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Are we living the end of democracy? a defence of the “free” time of the university and school in an era of authoritarian capitalism*

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*Estamos vivendo o fim da democracia? uma defesa do tempo
“livre” da universidade e da escola em uma era de
capitalismo autoritário*

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Carl Anders Säfström**

Abstract: In this article I address education beyond individualism, elitism and instrumentalism and instead understand education as central for a democratic way of life. I discuss the role of education in the making of democratic forms of life in the university, in the school as well as in other contexts outside institutions. I argue for the importance of defending the “free time” of the university and school against a “time of production” as a defining characteristic of university and school. I will show how a time of production undermine the very possibility of education, and which therefore also tends to negate pluralist democracy.

Keywords: Free time. Time of production. Pluralist democracy. Education. Radical change.

Openings and Beginnings

Our time in history seems to be marked by a certain urgency, not only as a consequence of the escalating “climate crisis” but also in the current political climate of increasing tensions and confrontations all over the world (Bollfrass & Shaver, 2015). It is an urgency in what Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2017) has called out as “the end of politics”, the

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** Director Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy. Disponível em: <https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/centre-public-education-and-pedagogy>, Maynooth University, Ireland. *E-mail:* carlanders.safstrom@mu.ie. *Orcid ID:* <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1517-9819>

end of democracy. That is, what has replaced politics for Berardi is the continuous destruction of the publicness of the democratic public life that follows in the wake of the neo-liberal flooding of the totality of social life as well as psychic life and the rise of the extreme right as a consequence. What Berardi claims to be happening all over Europe and North and South-America, is a violently played out aggression, what he calls “a war” against all institutions that support a healthy society and what makes such society possible, a pluralist democracy (Berardi, 2017).

According to Berardi (2017), it is precisely the verification of a cultural and social plurality that is no longer possible through education. Ironically though, there may still be *training* of specific skills, talents, and abilities, but not education according to Berardi, that is, not education as the opening of a space in which the possibility to direct oneself to the world and the other across difference is the conditions of its existence (Säfström, 2005a). In short, in which radical change, as well as a difference, is the condition for education. Instead, what Olssen and Peters (2005) calls knowledge capitalism and which I will call “the time of production”, is increasingly defining the field of study within schools and university (Säfström, 2005b).

In this article I will be developing an argument for a particular form of responsibility we do share as scholars of education, that is, to be standing up for the genuinely *public* space in which ideas can be born, and visions put into practice, as well as truths can be spoken. That is, I will do my best to be arguing for *the time of the university*, as a place and space for knowledge, insights, and commitments, as something else than the everyday life of business as usual in our modern societies of today, but as fundamentally contributing to a dignified life of the many and not only the elites.

And as such the university, as well as the school are absolutely central for democracy. I do not only mean in the obvious way that we in those institutions can “learn” about democratic procedures and obligations and freedoms, but fundamentally, that the very time of university and school, are in themselves expressions of the very *praxis* of a democratic way of life (Dewey, 1966).

In the following I will be discussing the role of education in the making of democratic forms of life in the university, in the school as

well as in other contexts outside institution, and as such as absolutely necessary for a pluralist democracy to exist at all.

The Time of the University and Scholé (σχολή)

In other words, the university, I firmly believe is not yet another name for the smooth running product-producing machinery we would like to think that the world of business is made up of (but seldom is). University, as I understand it, is instead a place in which time itself needs to be interpreted differently, beyond the organization and temporalization of work, production and as managing of the workforce.

The university is a place and space I would suggest that are best understood through the notion of *scholé*, the ancient Greek notion of a space of “free time”, that is free of the “bounded” time of work and production defining the life of *homo faber*, the working human. *Scholé*, is rather a place for “free time” that is, free from the obstacles of ordinary life, and have another “function”, beyond the production of work and things. *Scholé*, says Masschelein and Simons (2015) *makes* the world public or common, it makes a world for *us* to live in and through, together with others across difference.

That is, the university as well as the school can be understood as a *particular form* of gathering, a gathering, says Masschelein and Simons, “that makes” “free time,” a time of study and exercise where “the world” can be put “on the table” and be examined. Where the world, so to speak is present by being distant, and which therefore lets us explore the conditions for this world, and thus also making it possible to both sustain and to change the world: “With the coming into existence of the school form, we actually see the democratisation of free time which at once is [...] the ‘site’ of the symbolic visibility of equality” (Masschelein; Simons, 2015, p. 86).

