplinary background than humanities, is a complex outline of how to conceptualize theoretical and empirical research according to the principles of decolonial emancipation which is coming from a disciplinarily considerably different context if compared to the previous example. Professor of global and comparative higher education Iveta Silova originally comes from the former socialist spaces but has spent a considerable amount of time working for prominent American universities. Silova contributed a much more systematic and analytical methodology of implementing the decolonial approach in comparative and global education. In several of her highly influential books, she is developing a comparative educational approach for geopolitical topics that is based on the decolonial principles, since mostly she is focused on the postsocialist difference within a map of global education systems.

In comparison to Chela Sandoval, Silova does not insist on the transformative potential of decolonial emancipatory education and learning on the level of individual processes of positional self-consciousness, but rather is directly heading to the geopolitical level of structural dependence determining the overall position of the knowledge production and distribution systems in postsocialist types of governing infrastructures. The intention is to provide an additional exam-

ple of how decolonial emancipation might work in applied research based on advanced social and educational theory. It should be mentioned that one of the earliest and most important writings of Silova are the articles about rediscovering the postsocialist area in a comparative perspective in which she is counterpoising education in the post-socialist regions and in the former non-aligned regions to establish a joint research framework for marginalized and peripheral educational systems (Silova 2010: 2). Therefore, her overall goal is the decolonial emancipation of former socialist spaces by their advancement beyond their status of the periphery of the academic occurrences and beyond their marginalization in international knowledge relations.

Two important books by Silova are worth mentioning as an illustration of a well-structured and well-supported implementation of the idea of decolonial emancipation in the field of global comparative education. The first of the books to be shortly summarized is *Childhood and Schooling in (Post)Socialist Societies: Memories of Everyday Life* (2018). This book was co-edited with other internationally prominent scholars who were raised in various former socialist countries such as Latvia, Hungary, Russia, and other South-Eastern European and Euro-Asian countries. The contributions are based on the autoethnographies of the schooling experiences of the scholars, in other words, the reflections and memory narratives prepared by the authors which also put them in a comparative perspective among themselves. Most of these scholars associated with different disciplinary domains, after being raised and initially educated in some of the former socialist countries, moved to pursue prominent academic careers at globally leading universities. The main goal of these autobiographies was to provide a sufficient understanding of how it could be possible to decolonize your own experience of being subjected to an inferior position. The authors tried to avoid any kind of universalization of the experiences of childhood and schooling in former socialist countries (Silova, Piattoeva, and Millei 2018: 4-6). The autoethnographic method was chosen because it is a “powerful counter-hegemonic practice” since “the

subjects of knowing become knowing subjects who are now authorized to speak on their behalf”, on the opposite side of master narratives blind for any “politics of difference” (Young and Allen 2011: 7).

Another book prepared by Silova and colleagues *Reimagining Utopias* (Kovalchuk, Silova, Sobe and Korzh 2017) is even more important as it focuses explicitly on research dilemmas surrounding numerous attempts to understand educational change in the former socialist world and pursue relevant empirical research on it. As it has been stated in the book, some of the advanced research can easily fail to capture the essence of post-socialist experiences and realities situated within a complicated social and political context (Kovalchuk, Silova, Sobe and Korzh 2017: 2). From the perspective of junior researchers interested in former socialist spaces, it is essential to be intensively engaged in the fieldwork and to demonstrate the capacity for reflexivity. Another expectation from qualitative fieldwork researchers in the postsocialist context is the strategic use of one’s multiple identities in all kinds of negotiations (Kovalchuk, Silova, Sobe and Korzh 2017: 7).

Therefore, to remain critical, educational research in the postsocialist context shall continue to refer to social sciences and humanities, critically grounded pedagogy, and the potential for decolonial emancipation to enlarge and improve the possibilities of its application in different contexts. Educational theory and policy are always related to the contexts and not easily transferable from society to society, nor from culture to culture. What might seem impossible or contradictory in some instances is a defining point for educational research, since using reflexivity as an analytical tool and research technique comes with a great risk if not counterpoised on the other side with the structural, system, institutional or policy analyses, or some other supplementing methodologies.

Conclusions

Starting from the initial argument that education on the postsocialist peripheries should necessarily be both emancipatory and decolonial, through the definition of what decolonization means and how it could be pursued and developed in educational theory and practice, including the related disciplines, at the concluding segment it should be highlighted that the importance of emancipatory decolonization is to be understood in the context of geopolitical positioning. The main aim of emancipation and decolonization is epistemic equity to be achieved through detachment from the colonial matrix of power and less imbalanced knowledge production and distribution systems. Freire's method was a tool that helped to reflect on what it means to be put in the inferior position in the relationship of knowledge transfer (Freire and Macedo 2000: 11). The real question is what decolonial method has added to the approach of critical pedagogy, in terms of the difference between what emancipation signified before the global education crisis and what it means now.

The future of decolonial options within emancipatory progressive education is especially important concerning the weakening geopolitical position of former socialist countries and the identity crisis of many of them which could be prevented. Employing decolonial emancipation to strengthen the knowledge production and distribution of postsocialist countries might be the most important future task on the European peripheries. Decolonial emancipation should instruct postsocialist subjects to position themselves within geopolitical structures of power and raise their voice and capacities to improve their ability to stand for themselves and create their unique bodies and structures of knowledge.

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