

The Educational Environment as a Place for Humiliating Indoctrination or Dignifying Empowerment

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Abstract

This article addresses the way the educational environment has contributed to the manipulation of young students to perpetrate atrocities. In Japan, it was the quest of young brilliant students for aesthetics, beauty, meaning, and their sincerity and dedication that was manipulated so as to make them 'volunteer' to die as suicide pilots. In Rwanda academia was also involved in instigating genocide. 'Africa's Murderous Professors' is the title of an article describing how scholars paved the way for genocide. Radio Mille Collines blasted genocidal propaganda into the air. The entire society was mobilised, and academia was deeply implicated in efforts to promote ethnic cleansing.

It is suggested that it is a fundamental responsibility to protect children, students, and societies in the future from being manipulated into perpetrating mayhem. Educators should consider it a critical aspect of their work to empower students to enable them to resist manipulation. But first we must understand how manipulation works in the context of a true telling of our histories. Do we realise to what extent atrocities were introduced as 'noble duty'? Do we know about the humiliating effect of duping people into perpetrating atrocities?

Introduction

I am writing this text in Japan in 2006. Recent modifications in Japanese school textbooks triggered mass demonstrations by many in China and Korea, who feel that these changes illustrate Japan's attempt to 'gloss over its past.' Floyd Rudmin explains what happens: 'It is the humiliation of history. Japan's neighbors are now furious because Japan has again tried to gloss over its history of humiliating its neighbors, but Japan in turns finds it humiliating that it alone is required to continually account for and atone for its historical past.' (Personal message, April 11, 2005)

Textbooks? We ask. How can textbooks for school children have such an explosive effect? How can they trigger mass demonstrations?

For me personally, the relevance of textbooks became sorely visible for the first time during my fieldwork in Rwanda (see Lindner 2000).¹ I became aware of the extent to which schools and textbooks can be painfully inserted into the core of conflicts. I had never experienced the poignancy of this situation to the extent that it is played out in Rwanda: There are several 'histories' in Rwanda. The perpetrators of the 1994 genocide – as compared to the victims – construct different and in many ways mutually exclusive histories.

Jean-Damascène Gasanabo describes the situation as it represents itself to educators in a paper entitled *Teaching History in Rwanda*. Before the genocide, the entire society was made to 'accept' the 'necessity' of killing: to 'engage in killing' was depicted as 'going to work,' supposedly to prevent future 'humiliation' based on past experiences of humiliation. Only a few months later, when close to one million people were killed and the *génocidaire* regime toppled, the entire normative and ethical universe changed into its stark opposite. What was defined as 'legitimate' and dutiful action' before, turned into 'criminal and horrific atrocity.' Now those killed in the genocide acquired the status of victims – victims who were horribly humiliated and then killed – no longer was their horrible fate regarded as their 'due fate' (Gasanabo, 2000).

And academia was involved in instigating genocide. *Africa's Murderous Professors* is the title of an article written by Chege (1996), describing how scholars paved the way for genocide. Chege highlights particularly the role of three professors, Leon Mugesira and Ferdinand Nahimana, both national historians, and faculty member Vincent Ntirimana. Chege (1996) suggests that their propaganda efforts would have impressed Joseph Göbbels. Mugesira told an extremist gathering in November 1992, 'The fatal mistake we made in 1959 was to let the Tutsi get out.... We have to act. Wipe them all out!' (as cited in International Human Rights Foundation, 1993). Radio Mille Collines blasted genocidal propaganda into the air. The entire society was mobilised. The classroom and academia were deeply implicated.

How can we protect children, students, and societies in the future from being manipulated into perpetrating mayhem? What is it that we are teaching our children and students today? Do we really empower our students and enable them to resist manipulation? Do we understand how manipulation works? Do we realise to what extent

¹ See, among others, Lindner (2006a), Lindner (2006b), and more of my work on a *theory of humiliation* at <http://www.humiliationstudies.org/whoweare/evelin.php>.

atrocities can be introduced as ‘noble duty’? Do we know about the humiliating effect of duping people into perpetrating atrocities?

Arendt (1963) suggests that it is the ‘normality’ of evil that makes it so hard to tackle. It is the *banality of evil* – and the misuse of powerful cultural symbols – that I think we have to address first, starting in the classroom, in order to better protect future societies.

Which ‘reality’ is taught in the classroom?

We need to understand how schools and universities are participating in the creation of ‘reality,’ be it a ‘reality’ that coerces citizens into perpetrating atrocities or a ‘reality’ that empowers citizen to make informed choices and extend equal dignity to all. Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states that every human being is born with equal dignity. Is the meaning and spirit of this article translated into the classroom and lecture hall? Is it permeating both the contents and the methodology of today’s teaching?

