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Teaching militant humility against the aggressions of a neoliberal world

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ABSTRACT

This article develops a militant teaching humility regarding the foundational aggression and violence of a neoliberal worldview within late capitalism. Mainly the article shows how such aggressions and violence take shape as schooling the self-interested consumer within a school market. This article also shows how such self-interest understands education in terms of individualism, comparison, and competition, ultimately leading to the destruction of the social fabric of the common good of democracies. The teaching strategy identified highlights the humility and discipline needed to transform the aggression and violence of late capitalism into a non-violent but consistent strategy for democratization. The strategy developed in the article takes inspiration from Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière and Thich Nhat Hanh, and exemplifies what democratization in education implies today. This article concludes with teaching understood as an ethical and political concern in being *for* the other, in being interested in the freedom of the other.

KEYWORDS

Education; teaching; neoliberal; aggression; militant humility; non-violence; democratization

Introduction

This article highlights one condition for the late modern neoliberal flooding of the world, so taken for granted that it is often overlooked, and as a force reconditioning teaching and education for the worse. Such conditioning is rather, especially within the neoliberal ideology itself, celebrated as something good and necessary to push things ahead, to deliver real knowledge, and to form good and productive citizens (Alliance for Sweden, 2006). I will claim, together with theorists such as Berardi (2017) and Butler (2020b), that foundational for neoliberalism is *aggression*, that the very *forces* of neoliberal worldviews, hegemonies and socio-psychical conditions are an exaggerated emphasis on aggression and destruction.

It is an aggression in getting ahead of the other, of winning, in competing, in viewing the world in terms of comparisons to always be better, do better, and that this betterment is understood in individualistic terms in which beating the other is a good thing and a condition, to be ahead of everyone else. Its context is a society of winners and losers, rather than a decent society built on solidarity with the other, of being *for* the other,

and not only *before* the other (Månsson, 2014; Säfström & Månsson, 2004). Such form of aggression is played out on macro as well as micro levels of education, in educational policies as well as in teaching procedures since schooling is one of the prime socialising forces in society. That doesn't mean that teachers generally would find themselves comfortable within this regime of aggression, and there are many signs that they don't, but the expectations and regulations within this regime point them in that direction (Benn, 2012).

Aggression does not always mean violence (Butler, 2020a, 2020b; Hahn, 2001), but within the neoliberal authoritarian capitalism in which we live it transfers into violence as a productive part of capitalism itself (Berardi, 2017; Žižek, 2008). In this paper, some ways in which aggression and destruction are expressed in neoliberal schooling will be identified to develop a teaching strategy against such aggression.

Education on the other hand is not about violence or exaggerating aggression. Rather, it is the opposite; education is about extending social relations and to secure them for living well together across difference (Todd, 2003). Therefore, to counteract the aggressions and violence implicit in schooling the self-interested citizen is already implied by an educational point of view, since education, in this article, means to be interested in the freedom of other, which is implied by pluralist democracy (Biesta & Säfström, 2011; Dewey, 1916/1966).

This article is an attempt to call out and to counteract forces of aggression as foundational for neoliberal education and teaching, for schooling, not only by pointing to the passivity of love and compassion¹ often associated with teaching. This will be done by taking on an active role of teaching as a militant humility in line with, even if not identical to, Butler's arguments on an active non-violent approach to ethical and political life. The forces of aggression tend to have established themselves as the new normal in schooling over the last decades, shown for example in the public shaming and blaming of schools and teachers that has gone on in many countries (Benn, 2012; Elstad, 2009; Säfström, 2018). I will be discussing some of those cases to point out the aggressions involved.

First, in the following, the extensive aggressions of the neoliberal worldview are discussed, which also, ironically tend to obliterate conflict as the foundation of the political, and rather promotes a certain form of distribution as the regulative idea for politics (Mouffe, 2005; Säfström, 2020b).

Second, this paper addresses the aggressive campaign against education and teachers that has been going on in some countries, using Sweden – and to a lesser extent Britain and Norway – as examples of the more general phenomenon (Hogan & Thompson, 2021).

A third section discusses the connection between violence and non-violence, and particularly the relation between aggression and non-violence. Active non-violence is developed into a practice of teaching through what would, at first glance, look like a contradictory term: militant humility. It is worth noticing initially that Butler's (2020a, 2020b) arguments on non-violence exceed what is discussed in this article since I aim to discuss what can be meant by militant humility in teaching, rather than non-violence as a general political strategy of resistance (even if the latter is important in its own right). To do so, the first part of the paper establishes a context in which such strategy makes sense, and particularly traces the implicit aggressions of this context.

