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THE NOTION OF CULTURE
BETWEEN TRADITION AND TODAY
From Philosophical to Educational Perspective

Social sciences, and especially pedagogy, have seen a great deal of reflection on the fall in education standards, complaints about the loss or weakening of teachers' and parents' authority, and clashes of opinions on optimal forms of education. It is noteworthy that tradition and innovative approaches are usually presented as irreconcilable opposites in these clashes, with proponents of innovative approaches accusing traditional education of ineffectiveness, suppression of children's personality and too much abstractness.

The point of departure of my paper is the thesis that the above-mentioned issues in the area of education and social life have been caused by the loss of understanding of our spiritual tradition, and disconnectedness of the present from formative principles of the past. These principles were connected with the concept of culture as a system of distinctions that distinguish a cultivated person from an uncultivated one. However, these distinctions have long been questioned and sometimes rejected as a relic of elitist thinking. There is even a threat of losing the sense of distinguishing between culture and nature and in maintaining the position that culture is everything that is a product of social life or community life of people. Should I formulate it in one sentence, it is the consequence of a trend that makes people unable to formulate standards of distinction between higher and lower culture or to perceive the difference at all.

The current discourse on culture shows a monstrous tendency to utter relativism regarding what may and what may not be viewed as culture. This is undoubtedly due to the influence of cultural anthropology and relativist sociology in general, which both (for reasons that are quite understandable) deliberately fail to formulate any form of normative standpoint. The influence of social sciences on the formation of moral and cultural awareness is considerable. Instead of accepting individual responsibility for the problematic state of culture and efforts to solve this issue, they move the entire matter "one level up": culture is understood as a basically relative form of life reflecting the plurality of societies and communities.

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In her famous essay, Hannah Arendt called this state *a cultural crisis*. Reflecting on the main causes and manifestations of changes in politics and social life, she also focused on the question to what degree new pedagogy contributed to certain adverse phenomena (cultural crisis). Thus, she connected the issue of culture with the issue of upbringing and education. In line with earlier authors, she perceived cultural especially in weaker intellectual standards of modern Europeans. These were due to massification of education and infantilization of society, which places the values of childhood and youth on a pedestal.

In order to be able to address the issue of culture as a pedagogical problem, it is important not to view the state of culture and cultural awareness of an individual as something that naturally follows on from the nature of social life, as if school had nothing to add to it. Although relativism is nowadays often accepted as the only sensible and free form of thinking, it is necessary to consider the gravity of the question what is today understood by culture and if and how it is possible to educate cultured people today. What culture shall we lead children in schools to and what culture shall we pass on when educating and teaching?

The existing contradiction between the so-called higher, classical culture and culture in the sense of natural environment into which we are born requires pedagogy to adopt a position. Yves Lorvellec (2002, p. 97) notes that culture and intergenerational passing on of culture have been the basis of institutionalized educational activity. Education in schools has for centuries served the purpose of cultivating the individual through efforts not to leave them to themselves, in their "natural" form (i.e. one's psychological and physical form and in the form influenced by the micro-environment of their family or social origin). In short, school education has always aimed to change and elevate people to such forms of thinking and life that would otherwise remain hidden to them[1].

However, the traditional term of higher culture has lost its meaning under the influence of the ideology of equality of various social environments and has been dissolved in changeable requirements of a number of social (and in a narrower sense professional) environments to which it is necessary to adapt oneself. The question as

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[1] As noted by e.g. Leo Strauss in his lecture in 1959 *What is liberal education?*, culture in the Western sense of the word for 2,500 years originated from Cicero's concept of cultura animi, which is based on the Platonic project of care for soul through the educational idea PAIDEIA: "The word 'Culture' means … chiefly the cultivation of the mind, the taking care and improving of the native faculties of the mind in accordance with the nature of the mind. … »culture« if susceptible of being used in the plural is not quite the same thing as »culture« which is a singulare tantum, which can be only used in the singular" (Kambouchner 2006, p. 52). Strauss's interpretation continues the provocation leading to the present day concept of a culture "in plural", i.e. culture as any model of conduct shared in a certain type of human society: "If we contrast the present day usage of 'culture' with the original meaning, it is as if someone would say that the cultivation of a garden may consist of the garden being littered with empty tin cans and whiskey bottles and used papers of various descriptions thrown around the garden at random" (Kambouchner 2006, p. 52).

to the character and future of higher culture is almost not being asked. In the context of post-modern rejection of normative thinking, the problem of culture is seemingly "overcome" in the so-called democratic approach where everybody is an individuality, everybody comes from "somewhere", and everybody is entitled to his/her own culture. That is why some authors like Ortega considered this approach a sign of socio-cultural crisis and a product of the development of culture of elites to mass culture (Ortega y Gasset 2011).

