

Some notes on the necessity of autonomous educational practice and two concerns

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Abstract

This article suggests a sophisticated autonomous practice in response to Platonian Aristotelian philosophy's domination over education. It shows the dangers of empty education in which education is reduced to schooling the perfect citizen in the image of a perfect state. An example is given in which schooling in empty education is reduced to a tool for authoritarian capitalism inscribed in the formation of the State to increase profit while undermining a democratic society. Instead, this article claims that education was introduced by the Sophists as verification of equality and will show how education works counter to anti-educational and anti-democratic tendencies of Platonian/Aristotelian discourses on education and schooling. The article identifies and develops a practice of ignorance of inequality as such inequality is inscribed in machine schooling and offers a sophisticated practice instead. The article concludes by highlighting an autonomous tradition of educational practice making practice, as evident once Platonian and Aristotelian philosophy is refuted as saying anything meaningful about education.

Keywords

Education, Sophistical practice, equality, Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy, authoritarian capitalism, democracy

Introduction

In this text, I will suggest some implications of education beyond the influence of Platonian and Aristotelian philosophy since such philosophy has been harmful to the possibility of education as an autonomous field of thought and practice.¹ Such domination over education is harmful since it tends to reduce the understanding of education to be only concerned with schooling linking man and State from the position of state power (see Jaeger, 1943, p. 259). As discussed throughout the article, such reduction has serious consequences, not only for education but for democracy itself. To establish

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this point, I will explore some educational consequences following its marketisation, which tend to increase inequality, diminish equality as a valuable educational concern, and cement a point of power outside education as defining education's characteristics. On the other hand, an autonomous discipline of educational thought and practice, with its internal links to democratisation, is based on the Sophists, who were teachers and democrats who introduced education into intellectual history. Who introduced education as such into Western culture. Even so, it is not the Sophists as 'historical figures' that are important in the following, but rather some implication of the 'sophistical practice' (Cassin 2014) which they established and which is embedded within intellectual history as education 'proper'. Werner Jaeger's work on *Paideia* (1943, 1944) clarifies Sophist education.² As both counter to and preceding philosophy, Richard Rorty in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1980), both take on a Sophist position by saying: 'We shall, in short, be where the Sophists were before Plato brought his principle to bear and invented "philosophical thinking"' (p. 157), as well as show an alternative starting point for educational thought outside, or 'before' philosophy. Barbara Cassin (2014, 2020) is a philosopher and philologist who have continued, in the margins of philosophy, to translate a Sophist position into what she calls a 'Sophistical practice'. She shows how Sophist teaching and their invention of *Paideia* as fundamentally an ethical and political space of education have left traces in intellectual history to this day, regardless of what one thinks of the Sophists as historical figures. What sophistical practitioners tend to share in common, which this article shares with them, is the insight of a plural world we cannot escape and that the practices that follow from this insight always are formed in the world as such and concerning this simple fact: We do not live in the world, we live the world with others on which we depend.

The problematic relation of education and philosophy

The Sophists were teachers, not philosophers. This fact has had a lasting impact on both philosophy and education. By being afraid of the Sophists, as Cassin (2014, p. 25) puts it, philosophy constantly dismisses Sophist educational thought and practice. Plato demonstrates such fear in his aversion towards the Sophists, which still has consequences for the relation between philosophy and education up to this day, as well as for how education is widely understood as a tool for desires formed somewhere else than from within an autonomous educational discourse. Instead, education is understood as necessary concerning the relationship between the individual and the State, in terms of schooling, socialising the individual to be part of society, or as we shall see concerning Plato, being an expression of inequality itself. The fear of the Sophists is mainly expressed in Plato's assumption that the Sophists would only produce half-truths by not searching for truth for its own sake. The Sophists, as understood by Plato, 'was in danger of teaching half-truths—unless it could be grounded on genuine political and thorough political thought, searching for the truth for its own sake'. (Jaeger 1943: p. 293). However, as Jaeger (1944) also says, 'it is difficult for us to understand the *violence* of the detestation [of Plato against the sophists]' (p. 47; *my emphasis*). I found this violent detestation interesting, and which risks to follow and inform the relation between philosophy and education, but also risking to bring violence itself into Platonic style education. Furthermore, we are advised by Jaeger *not* to read the Sophists through Plato and not to read education through Platonic style philosophy, which would, to make a drastic comparison, be something of reading the history of Ukraine through the doctrine of Putin. For Plato, education, as well as the individual perceiving education, is a tool to control and perfect the State (see Jaeger 1943: p. 259). Therefore, in Jaeger's (1939) words: 'We must not depend on Plato's account of them [the Sophists]: for the point at which he always takes issue with them is not their knowledge, but their claim to teach *arete*', their connexion with life and conduct (p. 294). Plato's 'issue' with the Sophists was that they were teachers and educationalists who claimed that how we carry our culture and live with and among others in every day of life is possible to be taught and is

