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Carnival and Domination: Pedagogies of Neither Care Nor Justice

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Carnival and Domination: Pedagogies of Neither Care Nor Justice.

There are two alternative projects to overcome domination in education with ethics of justice and ethics of care.¹ I want to look beyond disagreements between the two projects about the essence of morality. Both these projects, from my point of view, have clear limits. The domination is mainly a problem of freedom, and ethics deal with a problem of good and evil. In other words, I suggest that reduction of human evil may reduce domination, but does not free us from it. Other approaches, like carnival and similar cultural phenomena, would do a better job of overcoming domination.

Moral discourse has one feature, which is important for me here: the language of good and evil does not have any intrinsic limits; one can become infinitely good and infinitely evil, at will. The idea of evil evokes a possibility of its at-will reduction — whether directly in interpersonal relations, or through social change. If there are practical limits in how good or how evil one may act, those limits do not belong to the moral realm proper. One cannot become “too good,” so good, that one’s goodness turns into its antipode. The language of good and evil gravitates towards absolute ideals of goodness, which may not be possible to achieve, but which ought to be achieved, if it were possible. The ideal varies enormously from one ethical theory to another, but its “limitlessness” is the same most everywhere.

The concept of freedom, on the other hand, is inseparable from the notion of limits. Ultimate freedom is unthinkable, or, rather, it amounts to non-being, to death. “Human limits structure the human excellencies, and give excellent actions its significance,” as Martha Nussbaum comments.² What exactly she means is clear from her example and discussion. Calypso offers Odysseus to stay with her on the island, to avoid all the future troubles, to become immortal and ageless.

He is choosing, quite simply, what is his: his own history, the form of a human life and the possibilities of excellence, love and achievement that inhabit that form... We don't quite know what it would be for this hero, known for his courage, craft, resourcefulness, and loyal love to enter into life in which courage would atrophy, in which cunning and resourcefulness would have little point, since the risks with which they grapple would be removed, and in which love, insofar as it appears at all, would be very different in shape from the love that connects man to wife and child in the human world of the poem. The very possibility makes one uneasy: for where, and who, in such a life, would our hero actually be? Do we wish for him a good result that involves a transformation so total that he might not remain himself?³

For surely one reason why the choice for transcendence seems unappealing to the reader is that it would, quite clearly, bring the story to an end... What story would be left, if he made the other choice? Plato saw the answer clearly: no story at all, but only praises of the goodness of the good gods and heroes.⁴

Freedom, in its extreme forms like immortality, ceases to be desirable. I would argue that all other hypostases of freedom become equally meaningless when taken to their maximum. The language of freedom contains, if only implicitly, a realization that absolute freedom, even if achievable, should not be achieved. In other words, ideals of freedom have different role than

ideals of goodness: in the language of freedom, the movement towards an ideal takes precedent over the ideal itself. Or, too put it differently, freedom is not a place, but a direction. The language of morality on the other hand, does not capture the drama of intrinsic limits that come from the most essential human conditions. Our freedom is being limited by much more than other people's evil deeds: by age, illnesses, physical constraints of the world, etc. The world maybe generally described as a set of limits existing in certain balance with each other. Although the humanity incessantly tries the limits, these are attempts to make sense of limits rather than to get rid of them all together.

Why do I think that concept of domination belongs to the language of freedom rather than to the language of morality? The reason is that complete elimination of domination is not desirable, even though domination can and should be reduced. A world without all forms of domination, I argue, will be a non-human world of total disengagement and loneliness.

I will now define domination. Among the whole range of limits that constitute human life, there are some imposed on us by others; by individuals, by certain groups, and by society. These *limits of human origin* constitute the phenomenon of domination. For instance, to say that an illness dominates one's life, would be simply a metaphorical expression. Domination implies some form of human involvement. Yet domination does not necessarily include instances of evil, of intentional harm. If someone intentionally does harm to me, it may severely hinder my freedom. But this does not mean that all, or even most limitations of my freedom come from someone's immoral intentions, even if another human being actually *causes* the harm. For many of the bad things that happen to us, there is nobody to blame. Domination is another side of social association, which is constitutive to human existence.

