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Review of Kontopodis, Michalis (2012): Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development – Exploring Time, Mediation and Collectivity in Contemporary Schools

Jacob Klitmøller

Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, University of Aarhus
Aarhus, Denmark

This is a somewhat belated review as the book in question was published a couple of years ago. However the book has recently been published in a new paperback edition thus reestablishing the timeliness of a review. This relatively short book has, as might be gauged from the title, expansive ambitions. Kontopodis aims to connect large-scale economic and political configurations with not only educational planning and reasoning but further also with human development. The book is a most worthwhile read for those who have an interest in connecting the larger societal shifts in educational thinking with an analysis of issues of personal and collective development. Kontopodis deftly manages to build the foundation of his analysis on a wide array of authors from philosophy, sociology, education and psychology. Besides presenting a concrete analysis drawing on a number of empirical cases the thorough use of references offers the reader a wealth of opportunity for further reading within the different subjects covered.

In the author's own description the book "focuses on concrete student cases [as opposed to earlier work] on school institutional and organizational issues [and] epistemological issues [regarding] the concept of *development*." (p. xiv). This framing is important as it makes the book less of a summing up and explication of Kontopodis' earlier work and more of a continuation and expansion of that work. Theoretically Kontopodis takes departure in multiple research traditions such as post-structuralist and process philosophy, ANT, Cultural-Historical psychology and Critical Psychology and Pedagogy. The settings from which Kontopodis has collected his data are similarly varied spanning marginalized students in a vocational school setting in Germany, the 'Freedom Writers' in the 90s California, to a Brazilian workers movement, employing a 'Pedagogia da Terra'. That this broad theoretical scope and wide array of settings are compressed into effectively 100 pages (excluding appendix, notes and references) left me wary at the outset as to whether the discussion of the theoretical framework and the analysis would be sufficiently explicit. At the end of my reading I am left with the impression that a longer and more thorough treatment of the different aspects of the presented argument and of the theoretical

framework would have benefitted the reader. Some rather important parts of the argument must be accepted with less available discussion than one might have wished for in a book. This holds true first and foremost for the concept of neoliberalism which frames the investigation and from which alternatives are sought, but also the use of L. S. Vygotsky who Kontopodis cites as “a major theoretical inspiration” (p. 6). For those left wanting however much can be found in previous work by Kontopodis (e.g. 2007; 2009; 2011a,b) and adds to the initial point that the book is best viewed as an extension and foray into new areas rather than a retrospective presentation of previous work. However it would be unfair to leave the impression that Kontopodis glances over important issues. Certainly his choice of focus means that some aspects are made less explicit – if one follows the many sources he quotes and cites it is clear that his work is thoroughly situated in existing debates on the topics he touches upon.

The subtitle of the book points to the key concepts surrounding the concept of development – i.e. time, mediation and collectivity. Central to Kontopodis’ analysis time is not an objective, ontological fact, but is enacted, created for and by participants in educational settings and beyond. Development, then, is not a movement in linear, objective time, rather:

“[Time and development] require a lot of work in order to ensure that particular relations are enacted and others are not. Both time and development are co-fabricated, entangled and processed together in a way that *doing* development is *doing* time and vice versa.” (p. 49).

Kontopodis distinguishes ‘potential’ development in which an already given (expected, designed) future is ‘realized’ from ‘virtual’ development which is ‘actualized’ when development takes a different course than what is laid out. The virtual development is thus a deviation from the expected, a resistance to what is taken to be ‘natural’ and of central importance for marginalized persons in the educational system. Such development is much less the work of the individual, but part of the collective work within communities, which is reflected in the selection of case-material.

Another central concept is that of *crisis*. This concept is used on multiple levels – societal and personal – and points to the ways in which societal contradictions constitute key aspects of the lived lives of individuals. On a theoretical level the concept is attributed to Vygotsky.