not something which is inherited by blood, as Plato insisted. Education for the Sophists is neither aiming at perfecting the State by schooling the perfect man, but education is rather about how to move with others in an imperfect everyday life, among the mediocrity of people's actual behaviour. For Plato (and Aristotle), *arete* 'could only be inherited. It could not be taught, and belonged to the aristocracy, the elite: 'Aristocratic education had been based on the inheritance of *arete*' through noble blood' (Jaeger, 1939, p. 287), and which 'returns in Plato' (p. 289). For education, on the other hand, *arete* 'can be taught, in principle, to anyone. Furthermore, more substantial, what makes an autonomous tradition of education, a sophistical practice, possible in the first place is that teaching is possible other than confirming a pre-existing inequality. Instead, teaching is practised to verify equality; *anyone* can be taught. That anyone can be taught is also the main complaint Plato has. He objects to the Sophists, claiming that they teach anyone whomsoever, but in this complaint, he ironically makes it clear that his teaching is *not* for anyone. Plato's teaching is for an aristocracy already considered to be carrying the ability to be taught inside them, and as such, being beyond and above everyone else, to be confirmed through education and teaching.

The source of the attitude toward the sophists is the tension between philosophy as representing the sphere of ideas and truth and the educationalists' teaching practices aimed at getting along with others in practical living situations regardless of such truth (see Jaeger 1943: p. 293). The tension signals a hierarchy established by Plato through his invention of philosophical thinking as separated from every day of life (see Rorty 1980: p. 157). Plato created a tension in the 'absolute separation between the eternal and the Spatio-temporal' (Rorty, 1980: p. 307). The power granted to such separation shaped Plato's political project so that his philosophy could be conditioning life in the city-state through schooling and from the point of state power (Bloom, 1991; Jaeger 1939, 1943). Education is fundamentally reduced to schooling, a process with a specific function but itself empty other than being filled with the desires identified by philosophy.

It implies, among other things, that education is dominated by philosophy directing its conduct based on a fundamental point of power. Rather than accepting this 'truth' as an expression of education, I will lean on the Sophists in their claim that Platonian philosophy has limits on what it can speak about: 'The doctrine of the Sophists is indeed an operator that serves to circumscribe and define the scope of philosophy' (Cassin, 2014: p. 30). Moreover, notably, Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy cannot speak about education without also introducing this pattern of power, which tends to take the concrete shape of domination, patriarchy and, to an inevitable extent, violence as part of education itself. In the following, I will raise some concerns about the ambition of Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy to dominate education.

The first concern follows from reducing education to schooling and making schooling into a process itself empty of meaning and to be filled and directed by 'philosophy' establishing its aims and goals outside education. What worries me is that if education is empty of meaning, only a tool for whatever desires are put on education and only a tool for any social formation, it will educate the fascists, the democrat, the madman, and the virtuous person. There is no way of talking about good education; for example, as Gert Biesta (2015) does. Education as an empty signifier fulfils whatever the powers dominating it requires of education. Therefore, it is crucial to claim an autonomous tradition of educational thought, which is already an expression of plurality and democratic praxis. Following the Sophists would mean one cannot use education for utilitarian ends outside its scope of responsibility and still be called education. It could be called indoctrination, manipulation, or schooling, but it could not be called education. Reducing education to a tool empty of meaning used by anti-educational desires is disastrous for education. However, it also puts education as a form of democratisation at risk and therefore weakens democracy as such. That this is not only a 'theoretical problem' but a real danger exemplified by the 'Swedish situation', in which the marketisation of

education is a tool in a battlefield for politics, challenging the more significant idea of public education as a guarantee for democracy and a democratic form of life (Säfström and Månsson, 2021). The following example may be extreme, but it also shows the dangers of reducing education to schooling, as empty to be filled with meaning from the outside of education, by the powers organising it. I am not saying that Plato is directly responsible for the marketisation of Swedish schooling, how could he be, but rather that such schooling is an excellent example of some significant archaic patterns introduced by Plato as education proper. I will expand on those traits after discussing the Swedish situation for schooling in more detail.

