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On Mediocrity, Education and Politics

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interviewed by Ivan Callus

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Abstract

Peter Mayo has a distinguished reputation in the critical sociology of education. In this interview he shares his thoughts on mediocrity and the challenges it poses to political thought and educational principles, particularly in terms of securing a balance between social equity and the kind of quality learning that can play a role in emancipative action. He reflects on the capacity of the work of Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire to motivate such action and the potential of Adult Education and truly democratized higher education to secure enhanced “reading [of] the word and the world”, while also speaking with candour about the damaging nature of some of mediocrity’s processes and effects.

Keywords: *mediocrity, Adult Education, politics, Freire, Gramsci, higher education*

IVAN CALLUS: *Thank you very much, first of all, for accepting to participate in this special issue of Word and Text on the topic of “Mediocrity”. Your participation allows us to frame a number of reflections on the relations between mediocrity and two of the fields in which you have made a mark through your research and your lecturing in University contexts around the world – Adult Education and the Social Sciences – and it also sensitizes us to the vitality of the political in thinking through the question of the mediocre.*

To start simply and directly, and with a definitional issue, what would the mediocre be for you?

PETER MAYO: Thanks for the invitation and for affording me space in this journal. I am honoured, not least because I recognize that this journal emerges from a country which has produced top people in a variety of fields, from the arts to sport. I must say, however, that I approach the subject on which you wish to interview me with mixed feelings. As an educator I have always insisted on both social justice and at the same time on striving for excellence in those fields at which one is good. And this is coming from someone who – let me state at the very outset – had wallowed, as far as schooling is concerned, in mediocrity for most of his secondary and pre-university education. I am not blaming anyone else for this (avoiding the sort of sociological explanations that come easy to me, trained as I am in critical sociology of education) and have no intention of indulging in self-pity. I want to state this, however, as some kind of cautionary reminder to myself of where I am coming from.

I am also worried about the danger of setting myself up as some arbiter of standards, deciding on who or what is mediocre and what or who isn't. In short, the last impression I should like to convey is that of setting myself up as some paragon of excellence in contrast to others I would deem mediocre. I have tried my hand at many things throughout my childhood and adolescence and proved damn mediocre! I must keep this in mind. But then I am also worried by trends of mediocrity to which I myself, if not careful enough, could be contributing.

The standard *OED* definition of mediocrity is: not being good, of only moderate quality. This lends itself to several "takes", one of which is that of being complacent and satisfied by the standards achieved locally, especially in a small country such as the one, Malta, from which we come. As an academic, I strive to broaden the boundaries in terms of readership and academic judgment of my output, perhaps not caring a toss as to whether I can be a big fish in a small pond or not. And I am often guilty of holding in contempt those who limit themselves to this. Academia, especially as far as sociology and educational studies go, is one area where I feel confident and my mantra has always been: I'd rather be a medium fish in a large pond. Of course, I developed that attitude in my early twenties. I wish I had developed it beforehand! Whether I have achieved this aim is another matter. That is not for me to judge.

IVAN CALLUS: *It has been said that the poor will always be with us, and perhaps the same could be said of the mediocre. Yet in the very act of thinking that, we catch ourselves also thinking that there is a lot that is politically objectionable in that statement. In fact, there are political obligations and challenges which emerge both if we recognize an ineluctable truth there, leading us to be defeatist, and if we feel, conversely, that emancipation from the mediocre is a vital objective precisely to the extent that it is so difficult to achieve. What are your thoughts on this?*

PETER MAYO: Well it all depends on the angle from which and the context in which we look at this. The major challenge, in the field of education, for instance, is to strike the right balance between striving for social equity and maintaining a certain quality. How do we strike the balance between opening access to higher education and at the same time ensuring that the general standard is of a very respectable level? This in my view is a challenge that is still to be met within the Higher Education field in many countries. On the other hand, how do teachers encourage their students to strive towards reaching the limits of their possibilities rather than retreat into a terrible self-fulfilling prophecy which mortgages the child's future in terms of goals reached? How do we generate an environment that stimulates intellectual, artistic and other forms of growth rather than smothers it, to "bring to one dead level all human minds", if I can play around with a line from Pope in the *Dunciad*?

I think it is commendable in any individual to strive hard to transcend the dross by which she or he is surrounded and not allow sentimentality to get in the way.

IVAN CALLUS: *In so much of your research you have reflected extensively and critiqued the work of two thinkers in particular: Paulo Freire and Antonio Gramsci. In their different ways, both Freire and Gramsci could be said to have militated against the mediocre. In other words, they held themselves to the political obligations considered in the previous question. At the same time, they embraced the mediocre,*

recognized it for what it was where they found it, and then worked toward its emancipation. Would you, broadly speaking, agree with this characterization? If so, where would you place the affinities and differences in their work, as far as our understanding of the mediocre and the challenges it poses stand?