In a fourth section, a militant humility in teaching is suggested as a response to the patterns of destruction, aggression, and violence within neoliberalism, which threatens to inform schooling as a new normal. In concluding the paper, it is claimed that militant humility in teaching contributes to a democratic, ethical, and political life.

The aggressions of self-interest and de-regulation

Central to a neoliberal economy is the project of destruction inspired by what Schumpeter (1942) called creative destruction. Such destruction, claimed Schumpeter, is necessary to revolutionize the economic structure and to infuse it with energy and newness. Despite Schumpeter's socialist agenda, neoliberal economics incorporated the idea of destruction, in the form of today's well-known strategies of de-regulation, in terms of downsizing state institutions to feed growth through, among other things, austerity measures controlling public spending while freeing capital 'flows' over borders and regulations (Bauman, 2000; Cunningham, 2015; Shammas, 2017). Overall large-scale projects to deregulate publicly controlled services include the postal service, care homes, the railway, public land, public broadcasting, public schooling, which are transferred into the private sector. That is, de-regulation is mainly understood in terms of freeing capital from constraints inflicted by regulations of the state and letting capitalism regulate itself through 'the market', without state control (Säfström, 2005). In Sweden, allowing free schools to be regulated by the school market, has meant that schools and teachers are envisaged as providers, parents and children are regarded as customers, and owners reap the profits from multiplying capital (Gunter, Hall, & Apple, 2017; Hogan & Thompson, 2021; Lundahl, Arreman, Holm, & Lundström, 2013).

When it comes to schooling, Sweden is an extreme example of a far-reaching deregulation of schooling. This is backed up on a massive scale by conservative think-tanks, right-wing interest-organisations, and conservative media (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2018; Säfström, 2005, 2014b). The input of capital into the school market established in Sweden is mainly through taxes, effectively turning public capital into private capital (Hogan & Thompson, 2021). This particular creative destruction of the school system as a publicly regulated institution has set in motion a larger neoliberal dominant political ideology that aims to reduce the reach of the state (Säfström, 2005; Shammas, 2017). It gives capital free room to multiply itself, particularly through lower taxes,² among other things. So, the taxes brought in are ongoingly transferred into capital for private schools and turned into profit for private owners, consequently draining public schools of resources (Hogan & Thompson, 2021).

Because of the general shift in policies and political will, the school – rather than being a public institution under democratic control – changes into a business, with other regulations beyond those for public institutions; as such, they are outside public transparency and control. One consequence of this shift in the context of such regulations in Sweden is that, as from 1 September 2020, essential school data was no longer publicly accessible, but considered a secret of private companies (Skolverket, 2020), thus withdrawing essential information from public concern.³ In other words, the drive towards privatisation has removed essential tools for public democratic influence as well as reduced publicly owned knowledge which is essential for decisions and judgments on how to operate in a democratic society.⁴

Neoliberal ideology in schooling is here understood as defined by deregulation; it is the foundation for a cluster of political strategies which all have in common different versions of deregulation, thereby loosening restraints on capitalism's prime force of self-interest. Such deregulation does not affect only the economy itself – as if the economy could ever be distinguished from how societies operate – but it alters the totality of society. The latter was made clear by the earlier British Prime Minister Thatcher, who was a strong proponent of neoliberalism, in her infamous speech in 1987 when she claimed that there is 'no such thing as society' (Cunningham, 2015). Such an outspoken political view weakens the very idea of a state regulating economy, and society as a 'common good'; it adopts a certain kind of instrumental politics in the service of the market, to produce 'private good'. The result is a society of individuals driven by self-interest (Hood, 2010; Shamma, 2017).

What is emphasised is the form of aggression in neoliberalism, and the absolute right of the individual to act from the point of self-interest within a differentiated space described as the market. All regulations come from within the capitalist economy itself, which aims at maintaining the market while blocking societal restraints which could hinder the growth of capital for private owners. The market, in other words is not a strict economical term but a metaphor for the workings of the totality of the socio-psychical sphere of relations (Berardi, 2017). Such relations are dominated by the values of self-interest, individualism, competition, and comparisons; in general, there is a will to be *before* the other rather than to be *for* the other (Säfström & Månsson, 2021).

In consequence, such anti-politics weakens democracy. It is 'anti-' if we consider politics to be a force, maybe even the sole force, of keeping the capitalist economy and contradictory self-interest in society under strain in the service of democratic concerns for the common good (Mouffe, 2005). Deregulation driven by self-interest is weakening the public as a self-defining entity in the social sphere (Dewey, 1927); it weakens popular sovereignty (Butler, 2015) by dissolving and dispersing living *for* the other, not only *before* her or him. In other words, a neoliberal worldview disperses what is foundational for any social formation in a pluralist democracy.