The ‘creative destruction’³ of public education and the privatisation of the school system implicit in neoliberal school policies has in Sweden resulted in a system regulated by a school market. It is a market in which the growing profits of competing corporations are not only financed by but also guaranteed by public taxes. The unprecedented transfer of wealth from the public sphere to the private taking place in Sweden has had adverse effects on education ‘for all’ and the very social fabric of Swedish society. Income inequality is rising, and wealth inequality is at an all-time high in Sweden,⁴ which now increasingly produces more billionaires than the world’s average.⁵ The increase in billionaires in Sweden is also a consequence of the ‘war’ on democratic institutions (Berardi, 2017: p. 41) – such as public education – and their privatisation in the wake of neoliberalism. What were before publicly owned institutions, democratically controlled and for everyone equally, securing the welfare societies with its support for precarious populations, are increasingly sold out to private capital instead. The shift is from solidarity and equality to individualism and profit as regulative ideas for social and political formation. It is not only a shift on the surface but a fundamental shift in the very social and political foundation of the society we are witnessing in Sweden. What drives this shift is the instrumentalisation and marketisation of education, turning schools to compete over assets (students) in a school market. It is big money that is involved,⁶ and therefore also big politics.

In the recent elections (Sept. 2022), the party on the Right (Moderaterna) formed a block with the extreme right party with Nazi roots (SD) and with the Christian Democrats and the support of the small Liberal party;⁷ this constellation of four parties got into power. Most of the attention by political commentators in media and elsewhere has been on the fascist party with Nazi roots (SD)⁸ as ‘Kingmakers.’⁹ Not much attention has been to the centrality of the small Liberal party in protecting the right to make a profit for the corporations involved in the school market.¹⁰ The Liberal party, which identifies itself as a ‘school party’, a party for privately owned and profitable schooling, is uncharacteristically for a liberal party today joining a coalition including a fascists party with Nazi roots (SD)¹¹ to protect the school market and its investors. There are also signs that the Swedish Democrats (SD) are now (October 2022) supporting the continued existence of the profit-driven school market. The corporations involved are guaranteed significant profits, while the social fabric of Swedish society is crumbling. The Left has expressed ambitions to regulate the school market by minimising the ability to make a profit (Social democrats) or abolishing the school market altogether to reinstate a public education system (the Left party). In other words, education and schooling are at the centre of a fundamental conflict between competing understandings of what a society is and who it is to serve. What has made this transition possible is, among other things, the reduction of education as an autonomous tradition of thought based on plurality and democracy to instead only being an instrument for whatever desires those in power may have. That is, instrumental education and schools do not carry any meaning not already formulated elsewhere and for desires of the order outside of education. In the dominant/hegemonic discourse, education and the school are considered empty of meaning, giving anyone the right to fill education with any meaning if one also holds power. The State seems to have an unquestionable right to be schooling its citizens in the image of its

desire to stay in power (Popkewitz, 2008). This ‘empty education’, inherited by the inscription of a pattern of domination over education from Plato and Aristotle as explored more below, is today not only an expression of the Platonian/Aristotelian line of thought in education but is also visible in politics and policies, as well as for example in the struggle over teacher education in Norway and Sweden (Säfström and Saeverot, 2017). The point is that by emptying education of meaning, as always and only being a tool for desires coming from ‘the outside’, it also, in difficult times, can become quite a dangerous tool. The consequence in the example given is that education and schooling become a tool for authoritarian capitalism rather than itself being a site of democracy, making, if not impossible, at least increasingly more difficult for emancipation and ‘new beginnings’ to emerge.

