

## Cerletti, Alejandro (2008): La enseñanza de filosofía como problema filosófico, Buenos Aires: Zorzal.

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In 2008, one year after receiving his joint Ph.D. from the University of Buenos Aires and the University of Paris 8 (under Alain Badiou's supervision, who was also the main subject of his thesis), the Argentinian philosopher Alejandro Cerletti published a short and incisive book, entitled *The Teaching of Philosophy as a Philosophical Problem*. According to Cerletti, “years ago, the question of ‘teaching philosophy’ was not considered a relevant philosophical problem and was considered, to a greater or lesser extent, a special case of didactics”<sup>1</sup> (p. 83). Being himself a professor of didactics and teaching practices in philosophy at the University of Buenos Aires and the National University of General Sarmiento, Cerletti emphasizes that philosophy classes should not be considered a mere juxtaposition of a philosophical content and some didactic method. Even though he is fully aware that there are several conceptions of what philosophy is about – and therefore of what it means *to teach* philosophy –, Cerletti holds that teaching philosophy is fundamentally “to give place to the other’s thinking” (p. 82) and that the best teachers are those who are able to teach in the most diverse conditions, “not only because they are able to conceive many didactic strategies, but rather because they are able to rethink, in their own daily practices, their own knowledge and their relations to philosophy itself” (p. 10).

Two main influences can be highlighted in Cerletti’s work. The first one is Badiou’s, whose conception of philosophy as a *creative repetition* is a milestone in the book: “philosophy would always be identified by the permanent play of what it affirms and what it questions; by means of the tension among affirmation, opposition and creation” (p. 34). The second one is Immanuel Kant’s *What is Enlightenment?* Although the German philosopher is only mentioned three times in the book, Cerletti claims that a philosophy teacher should act as a philosopher and provide the students with an opportunity to become philosophers as well.

In the four introductory pages, Cerletti puts forward his main thesis: “to teach philosophy is basically a subjective construction, supported by a series of objective and circumstantial elements” (p. 10). To carry out this task, Cerletti holds that philosophy teachers should practice this construction in a creative, active way. Therefore, instead of providing generic recipes of class design and didactic techniques, Cerletti intends to stimulate teachers to take the *central role* of teaching, “as *philosophers* who recreate their own didactics according to the conditions in which they must teach” (p. 10).

The opening chapter, “What is ‘to teach philosophy?’”, argues that such an elemental problem may be unfolded into several other questions, such as “What is *to learn* philosophy?”, “What does it mean *to convey* a philosophical content?” and even “What is a *philosophical*

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes are translated by us, Roger Xavier and Tomás Troster.

*content?*” But these questions would also rely on the answer(s) of “What is *philosophy*?” Although he presents some definitions of this capital concept, Cerletti reminds the reader that “philosophy is rather characterized by the constant reinvention of its own meaning” (p. 14). Therefore, “whether it is made explicit or not, what is considered to be philosophy should have some kind of correlation to the way it is taught” (p. 18) – and this should not only be explicit to the students, it should also be a part of the teachers’ daily thinking in preparing their classes.

Chapters two and three deal with the distinctive features of philosophy and the problems of conveying it. In chapter two, Cerletti points out that questions such as “What is life?” could have both philosophical and biological answers. On the one hand, a biology teacher could provide an answer that *presupposes* some *given* concepts and would be satisfied once the students understand them. What distinguishes the philosophical approach is its *intentionality*: philosophy “aspires to knowledge without presuppositions” (p. 24) and even after finding an answer, it could inquire the very concepts that supported this answer – which means that it is not as important as the questioning itself. Such an *attitude* is to be deemed uniquely philosophical: “the restlessness of the search is a feature common to all philosophers” (p. 28). Nevertheless, regarding philosophy teaching, the problem that emerges is how it is possible to teach someone this specific *intention* or *attitude* if, ultimately, it relies upon a *desire* to know. In the third chapter, where Cerletti borrows Badiou’s conception of philosophy as a cycle of repetition and creation, the same problem is evoked in a more explicit way:

... in a deep sense, it is not possible to teach “to love” wisdom, as indeed it is not possible to convey a formula for falling in love. [...] Between the philosophical questioning and the *desire* to philosophize there is a leap that is beyond any teacher. It is also the distance between the desire to know (philosophy) and the *desire* of the desire to know (the desire for philosophy). This leads us to a paradoxical situation: **the essence of philosophy is, constitutionally, unteachable**, as there is something in the other that is irreducible: their personal gaze while appropriating the world, their desire, in short, their subjectivity. Therefore, teaching philosophy can never guarantee that one will “learn” to become “a philosopher”, at least not in the way the teacher *wishes* it to happen. (p. 37, bolds added)