The domination connotes with power, control, and mastery. When an individual directly benefits from control and power over another, or has a choice of not having control over another, we may speak of detrimental domination, the instance of evil. But in the many cases, especially in educational context, the dominating individual neither seeks nor enjoys his or her dominating position. The distinction of this sort is quite vague and hard to prove, but seems plausible to me nevertheless, at least in theory. In some cases the dominating party is not even aware of its position.

To illustrate the point about unintended domination I will use the story, told in 1949 "Rocking-Horse Winner" movie, directed by Anthony Pelissier.⁵ A boy worries very much because of his mother's complains about the lack of money. This is an upper class family, and a viewer perceives the mother's complains as false ones, even more so as she has frivolous spending habits. But for him, and most likely for her, these are real problems. The boy finds a magical way to predict future winners in horse races, and to earn money for the family. These premonitions involve exhausting rituals of achieving state of trance. The boy would ride his rocking horse for hours to get an insight about the future winner. His mother does not know all these, and does not care where the money comes from. Eventually, after an especially exhausting attempt to guess the winning in the next race horse, boy gets sick and dies.

The form of domination portrayed in the story is strange and tragic. The mother is just inattentive to her son's deep worries. She does not realize what kind of impact her loud complaints about money make on her son. She causes her son a great deal of suffering, and ultimately, his death. And yet there is nothing malicious about her. She loves her son, and

worries about his strange insistence on riding the rocking horse, if only worries too little. I see an instance of domination here; the mother dominates her son's life, thereby limiting his freedom, and causing pain. I see no evil there. Although the mother is tormented with guilt after the boy's death, there are no more reasons for guilt, than if, for instance, her car would crash and the boy gets hurt in the accident.

I want to make clear that the mother dominated her son not only because of her unawareness of the real situation. The negligence maybe reproached as an action. It is also her whole being, the very essence of her character that set incredible limits in the boy's life. In general, being a parent means that your child cannot walk away from you, and all your soul's little demons will dominate the child's life. Many would agree that there is a certain amount of pain that comes simply with living. Some of that pain is allocated for children, "an essential myth of childhood — inevitable pain," as R. Rodriguez puts it.⁶ It takes an effort to agree that some inevitable pain comes from us, parents and teachers.

One may object that my understanding of domination stretches it too far. What is the point in including unintended or inevitable limitations that we impose on each other into the notion of domination? Does it make my notion of domination too broad, and therefore, meaningless? Let us try to think that domination includes only those applications of power that have self-serving, evil motivation. For one, such a definition would make the notion of domination superfluous. Why not simply call it evil? If we want to have any positive idea about good or evil, we have to admit that all other virtues like freedom, beauty, honesty, etc., may include some mixture of good and evil, or have their moral and immoral sides. If the concept of domination is useful for anything but plain moral judgment, it should logically include the possibility of both benign and malignant forms. Saying that domination is always immoral denies any substance to the concept of domination.

Another reason is of more practical nature. All the oppression in the world goes on under "we-do-it-for-your-own-good" slogan. Anyone from a common wife beater to a nation's dictator will deny evil intentions in his deeds. The only way to reduce domination is to argue that even though your dominance is presumably for the greater good, it still harms the dominated by depriving him or her of freedom, and therefore should be reduced or eliminated. What I am saying is that real instances of domination are better challenged with the language of freedom, than with the language of good and evil. The price of using the language of freedom is that one has to realize that absolute freedom is undesirable. Therefore, some forms of domination have to exist.

An unfortunate truth about schools is that they are dominating institutions. Perhaps, all the institutions are this way, but here is what we know about schools: if successful, they do change people. Richard Rodriguez in his autobiography writes: "...education is a long, unglamorous, even demeaning process — *a nurturing never natural to the person one was before one entered a classroom.*"⁷ Education, he points out, requires radical self-reformation. Whatever external, or internal forces make a person to change, the radical self-reformation may not happen without losses and trade-offs. "No pain — no gain" saying reflects certain essence of education. One may offer two ways to get around this claim. First, education should happen in the interest of a child, and therefore, it is not a domination. This simply is not true, because many instances of true domination that I know occurred with the dominating side being sincerely altruistic. A second correction may be that if a student is sufficiently involved into educational decisions, it is

not a domination. R. Rodriguez's story suggests that self-domination is still a domination. Self-afflicted loss is still a loss.