PETER MAYO: Yes to a certain extent. Gramsci is himself the perfect example of a person who transcended his “backward” environment full of what he termed “folklore”, which takes on negative connotations in his conceptualization, in order to strive to help raise the level of political preparation and consciousness of the subaltern classes, namely the peasant and industrial working classes in Italy without in any way pathologizing them. The same applies to Lorenzo Milani, from the same country, who hailed from a family (Milani Comparetti) in Florence which you would not expect to tolerate mediocrity, having produced top quality scholars. Freire himself talks of and has written about critical literacy in the sense of starting from the people’s existential situation and extending beyond that to create the conditions for all, teachers and learners, to read together the word and the world. Staying at the level of the here and now would result in what the Latin Americans call *basismo*, a “mythification” in Freire’s words (a direct translation from Portuguese) of the vernacular – in short, being content with mediocrity and with being fed the illusion of political participation which leaves them at a dead and therefore exploitable level.

Enabling the downtrodden to transcend mediocrity is a political act, both when carried out individually but, most importantly (and there’s the rub!), collectively – not easy to achieve in the latter case. Gramsci is adamant about members of subaltern classes being able to master the kind of “powerful knowledge” that, for all its social origins and its social biases, enables them to transcend mediocrity and not remain at the periphery of political, economic and cultural life. He denounced the kind of “watered down” knowledge, as he saw it, provided by the reforms of Giovanni Gentile (then Minister of Education in Mussolini’s Fascist government) as allowing for the kind of *laissez faire* pedagogy (a distortion of Dewey and of others’ progressivist ideas) that would, in the long run, sell working-class children short. Milani thought and argued likewise and both he and Freire, with their insistence on critical literacy, including critical media literacy, are instructive in an age when we are facing lots of “dumbing down” media junk that is contributing, in the eyes of many, to a democratic deficit.

As the mission statement for a new UK-based publishing venture, Zero Books, states, we are faced by a cretinous anti-intellectualism. We are told that this situation is promoted by well educated “hacks” employed by multinational corporations who insist that there is no need for one to be “roused” from one’s “interpassive stupor”. Freire’s sense of critical literacy, thankfully elaborated by a host of intellectuals, including public intellectuals, militates against this.

IVAN CALLUS: *The theory and practice of Adult Education is a vital corrective to the mediocre. It’s about enlargement of the universe of knowing and of knowledge, for those motivated in their amenability to that. In this respect and in the context of discussions of the mediocre, how do you perceive the role of Adult Education? How does it contrast but perhaps also resonate with formal and conventional schooling, and with Lifelong Learning?*

PETER MAYO: One would like to think that this is so but you would be the first to agree with me, I am sure, that this is not always the case. Too much Adult Education being provided worldwide constitutes a case of nothing more than “adult conventional schooling”. And while perhaps some people are satisfied with this, insofar as real subject learning takes place, there is much that serves to promote intellectual passivity and lack of creative and critical thinking. I recall my own experience in coordinating programmes run by the Education Department in Malta. Sometimes the kind of Adult Education that went on was a far cry from what I had come to expect, based on my readings around the subject as well as observations of practice in various places in Europe. I was also frustrated by seeing things turn out different from the kind of progressive Adult Education I had in mind and about which I lectured in a course I taught over and over again at University on a part-time basis – a course in Sociology of Adult Education. I was then a teacher on loan serving as an Adult Education officer, in addition to teaching part-time at University. I had to play second fiddle to senior officials in the Department who naturally held more clout than I had, given their position. This was frustrating. I would then come to terms with this kind of provision by rationalizing about it, highlighting what I would present as “positives”. I later would notice others doing likewise. I saw similarities there and identified “rationalization” as the thing in which we were engaging to give meaning to our work. Rationalizing about things that are a far cry from the kind of project one would have in mind is the surest way to keep mediocrity alive. One would be explaining away things by placing a “positive” spin on them, as if to convince oneself that the effort involved is worthwhile. People who have had to work within a bureaucracy would probably understand what I am talking about. I would like to think that I learnt solid lessons from this initial experience.

There is Adult Education and Adult Education. Happily one must applaud the various efforts of educators worldwide who struggle against the odds to stem the tide of mediocrity and social injustice. And when I say “odds”, I am also referring to matters of life and death. I am thinking here of persons, such as popular educators in Latin America, trying to educate critically in contexts marked by extreme repression.

As for “Lifelong Learning”, that is a double-edged sword. It can be used by many to do things differently. It can serve to challenge the status quo, and it can also – and I fear it does so for the most part – serve to reproduce elements connected with the status quo. This has become a standard critique of the dominant discourse on lifelong learning which places the onus on the individual – fair enough – but which also allows the state to abdicate its responsibilities to help create the right structures of learning for people at different ages, notably during adulthood. Failure is thus blamed squarely on the individual. There is too much talk about new basic skills which include mastery of literacy, ICT, numeracy etc – fine – but little talk about critical literacy, in the sense of “reading the word and the world”, being one of them. There is too much talk about “employability” (which does not mean employment), and therefore learning for the economy, and less talk about dealing critically with the economy, the kind of approach which would allow citizens to rise above the dross, eschewing the “common sense” *doxa*. And, possibly worse, as Maxine Greene would underline, little talk about the *imagination* as a way of perceiving and dealing with things critically and imaginatively. There is the danger that those of us coming from a critical pedagogy tradition, like me, can be ever so ready to harp on the former without giving due importance to the latter.