The university, as *scholé* (σχολή), as Masschelein and Simons say, then, cannot be reduced to an institution. In that sense the university is more of a “tradition” or a “culture” or a form in which the issue of continuity and change are always present within its very making of publics: In still other words; in making what is private into public concerns, in and through education (Biesta, 2017).

In the following then, I will be talking about education, as a place where ‘free time’ is possible in a world that seems to be losing its sense

of such time. At least that is what I will be examining in this article, that is so to speak what is on the table.

Maybe what is really at stake is what has been following education since its discovery of the radical change in 500 BCE, and therefore also of pluralism and democracy (Jaeger, 1939; Castoriadis, 1987). That is the discovery of the tension between controlling the outcomes of change and the irony that if one indeed succeeds in manifesting such control in full, difference doesn't seem to take place at all, but are instead reduced to adjustments and adaption under that which is already in place. And therefore only reproducing previously conditions. The control itself tends to kill off the openness and unpredictability that characterize all genuine change (Bauman, 1999), to block that which tends to be a condition for a pluralist democracy to take place at all.

For now some time ago I was involved in a panel at the ECER 2017 conference in Copenhagen that discussed the emerging new university, or rather the changing demands put on universities as a consequence of European Union regulations and other supra-national initiatives (Lynch, 2006). What struck me in this debate was that what was really at stake was the question of increased control of the university, which I don't automatically would object to without specification of the terms of such control. But the irony of the situation was, I think that if the University indeed put into practice, all those micro-managing “systems” suggested in the panel, the university seems to be at high risk of losing that which makes it unique (Lynch, 2006; Olsen & Peters, 2005). Not only in the life of a particular country or nation but in the history of humanity as such (to abolish its long standing tradition of being a place and space in the Latin speaking world in mediaeval times for *Studium generale*, and from 12th century *universitas magistrorum et scholarium*, to the *research based University* in our times).

Put in other words, by the urge to control in full, the very essence of the university, that which indeed make it into a unique place and space of “free time”, for inventing the world anew, in which truths can be spoken, and in which urgent problems of great importance can be examined and at times be solved, are vanishing (Masschelein & Simons, 2015). And therefore and in spite of all expectations that are put on universities today to increase the competitiveness of a nation and to be more efficient in knowledge-production, the very possibility to live up to such expectations are also vanishing.

With the erasure of *scholé*, with the introduction of the time of production within the university instead of “free time,” it becomes less and less possible for the university to be just that for which it exists. It becomes impossible to make the world *public* or common, a world for us to live in together with others who are not the same as me. It simply becomes something else than university, and the great irony is, I think, that as such the university becomes far less able to be contributing to the world of economy and business as well. It will severely reduce the ability for “innovation” as well. It loses its very meaning.

I have used the university as an example, but the same type of analysis can be made to bear on the place and role of schools in most of the different economies of today. The reduction of schooling into sites of “production” rather than of “free time,” tends to “produce” students as objects of production, but not prepare for a world for us to live in together with others who are different from me (Säfström & Månsson, 2018). To reduce education to the creation of things, as Gert Biesta (2018) says, are only a category mistake, since “– the educated person is not a thing, but a human with a different outlook.”

Education Beyond the Aristocratic Principle

Since the above analysis of the pressure for increasing “productivity” by speeding up time rather than slowing down time to be able to examine the world properly, can be bad news in itself, at least for us living our lives in schools and universities, it is still something more fundamental at stake. What seems to be at stake with the reduction of education into the production of things, is the very possibility of “plurality” and “democracy.” That is, education is not primarily an activity that teaches or exercise democracy, but education is instead the very condition for democracy. We would not be able to even think democracy at all if not education was discovered as real or as fundamental change by the early Sophists in Greece in 500 BCE, says Werner Jaeger (1939).

Before the Sophist education could only be thought of as the means for reproducing the aristocracy, before the sophist education was just for preparing a particular class to take exclusive responsibility for society and culture, leaving the rest in the dark. It was believed that only a specific class was able to take responsibility for the course and ‘destiny’ of history (Jaeger, 1939).

Teaching before the Sophists, as a consequence could only be understood as a limited process through which the “inner” talents of the aristocratic child were brought out, to shape the course of history: To realise, to give birth to a society and culture which in all its’ essential parts considered to be “resting” inside, in the “genes” (we probably would say today) of the aristocratic child. And since the aristocratic child was carrying the future of the society in their “genes” education and teaching could only be thought of as a process confirming that which was already “there” and which just needed to be brought out and shaped through teaching procedures, but in all instances mirroring the already established aristocratic way of life (Säfström, 2018a,b).