People do limit their own freedom all the time. An individual lets one side of his or her personality dominate others. For instance, a child who chooses to pursue a career of an actor, will deprive himself from multitude of other possibilities. It is common to believe, that if a child makes this kind of decision by her- or himself, this would be somehow better, than if his or her parents, for instance, made that decision. I do not see how this is true. If you take consequences only, they might be equally damaging whether we brought them on ourselves, or under somebody else's influence or pressure. If a child chooses a wrong, ineffective learning approach, it will be no better from the point of view of consequences, than imposing bad approaches on him or her.

Some children go through school without much pain. The most obvious characterization of domination in education seems to be a child's suffering. This is not a true mark. A child may not feel anything unpleasant at the moment of encounter with dominating adult. For instance, some children enjoy sexual experiences with adults, which does not make the child molestation any less dominating activity. Similarly, schooling may be quite pleasant, which does not change that children are subjected to profound transformation, and partial loss of their potential. One may object, that child molestation is morally wrong, while schooling is not. Yet I do not want this difference to obscure the similarity of "invisible" domination.

Children choose different strategies to deal with the dominating side of educational institution. Rodriguez embraced it, he internalized the pressure, gave himself in fully. This brought him a spectacular academic success, but also the loss of identity, severed intimate ties with his family. H. Kohl describes other children, who reject learning altogether, who avoid educational domination while paying very high price — not learning at all. This strategy of resistance is most futile, because it is directed not against real, but perceived evil. It aims against domination, which is not always possible to eliminate.⁸ A withdrawal from a dominating institution — physical or just mental — most often ends up with joining some other, maybe more dominating institution; a school is being exchanged for a street gang, for instance.

The dominating side of education is a particular case of more general feature of the world we all know. It forces us to make choices, to pay for all gains with some losses. One cannot learn without reforming one's self, and therefore compromising one's identity.

The physical world is fundamentally singular, which means that it allows only one possibility out of many to be realized at one time. This is a real root of domination. We are confound and dominated by others because we share with them a single world, and cannot have it all for ourselves. The modern Western civilization may be viewed as one great effort to change this singularity, mostly by multiplying available resources, but also by creating pluralistic democracies and postmodern philosophies. All these efforts show their clear limits. World resources remain quite obviously limited. Despite extensive provisions for freedoms of expression, the law, economy, and politics remain singularly organized in modern democracies. We still need common laws and policies; market mechanisms are universal throughout the world. The social world remains largely singular, and therefore dominating. But more than that, if we give this shared ownership over the world, we will also give up our humanity.

Simple increase of freedom for our children does not reduce domination. S.D.Rosenberg, H.R.Rosenberg, M.P.Farrel tell a story of one troubled family.⁹ A conflict between Arthur and

Nancy, father and daughter, is at center of this family's troubles. The broader movement toward questioning the parent authority sets the stage for the family struggle. The family narrative contains several subplots that are mutually contradictory. Arthur is committed to egalitarianism and personal freedom. So, he was shocked to be accused of being domineering. Nancy felt subtle pressure to fulfill parents expectations, to read her father's clues. She had an identity crisis trying to separate herself from her parents' expectations. Both children want their father to set more explicit rules, to take on a role of a father. As one can see, the simplistic approach to the problem of domination, namely giving children more and more freedoms, does not work, because it leads to new, more sophisticated forms of domination.

Domination cannot and should not be cured with any amount of care or justice, since limits of the freedom are built into reality. But the European civilization had developed a different solution: if reality does not cooperate, create another reality. A carnival, as presented by M. Bakhtin, is a thousand - year- old tradition of utopian approach to the world. What I am saying is that inevitability of domination in social world does not mean we should give up on our struggle with it. I want to acquire better understanding of domination in order to address the problem more efficiently.