The world is, in my view, crying out for critically imaginative alternatives to the mess in which it finds itself – social, economic, political, all inextricably combined.

IVAN CALLUS: *Can you speak to us about your personal experiences, across various international contexts, of seeing Adult Education programmes in action? How have you seen Adult Education allaying the prospect and spectre of the mediocre?*

I think I partly answered the question above. Of course I have seen this. Programmes carried out without adequate preparation and in as short a time as possible, to satisfy some UNESCO or other international body's urge, lead to this sort of situation. I have, since that 1990 experience referred to above, always called for pilot projects rather than massive project which suits politicians fine since they can brag in parliament, during PQ (parliamentary question) time, about numbers – never mind the quality. Most of the PQs we would receive in our office, from members of the Opposition who sought to critique policies and also MPs on the Government side, who sought to defend them, asked for numbers – an ingrained positivism across the board, if you will. Basically, how many persons are attending nationally, or here and there? That enabled us to gather and keep our stats in order but numbers were the major concern in Parliament. Quality issues were at a premium. The time involved in developing a pilot project, evaluating it properly and eventually rendering it more widespread is lengthy, which would exceed a five-year term of office. Five years can be a long time in a government's or a politician's life.

IVAN CALLUS: *We know that you have also written negatively about neoliberal agendas in the contemporary University, and about the way in which it leads to a flattening in research, in critical thinking and in educational outcomes. How would you link all that to questions of mediocrity? In this respect, what is the relation there, today, between excellence and mediocrity in the University?*

PETER MAYO: I sort of anticipated this question and hence stopped short earlier on. I could easily have continued in a manner that answers this question. Much favoured contemporary instruments of educational measurement, being encouraged by the EU and other bodies, involve quantitative indicators. This is very much related to what Lyotard calls *performativity* – everything must translate into a number that accounts for an easily measured outcome. There seems to be nothing that smacks of the qualitative at all. It is the sort of approach that exalts the mediocre. It bolsters the administrative arm and brings about lots and lots of bureaucratization. We see this in universities, in Adult Education projects that depend on EU funding and in schools, where, in the case of the last mentioned, teachers are weighed down by bureaucratic procedures and paperwork which prevent them from doing what they do best – teach. Of course, you and I see this in universities. How does one transcend the mediocre in these circumstances?

I think that the organization of courses that is occurring today and the way “outcomes” are decided beforehand contribute to a type of teaching at university that is piecemeal and parcellized. Most academic work is sadly conditioned by bureaucratic considerations, including corporate time, and carried out in the context of a provider-client relationship, hardly the condition for in-depth epistemological investigation and the generation of a community of scholars, of critically imaginative thinkers/actors. Systems which were very strong in terms of depth of coverage have been changed

overnight through the Bologna process. Learning seems to be presented as satisfying only one requirement, “employability”, and university qualifications are becoming simply consumption goods. I think the University needed to change and to break away from the elitist tradition we associate with the Humboldt legacy, though how much of that legacy really materialized remains to be seen (the situation varied from context to context). What seems to be replacing it, however, is a travesty of what higher learning is all about, in my book at least. My vision is of an institution which is accessible to help more people contribute to the generation of a genuinely democratic public sphere. What I am seeing in many countries, though not necessarily in Malta as yet, is the commodification of another vital organ of social life. It’s time we stopped this rot in order, to quote Henry and Susan Searls Giroux, to *Take Back Higher Education*.

IVAN CALLUS: A final question, if I may, asked in other interviews in this issue, if not always in so many words. In a nutshell: are we to respect or resent mediocrity?

Without batting an eyelid I would say “resent”, but then my own painful memories of wallowing in mediocrity would lead me to stop and rethink. I would then argue that we ought to examine the conditions that lead to such manifestations of mediocrity in the first place before rashly hitting out at those whose actions strike me as being mediocre. This is of course a tall order for me, prone as I am to being easily dismissive in the academy in which I have been engaged throughout the last twenty-three years or so.

Despre mediocritate, educație și politică

Peter Mayo se bucură de o reputație deosebită în sociologia critică a educației. În acest interviu, ne împărtășește gândurile sale despre mediocritate și provocările pe care le aduc gândirea politică și principiile educaționale, în mod particular cu privire la asigurarea echilibrului dintre egalitatea socială și calitatea în educație care poate juca un rol în acțiuni cu sens de emancipare. Profesorul Mayo reflectă asupra capacității operei lui Antonio Gramsci și Paulo Freire de a promova asemenea acțiuni și asupra Educației Adulților ca și asupra unui sistem de învățământ superior cu adevărat democratic de a asigura „citirea cuvântului și a lumii”. De asemenea, vorbește cu sinceritate despre prejudiciile pe care mediocritatea și efectele sale le poate aduce educației.