Change becomes impossible, and instead, education in such a context can only be understood as a process of adjustments to that which already exists as aristocratic life, shared by the elites in society over generations.

The problem though is not only the limiting of those to be educated and the following limiting of the group of people who are responsible for the establishment of the social sphere, for society as we know it, but also that it tends to give birth to a sharp distinction between those who really matter and those who don’t (Butler, 2015). And also, there can be no real sense of plurality, of different worldviews since repetition of the same aristocratic gene brought out by teaching, confirms a worldview inherited over generations and blocks any and all possible variations of how to make sense of the world.

In making education accessible for *anyone*, in theory as well as in practice, the early Sophists gave birth to the very first democratic educational theory known to history. Their insistence on that all people living in society share responsibility for that society, was releasing education from the rule of the aristocratic principle. Instead was introduced an alternative way of understanding education beyond only being perceived in terms of confirmation of the privilege of an elite (Säfström, in press).

The early Sophists established an alternative to such a privilege and promoted an understanding of education as in reach for *anyone*, which today can be understood as regardless of class, gender or ethnicity. Education can now on, thanks to the early sophists be perceived as for all in society not only the elites.

By the introduction of education as the possibility of radical change beyond the reproduction of *the aristocratic principle* of privileged education for the very few, it is also possible to understand culture as being expressed through the very acts of living, as always being in the state of taking form: culture as not only reproducing the given world but also opening it for change introducing different forms of living. In short, by the introduction of education as an expression of radical change it became possible to think democracy (Jeager, 1939).

That is, the understanding of education as an expression of radical change made it possible to understand democracy as that context in which the course of things is dependent on a lived and shared experiences of the “many” not just a few, and that “anyone” is invited to be part of the society. Education for all is in other words the very beginning of democracy itself.

Democracy, as the French philosopher Jacques Rancière (1999) says, comes into the world as a scandal, it lets anyone whomsoever bring their concerns in the forming of society. That anyone regardless of their position in society can be part of its course through education and democratic participation is also the reason why not just democracy has been hated by the elites, as Rancière (2009) says but too, I think why the elites likewise hate education for all. That is because real education does not accept *the aristocratic principle* as the foundation for teaching and learning but instead understands such a principle as an obstacle hindering education and teaching from running its course and therefore also hindering democracy to take form.

The aristocratic principle is hindering true education since it can only be about an adjustment to that which is already given, just reproducing a particular privilege. Sophists education breaks with such reproduction already at the outset by starting in the possibility of radical change that is that education is for *anyone* in the society, not just the elites. Education so understood, again and worth repeating, is therefore *inherently* connected to and *necessary* for any genuinely pluralistic democracy.

To reduce education by introducing *time of production* in schools and universities is to put democracy itself at risk, because it tends to objectify human relations and turn persons into instruments for each other's desires in accordance with a capitalist logic rather than into

humans with a shared responsibility for a diverse public life in a fair and just society. The aristocratic principle in education tends to feed into such a “capitalist logic” since, for just one thing, it is the elites who owns the means of reproducing capitalistic forms of living rather than democratic ones.

To reduce education to an instrument for the management of things is particularly dangerous, as I understand it, in a time when extreme right-wing populism, as well as outspoken fascist movements, is on the rise all over Europe as well as North and South-America. To defend the time of the university, as well as the time of education in schools then, are fundamental to secure that place and space in which democratic publics and counter-publics can be forming themselves in opposition to authoritarian forms of living, forms which are so damaging for a decent and respectful society (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002; Suissa, 2016).

The aristocratic principle feeds an understanding of culture as *fixed*, natural, unchangeable and only to be repeated over time, and is as such basically today at the heart of the New Right, according to Orellana & Michelsen (2019). That is culture as essentially unchangeable and eternal is at the centre of the ideas of the New Right, according to Orellana & Michelsen, and are finding its inspiration in the French nationalist thinker in late 1800s, Maurice Barrés:

Barrés theorised that the culture and integrity of a nation was ‘eternal’, and that any change to it, whether brought about by foreign influence or progressive politics, would bring about its demise. Any cultural change, be it to the arts, to the role of women, or to racial assumptions, was seen to erode the spirit of the nation and its way of life (Orellana & Michelsen, 2019, p. 5).

When “free time” is squeezed out of education it can only be thought of as an *instrument* for reproduction of status quo and as such it tends only to be confirming the aristocratic principle, to confirm the *arrogance* of the elite. That is, without an understanding of the importance of “free time” education will only be understood as just another instrument for the propagation of a particular relation of power in which the elites reinstall their superior positions in society.