The point here is that a neoliberal ideology is not passive but active in the destruction of public interest through aggressions within a hegemonic reality. It dissolves social bonds within that reality, as the latter needs individuals who do not only see to their self-interest, but which also *de facto* can act *for* the other, in concert with her or him. Neoliberal ideology then disperses and dissolves the publicness of the public, by introducing self-interest as the driving force of the market and its tools: individualism, comparisons, and competition, as the defining characteristics of the totality of social life (Berardi, 2017; Butler, 2015; Rancière, 2007). Public education contaminated with such hegemonic ideology⁵ will increasingly find it difficult to transform private, self-interests into public concerns, which as Biesta (2017) and Masschelein and Simons (2015) suggest, should be a defining task of public schools.

To teach is to be interested in the freedom of other, not primarily in the freedom of oneself; education is founded on the conviction that anyone can be taught, not just someone particular, but anyone (Jaeger, 1939/1965). A teacher is interested in the freedom of the student, of the other, not his or her own; that is, *education* has an ethical foundation and direction which is not compatible with self-interest (Bergdahl & Langmann, 2018; Papastephanou, 2014; Todd, 2003). Therefore, education proper, if we

agree on the direction and purpose of teaching, finds itself in a confusing state within neoliberal contexts. Such schooling based on self-interest, which produces anomalies and irrationality, seems to be promoting a kind of anti-education forcing teaching into the realms of instruction alone (Bergdahl & Langmann, 2018). Teaching reduced to instruction risks losing its educational purpose altogether, and instead be instructing for the promotion of self-interest, and to organise comparisons and competition, all managed through an assessment regime (Biesta, 2017).

The task of schooling in this new reality is to strengthen private interests, since such interests are understood to increase the capacity for competition in the market, with parents and children as customers of schooling caught up in the web of consumption (Whitty & Power, 2000). The child within this new reality is channelled as a citizen through the tradition of the family rather than through the publicness of the school, cementing social class. The child's rights transfer to the rights of his or her family rather than being a citizen in his or her own right (Englund, 2010). The family is as such a self-serving unit, defined by its social class and social position, choosing from a variety of options in a market – Which school to attend? Which school best confirms the interests and position of the family projected onto the child? (see Englund, 2010.) As such the child is already known, through his or her status and schooling work to reproduce the child as the member of her or his class.

The paradigm of distribution that tends to dominate schooling in neoliberal democracies is a distribution of valued abilities and talent over a social spectrum defined by capitalism (Säfström, 2020a, 2020b); this becomes an effective tool in allocating places and spaces according to a foundational and naturalised inequality. A naturalised inequality is understood as a necessity, and the sole foundation of social institutions such as schooling⁶ is to reproduce this necessity of inequality.

In such context the primary aim of schooling is not to expand popular sovereignty (Butler, 2015), not to expand the access to the public scene, but to effectively distribute talent and abilities through the mechanism of a school market reproducing privileges already established. Furthermore, the distribution always functions as a centralising power to those who are considered as already valuable, since the paradigm of distribution has turned the values on which it is founded into necessary conditions for schooling to work; accordingly, individualism, self-interest, competition and comparisons, assessments, and accountability. Neoliberalism is hegemonic (Mouffe, 2005) in that it aspires to define the totality of schooling, its reality.

The creative destruction of public education

The forces of creative destruction and aggression are not foremost a political strategy for coming into power, but a characteristic of that power itself grounding its hegemonic status. The forces of aggression and destruction are foundational for neoliberalism and are precisely what makes its political economy, its strategies as well as its world views neoliberal. In this section, I will give examples from Norway, and Sweden, and eventually England, of some consequences of such a worldview in which aggression is normalised, and functions as a destructive force within the context of schooling.

In Norway, the tendency to shame and blame public schools and teachers in those schools considered not good enough has become normalised (Elstad, 2009). In

Sweden, teachers are publicly blamed for not being educated enough, not delivering enough knowledge, but rather caring too much for the student, which is labelled as 'fluff' (flum in Swedish) (Säfström, 2014b). In Norway, the public shaming and blaming, says Elstad (2009), was triggered by media, which constructed league tables of public data about student achievements to focus on the bad achievers, naming them, pointing them out to be publicly shamed. This pushed those schools further into disrepair, without providing any deeper analyses of reasons for the results, excluding an informed analysis of the socio-economic realities in dispersed neighbourhoods in which the schools were located.

What these examples show, among other things, is that being public undergoes a transformation in which being public now means to be exposed to negative space for blame, for being shamed, rather than as a space for democratic accountability. Or maybe more accurately, accountability itself changes meaning from fundamentally being based on democratic concerns into being a frame for different types of moralising blame and shame.