Bakhtin wrote that cultural forms of laughter in effect created second world and a second life where all medieval people took some part.¹⁰ Carnival does not mean total escapism, and failure to change the reality, but it rests an understanding of how far reality can be changed. Carnival creates a parallel reality of a folk festivity, of a utopian human community without hunger, hatred, oppression, social hierarchy, and rigid cultural taboos. The only limitation of this wonderful world was that it was short-lived. It is interesting to notice that the peak time of carnival culture falls on the Renaissance period, when some of the most oppressive political regimes existed. Yet it is possible that the highest achievements of human freedom were made in 16-th century, because the carnival is a break from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom. It is capable of something neither justice nor care can do.

The carnival in some respects is opposite to ethics of care; it is care-free. People do not care about each other, because the very difference between you and me fades. It implies certain loss of individuality in favor of chaotic, but united multivoiced body of a carnival. Not-caring results from utopian bounty. There is no future, no commitments, no worries in the carnival. One does not watch carnival, according to Bakhtin, but lives it. Carnival is life taken from its regular rut. Any distance among people is canceled. Free and familiar contact among all people is a unique for carnival category. A person frees himself from any social role, any conventions of regular world.¹¹

It is very important to note that the carnival culture needs, so to speak, "the first world" of official social realities to laugh at. This is why certain stability of social institutions is important in schools. Some rituals should exist if only to be ridiculed from carnival position.¹² Carnival is not a rebellion; it does not call for an immediate abolishment of social conventions, but it demonstrates that those conventions are cumbersome and ridiculous, and do not constitute essential human relations. Bakhtin pointed out very important feature of medieval laughter that does not apply to most of the modern humor. An ancient laughter was ambivalent. It included rejection and acceptance, praise and cursing, bringing down and elevating. The carnival made fun of official institutions, even of God and saints, while it also manifested certain acceptance of authority and sanctity.

Some may suggest that carnival is a Middle ages phenomenon, which “died with modernity.”¹³ Bakhtin seemed to say exactly that, pointing out that carnival gradually recedes from 17th century on, leaving its traces in a particular literary tradition, and some forms of laughter culture.¹⁴ Bakhtin never examined the reasons of such a change. I think he believed in some version of a “golden age” theory. Bakhtin himself obviously could not have witnessed the true medieval carnival, and only knew it through literature and related cultural phenomena. I cannot make any judgment whether modern forms of carnival and carnival culture are worse or less impressive than the ancient ones. It may very well be the case that since life of democratic society has become more and more free, the need for such a strong “vaccine” as big all-encompassing carnival has receded as well. At the same time, I maintain that no society can afford to live in total, utopian freedom permanently, and no form of democracy can free us from domination. As long as this is true, there is a need for carnival.

But what about education? I will argue that we cannot change dominating nature of education. No amount of care and justice can do that. I hope this does not sound like suggestion that a school is not a place to care for children. My concern is that care should not be viewed as the only project worth pursuing in education. The carnival and third places are other effective tools in reducing the negative effects of domination without destroying the education. We can create a level of second reality in schools.

School always included some forms of laughter culture. Bakhtin noted that academia from Classic times had its own strong stream of laughter culture, where not only Latin grammar, but also Holy Scriptures were objects of parody.

It is quite difficult sometimes to track down carnival-like situations in contemporary school descriptions, because most researchers ignore them as too volatile, too unusual and too unrepresentative for a school culture. Nevertheless I have a belief that every good school engages into some form of carnival, or maintains its “third places,” which I will define later, or both. One example comes from a school I have spent considerable time studying in 1987-1990.

