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DAVORIN TRSTENJAK¹

(1848-1921)
Nedjeljko Kujundžić²

Davorin Trstenjak (who originated from Croatia) belonged to a small European nation, and this fact certainly helped to shape his belief that freedom was the most precious possession of man. The entire life of this teacher and educational theorist was spent in an effort to uphold and promote the idea of freedom and giving it a central place in his philosophy of education. The role of freedom in the educational process has never been stressed so strongly by any Croatian educator before or after Trstenjak, and there are not many educators who have based all of their theoretical and practical educational work on this notion. Trstenjak can therefore be considered as one of the founders of modern emancipatory pedagogy, a dominant trend in the education of our time.

Trstenjak's beliefs as a teacher were in full accord with his personal disposition. He cherished freedom above anything else and inculcated this love to thousands of students whom he taught and whose troubles and joys he shared.

He was born on 8 November 1848 at Krcevine, a small village in a corner of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which had not been touched by the great European revolution. His freedom-loving spirit was awakened very early: 'Grammar school was a torture chamber for me,'³ he wrote later, remembering his authoritarian Herbartian schooling that suppressed the personality of pupils in every respect, trying to mould obedient subjects parroting whatever was taught as official doctrine. Reminiscing about the difficult period of groping for self-realization, in the autobiography that he wrote shortly before his death, Trstenjak said: 'Since my youth, freedom of thought has been my goddess.'⁴

After graduating from teacher-training school he worked as a schoolteacher at Karlovac (1871–89), Kostajnica (1889–99) and Gospic (1899–1908). Afraid of this freethinking man, the authorities forced him to retire in 1908. However, during the remaining thirteen years of his life he became even more active and produced a series of books and several hundred articles.

He died in Zagreb on 10 February 1921—independent and his own man in spite of his poverty and lack of official recognition. In his will he demanded to be cremated (which was considered shocking at that time) and interred without ceremony. He left his modest property to educational institutions, his last act of faith in the educational mission.

An adherent of liberty

Always on the side of the teaching profession and the people, and never on the side of institutions, he wrote in 1908:

The schools, teachers and students will be freed by those who are ready to dedicate their work, their sacrifices and enthusiasm to the development of education; those who rise and fall with it; those who are the soul of every school; they will be freed by the teachers who teach at school and by the folk who send their children to school.⁵

Out of this passionate personal adherence to liberty, a philosophical concept of freedom as man's highest ideal and aim gradually developed, based particularly on Trstenjak's study of Socrates, Rousseau, Pestalozzi and Nietzsche.

As has been pointed out by D. Frankovic, Trstenjak's best biographer to date, he was the first Croatian educator who 'made man as fighter the objective of education'.⁶ Even when considered in an international context, Trstenjak remains quite unique in the clarity, vehemence, consistency and methodological soundness of his thesis that freedom and the effort to achieve self-emancipation should be the ideals of education. It is because of these qualities that Davorin Trstenjak, an educator formed in the backwaters of Europe, deserves to be presented to a wider public.

Davorin Trstenjak understood 100 years ago that history should be defined as man's painful struggle for his full emancipation. He claimed that historical development was moving towards the affirmation of ever-smaller units of collective existence. Today we know that this thesis has been confirmed by the march of events: after the First World War more than fifty new states were created, and this number was doubled after the Second World War. Today, the United Nations consists of more than 180 Member States and a number of nations are still struggling for independence. In this movement towards emancipation schools must play a decisive role. Since Socrates was the first to state the crucial importance of education for man's development, Trstenjak was right to consider him as the first emancipatory educator and his most venerated forbear.