This particular socio-political ‘Swedish example’ shows how politics, and authoritarian capitalism in an unholy union, use education as a means and instrument for their desires and, consequently, contribute to the repression of democracy. Repressed is precisely the internal link between public education and democratic society. The marketisation is turning it into a link between ‘customers’ and ‘providers’ driven by profit instead. That is, ‘profit’ is the overriding value of the market-driven school system. As such, it allows anti-democratic forces to tame the school (Masschelein and Simons, 2013). The marketisation of a public school system and its resulting democratic deficit (Säfström and Månsson, 2021) is a sign of neoliberal and authoritarian capitalism finding new markets to monopolise and a sign of a weakened democracy. Such shifts in social organisation, as exemplified above, directly impact the possibility of the school being a site for democratisation. Since the school, the Greek *Scholé* is a ‘form’ where the “‘common good” [is] made possible...” (Masschelein and Simons, 2013: p. 51), it is constantly under threat from anti-democratic forces.

Furthermore, as Masschelein and Simons (2013) suggest, the very history of the school is ‘a history of taming; a series of strategies and tactics to dispel, restrain, constrain, neutralise or control the school’ (p. 51). The example above is another expression of such a history of taming the school. The instrumentalisation of education and its reduction to be a tool for desires formed outside education, and contrary to the democratic form of the school, creates an *anomaly* in education if accepted as education proper. It creates a tension between the democratic form of the school and the anti-democratic desires inscribed as schooling informed by profit as an overriding value.

In the example, then, what is at stake is not only the misuse of the word ‘education’ but the destruction of the common good of a healthy democracy. This point not only speaks to society’s social organisation through policies regulating schooling, turning it into a market but also points to the destruction of the common good as informing the sensible realm of the social necessary for democracy to work. Frank ‘Bifo’ Berardi (2017), commenting on the severe consequence of the ‘war’ (p. 41) on democratic institutions by neoliberalism and authoritarian capitalism in general, claims that we live in a time in which we increasingly have difficulties ‘understanding our sensibilities as an extension of others’ (p. 55). He further suggests that an ethical and moral catastrophe in losing connectivity between people marks our time. By suppressing education’s performativity as a force of democratisation, one is also suppressing linking people across differences. Therefore, to expand an ethical foundation for popular sovereignty (Butler, 2015), one must establish the ethical and political conditions for democracy to work as such.

Moreover, that is what Sophist education does, and it establishes equality as foundational for expanding *paideia*’s ethical and political practice (Jaeger 1939: p. 300). To reduce education to an instrument to do something with, as is what Platonian/Aristotelian style philosophy does, is placing education within a relation of profound dependency over time rather than verifying education as an autonomous field of thought and action intimately linked to democracy as such, as was the case for

the Sophists. The positioning of education as dependent on philosophy for meaning and content creates an absolute inequality. It is an inequality in which the outside of education always is to define the inside of education. It establishes a pattern in which education itself signals this inequality and dependency. It becomes difficult to even think of education outside the reproduction of inequality.

The second concern addresses the spatial-temporal world, not as separated and subordinated by eternal ideas and ‘permanent truths’ (Jaeger, 1939: p. 11) but in the Sophist understanding of the practice. A sophistical practice highlights traces from the introduction of education in Western culture, which points to a line of thought in which ‘practice makes practice’, as Deborah Britzman (1991) so aptly puts it. That is, educational practice does not get its meaning from a sphere of ideas outside of practice itself but unfolds as meaningful in concrete reality, on which it depends. Educational practice is rooted in the world where we live our lives among others and aims to link such plurality across differences. It is a practice of expanding the ethical-political sphere of the public from within itself outwards, which the Sophists understood *Paideia* to be (Jaeger, 1939: p. 300). That *arete*, the embodiment of virtues, can be taught, in principle, to anyone. That teaching is possible and expands who and what can appear on the social scene. Teaching expands not only what can be thinkable and graspable but literally who can appear as belonging to the society in which one lives – teaching as a *sophistical practice* then expands who and what carries meaning, who and what appears valuable in life’s social formation by verifying equality. Sophist education is a radically different starting point than what has been offered from instrumentalised empty education of the Platonian/Aristotelian kind. The Sophists formulated their educational practice before Plato ‘invented philosophical thinking’ as Rorty said (Rorty, 1980: p. 157) and established education, in Britzman’s words, as a ‘practice that makes practice’.