It is certainly not my intention to question one of the basic humanistic principles, that is the people's right to self-determination. However, is today's concept of culture sufficient for the school to continue to fulfil the traditional role of personality cultivation? And is there still any responsibility for the survival of the so called "higher" culture, whose fruit still constitutes the curriculum of school education although its potential to appeal to younger generations is getting weaker? As hinted by many (Lorvellec 2002; Liessmann 2008; 2015; Lucas 2009; Šima and Pabian 2013 etc.), even universities, these long-standing pillars of the Western world culture, are giving up on classical models of education due to the prevalent understanding of education as training for a profession as well as to the socio-economic pressure of the world of politics and labour. For this reason, I would like to note here the responsibility that school education has to higher culture.

Troubles with terms –
Philosophical versus sociological concept of culture

Our present-day term of culture has been influenced by two types of discourse. *Classical, or more specifically aristocratic, concept of culture* is more or less formative and is based on the philosophical tradition of universalism (although in some cases transformed to a specific form of Romantic and post-Romantic individualism).

Since the 1960s, the dominant theory in the discourse of culture has been *cultural relativism* (Boudon 2011, p. 30), supported sociologically as well as philosophically by a number of movements, from social constructivism to political proclamations of multiculturalism. Let us examine these two concepts of culture in greater detail.

1. Culture as aristocracy of spirit

The normative discourse that is sometimes called elitist[2], emphasizes what Nietzsche called aristocracy of spirit: culture is a form of humanity to which a person should grow and in which he or she should be brought up and educated. It is not a natural

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[2] Some authors call it philosophical in contrast to the sociological or anthropological concept of culture. It is not entirely accurate as post-modern trends to relativize the concept of culture appeared not only in the works of social scientists, but also in the works of philosophers.

part of the life of an uneducated person. In his third *Untimely Meditation* Nietzsche develops the idea of two consecrations to culture and says that "culture is the child of each individual's self-knowledge and dissatisfaction with oneself" (2005, p. 189).

It is evident that Nietzsche was interested in the idea of culture as the horizon of significance. Culture is a matter of lifelong struggle, self-denial and self-overcoming which only those who have not stagnated in what is natural to them, be it physiologically or psychosocially, can achieve. Culture represents a metaphor of life fullness, although this fullness is experienced only negatively through never-ending suffering, constant hardship, feeling the lack of value, unattainable ideal or even meaning.

Therefore, culture cannot be identified with something that the individual naturally grows into, with the process of socialization and enculturation as it is discussed by a great number of social scientists and educators. It is necessary to have passion, knowledge and humility in our search for a form of cultural life while the search is not consistent with self-satisfaction with our common life.

An important element of the classical concept of culture is also the emphasis on universality in searching for standards for fine differentiation of values and forms of life corresponding to them, in order not to be in Nietzsche's words (this time in his first *Untimely Meditation*) "harassed slaves of the moment, opinion, and fashion" (2005, p. 195). The search for standards is motivated by the need to formulate theoretical, moral and aesthetic bases of existence that would transcend what is merely given towards to what shall be[3]. Thus, the word "culture" in "classical" (aristocratic) concepts denotes a standard to which we have to grow during a long process part of which is overcoming of egoism and relativism of human needs as well as seeing the entire human work as an assignment, a challenge and so far unattainable ideal. Culture can, therefore, never be fully identical with the environment we live in.

2. Sociological approach: relativist concept of culture

Such concept is in stark contrast with the sociological or more precisely ethnographic concept of culture, which is nowadays widely accepted due to the dominant influence of sociological perspectives on anything. Sociologism and the relativist discourse connected with it remain on the level of description and thus significantly influence the nature of collective representations related to the so-called cultural life. From this point of view culture seems as something dispersive, as something that permeates all areas of social life, and especially as something that changes and differs from one area to another and from one epoch to another without us being able to determine any

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[3] See Gadamer's interpretation of Hegel's concept of the significance of theoretical (general) education for morality (Gadamer 2010, p. 26) or Goethe's reflections on artists and artistic education (Eckermann 1941, pp. 18-19, 17).

standard that could compare various culture forms (Lorvellec 2002, p. 40; Lévi-Strauss 2012, p. 75).