Within Trstenjak's education system, freedom is seen as the essential element; the axis of man's overall activity. Every individual intuitively feels the need to be free. According to Trstenjak, anthropology and pedagogy must analyze this drive for liberty, mark its limits and find a *modus vivendi* for all the separate freedoms required by each individual. He believed that only with the help of an emancipatory education would people be able to improve their condition: he also believed in the emancipatory power of creativity in the field of science and the arts: 'In Antiquity man was educated for the state, in the Middle Ages for the church, and in the modern age he is educated to be himself—a man.'⁷ In classical antiquity the technology of education relied on coercion, in medieval times on prayer; in modern times it must rely on creativeness, science, technology and work, that is, those activities with which man can broaden the horizons of his freedom. This is why Trstenjak did not set great store on the activity of political parties:

Technical progress is the basis of man's development...only when man invented the tools and means of production was he able to rise above the animal. At that moment he began to build a separate empire, governed by different rules of development, which do not exist in the rest of nature.⁸

Learning how to learn

Even today many theories of education hold that the main task of schools and educators consists in transmitting the acquired historical experience of mankind to the younger generation. Trstenjak was among the first to see that this notion was self-contradictory, because insistence on traditional experience stifles the primal freedom-instinct among the young. Pupils treated as mechanical sponges, taking in all that they are told, will not be able to create anything new. Aware of this, in opposition to the authoritarian tradition to teaching, Trstenjak insisted on the importance of 'learning how to learn', of conditioning the young to be creative and to act independently, instead of passively accumulating information to be mechanically reproduced in examinations. Trstenjak embraced the precept *Ars docendi imitatur artem discendi* (The art of teaching is an imitation of the art of learning), but never veered completely to a child-centred approach. He advocated a synthesis between guidance and spontaneous growth. With the goal of

leading to the true emancipation of the individual, education should be conceived as a form of help, communication, understanding and love—creative co-operation. Here Trstenjak's concept of freedom is crucial as well. Individuals can be educated only because they are ontologically directed towards freedom. A person therefore accepts—and craves for—activity that increases his/her freedom and, conversely, resists everything which, in Sartre's words, steals it. If people are relatively free at every stage of history, it follows that they are also beings requiring education in order to realize themselves.

As a separate science, pedagogy must instead concentrate on fruitful communication between the student and social values. Its essential subject is the 'how' rather than the 'what'. First, pedagogy must awaken the interest of children and young people for science and technology; second, it must help them to grasp what is essential in newly acquired knowledge; third, it should enable them to move from understanding to effective action; fourth, it should help students to evaluate education and learning; last, and most important, it must lead them to control their own freedom.

If educational science is mainly concerned with communication, then, as Trstenjak also knew, the accent must be on the educational process and its catalyst, the teacher. Trstenjak wrote warmly and passionately about the role of the educator from first-hand knowledge. For him an educator's talent was equal to that of an artist. The artist can learn the principles or art history, even some techniques, but creativeness and virtuosity cannot be learned. Likewise, an educator can and must learn many things, but only a person endowed with a special talent can become an outstanding teacher. The highest gift of the teacher is, therefore, the gift to communicate.

That Trstenjak was a master at communicating with his pupils could be witnessed by testimonials from former students.⁹ With the intuition of a born teacher he was aware of the pupils' needs for a whole experience. He set meaningful challenges to their cognitive, emotive and psychomotor capacities, often varying his methods, creating a total experience. In short, he animated them, then let them process the information by themselves. He knew that it is only after the pupil's potentials have been freed under the teacher's influence that the process of education can be transformed into self-education, a process during which the pupil learns to behave in a new, freer and more purposeful way. Trstenjak knew that society would never have all the gifted teachers that it needs, but he still believed that educators without talent should not be allowed to set foot in a classroom. He wrote: 'Those who think that there exists anything in the world more exalted than the teaching profession know nothing about this calling.'¹⁰ Trstenjak described his notion of educational commitment as follows:

The best schools are those that teach children to be their own masters, willing and capable to work, rather than to be good and obedient only as long as they are under control. Children must be taught to become men who will not need to be watched in everyday life, and they should be educated in such a manner as to be capable of mastering themselves.¹¹

Thus, the way to freedom always leads from education to self-education. It is therefore the main task of every educator to emancipate his students, to open up new prospects for them, to teach them how to learn, work and create rather than to fill their heads with ready-made clichés and stereotypes. The only 'must' for a teacher is the capacity to use metaphors that will present new knowledge to the pupils in as vivid and concrete form as possible. School is not merely a preparation for later life, it is life itself in which students test their abilities and simultaneously become free.