The practice that makes practice

For John Dewey (1966), educational practice precedes philosophy, and philosophy itself is made possible by educational practice. The ‘fact [is] that the stream of European philosophical thought arose as a theory of educational procedure’ (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 331). However, instead of, as Dewey does, claiming that philosophy is part of education, Richard Rorty (1980) claims a point before philosophy as the point from which educational practice emerges. Therefore, the invention of philosophical thinking is alien to educational practice, and for Plato, educational practice lacks the aspirations of an ‘unlimited’ philosophy (Rorty, 1980; Cassin, 2014). It also concerns an unlimited philosophy that we find the source of Plato’s violent aversion towards the Sophists. Since the Sophists precisely challenge Plato’s project of a limitless philosophy: ‘The doctrine of the sophists is indeed an operator that serves to circumscribe and define the scope of philosophy’ (Cassin, 2014: p. 30) by, among other things, understanding ontology as just another discourse. As Cassin (2020) claims, ‘Gorgias shows that ontology only holds its position, and takes centre stage, if it forgets not being but that it is itself a discourse’ (p. 34). For the Sophist, the word is of the world, *is* the world, and there is no point outside of this world from which meaning and power flow (Cassin 2014).

Sophist education is not about ‘the essence’ of truth for its own sake, dependent on an absolute distinction between ‘the eternal and the spatial-temporal’, as Platonian philosophy does (Rorty, 1980: p. 307). A sophistical practice, education and teaching are about how to live well *with* and among many other human beings in everyday life, without assuming a point outside such life on which life can be ‘grounded’ (see Jaeger 1939, 286 pp, Bernstein, 1983). Moreover, ever since the emergence of (Platonian) philosophy, as described by Rorty (1980), as the emergence of ‘philosophical thinking’ in the search for *essences* ‘e. g. of the essence of “philosophy” itself’ (p. 370), a pattern of domination over education is established. Not only by the inequality produced by the instrumentalisation of education as discussed above but also by the way Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy dominates education by introducing *science as the First philosophy* into education.

Science as the First philosophy is ‘to be the true, the “highest” kind of culture and replace or *dominate* the current educational discipline’ (Jaeger, 1943: p. 318; *my emphasis*). Science (of Platonian/Aristotelian kind) was the First philosophy and the highest form of culture, replacing the ethical-political practice making practice of Sophist *Paideia*. Therefore, Platonian/Aristotelian domination of education also undermines what is educational about education – how to be living *with* other people every day – and instead has established a hierarchical relation of power in which practical life is to be *dominated* by essences and permanent truths emerging from science as the First philosophy. A Sophistical practice, on the other hand, is about how to move in concert with others in the best of ways to embody the virtues of a good life: always embracing the first question of sophistical existence, how to be living together with others in a pluralist society formed based on equality (which they found in nature as well as in social organisation, Säfström 2021; 2022b).

Furthermore, it is precisely because of the figure of domination inscribed into education that Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy is obscuring the purpose of sophistical practice to expand who and what can appear on the social scene by linking different worlds across differences (Säfström, 2022b). By searching for essences and permanent truths instead, Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy establishes education as a reality that sorts people in terms of those essences and truths and their internal and hierarchical order. Education in their Platonian/Aristotelian universe could only be about the reproduction of essences and permanent truths, as those were already the property of the aristocracy, the elite. *Arete*, the way one embodies the culture and lives one’s life could *not* be taught, only reproduced. The social and political order of inequality is naturalised rather than, as for the Sophists, being a consequence of a particular ethical and political practice informed by the equality of the democratic social order as well as the democratic form of the school (Jaeger, 1939, 1943; Masschelein and Simons 2013).

As the First philosophy, Platonian/Aristotelian theoretical science establishes an absolute starting point from which power can flow by naturalising a particular social and political order. That is, science, as Rorty (1980) says, is a language that claims to be speaking the same language of nature itself if nature could speak. Such language (or discourse, as Gorgias claimed, according to Cassin 2014) mirrors the rationality inscribed in nature, which means that it speaks absolute truth. An absolute point of power is established through the invention of this language/discourse, on which absolute truth can rest.¹² It is absolute, because it is claimed to be based on the exact language mirroring nature. Richard Rorty (1980) deconstructs such an idea of absolute truth based on ‘an unclouded mirror of nature’ by claiming that:

The notion of an unclouded mirror of nature is the notion of a mirror which would be indistinguishable from what was mirrored and thus would not be a mirror at all. The notion of a human being whose mind is such an unclouded mirror, and who knows this, is the image, as Sartre says, of God. Such a being does not confront something alien, which makes it necessary for him to choose an attitude towards, or a description of, it. He would have no need and no ability to choose actions or descriptions. He can be called ‘God’ if we think of the advantages of this situation, or a ‘mere machine’ if we think of the disadvantages. (p. 376)