In Sweden, the shaming and blaming of teachers and schools (Säfström, 2014b), if not the entire public school system, was driven by governmental politics as well. The so-called Alliance for Sweden (2006) claims that a market-driven school system, free from state constraints, would be better in disciplining students as well as being more effective in teaching evidence-based knowledge; it also argues that the free choice of an un-regulated school market schools is more democratic (Säfström & Månsson, 2021). The aggressive strategy adopted by the Alliance for Sweden was textbook new public management strategy (Hood, 2010), using speed together with a massive media campaign (*spin*) to legitimize the foundational changes implemented in a few years, for the entirety of the educational public-school system in Sweden (Englund, 1995; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2018; Wiklund, 2006).

Because of this shift in school policy of a general deregulation strategy and privatisation of public life, in which schooling drives an effective differentiation according to abilities and talent (read *class*), a dramatic increase of social and economic inequality follows. A rapidly increasing and intensified rise in inequality in the Swedish society is reported by organisations such as OECD (2015) as well as by educational and other types of domestic research (Aaberge, Langorgen, & Lindgren, 2018; Pelling, 2019). That is, schooling in Sweden, as Börjesson, Broady, Le Roux, Lidegran, and Palme (2016) show, is no longer thought of as compensating for a lack of social and or cultural capital, but rather more effectively confirms a social and cultural capital already established.

In Britain, the historical context for comprehensive schooling is historically quite different. As Benn (2012) explains, after World War II, 'high-quality comprehensive education was never presented to the people as a democratic ideal; indeed, it was never presented in any coherent form at all' (p. xx). Still, existing English state schools which often were driven by ideals other than self-interest, and which were backed by sociology of equal access to schooling and later pushed for equality of results (Blackledge & Hunt, 1985), are today under restraints of the free school model similar to those in Norway and Sweden.

What Benn (2012) describes as a comparable full-frontal attack, coming both from the media as well as official representatives; 'Now, more than ever, we are subject to relentless coverage of our allegedly 'dumbed-down' state schools and the 'curdling' of the comprehensive experiment' (Benn, 2012, p. XXIII). Benn also says:

Our state education system is fast fragmenting, and without full and proper public debate. The government currently boasts that two schools a day are converting to academy status, leaving the local, collaborative family of schools to go alone, becoming accountable only to a handful ministers and civil servants in Whitehall. (p. 179)

Benn puts forward a question, which since 2012 seems to have become discouragingly answered in affirmative:

Will we – parents, citizens, taxpayers – stand by as one of our most vital public service passes into hands of venture capitalists, hedge fund managers and a growing array of faith groups? (p. 179)

In Sweden, this is even more a *fait accompli*, since among the established parties it is only the left party who is outspoken in its political will to stop the transference of public capital through the free school system into private capital. As such, by feeding venture capitalists and hedge fund managers successively, we are withdrawing schooling from public democratic control, and draining the state schools of funding (Hogan & Thompson, 2021; Lundahl et al., 2013).

Teaching in the new accountability regime

Such a shift away from public accountability on democratic terms, as outlined above, signals that schools are being withdrawn from public control and that the context in which schooling is taking place has shifted considerably from a public domain to a private sphere defined through a neoliberal market ideology. Such a shift essentially signifies the move towards an anti-educational sphere in which the meaning of words such as accountability also profoundly shifts. Schools have always been accountable to children, parents, school boards, municipalities, democratic institutions regulating schooling such as the department of education and the democratically elected parliament and governments. A 'new' accountability has surfaced as schools have now only become particularly accountable for their effectiveness in producing outcomes expected by those who have invested in the school market. Such shifts are not only operating on a macro level of society but also within the microcosms of classrooms, through a hegemonic assessment culture.

As Benn (2012) reports from England, the assessment culture and the fixation with league tables and rankings in line with a neoliberal world view is showing itself in the microcosms of a school class 'creating an unofficial, inflexible ranking within each class or year group' (p. 186). The point is that this ranking practice is not to be understood as an isolated event but as a concrete expression of the very function of a neoliberal school, which also means that teaching itself changes character. It must adapt to an assessment regime, and its instructions have to adopt the ideal value of self-interest, practices of competition and comparisons, and to conform to a general consumerist understanding of education (Hogan & Thompson, 2021).

That is, instead of, for example, teaching which focuses on the questions that give rise to a particular set of knowledge, making that knowledge problematic and therefore understandable in its complexity, what tends to be encouraged is the encyclopaedic style of knowledge which is easily assessed (Biesta, 2010). The problem then tends to be that teaching itself becomes directed by what we already know to be measurable, that knowledge becomes equal to that which we can measure, reproducing the given,

and that the instruments used for measuring also becomes decisive for knowledge as such (Biesta, 2010). In other words, a consequence is a severe reification of knowledge as well as of possible ways in which teachers and students can relate to each other within teaching.