Laboratory School #825 in Moscow, a.k.a. Karakovskii School, has its traditional Spring *sbor*. The word means just a gathering, something between a retreat and an assembly. Up to two hundred children and adults go out of town, or isolate themselves some other way. They spend three or so very intense days (with very little sleep, actually, which helps to boost creativity) filled with skit-making, fun, serious discussions, some physical work and sport, and games. *KTD*, an abbreviation for a collective creative action (*kollektivnoe tvorcheskoe delo*) generally describes a primary kind of activity. On its surface, it is skit-making, quite elaborated in some cases. But the educators and older students attach a specific meaning to it, a meaning sharply different from simply having fun. In fact, they perceive it as a work, as a duty, as a demanding service. For an individual, *sbor* is a spiritual experience more than anything else. Being a part of some greater whole, a communion, is the goal; skits, arts, planning and organizing, doing dishes, and even helping the neediest are the means to achieve that goal. *Sbor* is an independent non-utilitarian cultural phenomena, as for instance, a theater is. In Karakovskii’s school they say “to make *sbor*,” meaning that there are really different degrees of success, and everyone could feel it.

Just like in carnival described by Bakhtin, *sbor*’s essence is a universal, all-engulfing laughter. This type of laughter exists in city crowd, on market place, on city square. It is the laughter of

the masses, but not only a satire, not the modern understanding of laughter. The carnival laughter defies the fear by ridiculing gods and authorities, and in such a way makes the world closer and more familiar. It is also an ambivalent laughter, embracing the new and the old, the death and the birth, beginning and end.

As Dmitry S. Likhachev et al. commented,

Laughter violates existing connections and meanings. Laughter reveals the senselessness and absurdity of existing in the social world relations [...] However, laughter also has a certain productive element – if only in the world of imagination. Laughter destroys, but also creates something of its own, that is a world of broken relationships, a world of absurdity and illogical relations, a world of freedom from conventions and therefore a desirable and careless one [...] In its own sphere, laughter restores human contacts which are distorted in the other social sphere, because laughing people are ‘conspirators’ of a kind, who see and understand something they neither saw or understood before, or something others cannot see and understand.”¹⁵

This characteristic can be fully applied to *sbor*. Its language is the language of laughter, and laughter possesses destructive power. *Sbor* profoundly shakes all conventions of social life. For example, the heretofore all-powerful principal acts as a little kid, teachers give up their responsibilities, letting students run their own affairs. General excitement and exhaustion bring adults and students alike to most unusual and free encounters among themselves.

I think that the whole school organization, its culture and activities exist for these brief moments of freedom that every kid is given an opportunity to live through. However, carnival has profound impact on the social organization of the school. Karakovskii’s *sbor* takes less than one per cent of the year, but is undeniably the most important event of the school year. It energizes the whole school community, brings about a peculiar feeling of liberation and connectedness. The *sbor* symbolizes everything dear to the school community; it has a power to cancel troubles, smooth conflicts, and put everything into some perspective.

The concept of carnival applied towards school describes a particular rhythm of school life: an everyday phase is followed by a carnival phase. Again, the utopia should be kept limited in time or/and space. My ideal is a school that lives two distinctive modes of life: one is somewhat conservative, with a complex web of traditions, rules, and roles, the life of everyday learning; and second is life of carnival, where traditions, rules and roles are broken, reversed, and laughed at. In addition such a school would include some hangout places with no or minimal adult supervision, but still within the orbit of the school culture.

I suggest that what C. Lasch calls “third places” represents essentially the same utopian project, although limited within space, not time. The term actually belongs to R. Oldenburg, who coined it to distinguish informal hangouts from large, highly structured organizations, on the one hand, and from families and other small groups, on the other.¹⁶ The third places are taverns, coffeehouses, beer gardens and pubs of a particular kind, where one is known in an informal way. Their primary function is not an alcohol consumption, but conversation, the essence of civic life, as Lasch puts it. He claims that the third places sustain democracy; they sort of prepare a person for political life. While this might be true at a certain degree, the main purpose of the third places from my point of view is to create an alternative, utopian reality; to take people’s lives out of singularity of their jobs, families, and politics into world of fantasies, loitering, and blathering.

It just makes people happier, and happy people eventually make better citizens. But most important, the strangers may enter the realm of freedom in this provoking atmosphere of the third place. McLaughlin et al.¹⁷ portray how “third places” can function as substitutes for carnival in educational institutions. All six successful youth organizations they studied, have special time, and sometimes special places for “just hanging out.” This is not trivial matter of having some fun time. The “third places” in schools may play an important role in conditioning dialogue. In fact, some forms of extra-curricular activities of drama, music, sports, journalism, etc., may be successful because they share some traits of “third places.” The third places do not only provide social engagement, but also disengagement, retreat into utopian world. A democracy, as any other society needs people not to take it too seriously. A society needs a utopian outlet that can provide people with what real social world cannot provide with — freedom.