Science as the First philosophy, the desire to be released from judgement, from facing something alien forcing one to ‘choose an attitude towards’ or ‘description’ of, encourage the idea of an exact language as a mirror of a natural ‘rationality’. Moreover, such language, owned by the Platonian/Aristotelian philosopher dominating education, furthers the separation of education from every day and, therefore, from practice in and of the everyday. Such discourse thwarts the condition for education, for sophistical practice in the everyday. Sophist education, sophistical practice, is neither

empty nor a reproduction of social and political inequality but concerns how to move well with others in an environment on which everyone depends. Education, therefore, requires judgement about dealing with something alien to oneself and choosing an attitude towards it to be in the world with others in ways embodying the virtues of living well with those others.

Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy dominating education is reducing education to a mere machine into a process performed in a machinelike fashion, in which no judgement is neither necessary nor possible, reducing education to an empty process. It does not leave much room for education, or teaching for that matter, as a practice that makes practice of democracy. For education to take its form of being a sophisticated practice concerning equality and living well with and among others here and now requires one to acknowledge the ambiguity in negotiating how to go on in a mixture of people who may go on differently. It requires a sophisticated practice which establishes and expands relations across differences in this mixture.

The school form, *Scholé*, is an expression of the equality experienced as well expressed in every day of the school (Masschelein and Simons 2013) rather than an expression of the absolute inequality of schooling. The latter is formed as desires to become ‘a mere machine’, in which no judgements are neither possible nor needed. Teaching is reduced to the applications of rationalistic methods, which themselves are thought of as reducing the need for judgements, and educational research, consequently reduced to ‘evidence-based’ educational research (see Biesta, 2015). ‘Machine schooling’, informed by the Platonian/Aristotelian archaic patterns, moves people away from how to live well with others in the imperfectness and fallibility of actual life towards concerning the perfection of the State instead (Jaeger 1939). The sophists ‘must take account of the diversity of opinions, the mediocrity of peoples’ actual behaviour, and finitude in its lived reality’ (Cassin, 2014: p. 117). ‘Machine schooling’ implies a figure of power-driven by an idea of perfection (in ‘the machine’ according to Rorty above, or in the State according to Plato, or the Market according to neoliberal education), which eliminates the need for your judgement.

Schooling, machine schooling, in line with Platonian/Aristotelian education, necessarily signifies a process of perfection (Todd, 2009), linking man and State from the point of state power and with the help of science as the First philosophy dominating education. That is, the mediocrity of people’s actual behaviour in everyday life, in which people live with and move among a mixture of other people to the best of their abilities, is to be dominated, perfected, and controlled by schooling the perfect man, through which the perfect State successfully emerges.

So who is this man perfecting the State in the vision of Platonian/Aristotelian domination over education? According to Aristotle, it is at least transparent who he is not: ‘It was Aristotle who truly classified them [the sophists] as “other”, who put them in the index as “other” [...] when he demonstrated that their discursive regime, their way of speaking, was not human’ (Cassin, 2014: p. 6). So while the Sophists were not only dismissed as nonhuman by Aristoteles and therefore not able to be perfected, neither were ‘women, child, animal and slave’ (Cassin, 2014: p. 6), who were considered as *homoioi phutôi*, to be ‘like plants’ (Cassin, 2014: p. 6). By writing off the sophists ‘even from humanity itself’ (Cassin, 2014: p. 30), Aristotle also ‘helps’ establish, to the degree Aristotelian philosophy is dominating educational practice, schooling as a reality in which an absolute distinction between human/nonhuman continuously operates. Such a distinction is a condition for Aristotelian philosophy. Consequently, schooling in such a universe is drawing distinctions between human/nonhuman to be identifying who is part of what Butler (2015) qualifies as a liveable life; it identifies who belongs to humanity and who does not belong (see further Butler 2015, 2020). It creates an absolute hierarchy internal to the very functions of ‘machine schooling’ and sorts people according to a more or less valued life from the point of view of the perfect man, which for Platonian/Aristotelian education always is the Aristocrat, the elite.¹³ Thus, Platonian/

Aristotelian domination over education introduces schooling as the differentiation between useful lives from the point of view of the State, as the latter is an expression of an overriding point of power (as the schooled Aristocrat, the elite, embodies this power). It establishes an ontology of existential inequality as the foundation for ‘machine schooling’. It reproduces the power of patriarchy and inequality in general as natural and given from the point of the absolute power of the real itself.