The diversity and richness of the included empirical material is impressively managed and is a valuable part of the entire analysis. Kontopodis continuously turns from theoretical development to empirical analysis based in different cultural settings. Kontopodis’ ties global economic and cultural trends to personal development and develops the analytical tools while analyzing different aspects of development – seeking out possible virtual development among different kinds of marginalized persons and communities. The work on disciplining students in German vocational education is contrasted with the work done by the ‘Freedom Writers’ in California and the ‘Pedagogia da Terra’ in Brazil. The three instances are connected by being populated by marginalized groups – however what separates them is that the German students are much less part of a collective, than is the freedom writers and more so the Brazilian workers. Thus there is a progression in the way in which the three case-examples – German, American, Brazilian – reveal learning and development that incorporates still more of the societal context in which they are part – and offer a still stronger collective in within which the virtual development can be rooted.

Among the Freedom Writers, who as part of their lessons wrote diaries that were discussed in the classroom and opened up a number of ethical matters grounded in students' experiences, new relations were created by the participants, "not as individual development but as *development of qualitatively new societal relations*. An escape was thus performed from the neoliberal technologies of the self [...]" (p. 70).

There is a very strong link, I believe, between Kontopodis' ideas and those developed by Nissen (2012). They share a focus on the way the collective is crucial in understanding persons' development. Nissen makes Althusser's concept of interpellation central to his analysis of individual development as relation to diverse collectives and this matches quite closely Kontopodis' concern regarding the collective's role in the possibilities of a person's development. Nissen's concern is subjectivity, Kontopodis' is learning and development.

"Learning and development in this sense is an intensively lived-through, purposeful, sensemaking and transformative process that involves all psychological functions and resolves a crisis on personal and interpersonal levels and reflects societal-cultural-historical contradictions." (p. 85)

Thus use of Vygotsky, who Kontopodis attributes the concepts of crisis, development and here psychological functions, merits a few comments. On the one hand Kontopodis follows the work of others that have interpreted Vygotsky in an activist manner (e.g. Stetsenko). Doing so clearly aligns Vygotsky with the process-philosophical and post-structuralist sociologists, educationalists and philosophers that Kontopodis uses to argue the connection between human development and the neo-liberal societal framework (e.g. Foucault, Ball, Bourdieu). The question is at what cost. Arguing for his view of Vygotsky, Kontopodis writes:

"In my view, throughout Vygotsky's work, from the very beginning to the very end [...], the tendency to conceptualize time and human development in terms of evolution (linear development) or dialectics (development toward a given ideal form), appears side by side with the tendency to perceive development in terms of eternal return (as a drama that leads to unpredictable results and radical novelty). To employ a Bakhtinian term, one could say that Vygotsky's work on time and development presents *multi-voicedness* and is thus legitimately open to different interpretations." (p. 91)

Indeed, Vygotsky's work has famously been the subject of much interpretation (Miller, 2011). And it is a merit of Kontopodis that he acknowledges the multiple voices in Vygotsky although it remains unclear how different concepts of Vygotsky, in Kontopodis' analysis, relates to any of the three versions of time and development. Does 'psychological functions' have the same relation to the 'eternal return' as it does to the dialectic understanding of development? And although Kontopodis attributes to Vygotsky the reworked idea of virtual and potential development these concepts are later explained by reference to Deleuze.

"Vygotsky was, however a modernist – at least to a certain degree – and did not work out the radicalism of his conception: Mediating devices – signs and tools – do not only mediate communication or thinking but also shape the very temporality of development itself." (p. 91)

My gripe then, with Kontopodis' use of Vygotsky is that I have difficulty seeing what Vygotsky contributes that is not already available in other (post-structuralist) authors that

Kontopodis uses. Ironically, or perhaps indicative of the above critique the issues raised concerning Vygotsky has little impact on the overall analysis in the book

Given the vast ambitions and the wide array of theoretical discussions and empirical analyses any gripe I have with the book cannot deter from the fact that this book is well worth reading. It is both a valuable addition to the research literature in educational studies and as an educator I will be searching for opportunities to discuss it with master- and ph.d.-students as an example of ways of researching educational processes in a post-structural framework.

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About the Author

Jacob Klitmøller is an assistant professor at Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences at Aarhus University. His research areas are student experiences in education; teacher uses of instructional techniques and qualitative analysis.