In *Kamikaze, Cherry Blossoms, and Nationalisms* by Ohnuki-Tierney (2002), the author introduces the reader into the eerie way in which young and brilliant Japanese students were coaxed into dying as suicide bombers in World War II (this is the term we would use today; their operations, however, were termed *tokkotai* operations in Japan, and in the West they became known as *kamikaze* operations). Ohnuki-Tierney was motivated to write her book because she was deeply moved by the diaries of these young students. These diaries show how these highly educated young men, doomed to die, were torn. Most did *not* want to die. Ohnuki-Tierney analyses how they were ‘persuaded’ to ‘volunteer’ by ways of *méconnaissance* (misrecognition). What she explains, in detail, is how, among other tactics, the aesthetics of Japan’s cherry blossom symbolism were used – or, more precisely, abused as part of the effort to persuade these young men to give their lives for the honour of their country.

Ohnuki-Tierney uses the concepts of *méconnaissance* and *naturalisation* to illuminate how symbolic communication can be manipulated. In her book, she describes how the cherry blossom symbolism, which originally signified life and renewal – rather than death, was transformed to serve the tactical needs of the imperial war machine (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002). Aestheticization was used to make ugly cultural practices appear visually and conceptually beautiful. Slowly, in a step by step fashion, the more militaristic the country became, the cherry blossom symbolism was circumspectly transformed to aestheticize death.

This is not just a Japanese story. There are important lessons to be learned for the world. Unfortunately, there is a lack of scholarly interest. In the United States, despite the availability of countless scholarly publications on World War II, not a single one addressed the *tokkotai* prior to Ohnuki-Tierney’s book. After the war, the American occupational forces ‘blackened-out’ the textbooks; passages were literally blackened or cut out with scissors. Topics such as the atomic bombs that devastated Hiroshima and Nagasaki or the *tokkotai* operations were taboo. Also the Japanese themselves left the *tokkotai* unmentioned when the American occupational forces had left and they were able to publish their textbooks again without American censorship.

The author wonders: ‘How did the state create such basic changes in the conceptions of the emperor and cherry blossoms without alarming the people? Were the people

cognizant of the changes, or did they take them as “natural”?’ (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002, p. 15).

Another notion used to aestheticize deaths on the battlefield was the image of ‘a shattering crystal ball’ (*gyokusai*). The term originated in *The Chronicle of Beiqi*, a chronicle completed in 636 during the Tang dynasty in China (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002, p. 114). The term refers to the beautiful way in which a crystal ball shatters into hundreds of pieces. The Japanese military government adopted the term to encourage mass suicide when faced with a hopeless situation. The expression began to appear as early as 1891 in a school song that declared that Japanese soldiers would fight until they died like a shattering crystal ball, irrespective of how many enemies there were. The most dramatic use of this term of aestheticization occurred when the Japanese military headquarters decided to abandon their men on the island of Iwo Jima, which was too heavily surrounded by American ships for them to be able to send in support. Except for twenty-nine who were captured, 2,638 died or committed suicide (there were 550 American casualties) (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002, p. 115).

The concept of *méconnaissance* and naturalisation

The concepts of *méconnaissance* and *naturalisation* are used, among others, by Roland Barthes, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault.²

In his work on mythology (1954-1956), Barthes (1972) discusses socially constructed reality and how it is perceived as ‘natural’ (see also work on ideology by Eagleton, 1991). Barthes (1972) describes how opinions and values are introduced by a certain group and then held up as ‘universal truths.’ As a result, those who try to question this socially constructed reality (what Barthes calls *le cela-va-de-soi*) are ridiculed and rejected. They are accused of lacking ‘bon sens.’ Power relations are thus glossed over, and their political threat is obscured. Barthes thus exposes the artificiality of ‘realities’ which disguise their historical and social origins.

Bourdieu proposes a *theory of practice*. According to him, social behaviour is the continual accomplishing of actions (Bourdieu, 1977). Bourdieu (1977) writes on the naturalisation of the arbitrariness of an established order and how an entire system of schemes of perception, appreciation, and action constitutes what Bourdieu terms the *habitus*. It is this *habitus* that lends order to customary social behaviour by functioning as ‘the generative basis of structured, objectively unified practices’ (Bourdieu, 1979, p. vii). (See also Bourdieu, 1979; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) exposes the naturalisation of the ‘criminal character,’ and in his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1979) analyses the naturalisation of the dividing line between the ‘homosexual’ and the ‘heterosexual.’

