Keynote Address

Religious authority and hyper-solidarity in education: Insights from Israeli politics and Muslim political thought

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The purpose of this lecture is to problematize the place of authority in politics and education. Specifically, this essay highlights the role of authority, religious authority in particular, in establishing a moral order that values compliance and conformity at the expense of liberty and critique. In doing so, the lecture reflects on Israeli politics and Islamic political thought. Pondering on both, the essay explains how the authority conferred through the use of religious language creates a condition of hyper-solidarity. Under conditions of hyper-solidarity, religious authority becomes pervasive, permeating, and more entrenched and difficult to challenge. It becomes increasingly difficult to be critical, because to criticize is to forgo that hyper-solidarity, and to assume a position of exteriority. Therefore, obedience becomes a choice and a position taken in favor of stability, consistency, and continuity of the group.

The first part of the presentation will shed light on the multifaceted nature of authority in education, arguing that it is embodied in texts, institutions and persons. In doing so, I will also try to identify what is distinctive about the nature and role of religious authority in educational settings. Secondly, I will discuss Israeli politics to highlight how it has been framed and infused which religious rhetorics. This part aims at demonstrating how the language of the supernatural or the transcendent, as a manifestation of the power of religious authority, has been influencing Israeli politics and dictating a strong Jewish hyper-solidarity. Admittedly, the critical analysis provided here might be overtly political. Yet I wish to emphasize, it is anchored in a particular vision in which I
see society in Israel as equal for and shared by all, Palestinians and Jews alike. Thirdly, I will discuss how hyper-solidarity is conferred in the Sunni Islamic political thought. More specifically, I will explain how a hierarchy of values is established to prioritize stability and unity over justice and liberty. Finally, I will present my concluding thoughts that might be relevant to a wide variety of educational practices.