For elitist education itself this is a given, but also for some forms of critical theory in education. That is, if critical theory in education only

concerns the reproduction of power through education, it will be difficult for not saying impossible to understand education as anything else than an instrument for such reproduction, and therefore tend to be confirming the aristocratic principle in reverse (Rancière, 2007, Säfström, in press).

Without *scholé*, without the “free time” allowing the world to be understood as well as properly examined beyond the aristocratic principle, there is an acute risk, I think of putting democratic culture at risk of extinction. Because the notion of *scholé* is that which can guarantee that the university, as well as the school, is not only to be reduced to one more *institution*, and as such primarily bounded by the historical and political situation of power in which it finds itself. The school and university are rather to be understood as “the visible and material refusal of natural destiny” (Masshelein & Simons, 2015, p. 86) and therefore as an instantiation of democratic forms of life across difference.

I firmly believe it is necessary to both defend and expand school and university as particular forms of gatherings, and as such as being able to reach beyond its institutional limitations. And therefore, also to contribute to the making of the world as liveable for all in society beyond the constraints of institutions, but certainly not without them (Suissa, 2016; Säfström, 2018a, b).

What Are Our Responsibilities in a Time of Production?

While just and fair institutions are necessary for a stable democracy to work, and important to struggle for, a democratic way of life cannot nevertheless be guaranteed by institutions. This is because institutions are in themselves embodying inequality says Rancière (1991), while human relations are not, at least not necessarily so.

It is people of flesh and blood who can choose to do what a rational person own him or herself, not institutions, it is a rational person who can verify another person as a speaking being, and not immediately reduce the other to a category within a social structure of inequality, upheld by endless comparisons and competitions, ultimately only confirming the logics of capitalism and neo-liberalism.

In still other words, people can choose to ignore the inequality of institutionalised life in the *polis*, and instead verify the other as an equal intelligence beyond such structured inequality. Because, says Rancière

(1991), a rational person is a person who has realised that if he or she can speak the truth, the other can as well.

Such verification of the other as speaking his or her truth is at the beginning of emancipation, and turn the noises of the many into meaningful discourse. It turns the noise of “the wrong people” (Säfström, 2014) into words that expresses valuable meaning. Emancipation begins when speech from the excluded can be heard, and therefore making an impact on the moving scene on which we all live.

Such speech becomes politically significant when those whose only function in our liberal democracies are to vote responsibly, but otherwise only to be appearing as *the populace*, speak as if they had the right to, also in circumstances that deprives them of that right (Ruitenber, 2008; Butler, 2015). The time of the university as well as the time of the school is therefore the time for speaking truth as well as listening carefully, of hearing those voices that in the normal discourse are deemed as noise (Todd, 2003). To verify such speech as meaningful is to expand the publicness of the public and to verify counter publics forming themselves over difference (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002; Suissa, 2016).

What education fundamentally does in the context of school and university then, is to verify the other as speaking their truth, rather than explaining the world for her or him (Rancière, 1991). That is, teaching, in my mind, is the context in which a multiplicity of different voices that cannot be heard clearly are amplified, beyond the “common sense” of the “normal discourse”.

Teaching in a context of free time, then, reconfigures that which makes sense, it breaks into the normality of discourse and make new meaning possible. As such it transforms the publicness of the public in ways that verifies a pluralist democracy at work rather than feeding an elitist and capitalist society of winners and losers (Säfström, 2018c).

Why is the Time of Production in Schools and Universities so Harmful?

A problem with only understanding school and university in a time of production is not only that it becomes increasingly difficult to understand what education *is* or could be beyond confirmation of privilege, but also that the very idea of education itself seems to vanish into yet another technical problem of learning, or into a sociology of

the function of educational systems within society, basically reducing education to one or another form of instrumentalism (Säfström, 2018c).

If there is an intrinsic relation between education and democracy, as I have been arguing and if the time of the university, or in more general terms the time of democracy, as Berardi says, is over, so is education as the making of the public, its transferring of private interests into public concerns (Biesta, 2017; Masschelein & Simmons, 2013).

To be precise, the challenge to a democratic way of life in and through education is the negation of the very “publicness” of the public (as well as its value) that follows from instrumentalism, since instrumentalism refute the idea of the public as something more than as a means to an end in a distant future.

That is, in its extreme form instrumentalism in politics is the total reduction of the value of the social and an overemphasis of the people as a single unit, and the people as a means to a higher end outside the realm and value of the diversity of actual people in the social life.