Later, in 1914, summing up his life and work in his biography entitled *What I Wanted*, Trstenjak gave the following interpretation of his personal commitment:

I wished to make exemplary people from my students, to transform them spiritually and morally; I wished our folk to be as emancipated as possible, as honest, hardworking, happy, free and glorious as possible, and I worked towards

this goal both within and outside the school...I am happy that I have not lived in vain...that I have added my drop to the lake of our culture.¹²

This by no means small drop consisted of an impressive *oeuvre*: about forty books and about 500 essays.

A freedom fighter

Davorin Trstenjak spent his entire life fighting for the emancipation of his country and of himself, and his ideal of free education should be of interest to us as long as freedom is of interest to us. Stressing freedom as the common denominator of all that is human, Trstenjak upheld the highest idea of education and of human life as a whole. Trstenjak developed a pluralistic concept of freedom, whereby each individual and each nation can achieve emancipation—in association with others, but also on the basis of their own creative needs. In this he was a true progressive humanist.

Trstenjak's other unmistakable contribution is his theory about the teacher and about educational communication. As we have seen, he put forward the idea of the artist/educator, animator and creator. In his view the teacher is not to be allowed to seize the sacred right of students to be individuals. He is only there to help them develop, to use their own talents. For Trstenjak education was in fact a branch of the science of human action—praxeology. Regarding education as self-education he believed that the students were the final authors of their personality. The educator is just a necessary assistant to man's self-constitution and self-realization through work, free exchange of ideas and creative daring. Schools, seen as organizations in the service of education, should therefore be radically restructured to become places of true learning, where all the participants in the educational process are free, equal, and motivated by mutual respect. Comenius' dictum, *omnes, omnia, omnino* (to teach everyone, everything, completely), was uppermost in his mind at all times. He believed in this educational maxim from the beginning of his career to its end and, more than that, he successfully put it into practice.

For his dedicated service to his people, his homeland has honoured him by instituting an annual award bearing his name, which is given to those educators who carry on his emancipatory educational mission.

Notes

1. This profile was first published in *Prospects*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1986.
2. *Nedjeljko Kujundžić (Croatia)* At the time of writing the article on Davorin Trstenjak, Professor Kujundžić worked at the Department of Education of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Zagreb in what is now Croatia
3. D. Trstenjak, *Uzgoj covjeka* [The Education of Man], p. 27, Zagreb, 1917.
4. D. Trstenjak, *Sto sam htjeo* [What I Wanted], p. 7, Zagreb, Pedagoski Arhiv, 1914.
5. D. Trstenjak, *Slobodna skola* [A Free School], Zagreb, 1918, pp. 23–9.
6. D. Frankovic, *Davorin Trstenjak - borac za slobodnu skolu* [Davorin Trstenjak - Fighter for a Free School], p. 149, Zagreb, Skolska Knjiga, 1978.
7. Trstenjak, *Slobodna skola*, op. cit., p. 1.
8. D. Trstenjak, *Prirodni uzgajatelji* [Teachers by Nature], p. 9, Zagreb, 1907.
9. J. Radosevic, 'Davorin Trstenjak kao ucitelj' [Davorin Trstenjak as a Teacher], *Ucitelj* (Belgrade), No. 10, 1931.
10. D. Trstenjak, *Zreo ucitelj* [The Mature Teacher], p. 127, Zagreb, 1907.
11. Trstenjak, *Sto sam htjeo*, op. cit., p. 11.
12. *Ibid.*