Sophist education

Cassin (2014) claims that it is with the sophists that women enter into philosophy: ‘It is quite natural to assimilate, or to be tempted to assimilate, this philosophical power [of the Platonic-Aristotelian orthodoxy] to power of masculine kind....the first women I came across in philosophy were the Sophist. They constitute for the Platonic-Aristotelian orthodoxy an unassimilable heterodoxy’ (p. 5).

The unassimilable heterodoxy of education, of sophistical practice, is a heterodoxy which brings with it not only ‘the first women’, as Cassin (2014, p. 5) has pointed out, but also moves beyond the very ontology of inequality inscribed as machine schooling, by being concerned with equality instead. The Sophists were democrats for whom equality is a central concern and motivating the organisation of the democratic city-state.¹⁴

Therefore, from the point of education, from point of sophistical practice, Platonic/Aristotelian philosophy is best ignored in education. It is a philosophy whose program is, as Jaeger (1943) pointed out, to ‘dominate education’ (p. 318), and which, through such domination, removes education from concerning the life we live with others in the mixture of everyday, and instead encourages us to be perfecting the State by perfecting ourselves. We are inherently bound to the State, to the point of power from which our lives gain meaning. Moreover, its programs also bring specific patterns of power, inclusion and exclusion of establishing definitions of who is human and who is not. A sharp line between humanity and nature is introduced as well as domination, violence and patriarchy as internal to education following such distinctions and discourse, internal to our perfection.

In *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, Jacques Rancière (1991) identifies a strategy for the teacher who ‘ignores’ the figures of domination inscribed through the desires of machine schooling into living life. Instead of reproducing inequality, the ‘ignorant’ teacher verifies equality. One can choose, he writes, to withdraw one’s intelligence ‘from the land of inequality’ (Rancière, 1991: p. 90). That is, as teachers and educationalists, we have a choice to embrace the sophistical practice, as such practice verifies equality in its performativity. It is what such practice does, rather than fall into the discourse of inequality as if this inequality is real and not only a particular ‘program’, invented as such by Platonic/Aristotelian domination of education by an elite to reproduce itself.

To verify equality is, for Rancière, to perform education: education as a performativity of emancipation, and in that he works within the parameters of Sophist education. To be emancipated, says Rancière, one has to realise one’s equality with everyone else; ‘emancipation [...] teach[es] people to be equal in a society ruled by inequality and by the institutions that “explain” such inequality’ (Rancière, 2010: p. 9), as a necessary reality.

That is, what Rancière helps us see is that there are concrete strategies to be performed that ignore the Platonic/Aristotelian inscription of *dominance* over and into education that founds an ontology of inequality, through which ‘machine schooling’ operates as seemingly necessary, responding to a supposedly natural inequality of the real. By ignoring ‘machine schooling’ as having anything to do with education or the real for that matter, it is possible instead to set the performativity of education into motion. It is to practice sophistical practice by verifying equality in all situations of inequality,

interrupting the desires of ‘machine schooling’ in establishing a point of power as if that point is absolute; if so, this point takes the form of ‘the State’ or ‘the Market’.

Beyond ‘machine schooling’, beyond the Platonian and Aristotelian philosophy dominating education, there is Sophist education, which no longer only belongs to the Sophists as historical figures. Education as a sophistical practice has revealed itself throughout history whenever equality is verified in situations otherwise marked by inequality. It shows itself when teachers verify equality across differences in the classroom and when the formation of public education for the common good takes place by verifying equality across differences. Such education, such sophistical practice, exists in the school, says [Masschelein and Simons \(2013\)](#), but is systematically ‘tamed’ over time. Verifying equality in every moment of education is a practice that makes practice informed by emancipation. It sets students, teachers, the school, and people in general free from the oppressions inbuilt into machine schooling.