² The term *méconnaissance* (misrecognition) is being used in different contexts. It has been coined by Henri Wallon. Jacques Lacan (1977), his student, uses *méconnaissance* in connection with his thesis on the origin of selfhood in the image a child sees in the mirror, the *mirror stage* as a foundational step in the child becoming a subject. For Louis Althusser (1971), the unconscious is not unlike ideology - the false ideas that people have about social structures. *Interpellation*, a process by which ideology addresses the individual, is always a process of *méconnaissance*.

Faber (1999), discusses *Intuitive Ethics* where he suggests that intuition is the naturalisation of dominant values and beliefs. He bases his theory of intuition on the sociological terms of *habitus* as used by Bourdieu (1979), *routinisation* by Giddens (1984), and *naturalisation* by Fairclough (1992).

Ohnuki-Tierney herself uses the concept of naturalisation to explain historical ‘discontinuities’ and how they are manipulated to be perceived as ‘continuities.’ She identifies three mechanisms that facilitated the naturalisation processes in Japan: (1) refashioning of the tradition; (2) aestheticization; (3) and symbolic *méconnaissance* (Ohnuki-Tierney, 2002). She writes: ‘The refashioning of tradition is a common strategy used by social agents who wish to present altered cultural institutions as ‘our tradition from time immemorial’ so that people will accept them as ‘natural’’ (Ohnuki Tierney, 2002, p. 15).

This process of appropriating history and culture for socio-political purposes can even be spread involuntarily by people who intended well. The ‘student soldiers’ who volunteered to die, were deeply steeped in literature, both Western and Japanese. They were taught to be inspired, for example, by Ralph Waldo Emerson’s call to ‘hitch your wagon to a star.’ Emerson did certainly not wish to instigate suicide attacks. He wished to stress the importance of the individual and encouraged people to rely on their own judgment. Similarly, Inoue Takeshi, a pro-Western intellectual who fought against military encroachment on education, included in his well-intentioned and ‘progressive’ text book, the *Cherry Blossom Reader*, numerous symbols of Japanese nationalism and militarism (Ohnuki Tierney, 2002, p. 18).

Japan and Rwanda: Two cases of humiliation through betrayal of good faith

Both in Japan and in Rwanda, I have met people who say that the worst suffering, stemming from the most painful form of humiliation, is when you are forced to become a perpetrator and you are too weak to resist, too much of a coward to say no (and face death). The same humiliation-based suffering may also arise later, for those who were too ignorant to even understand that they had been duped into committing atrocities under fabricated social pretexts.

Japan

Dower (1999), in *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II*, describes how a young man, Watanabe Kiyoshi, is devastated by how the emperor ‘lost’ his god-like nature after the surrender.

Watanabe survived the sinking of the great battleship *Musashi* in which most of his comrades perished. As a young fighting man, Watanabe believed every word the emperor said about the ‘holy war’ and he was willing to give his life for the emperor. When defeat came, Watanabe assumed the emperor would commit suicide. This seemed the appropriate way to shoulder responsibility for the defeat and avoid being humiliated by the enemy. The fact that the emperor neither committed suicide nor abdicated drove Watanabe into deep pain. Watanabe’s journal began on September 2, the day of the

surrender ceremony in Tokyo Bay. He saw Japanese vessels flying the enemy's flag. There could be no greater humiliation, Watanabe wrote (Dower, 1999).

Emperor Hirohito was protected by the American occupying forces, because they thought this would lend stability to the situation. His war responsibility was actively de-emphasised; he had to give up his claim to be a god though. Watanabe went out of his mind. Why did the emperor show no sense of shame? Watanabe wrote 'The emperor threw away his divinity and authority by himself and bowed his head like a dog.' (Dower, 1999, p. 340). For the young man, 'the emperor died on this day.'

Watanabe was particularly incensed by the emperor's denial that he ever had been a 'manifest deity.' Was Hirohito playing games with the people? Why could he not simply admit this was done by his order? If friendship with America was so important, why had they gone to war in the first place?

By mid-October 1945, Watanabe fantasised about burning down the imperial palace, hanging the emperor from a tree by the palace moat, and beating him with the same oaken stick that was used on sailors in the imperial navy. He wanted to drag the emperor to the bottom of the ocean to show him the thousands of corpses lying there as a result his war. He wanted to pull the emperor by his hair and bang his head against the rocks on the ocean floor. He felt he was going crazy. At the New Year's Day of 1946 he felt dizzy, 'cold blood' rushed up from his feet and he felt like 'vomiting' his anger. Watanabe's former elementary school teacher told him it was better that Japan had lost the war because now they could build democracy with American help. This same teacher had once urged his young students to join that war! Watanabe was thrown into deep agony. He felt betrayed by his former idols and humiliated by his own ignorance. How could he trust authorities so blindly, from school to emperor?