Culture in the relativist discourse of social science has started to be perceived as natural environment, almost something like "amniotic fluid" of a person frequenting a community regardless of the quality and kind of the community. Culture is literally everything that a person acquires during the process of socialization, a system of given customs, traditions, relationships and idioms (Lévi-Strauss 1983; compare also Finkielkraut 1993). Owing to these views the concept of culture as presented by classical thinkers has been almost forgotten because it was labelled by social science as a relic of metaphysical bias or obsolete ways of thinking. This has had an impact on the formulation of bases and aims of education of a cultured person so that we have to ask in what sense it is still possible to speak about culture.

The term "culture" has stopped being associated solely with great works of art and peaks of civilization forms. It has broken the boundaries delineated by the collective memory of intellectuals and artists, and it has broken out of museums, libraries, concert halls and educational institutions. It has become a common part of general discourse, with which we are confronted in various forms in the media, in the special product of modern times called "leisure time" and in the so-called culture industry, which can be understood as destruction of culture, at least if we are to talk about culture in the traditional sense of the word (Ortega y Gasset 1993; 2011; Arendt 1994; Adorno 2009). In Gianni Vattimo's words, culture and, in a narrower sense, aesthetic experience have become pluralized. They have become limited experience of a certain community rather than a specific manner of evaluation of a certain structure (Vattimo 2013, p. 110).

Culture as a public good or a product intended for entertainment, amusement, and relaxation, or at best for instruction, typically rejects any claim of universal validity and hierarchization of values. Alain Finkielkraut shows convincingly that the relativist movement connected with partial (more specifically national) understanding of culture started to become massively prevalent through the Romantic idea of *Volksgeist*, which rehabilitated national and social bias as early as the beginning of 19th century and later it elevated them to culture level (Finkielkraut 1993, p. 21). Cultural cultivation as search for universal values (Plato-inspired philosophy) started to be considered as a means of uprooting people from their natural environment and in the international perspective as the main cause of Europe's colonization and hegemony efforts (Finkielkraut 1993, p. 22). Post-modern relativism in culture thus seems to be just the consequence of the prevalence of the Romantic idea of culturally formative meaning of the spirit of nations and national communities.

While our ancestors dealt with the problem of relativism as a way to determine the nature and orientation of their own history in the context of the right for national self-determination, today's pedagogical problem with relativism lies in indifference – lack

of involvement and inability to determine the direction the leadership, formation and education of people should be headed in a world in which all approaches potentially have the same value and gravity[4].

New culture or new barbarism?

It is noteworthy that the onset of relativism was not only due to social sciences (Boudon 2011), but also to the disintegration of the classical concept of culture, which had started as early as late 19th century. The relativist tendencies of that time were an understandable reaction to ideological emptiness of a time that only wanted to live off the heritage of the great classical culture and had not been able to create anything radically new. Ortega y Gasset (1993, p. 37) argues that the period of *fin de siècle* also brought incredible and unprecedented population growth and thus increased the influence of the masses on culture as well as decision-making processes in the then society. One of the reasons why mass culture has become so popular is that the crowd sees culture only as an image of its soul.

Post-modern loosening or direct denial of any clear criteria in humanities as well as social practice is understood from the point of view of normative discourse as new barbarism (Steiner 1973; Finkielkraut 1993; Ortega y Gasset 1993; Arendt 1994; Adorno 2009; Fabre 2011 etc.). As the difference between lower and higher has become vague, one of the long-term main education targets has been cancelled. The culture of great models and works of art for the understanding of which we need to painstakingly create a system of interpretation tools during school formation does not exist anymore. Culture has become environment in which we have been placed since the moment we were born as in a system of collectively shared ways of behaviour, customs, meanings, and symbols.