Knowledge in schooling, beyond such reification, says Benn (2012) is to unfold a possible and 'constant recreation of self' (p. 186), and where relations with others beyond oneself are explored, to extend social relations and to find ways of maintaining them (see also Biesta, 2010; Todd, 2003). When teaching loses its role in sustaining such explorations it also loses something of its defining characteristic. Teaching loses its capacity to be expanding an understanding 'of our sensibilities as extensions of others' (Berardi, 2017, p. 55). That is, it loses its capacity to extend our sense of others, and thereby loses the capacity to extend the ethical foundations for a sound publicness of the public necessary for a pluralist democracy to work.

The aggressions visible in the destruction of state schooling and the subsequent shifts that have taken place also in teaching procedures and classrooms, generally are not just an arbitrary coincidence but fundamentally a result of the very *zeitgeist* of the neoliberal worldview at play. As such, aggression itself is not only setting certain conditions for schooling and teaching but also works increasingly as a hegemonic reality for schooling. Such conditions operate against the very traditions of educational thought and teaching in which an extension of sensibilities to live well with and among others is the very reason for education in the first place (Jaeger, 1939). Since shared sensibilities make the very publicness of the public possible, schooling in an ideological context of neoliberalism does not support democratization, nor educational thought and practice, which the sophists have much earlier considered the very *praxis* of democracy (Dewey, 1916; Jaeger, 1939; Säfström, 2020b). Instead of embodying democratization, neoliberal school systems are encouraging aggressions (self-interest, comparisons, competition, assessment, accountability), without mobilising the capacity of education and teaching to hinder aggressions turning into violence, erasing the ethical foundation of education.

Neoliberal schooling also seems to incorporate within itself the irrationality of promoting self-interest in education aiming for private good. As such, neoliberal schooling, its policies and practices are emphasised, and legitimatised by the general neoliberal violence of 'war' against public institutions (Berardi, 2017, p. 41). In the next section, different aspects of violence are discussed, as to be specific on how and when aggression turns violent in schooling. This is followed by a section in which teaching as a militant humility is offered as an active response to violence, aggression, and destruction implied by neoliberal schooling.

Violence and non-violence

Violence is essential for certain forms of social bonding, as Judith Butler (2020b) explains: 'certain social bonds are consolidated through violence, and those tend to be group bonds, including nationalism and racism'. Such violent consolidation of particular forms of social bonds is also a necessary condition of capitalist society. Berardi (2017) says that 'violence is no longer a marginal tool for social repression, but a normal mode of production, a special cycle of capital accumulation' (p. 143). Violence, then, takes the form of

a strategy for social bonding within the context of nationalism, racism and capitalism (Feldman, 1991; Fredrickson, 2003; Žižek, 2008).

There is a distinction to be made between systemic, objective, and abstract violence to clarify the relation between these concepts, particularly because abstract or symbolic are often understood as unrelated to concrete forms of violence. Also, subjective experienced violence is too often understood and criticised as an isolated phenomenon when it comes to schooling (Ekerwald & Säfström, 2015; Langmann & Säfström, 2018; Žižek, 2008). Zizek argues that we need to understand the fundamental systemic violence of capitalism within expressions of subjective experiences of violence, otherwise we cannot make sense of the difference between the physically violent outbreaks within the protests of movements motivated by self-defence, such as Black Lives Matter, and the systemic violent force of the police legitimized by the state. The latter, itself a concrete example of systemic violence in which the subjective experienced effects of violence, necessarily give rise to defence mechanisms against the atrocities performed to sustain a deeply racist capitalist system. Butler (2020a, 2020b) argues that attacks on living life will always produce counteractions, in defence of living life, and that Black Lives Matter is to be understood as such a response, which, according to her makes us rethink non-violence as a strategy, not any longer as passive (as Gandhi proposed) but as active.

Zizek adds a third form of violence: symbolic violence – the violence inscribed in the patterns of language itself. Symbolic violence can be understood through Levinas (1994) regarding how the other becomes erased as other by being made into a category within language, becomes a noun, a 'said', rather than signifying a verb within the 'saying' itself (Säfström, 2003). As a noun, a person becomes objectified in schooling from the point of someone else's desires (and assessed as such), rather than being an Other for whom I am responsible. The other is as such erased as an ethical being, erased from being subjected to morality by the way language itself operates (Levinas, 1994). The role of education in this scenario is to understand teaching as a saying, as a verb, in which the other is kept from lapsing into a noun. Teaching, in avoiding symbolic violence is within itself to uphold being as a verb, the other as an ethical subject for whom I am responsible (Säfström, 2003).