One may object that third places have their own dangers, and their own forms of domination. Indeed, teenagers’ hangouts may be quite dangerous and sometimes tend to develop gang-like oppressive structures. R. Oldenburg may be criticized for some idealization of the third places in his book.¹⁸ Third places as well as carnivals may turn wild, violent and inhuman. I could say only two things in reply. First, I never argued that freedom always goes hand to hand with morality; the opposite claim was mine. Freedom, even in its utopian form implies risk. And second, third places are not equivalent of big city streets; these are not jungle, but small islands of utopia. They have some rules of the game, just like carnivals develop their own traditions and languages. Yet both carnival and third places are completely voluntary, and as soon as they begin to impose undue burden on freedom, people leave them.

Carnival and third places are situations that deliberately reap the social fabric of a school. They introduce special time and space which invites instances of freedom, but do not guarantee such instances. Carnival may only take relatively short time; third places may look like insignificant auxiliary fixture on the school landscape. Yet I believe they should be paid a very serious attention by educators. If one takes seriously a preposition that freedom is important for human existence, than carnival and third places should be at the center of attention of school organization.

The fine art of living includes, but goes well beyond being a moral person. It also requires an ability to escape into the world where morality, along with realities of everyday life, is irrelevant. We cannot be happy relying on morality alone. Or, putting it differently, we cannot describe a good life only in terms of moral language. Education should reflect this fact, and place carnival and third places into the orbit of educational thought and practice.

¹ Kohlberg-Gilligan controversy is but one example.

² Martha C. Nussbaum, *Loves Knowledge* (Oxford University Press, 1990), 368.

³ Nussbaum, *Loves Knowledge*, 366.

⁴ Nussbaum, *Loves Knowledge*, 367.

⁵ The script for the movie was based on D.H. Lawrence’s story.

⁶ Richard Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory: The Education of Richard Rodriguez*, (Bantam Books, 1982), 27.

⁷ Rodriguez, *Hunger for Memory*, 83.

⁸ Herbert Kohl. “*I Won’t Learn from You*” (The New Press, 1994).

⁹ S.D.Rosenberg, H.R.Rosenberg, M.P.Farrel, "In the Name of the Father," *The Cultural Politics of Self-Understanding*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 41-59.

¹⁰ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kul'tura srednevekovia I Rennsansa*. (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1990), 10.

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problemy Poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1963), 165.

¹² For a very different view of Bakhtin's concept of carnival see Richard A. Quantz and Terence W. O'Connor, "Writing Critical Ethnography: Dialogue, Multivoicedness, and Carnival in Cultural Texts," *Educational Theory*, Volume 388, Number 1 (Winter 1988): 95-109. Authors see carnival within the context of critical theory, as an expression of oppressed voices. I do not see any evidence that Bakhtin ever intended his concept of carnival to characterize a power struggle of oppressed groups. On contrary, Bakhtin was explicitly anti-Marxist and remarkably indifferent to the issues of class struggle, at least in works published under his own name.

¹³ See for instance, Quantz and O'Connor, "Writing Critical Ethnography: Dialogue, Multivoicedness, and Carnival in Cultural Texts," 104.

¹⁴ Bakhtin, *Problemy Poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 174-176.

¹⁵ D.Lichachev, N.Ponyrko, A.Panchenko, *Smekh v Drevney Rusi* (Moscow: "Nauka", 1984).

¹⁶ Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*. (New York-London: W.W.Norton & Co, 1995), 119.

¹⁷ McLaughlin, M.W., Irby, M.A., Langman J. *Urban Sanctuaries: Neighborhood Organizations in the Lives and Futures of Inner-city Youth* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994).

¹⁸ Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, And How They Get You Through The Day*, (New York: Paragon, 1991).