

# Commentary on “Objective Hermeneutic: Methodological Reflections on Social Structures in Women’s Lives” (Petra Steiner & Barbara Pichler)

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In Steiner & Pichler’s (2009) article I identified three crucial concepts that I shall discuss: Education (‘adult education’), sex/gender (‘wo/men’) and socially sedimented structures or nodes (‘time’). In my comment I will try to contextualize these three terms and clarify their interconnectivity.

## EDUCATION

First of all, in Steiner and Pichler’s article education appears as the field of encounter in which the subjects of the present inquiry are found. Since knowledge of the individuals’ motivations is crucial for the understanding of human actions, the consequent question should be: Why are they there? We could assume that they seek formal qualifications, practical knowledge, professional and personal exchange with others, maybe access to professional networks, and so on. Yet, the question that seems most important to me is whether or not they are there because they have a genuine, personal interest or motivation, or because they have to or need to be there, maybe due to labour demands or other necessities.

Modern work life in western societies<sup>1</sup> demands quite a lot from individuals: a good basic education, constant ongoing education, international work experience, knowledge of foreign languages and so on. The requirements, however, are not only focused on the labour world. These permeate the whole life, which includes the imperative of having a functioning social life, a slim and healthy body and so on (Ottomeyer, 2004, pp. 113; Hurr, 2002, Chapter VIII, sec. 2).

One such requirement is the so-called ‘life-long learning.’ This means that one has to constantly improve one’s labour market efficiency through continuous education in the form of courses, degrees, workshops, seminars and so forth. The labour market, and of course capitalism in general, set the basis for a fundamental competition between the individuals (Ottomeyer, 2004, pp. 60). If you want to succeed or even just survive you always have to be alert, vigilant, trained, and ready to grasp the chance, in spite of, or even especially to your fellow competitors’ disadvantage.

Hence, education can be seen as a functional tool in capitalist society for shaping the human material—‘human resources’—as required (Hurr, 2002; Gerlach, 2000). In

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1 Since it is not possible to speak for everyone on the planet (and not even for everyone in one city or district or house etc.) it is necessary to account for one’s own position, not only in the sense of views but also regarding the geographical and social position. In this sense I cannot start a universal discourse that accounts for all societies but only a discourse that accounts for the type of society I live in. But even this is only possible when myriads of differences are—momentarily—neglected.

education the anticipated and desired outcome is already set in advance (Stern, 2008, pp. 9): One has to 'absorb' the preset content and then 'discard' it at a certain point to certain conditions (this could be called a *bulimic form* of 'learning') to get the required and/or desired marks, degrees, etc. Holzkamp (1995, pp. 190; see also Kaindl, 2005) differentiates between *expansive* and *defensive* learning. Expansive learning is explained as a self-induced and motivated process with the goal to expand the degree of disposability over my living conditions. In contrast, defensive learning is understood as a process in which one has to 'learn' something because otherwise one has to fear a curtailing of one's living conditions (Holzkamp, 1995, p. 191).

The question to ask in regard to the topic of adult education is thus: Does one have to take a certain course to repel negative consequences or does one take a course out of her/his own motivation with the goal of increasing independence, emancipation, and disposability over living conditions?

## **SEX/GENDER**

We live in a society that recognizes only two sexes/genders—the male and the female (Herrmann, 2007, pp. 195; Bourdieu, 2005). For those individuals identified (and self-identified) as females, the challenges of modern western life may be even more (Geissler & Oechsle, 1994, p. 146). Usually—as stated in Steiner and Pichler's article as well—they are in charge of family issues; organizational aspects and duties—on a practical *and* emotional level—are theirs to fulfil, at least in most of the cases (Haug, 1991).