In schooling, bullying is a concrete example of how systemic violence operates, which all too often is understood as subjective violence alone. The bully and the one being bullied, rather than being the result of certain identities, personalities, or psycho-social circumstances, is systemic and a result of a specific power structure that is irrationally filled over time, often by the same person. The bully becomes bullied or the reverse, but the systemic nature of that violent act remains. As systemic violence, bullying has more to do with how the institution exercises power and the role and function schooling has in normalising certain structures of domination within capitalist society than subjective acts of individuals, even if they are experienced as such (Ekerwald & Säfström, 2015; Säfström 2014a). Bullying then can be understood not only as subjectively experienced violence alone, but symbolic as well as systemic violence. As such, bullying is more than the horrible experiences of individuals; it is also a significant systemic problem for the very possibility of schooling to contribute to democratization (Ekerwald & Säfström, 2015; Langmann & Säfström, 2018). What follows as a consequence is an anomaly within schooling itself, forcing schooling into what is an irrational position of anti-education, claimed to be education proper, and which as such has no response to bullying or other forms of violence, since it is already implied in its practice.

According to Butler (2020a), aggression is often confused with violence, making non-violence into a necessary passive reaction to violence, always on the retreat. Butler says, 'it is central ... to foreground the fact that non-violent forms of resistance can and must be aggressively pursued' (p. 21). That is, if systemic violence is making violent imprints on our bodies and puts unjustified restrictions on the ways we can live, constraining the very liveability of life for some rather than others and negating the lives of some to matter, then passive non-violent response to and resistance to systemic, symbolic, and subjectively experienced violence is simply not enough. To respond to and resist neoliberal schooling the passivity of non-violence is not enough. We need *active* non-violent strategies which in themselves emanate from education and teaching beyond neoliberal schooling. Non-violence, says Butler (2020a), is not so much an 'absolute principle, but the name of an ongoing struggle' (p. 23) in which we also 'take responsibility for our anger' (Hahn, 2001) and aggressions. It is not so much a moral position, as a 'social and political practice undertaken in concert, culminating in a form of resistance to systemic forms of destruction' (Butler, 2020a), and therefore 'non-violence can and must be aggressively pursued' (p. 21). Again, aggression is not the same as violence, and there is no absolute and clear line, but a non-violent approach within itself 'negotiate[s] fundamental ethical and political ambiguities' (p. 23), whilst the very nature of systemic violence does not. Systemic violence is legitimised by the system it is part of, by naturalised power, and aims ultimately to protect that system from change, to remain the same regardless of its unjust and unequal impact on living life, on liveable life. Butler (2020a) summarises her discussion on this point by saying that:

Nonviolence is less of a failure of action than a psychical assertion of the claims of life, a living assertion, a claim that is made by speech, gesture, and action, through networks, encampments, and assemblies; all of these seek to recast the living as worthy of value, as potentially grievable, precisely under conditions in which they are either erased from view or cast into irreversible forms of precarity. (p. 24)

In extending her discussion, Butler (2020a) refers to an interview with Albert Einstein in which he named his position against war and violence as a 'militant pacifism', which she rethinks in terms of 'aggressive non-violence' (p. 28) in line with the above. In addition, Butler argues that for such position to make sense, a second suggestion must be considered and that is the issue of equality, a 'commitment to equality' (p. 29).

It is exactly here that Butler's argument starts to resound with education, since educational thought as introduced by the Sophists to the world in early Greek thought, is a commitment to equality (Jaeger, 1939). That is, the early Sophists were democrats, for which equality is the defining characteristic; an equality they found in nature as well as in social and political life (pp. 323–324). In addition, education for the Sophists was to be for anyone in principle, and not only for the reproduction of an aristocratic elite. They argued against the idea of education and teaching as only to be confirming an order of inequality already established. The Sophists insisted that how one lives one's encultured life could be *taught* to anyone (Jaeger, 1939).

In other words, education is about extending one's sensibilities as to include others as well, it is as such about a certain form of humility, in which teaching is *for* the other, not to place oneself *before* the other. Teaching as educational practice is to be interested in the freedom of the other (Biesta & Säfström, 2011), it is to be committed to a certain form of

equality in facing the other and to take responsibility for the wellbeing of the other (Todd, 2003). In this lies the foundational humility of education and teaching. In the next section, I will be developing a strategy of teaching militant humility to resist consequences of aggression turning violent, and education and teaching as expressions of such violence. This strategy, I argue is an active non-violent response and resistance to those destructive forces implied by neoliberal schooling.