However, a conservative return to the past and traditions that seem to be silenced today is not possible. As shown by Umberto Eco (2006, p. 31), each new cultural form, or a "modification of cultural tools" always seem to be "a deep crisis of the previous 'cultural model'". It is therefore necessary to beware of unproductive nostalgia as we will not be able to understand the real impact and depth of the change (crisis), "unless we

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[4] In his book *The poverty of relativism*, Raymond Boudon points out to a fact that may be surprising in the current intellectual atmosphere of burgeoning relativism. Boudon revised a great deal of empirical research concerning value orientations and convictions of the inhabitants of Western Europe. He concluded that relativism is rather an attitude and conviction of (post-modern) intellectuals than a markedly prevalent orientation of "ordinary" people. Boudon's results did not prove that the younger generation leans toward relativism more than older generations. This paper does not deal with this clearly interesting question as the concept of education in schools is (despite certain social demand) the domain of highly specialized intellectual activities of professionals, not a reflection of the prevalent opinion in society. However, this issue is important sociologically, in particular regarding the philosophical question of the so-called objectivity of values (cf. Boudon 2011, p. 65).

take into account that new tools will be used in the context of humanity changed both by causes that have brought these tools to life and their use" (Eco 2006, pp. 31-32).

Alain Finkielkraut argues that relativization of culture manifesting itself in the loss of sense for the difference between higher and lower culture, has had a profound impact on school education. As Finkielkraut writes in his essay *La défaite de la pensée*, we live at a time when "a pair of shoes has the same value as Shakespeare", when a rock concert qualifies as a cultural event in the same way as a rendition of a Beethoven's symphony by the Berlin Philharmonic, when the latest fashion design by a famous fashion designer is appreciated more than the publication of collected Plato's works. This situation is due to the pedagogy of relativity (Finkielkraut 1993). So let me explore the problem of culture relativization using examples from school education.

1. Relativization in the context of school culture

Michel Fabre follows pedagogically relevant consequences of ambiguous understanding of culture in his book *Éduquer pour un monde problématique.* He emphasizes that "talking today about the 'culture' of pupils and 'school culture' requires constant effort to situate oneself in the intersection of the two meanings of the term 'culture'" (Fabre 2011, p. 159). This is also evident as we look at educational content captured in education programmes and curricula. We still find references to names and artefacts considered to be an integral part of the so-called cultural heritage. The opinion that school should at least inform about great works of thought and art prevails. At the same time curriculum increasingly involves content that can only be described as cultural if we accept the concept of culture as natural environment of people's lifestyles. Pupils are part of this environment regardless of its quality or level of stimulation.

In her book *L'enseignement en détresse* (1984), French classical linguist Jacqueline de Romilly strongly criticised the decision made by authors of one literature textbook to include the Asterix comics among great works of world literature, such as *Iphigenia* or *Germinal* (de Romilly 1984; cf. Fabre 2011, pp. 157-158). De Romilly follows simple logic: the school edifies children on subjects that are not known to them from their daily life. Thus, the school emancipates them from the community on which they are naturally dependent (Fabre 2011, p. 157) because only what transcends us, edifies us (*ibidem*). The school's mission is not to strengthen children in what is already obvious to them, but to help them overcome their limited perspectives of looking at the world, especially when it comes to their ability to perceive what is unintuitive, un-natural, un-useful and what their daily routine fails to provoke them to explore.

The above-described school situation encountered by the professor from Collège de France is something we are familiar with in Czech schools, and not only in literature lessons. It is quite common that besides reproduction (less often analysis) of classical

music work music teachers use some music that is better known to children. The reason for this is for the children to find something they know and not to bore them with something that they may find distant and strange. Comics, not only the almost classical comics, but also literature naturally liked by children (not necessarily only the Harry Potter books) seem to be the solution to the decline in children reading books as well as to declining historical knowledge. We find ourselves here at the very heart of the problem: Should schools use the traditional idea of culture as something to which it is necessary to elevate pupils or adapt to pupils' out-of-school life natural environment? Current trends in pedagogy seem to tend to the second option.

It is worth pointing out that it is quite impossible to meet the present requirement for the school to adapt everything to children and to base school pedagogy on children's out-of-school experience[5]. The key slogan of the current official education doctrine on the connection between school and practical life shows itself as abstract theory if we take into account the diversity of family structures, hierarchy of values, individual formative experience as well as of children's temperament and talents. Practical life and living environment of various pupils are incomparable. However, what needs to be taken seriously, is the fact of living in a pluralist society, which requires certain art (skill) to be perhaps not in harmony with otherness, but to respect it.