The most extreme instrumentalism in politics is therefore fascism, in which the people are only a means to a higher end, the ultimate “morality” of the nation, reducing every individual life’s value to a measurement of fulfilling the final single meaning represented by the nation itself. The single life is worthless as anything else than as a means for the realization of the fascist “highest value” (Arnstad, 2016, Poulantzas, 1979; Traverso, 2019).

When it comes to the neo-liberal political project in which we (still) live the consequences of, the individual is reduced to a means for the aggressive competition that makes up the market, predefined within the political project of authoritarian capitalism as an asset of that market, or what Giroux (2018) calls neo-liberal fascism.

Education informed by political instrumentalism in such a context is to guaranteeing a steady production of (economic) value through aggressive competition, but not to educate the values of a democratic way of life (as Dewey, 1916 wanted it to be) beyond the self-referencing framework of capitalism.

Instrumentalism, therefore, suits the neo-liberal political project just fine, it is its’ very understanding of education. Instrumentalism is what gives education meaning within the neo-liberal political project, and reduce education to a system of schooling, as itself a particular

form of value production, to the distribution of (encyclopedic) knowledge as measurable and quantifiable value across the social spectrum and pairing such value with values circulating in the capitalist economy.

The very meaning of the student in such system of schooling is to be understood with his or her quantifiable accumulation of knowledge, through talent, skills, and abilities, and as such being coded as the currency of the school market. Quantifiable, measurable knowledge accumulated by talented students with (perceived natural) abilities and skills are all categories within a particular economy of schooling, defining *being* itself within such economy as more or less valuable with its effectiveness and productivity.

The profound problem with the time of production then, is that it creates self-referencing frameworks, itself can be understood as a property of such frames. In addition, it creates claustrophobic realities as well. Self-referencing frameworks make change impossible and reduce education to effective processes of adjustment to that which is already given, rather than breaking out from it. There is no breathing possible, the educational impulse of radical change dead, forever (Säfström, 2018c). And with it a democratic way of life as well.

It means, among other things, that if a society is increasingly repressive, intolerant and anti-democratic, schooling in such society would not be able to be anything else than the making of adjustments to such forces more effective. Besides, also in cases when the goals of education are to promote a more democratic society, if such goals are to be reached through instrumental education, they are turned in effect to its opposite.

That is because instrumentalism has nothing to do with human value at all. It has nothing to do with the relationality of the social and its excess, not what's valuable for us in our lives, instead of based on the rationality of *homo faber*, that is on the rationality of using tools, and measuring how useful those tools are in doing its work (von Wright, 1988). Human relations cannot be reduced to tools of effectiveness, without stopping being human altogether.

Educational thought, or what I here have called the time of the university is, in other words, about freedom (of the other) and a presence able to embrace a sense of freedom for the individual as well as the community in which the individual lives (Biesta & Säfström, 2011).

Fascism, as well as extreme forms of nationalism, in all its versions are, on the other hand, about a certain pessimism towards the possibility of such a presence and replaces freedom with an idea of a moral law that conglomerates all individuals and generations in a single nostalgic tradition and purpose of a people as one and undivided. Neo-liberalism adds to such “oneness” rather than challenge it, by replacing a democratic way of life with the unity of the market within an authoritarian capitalism (Säfström, 2018c, in press).

In conclusion

The time of the university is a time for education, not for production of things. To transform university and school into places for production of things is counterproductive, since school and university are not primarily dealing with the production of things, but with thought, truth and human relations. Therefore, university and school in a time of production will not only be inefficient and “bad business”, since it would need to spend all its energy in diminishing and controlling thought, truth and human relations, but also destructive for the possibility of transforming private interest into public concerns. More importantly then, and as I have been showing above, to introduce the time of production in schools and university instead of “free time”, is to put democracy itself at risk, and that in a time when destructive forces of aggression towards the plurality of social life is on the rise all over the world. I have argued that as scholars of education, as scholars of the possibility of radical change, of plural democracy, it is our responsibility to speak truth to power, to stand up for education for anyone. Real education is not about reproduction of privilege, but about verification of equality, and as such education is an *instantiation* of radical change. To defend the time of the university and school as a particular form of gathering defined by “free time”, is therefore a struggle worth taking, because it is about the very existence of freedom and democracy.

Finally and in general terms, education turns us toward the world we share with others, it makes us not only at home in this world at precisely this moment in time, but it also makes a change of the world possible, across difference: Education literally makes a truly pluralistic democracy possible.

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