The militant humility of teaching

Militant humility of teaching is an important practice for responding to the reproduction of irrationality and anomalies produced by self-interested forces of aggression and violence in schooling. The very aim of such teaching is to *intervene* in all situations, events, and relations made up by an unrestrictive self-interest, and to counteract the excessive forms of aggressions turning violent. Militant humility in teaching intervenes and disrupts an ongoing destruction of the ethical foundation of education within neoliberal schooling to expand the publicness of the public, rather than to restrict such access to the already privileged. The goal for such teaching then is to expand the reach of *being for* the other, to unfold the capacity of sensing the other as an extension of one's capacity of sensing, to be sensing oneself as well as the other without self-interest through a relation over difference. Teaching is enforced by being interested in the freedom of the other and not oneself (Biesta & Säfström, 2011), through the verification of equality. Such teaching takes people's anger of being left behind in the context of winners and losers as legitimate anger, and teaches how to take care of one's anger while redirecting others. Militant humility in teaching is redirecting anger, through a vigorously disciplined practice of non-violence, and as such exercising resistance to the ongoing destruction of liveable life orchestrated by the violent aggressions in late capitalism, as well as what follows from racism and nationalism (Butler, 2020a; Žižek, 2008).

Active non-violence also speaks directly to how a militant humility of teaching operates within the practice of a classroom, in performing resistance to desires put onto students and teachers alike, in living up to institutionalised expectations of competing with everyone else within a neoliberal worldview. Such a worldview operates in schooling by naturalising a division of people according to hierarchies of inequality aiming at sorting out the winners from the losers. When such 'teaching' is sanctioned on a large scale in a society and made into a regulative idea for social organisation, society becomes foundationally irrational, says Rancière (1991). The consequence of making self-interest the main driving force of social interaction in neoliberal schooling is that it transfers the overall patterns of destruction and aggression into the very heart of relations between people. It does so by charging each will with the motivation and intent to be 'destroying another will by preventing another intelligence from seeing' the equality of speaking beings (p. 82). When emphasis in education and teaching is on an unchallenged self-interest, and from such point of view promotes comparisons, assessments, league tables, and competition, schooling becomes reduced to teaching students to be *before* the other, to beat the other rather than being for the other. In the last analysis producing a social being 'possessed by inequality's passion' (p. 82).

Teaching in neoliberal schooling risks becoming reduced to the reproduction of inequality passions made into conventions in which the passion for inequality is the

driving force for social life and a defining characteristic of relations between people. Teaching in such a scenario becomes reduced to instructions in how to practice inequality, whose sole purpose is to fulfil the desires of neoliberal schooling to enculturate self-interest. By so doing it excludes the necessary ethical foundation for teaching as well as for relations between people generally, as otherwise implicated by education and democracy.

A militant humility in teaching intervenes into cycles of reproduction of privilege as those enforced by patterns of aggressions and violence in the name of schooling. Militant interventions demand a disciplined practice of the teacher, in taking care of one's anger over schooling being reduced to the reproduction of inequality, and in which people are divided into winners and losers. Such practice implies taking care of one's anger on witnessing teaching and education being reduced to an instrument for sorting out some people as of less worth, and to redirect such anger into an active practice of non-violent response to such systemic as well as symbolic violence.

To take on an active non-violent response means, as Butler (2020a) pointed out, that one is negotiating fundamental ethical and political ambiguities within every act of teaching. It is to understand teaching as a series of responses to pressing issues challenging democratization in schooling, and to embrace the ethical *being for*, as a regulative idea for relations within as well as outside classrooms. Teaching as a militant humility I suggest, is fundamentally an ethical and political practice undertaken in concert with those engaged in teaching and being taught, culminating in resistance to systemic forms of destruction, aggression, and violence.

Ethics in teaching is here not to be understood as moralising over injustices of neoliberal society, but as implicated in the performativity of verifying equality across difference. It is an ethics that goes beyond individualism and self-interest, beyond the idea of an authentic self, full of itself, autonomous and ready to act, to choose, and to interact, to compete with others regulated only by the restraints of a market. The ethics implied by a militant humility in teaching is rather an ethics in which the 'I' does not 'possess itself too firmly' because 'if I possess myself too firmly or too rigidly, I cannot be in an ethical relation' (Butler, 2015, p. 110). Humility in teaching rather implies, a 'very specific mode of being dispossessed [and which therefore] makes ethical relationality possible' (p. 110).

To be entering into the humility of teaching is to ask oneself: With what right do I teach? (Säfström, 2003). It is to realise that it is not enough to be referring to laws and regulations to properly answer the question. One also needs to be considering the very act of teaching itself and the relations to other people it implies. In other words, the right to teach is implied in teaching, and yet can only be answered within the unique moments of teaching, by the other giving permission to be taught: Yes, you can teach me.