The situation for individuals who do not fit into this binary gender scheme is a complex one (Rauchfleisch, 2007), and it is not targeted in Steiner and Pichler's text. The scope of this commentary does not allow for a necessary discussion either. Nevertheless, mentioning a position outside of the fe/male matrix serves to question the matrix itself. Since Steiner and Pichler cite Judith Butler and her concept of performativity (Butler, 1993, pp. 12) it seems important to focus on the binary gender scheme as a fundamental (maybe the most basic, Scholz, 2000; Goffman, 1994) example of a socially structuring principle (Goffman, 1994; Bourdieu, 2005.). Butler's concept emphasizes the aspects of constant production of gender and the possibilities of performing gender—especially beyond the fe/male boundaries. This matrix is strictly dual, everyone that does not fit into it must be treated, operated, changed. It is a system that works with and through the principle of identity and identification (for a critique of 'identity' see Sanin, 2002). In order to identify someone or something you must have certain criteria that tell you whether or not the object to identify 'belongs' to a certain category. In the case of gender, such markers are usually the external sexual organs, aesthetic elements (hair, make-up, clothes, etc.), and behavioural elements (posture, aggressive acting, etc.). The object to define is screened regarding the various criteria and then an identifying decision is made. In a patriarchal system the outcome could be as follows (taken to extremes): man = good; woman = not so good; something in between, like a man behaving/dressing like a woman, a woman behaving/dressing like a man, etc. = bad; not identifiable = very bad.

In our two-gendered world we all have to somehow deal with the continuing process of 'genderization,' of "doing gender" (West & Zimmermann, 1987). My question now is: If we have to deal with this binary matrix, do we, at the same time, have to adopt its

categories? Or, to put it differently: If we have to grapple with our identities as a wo/man, that we got assigned respectively to ourselves, do we have to do that prospectively? I have to deal with my socialization as a wo/man, but do I have to prospectively project myself as a wo/man?

As should be clear by now, the western binary gender matrix is a dictatorial one. Those who do not fit into it have to change, be changed, rejected, and/or marginalized. Therefore, I propose to adopt a merely strategic attitude towards gender (which includes a process of un-identification): If it is of personal advantage (for example getting an adult education course funded because I 'am' a woman), it is appropriate to present oneself as the expected one; but if it is a matter of general discourse, the gender categories should not be taken seriously. They should be seen as what they are: a human construct.

## TIME

Steiner and Pichler identify 'time' as a node within social structures (or better: social performances). In the daily life of the 'examined' women time appears as a scarce resource "regularised by patriarchal structures" (ibid.). But 'time' is more than a patriarchal structure for suppressing and/or controlling women. Elias (1988, p. 145) defines the modern appearance of 'time' with its watches, calendars, schedules, timetables and the like as a coercing force. Yet, this coercion is to a great extent already internalized; it became a 'self-coercion.' We have become used to our specific western time management since kindergarten or even earlier, having to watch our parents leave the house at certain hours etc. 'Time' in this form follows the capitalist imperative of functionality (Sennett, 2000, pp. 72).<sup>2</sup>

In Steiner and Pichler's argument the relation of the sexes appears as a relatively clear offender/victim relation. Patriarchal structures oppress women in their role as partners, mothers, housewives, employees, etc. Since the authors follow an emancipatory impetus, it appears more appropriate to abandon such a (apparently) clear distinguishing model for a more dynamic one (Haug, 1981, pp. 244). We are subjects submitted to conditions of dominance but at the same time we *live* these conditions, we (re-)produce these structures, these flows of dominance. It still remains important to address specific mechanisms of identification linked with specific forms of oppression (you are a woman, hence you're worth less than a man, hence you have to do this and this etc.). Nevertheless, identifying subjects (momentarily) *on these* positions is quite different from identifying them *as these* positions. Assigning the permanent position 'victim' to a person is not empowering, although it can help momentarily to make injustices visible (for the person itself and others as well).

I hope I could contribute some useful inputs in addressing some crucial questions to the conditions we live in and to some of their intersections, that is the performativity and locality of (sexed/genderized) subjectivity, embedded in, permeated by, and (re-)producing capitalist living conditions, moving within prefixed 'structures' and at the same time (re-)constituting them. The knowledge of these structures, processes, and

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<sup>2</sup> Capitalism is not to be understood as an oppressive, dominating structure that 'lies' on people but as a relation, a condition.

conditions is a necessary prerequisite for the “discovery of new ways of living” (Steiner & Pichler, 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> Contrary to APA guidelines, the references include the authors' first name in order to make women in science more visible. Due to androcentric schemes of perception, we implicitly tend to expect men behind names which are not explicitly marked as female.

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