Concluding remarks

The autonomy of education is evident, so to speak, as soon as we refute Plato’s violent attacks on the Sophists and Aristoteles’ dehumanisation of them. The Sophists were teachers and educationalists, not philosophers in the meaning given by Plato. An autonomous tradition of education emerges in intellectual history with the Sophists as a practice that makes a practice of democracy possible. In line with the sophists, education emerges as a performativity of equality since *anyone* can be taught; the figure of equality, so to speak, is inscribed in education and teaching. In other words, education and teaching without verifications of equality is not education. Despite this fact, schooling today can operate as if it does not concern pluralism, equality and democracy but rather on the premisses of inequality set by authoritarian market capitalism, as shown by Swedish market-oriented schooling. Such a figure of schooling is possible because it attaches itself to an ‘absolute point of power’ outside of education, if so, the State or the Market, from which Market-driven schooling gain meaning. The Swedish example shows that it creates a dangerous situation in emptying education and weakens democracy. Instead of equality, such schooling systematically verifies inequality. Inequality is made possible in the dominant discourse, in the discourse of domination, because it is considered real, rather than a consequence of a particular program for some specific utilitarian ends of reproducing an elite. The such figure of domination is entering the intellectual history of education through Platonian/Aristotelian philosophy. Swedish market-oriented schooling is an example of the patterns of power established through such philosophy, which motivates inequality’s continuous performativity instead of equality.

On the other hand, an autonomous education in the form of Sophistical practice concerns itself with how to move with other people every day, not searching for a point from outside the practices of which every day consists. Sophistical practice is to consider the poor behaviour of actual people when teaching how to move with others to verify equality and, through such verification, expand who and what can be seen, thinkable and graspable. That is, a sophistical practice is concerned with the present, with how to move in an ethical-political space of today, and, in so doing, counteract anti-educational and anti-democratic forces by expanding who and what can appear on the scene.

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Notes

1. In this text, with philosophy, I will mean the Platonian/Aristotelian style philosophy. I follow Cassin (2014, 2020) in her critique of the Platonian/Aristotelian orthodoxy in philosophy. I also want to point out that education within this philosophy is not education but philosophy. I think it is also rhetorically significant to talk about philosophy, similar to how philosophy talks about education. To turn its discourse back on itself. At least, that is what informs my approach in this text.
2. To be precise, the very term philosophy is still in a debate at the times of the sophists and is therefore ambiguous when discussing education and philosophy (see Jager 1944). In this text, though, with the aspiration of clarity, I will reserve education for the sophists and philosophy to be founded as such by Plato.
3. See further Säfström (2022a), where the ‘creative destruction’ implicit in the neoliberal political and economic ideology and its consequences for education is discussed.
4. ‘While income inequalities are relatively low in Sweden, wealth inequality remains high, comparable with countries such as France and Germany. In 2021, the bottom 50%, middle 40% and top 10% respectively held 6%, 36% and 58% of total national wealth’. Chancel et al. (2022).
5. the rich total wealth increased in Sweden by 9.3%, compared with 8% for the global world. World Wealth Report.
6. The turnover for just one of the corporations in the school market, Atvexa, was 1.8 billion in 2020, growing by 15% each year since 2015. <https://tankesmedjanbalans.se>, <https://www.allabolag.se/5567814024/atvexa-ab>
7. Liberals only 0.6% over the 4% required to belong to parliament.
8. See Arnstad (2016) on European fascism.
9. SD was named as such by several international outlets, including *The Washington Post* (2022).
10. The profit-driven market school system was shaped from 2006 to 2014 by the then minister of education from the Liberal party.
11. The Liberal party rhetorically claims to be enemies of the fascist party and vice versa. They both support a constellation of right-wing parties coming into power. The fascist party, the Swedish democrats, is the largest to save the school market and the unprecedented profits it produces.
12. It is also a point of ‘absolute’ power in the way Aristotle used his science as the First philosophy to distinguish between who is to be human and who is not. The sophists, like ‘women, child, animal and slave’ (Cassin, 2014: p. 6), were ‘like plants’, not human.
13. A point developed in Säfström (2021) as an ‘aristocratic principle’.
14. The invention of ‘nature’ by the Greeks, from the human viewpoint, was made in tension between a democratic and an aristocratic view. There is ‘an aristocratic and a democratic conception of nature’ (Jaeger, 1939, p. 324). However, inequality or equality is emphasised and taken as motivation for the social and political organisation of the city-state.

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