Without such affirmation teaching risks being symbolically violent in erasing the will of the other, and by conceptualising him or her as a student hierarchically placed as inferior, as such inferiority is inscribed within institutional expectations. The aim of teaching as militant humility is not to reproduce institutional expectations of inferiority, but rather being 'ignorant' of such expectations (Rancière, 1991) as they divide and hierarchise to confirm an inequality taken for granted. A militant humility rather requires one to unconditionally be confirming, in practice, the right of anyone to appear on the scene, of being heard and seen, of being listened to, and verifying the right to speak as if one matters. It is to practice taking care of anger (Hahn, 2001), and insisting on teaching as a particular

practice which, in Butler's (2020a) words, implies to 'recast the living as worthy of value' (p. 24). To teach as a militant humility is to practice, to take the risk of hearing those whose speech is silenced, and to attach value to such speech.

For Rancière (1999), democracy is not a regime or a social way of life:

It is the institution of politics itself, the system of forms of subjectification through which any order of distribution of bodies into functions corresponding to their 'nature' and places corresponding to their functions is undermined, thrown back on its contingency. (p. 101)

A militant humility in teaching then, as an act of democratization of forms of subjectification, is throwing back on its contingency any attempts to fix people as winners and losers, any attempt to be implementing neoliberal schooling, as such schooling is driven by self-interest and inequality passion. A militant humility is about vigorously defending the right, ability, and possibility to intervene into that which presents itself as a necessity, upholding the power of discourse of those who matter, excluding some as not there but 'included as excluded', as Rancière says (1999).

Teaching as militant humility asks of us teachers to actively oppose systemic as well as symbolic violence to living life, that we defend whoever is pushed into precariousness 'precisely under conditions in which they are either erased from view or cast into irreversible forms of precarity' (Butler, 2020a, p. 24). We commit to that equality inscribed in educational thought, and which defines that thought as educational in the first place.

Such verification and responses aim to make room on the scene for more people than the ones already there or to shift the scene altogether. It is to expand the possibility to appear on the scene, repressed by systemic as well as symbolic violence, aligning with and encouraged by the smooth functioning of neoliberal aggressions inscribed in, among other things, testing and assessment regimes. As such, neoliberal schooling naturalises an inequality already taken for granted within the broader neoliberal world view.

The militant humility in teaching restores, when so needed, the conditions for a truly pluralist democracy and acknowledges that some people are more precarious than others. In all other cases, a militant humility in teaching is simply good practice.

Concluding remarks

Neoliberalism feeds a destructive project for all sorts of public interests, but has a particular destructive impact on schooling, since it tends to produce irrationality and confusion about what education and teaching are all about. Education and teaching cannot be founded on aggression and self-interest without losing its meaning. Neoliberal schooling is not founded on educational thought, but rather on self-interest. Therefore, such schooling tends to be forcing teachers as well as all involved in education into a precarious situation in which comparisons, competition, assessment regimes, accountability, are all self-exploratory. That is, such situations are understood as a necessary reflection of natural inequality, rather than as a particular ideology striving for hegemony. A militant humility of teaching then is a constant reminder of the contingent condition under which such ideology is enforced, conditions made up of aggression and destruction, ruining the lives of some at the benefit of others. Such teaching is not only a passive defence, but

active in pursuing a non-violent force of anger, and channelling such force of anger into a militant and disciplined strategy of teaching. In these terms, teaching is understood as a necessary ethical and political concern in being *for* the other, in being interested in the freedom of the other, as well as education more generally is a necessary condition for democratization.

Notes

1. The point is that it is not *necessary* to love the student, which is still possible, to teach her or him, but it is necessary to be committed to the freedom of student in order for teaching to be educational (Biesta & Säfström, 2011; Säfström, 2021).
2. To stimulate the economy in this way is often referred to as ‘trickle down’ theory, or to be precise, what economists argues is that ‘existing tax rates are so high that the government could collect more tax revenues if it lowered those tax rates, because the changed incentives would lead to more economic activity, resulting in more tax revenues out of rising incomes, even though the tax rate was lowered’ which in the end will benefit everyone in society (Sowell, 2012, p. 1).
3. Even if this is still under discussion in Sweden, it shows clearly what is at stake when private interests challenge public interests.
4. Ironically it also weakens parents and children as customers by withholding information important to be able to choose wisely.
5. As the historical example of the Swedish case shows, a ‘free choice’ of school, a defining characteristic of the neoliberal school policy at the time was introduced by a social democratic government, which in practice meant that different social groups increasingly congregated in the same schools in line with their social statuses. (See further, Englund, 1995.)
6. See further Säfström (2020b), in which an analysis of the paradigm of distribution in schooling is the main theme of the book.

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