Nevertheless, Cerletti is not a pessimist. Understanding that philosophers are “*re-creators*” of problems (p. 25) from the standpoint of their own world and time, he claims that the primary mission of a philosophy teacher is to instill that philosophical attitude into the students. Even though philosophy repeats old questions and problems – “a repetition is a condition of possibility for creation, that is, for the appearance of something different” (p. 32) –, philosophical repetition demands to be interpreted and reformulated *from the context in which it occurs* and, therefore, should also be a repositioning and a recreation of the problem it re-enunciates. Between repetition and novelty, the teaching of philosophy must pursue to rearrange the questions previously made by other philosophers, but always from *our* present reality, as well as to project them *towards the future*, making a synthesis of these old questions, giving them a new value. Philosophy can thus be a *creative* repetition and “a good [philosophy] teacher will try [...] to create the conditions for, perhaps, a ‘love’ to take place” (p. 37). If it is not possible to guarantee the *teaching* of philosophy, it is possible, at least, to verify its learning,

whenever the student “establishes new relations with the world” (p. 39).

The title of chapter four inquires: “Why teach philosophy?” Cerletti narrows down the question by asking: why teach Philosophy *in schools*? For those who work in philosophy – teaching, researching, writing – the question might seem odd at first, but the author draws attention to the fact that the legitimate place of philosophy in schools is questioned all the time by politicians and lawmakers. The issue about the *why* can quickly turn into a question about the *utility* of philosophy: what is the *use* of philosophy, especially when compared with other school subjects? Cerletti proposes the following answer: instead of advocating the utility of philosophy – inserting it in the same quantitative interplay of market values practiced today –, or exalting the uselessness as its main virtue, he maintains that the “meaning” of philosophy is to try to “denaturalize what seems obvious” (p. 51). Accordingly, a philosophy course is a place where we “can *think* the world where we live and decide how we place ourselves in it” (p. 51). Philosophy should reflect on the *present* and cannot avoid questioning the very space where the teacher and the students are: their classroom, their school, their neighborhood, their city, their country, their planet, ... Thus, for Cerletti, philosophy could be seen as an exercise of freedom: while philosophizing, the person “takes nothing for granted and **is not satisfied with others thinking for them**” (p. 51, bolds added).

Chapter five raises some issues that should be stressed. The most natural translation of its title – “La *formación* docente: entre profesores y filósofos” – would be “Teacher *training*: between teachers and philosophers”. In some European countries, there are no university degrees exclusively aimed at the formation of high school philosophy teachers. In France, for example, after completing the first university study cycle, called *licence*, one may undertake the recruitment exam called CAPES, and then become a high school teacher. But in Argentina – and also in Brazil, where the translation of Cerletti’s book is more extensively read than its original version<sup>2</sup> –, there are two different university degrees in philosophy: *profesorado* – focused on teaching in high schools and *licenciatura*<sup>3</sup> focused on research and teaching in higher education. These two degrees have in common some “theoretical” courses – less numerous in *profesorado* degrees, which in turn have some exclusive subjects focused on teaching practices. Considering this framework, we can understand Cerletti’s critique: “A philosophy teacher is not ‘formed’ only by acquiring some philosophical contents and some pedagogical contents, and then juxtaposing them” (p. 53). Trainee teachers learn more from experiencing and observing the way their own teachers and professors work, rather than from thinking about teaching theories or teaching techniques which they have not tested by themselves. As Cerletti stresses, as students in a philosophy teacher training, “the years of apprenticeship have a major naturalizing force” (p. 57). In other words, trainee teachers tend to internalize the way they were taught by their own teachers, and they rarely take that into consideration. While we are being taught a given philosophical content, at the same time, we are being taught *how* to teach. In this regard, a course that prepares future teachers of philosophy must enable them to become the teachers *they* want to be, by providing – in their own *practice*

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<sup>2</sup> According to Google Scholar, the Brazilian translation of Cerletti’s book (Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2009) was quoted 189 times, against 102 of the original version. Cf.: <http://bit.ly/CerlettisProblems> (20/08/2020).

<sup>3</sup> Curiously, the word “licenciatura” in Brazilian Portuguese is equivalent to “profesorado” in Spanish, and “bacharelado” (in Brazilian Portuguese) means the same as “licenciatura” (in Spanish).

– teaching strategies that may be applied in their given working contexts, and that may be fully integrated with their own personal conceptions of philosophy and education. Once again, Cerletti highlights that *what* is taught must have a direct relation with *how* it is taught.