We find similar formulation also in the targets of multicultural and other education. School cannot remain to be a place where children only "get normal", "free" and "humanized" through contact with the only possible hierarchy of values which they should gradually acquire. The question remains whether we should respect otherness in all its forms and levels. If the answer is not, the question arises what criteria should be chosen for their acceptance or refusal or whether we should even fight against otherness. This is a very topical challenge in the light of the negative events of the past months and years connected with a very specific approach of some individuals to the question of religion.

2. Consequences of relativism – banalization of education?

Nowadays we have been confronted with pluralism not as observers and commentators, but as active participants. Pluralism has become a challenge to which it is necessary to adopt a position. It is no longer enough to ascertain plurality and otherness. While we are clearly aware of this in the political perspective, it is as if we still fail to realize that political problems are only one of the specific dimensions of more general cultural and educational problems. Our way of understanding education will have an immediate

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[5] This demand cannot be taken entirely seriously or literally. To meet the needs of, let us say, thirty students would mean for the teacher to process and evaluate so much information that only a very powerful computer could handle.

impact on the awareness of population and the spectrum of practical activities that the population will be able to perform, as well as on spiritual atmosphere, which influences ways of thinking, behaviour, experiencing and planning life's possibilities. The ability and will to prefer the sublime to the low as well as the level of involvement in authentic creation as opposed to the consumption of the so-called cultural products of the "spirit of the time" show the degree of social cultivation.

If our era is determined by the conflict of the classical and relativist, academic and mass approach to traditions, values and education, it is one of the leading assignments of current pedagogy to think of new ways how to achieve possible meeting points between higher and mass culture. The didactic and cultural experience obtained from reading Asterix comics is radically different if we read it with prior knowledge of *Commentaries on the Gallic war* (Fabre 2011, p. 180). It would be a mistake, made by many, to juxtapose the academicism of higher culture and populism of mass culture. Higher culture would thus under the conditions of our time remain closed in museums and libraries (Steiner 1973, p. 101; see also Eco 2006). It is advisable to consider whether and under what conditions works of pop culture can function as initiation ports to the cultural world of "great works", the context of which is obscure to children today for a variety of reasons, one of them being the fact that they are rather distant to ourselves.

The efforts made to achieve this have so far been dubious. The three tenors in the concert at a sports stadium have very little in common with an opera performance. Such concerts have been motivated by efforts to bring young people back to concert halls. It is equally questionable whether the so-called crossover projects involving famous opera singers can motivate young people to listen to classical music and to try to understand it more deeply. Denis Kambouchner (2006, pp. 62-63) suggests that we should stop all discussion on what culture is based. Instead, we should be asking the fundamental question what can be the symbolic initiation, awakening, and stimulus for children aged 8 to 15 owing to which children's discovery of facts, forms and rules would be motivated by their real interest, not by conformism or by their being forced to it.

However, each teacher who takes his/her work seriously should try to find new ways of presenting great works of art and philosophy as they contain European historical identity as the principle of creative self-overcoming (Strouhal 2013). Today more than ever before, we need the decisiveness Friedrich Nietzsche called for. It is the type of decisiveness that prefers strenuousness to the ideology of dumbing down, search to *a priori* understandability, modesty and self-denial to egoism and inability to submit to the sublime. As educators who are responsible for future development, we have to ask what we are going to gain and lose if we completely reject fundamental elements of the aristocratic idea of culture and content ourselves with the sociologically influenced relativist concept.