Rwanda

In his article *Africa's Murderous Professors*, Chege (1996) explains the situation as follows: 'The catechism of the madness that ... overtook Rwanda was authored not by some African magician extolling the supremacy of the Hutu race in ancient 'tribal' wars, but by accomplished Rwandan professional historians, journalists, and sociologists at the service of a quasitraditionalist and genocidally inclined cabal (p. 33).

In Kenya, in 1999, I heard stories of Hutu *genocidaires* who were in hiding and needed psychotherapy. They could not eat anymore without seeing the small fingers of children on their plates. I am not sure whether all details are true; at least, this is what I was told.

Many Hutus had been forced to kill members of their own families, their Tutsi spouses and Tutsi-looking children, in order to show their allegiance with the Hutu-cause. The International Panel of Eminent Personalities to Investigate the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda and the Surrounding Events (2000) confirms, 'Hutu women married to Tutsi men were sometimes compelled to murder their Tutsi children to demonstrate their commitment to Hutu Power. The effect on these mothers is also beyond imagining' (chapter 16, paragraph 4).

When the genocide was over and the Hutu government had been ousted from power, these people found themselves in a devastating place: They had lost everything, worse even, their families had died at their own hands. They had furthermore lost all honour,

pride and self-respect. They were humiliated, not only once, but on many levels and continuously. At first, they had been coerced into becoming perpetrators and the fact that they did not prefer death to succumbing to this pressure was deeply humiliating to them. Secondly, after the demise of the Hutu government and the world's moral outcry against the genocide, they were being humiliated almost daily because they were Hutus and thus belonged to the category of *genocidaires*.

It is as if those who killed their own family members cried out, either consciously, or through psychotic symptoms, 'I did not want to kill my family, I was forced! I was told that it was the right thing to do! But now I learn that it was not only wrong, it was even the most despicable atrocity! How would I wish I were the one dead and not them! I was weak! I deserve to be loathed as a *genocidaire*! The one who loathes me most is me, myself! Do I still have a right to live?'

Concluding remarks

Ohnuki-Tierney (2002) explains that a kindergarten song was published in Japan in 1887 that prepared children to 'die for the emperor,' 'Mountain cherry blossoms, mountain cherry blossoms, even when they fall, it is for His Majesty' (p. 123). In her final analysis, Ohnuki-Tierney (2002) concludes, that it was their quest for aesthetics, beauty, meaning, and their sincerity and dedication that doomed brilliant young students to 'volunteer' to die as tokkotai pilots. Those who volunteered were the idealistic and earnest ones, those who did not try to evade what they perceived to be their noble duty, namely to die for the honour of their emperor and the future of the Japanese people (unlike some of their comrades who managed to survive the war by holding on to less lethal tasks in the military). Many believed that a new peaceful world would rise from the ashes and that their sacrifice would help.

Why did these dedicated students, full of noble feelings and the wish to bring peace to the world, not fight against the political nationalism orchestrated by the state? Ohnuki-Tierney believes that those young men would indeed have been able to do that if the coercion had been more blatant. Yet, the utterly insane tokkotai operation was made 'palatable' by hideously manipulated symbols of beauty, such as cherry blossoms and crystal balls. To make the tokkotai operation a 'forced' voluntary system instead of an imperial order compounded its character of a trap. It furthermore exonerated those who were directly responsible (who, interestingly, never volunteered to die themselves!). The young students were coerced by their superiors, by the circumstances on the military bases to which they had been drafted, and by the atmosphere of the society at large. In that way, the best young people were 'willing' to die, yes, but only in the sense that those in leadership positions, including intellectuals, teachers, and professors, sent them to their deaths.

Japan, Germany, Rwanda – the list of places where atrocities were planned and perpetrated is long. We need to assume responsibility as humankind as a whole, for the atrocities that have been perpetrated on planet earth. Empowerment theory and the work of the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paolo Freire (1970) suggest that supporting a community in identifying and realising its needs is the foundation for community regeneration, and, we may add, prevention of new atrocities. We have to create

educational systems in which school administrators and teachers are empowered to prevent future atrocities.

At the global level, we need to build a *decent global village*, in the spirit of what Avishai Margalit (1996) calls a *Decent Society*, where decent institutions are created that do not have humiliating effects. We have to craft global cultural practices and institutions for the stewardship of our planet as a joint task – a community game and not a Wallstreet game – based on Article 1 of the Human Rights Declaration that states that every human being is born with equal dignity. Schools and universities should be the first in line to accomplish this task.

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