In chapter six, Cerletti addresses some issues around the teaching of philosophy, institutions, and the state. Asserting that there are no neutral institutions, he asks: “is a ‘free’ expression of philosophy conceivable in educational institutions?” (p. 68). Alongside with Foucault, Cerletti takes Socrates as the emblematic figure of the rebel thinker who became a hero in the philosophical canon and asserts: “the radical and denaturalizing philosophical attitude [of a philosopher like Socrates] can only be presented [in an educational institution] by following a monitored narrative or reading, which cuts off any danger” (p. 65). Is it possible to encourage such a critical attitude that may be turned against the very institution within which it was nurtured? Reminding us about the fact that sometimes the teaching of philosophy is presented by governments as a path to civic education, Cerletti points out that this may also confront the limits of institutional education. In spite of such conflicts – and, at the same time, always bearing them in mind –, he praises philosophical education:

Philosophy is fundamental in forming critical individuals capable of questioning the validity of an argument, the legitimacy of a fact or the apparent unquestionability of what is given. Its task *par excellence* is to promote a sharp thinking that makes it possible to demystify the illusion that certain practices and knowledge are ‘natural’, and showing the conditions that make them appear in such a way. (p. 72)

Cerletti concludes that the way philosophy is taught in schools must be constantly questioned, as well as its place within educational institutions, not forgetting the limitations of the criticism that teaching philosophy has in such institutions.

The seventh chapter is entitled “Towards a philosophical didactics”. Here, Cerletti asserts: “if the *goal* of our methodology is to philosophize, the ‘content’ to be taught must connect the philosophical **activity**, the philosophical **attitude** and the philosophical **theme**” (p. 77, bolds added). To do so, he defends that the teaching must also link the philosophical contents (whatever the teacher decides them to be) with what students already know, their values and what they think. Even though it is uncertain that students will actually philosophize, teachers must stimulate them to take hold of the philosophical problems. Otherwise, as Paulo Freire states, philosophical lessons will be “answers to questions that have not been asked”<sup>4</sup>. Another important issue of this last chapter is how to evaluate the learning. Cerletti affirms that although it may be possible to assess a given set of skills and the mastery of the notions taught – like the history of philosophy, and concepts –, only those who learn philosophy are really able to say “I have learned!” This, needless to say, poses some problems. Thus, the real evaluation of a philosophy student would be not a major concern for the teacher. Referring to Jacques Rancière, Cerletti points out that “the schoolmaster is the one who keeps those who are searching on *their*

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<sup>4</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogia da autonomia*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2006, p. 86. This quote is ours, but it is very close to what Cerletti states on page 79: “the students must have made the problem their own [...]. Otherwise, [what is taught] will only be a series of strange answers to unasked questions and, as we know, this leads only to the repetition of the same thing”.

course, on their personal path of search, not the one who dictates what to think and do” (p. 81). Following Rancière, Cerletti defends the displacement of the teacher from the role of *regulator* to the role of *emancipator*. The teacher is thus someone who will teach the *desire* to learn, and to ask questions, always beginning from what the pupils think. For Cerletti, any given didactics, even the most complex and well elaborated, will face its limits when confronted with the *other*: “to give place to the other’s thinking” (p. 82), and because of that, teaching philosophy is always a process built upon the dialogue, with the goal of taking philosophy from the realm of exclusivity to the public space. As the last words of the chapter state:

Of course, in the end, each one will choose whether to philosophize or not, but they must know that they *can* do it, that it is not an unfathomable mystery that only a few people have as a treasure. And in this process, the teacher has a fundamental task in stimulating the will. (p. 82)

In the conclusion, Cerletti claims that philosophical knowledge was regarded in the past as separated from didactic knowledge, but this can no longer be the case: *what* is taught must have a direct relation to *how* it is taught – and this also applies for what purpose and in what way future teachers will be trained. “Every genuinely philosophical course [and this also includes university classes] should fundamentally mean an encounter with thinking that involves the decision to relate to knowledge in a new way” (p. 85). To do so, Cerletti gives a few practical advices about how to construct a course plan based upon the ideas expressed throughout the book. It is not intended as a prescription nor a description of a teaching method, but rather may serve as an illustration of what the author understands by *teaching philosophy and philosophical method*:

1. a critical-reflexive moment, when teachers evaluate their own experiences as well as their personal conception of the content that is to be taught;
2. a propositional-theoretical (or foundational) moment, in which the teachers needs to answer *why* they are teaching precisely what they are teaching – and Cerletti emphasises that it is not only about the content, but also about displaying the teacher’s own commitment with the subject;
3. a didactical moment, after having sorted the two first points, the teachers must then organize their class, having in mind *what* they are going to teach and *how*, and again the construction of this didactical plan must be in synchrony with the environment;
4. a new critical-reflexive moment, when the teachers come back to the first step, but now having put to test their own didactics, beliefs and knowledge, they can have yet a different insight on their own practice, because:

If the question ‘what is it to teach philosophy’ is itself a philosophical question, it never stops from asking, and the horizon of its answers is updated from the experience of teaching and the philosophical will of the teacher to continue investigating. (p. 88)

For all teachers intending to devote themselves to becoming philosophers in the task of teaching philosophy, this book is certainly a highly profitable reading. More than a checklist of questions

and problems that a philosophy teacher should tackle for their teaching practice to really be philosophical, it urges the need for philosophizing about the present – not without the philosophical tradition but recreating it in our own world and time. And to make an appropriation of this great tradition, Cerletti echoes Kant’s “Sapere aude!”, declaring (p. 76): “we must *dare* to think ...”