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In conclusion, I would like to note that the post-modern radicalization of the contrast between **the normative and the descriptive concept of culture, together with the conse**quences of the democratization of education again open up the *issue of education of new elites*. It is no longer possible to say clearly who should determine the "spirit of time". Pluralism is a reality we need to come to terms with. Moreover, as noted by Fabre (2011, p. 165), the classical elitist approach to culture based on fascination with the uniqueness of a great work of art and the aim to create a genius is very often accompanied by a negative or indifferent attitude to the troubles, desires and needs of an ordinary life. This is incompatible with the pedagogical and ethical principle of interest in human solidarity. There is a tension between the principle of the ethics of uniqueness and the principle of the ethics of solidarity. It concerns the Platonic project of the connection between the order of truth and the order of politics. However, as it is well known, such projects lead to a totalitarian approach to social life and to education in particular as the principle of truth simply differs from the principle of politics, or more specifically justice (Lyotard 1993, pp. 105-106). Therefore, it is not possible to maintain the Enlightenment position that considers school a place of general cultural Enlightenment through elitist doctrine if we want to maintain the political idea of democracy. It is necessary to consider the problems of culture in the context of current social changes, in particular considering participation of previously inferior classes in social life control through the establishment of mass media (Eco 2006, p. 32). Mass media have created a new historical era with new value systems. To reflect these new value systems, "new ethical-pedagogical models will have to be established" (*ibidem*).

Eco warns us against futile nostalgia for the good old days of education as it would not be of much help. Cultural aristocratism (or as anthropologists say "ethnocentrism") shows a tendency to proclaim one's own social background as the only possible culture (Fabre 2011, p. 180). On the other hand, we are aware of the fact that mere relativization of standards and giving up on searching new standards lead to a blind alley. Our time also needs a common "map" even if it only served for plotting new coordinates (cf. Fabre 2011, p. 180). We need new symbols and new standards, but we should not give in to the overwhelming impression that the destruction of one order can be "replaced" by its total absence.

It is evident that culture has over the past one hundred and fifty years no longer been considered a world that should be built by the efforts of great individualities on the ruins of narrow-mindedness, short-sightedness, prejudices, and falsehood. Culture has become a function of the moment and common need of life. It is therefore understandable that under the conditions of mass education we relate to it as to an area of free time fun activities and relaxation from work duties and stress. It remains to be seen where such concept of culture and related strategy of education will lead to.

The political implications of this paper seem to be obvious although they are beyond its scope. In my opinion, it is very important to explore what is understood by the term culture at a time when the question of cultural adaptation of newly arrived inhabitants in Europe is being discussed. It is quite often not clear what refugees should adapt themselves to.

The problem is not only in relationships between major and minor culture – it is much deeper and it is implicated by questioning the notion of culture itself: how should we think about the really humanistic and educative culture? There is some hope for us Europeans and for those who are newly arriving in Europe in the will to undertake the demanding search for culture as the common spirit of the world in which even radically opposed views can meet. However, in order to achieve this, it is necessary to stop being afraid to hierarchize and to dare to search for distinctions between what only is and what should be.

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The Notion of Culture between Tradition and Today.
From Philosophical to Educational Perspective

Abstract: The text deals with the problem of cultural relativism in the present-day school education. It describes two notions of culture, the classic and the relativist one as well as the classical and postmodern philosophy behind them. It depicts the situation in school education (humanities, art education) under the massive impact of sociologically influenced notion of culture. The main aim of the text is to show that despite living in the postmodern era educators cannot completely resign from the principle of value-hierarchisation as they have responsibility for cultural tradition. The text also emphasizes that helping children to search for distinctions between what only is and what should be is an educational task, too.
Keywords: classical notion of culture, social sciences, cultural relativism, school education, banalization of education

Pojęcie kultury między tradycją a współczesnością.
Od perspektywy filozoficznej do edukacyjnej

Streszczenie: Tekst dotyczy problemu relatywizmu kulturowego w dzisiejszym systemie edukacji szkolnej. Opisuje dwa ujęcia kultury, klasyczne i relatywistyczne, a także filozofię klasyczną i postmodernistyczną, które są podłożem tych ujęć. Przedstawia sytuację w edukacji szkolnej (humanistycznej, edukacji artystycznej) w kontekście ogromnego wpływu socjologicznego ujęcia kultury. Głównym celem artykułu jest wykazanie, że pomimo życia w erze postmodernizmu edukatorzy nie mogą całkowicie zrezygnować z zasady hierarchizacji wartości, ponieważ ponoszą odpowiedzialność za przekaz tradycji kulturowej. W tekście podkreśla się również, że pomaganie dzieciom w poszukiwaniu rozróżnień między tym, co jest tylko, i tym, co powinno być, jest również zadaniem edukacyjnym.
Słowa kluczowe: klasyczne pojęcie kultury, nauki społeczne, relatywizm kulturowy, edukacja szkolna, banalizacja edukacji