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Democracy and education: In spite of it all

Introduction

Just over on hundred years ago, with the publication of *Democracy and Education*, Dewey made a case for the mutually dependent relationship linking a legitimate education system and a thriving democracy. A century on, many would argue that democracy and education have been decoupled and that both have been diminished and devalued as a result (Labaree, 2011; Schostak & Goodson, 2012). Of course, this begs the question as to the degree to which democracy and education have ever been harmonised; but Dewey's point was that knowledge needs to be conceived of as necessarily tentative and provisional and that democracy, insofar as it is open to the inevitability of change and difference, is the only political form of organisation capable of providing an environment conducive to this conception of knowledge. Part of my argument in this paper is that today's democratic politics has, to a considerable degree, been captured by the assumed certainties of neoclassical economics and that this situation is mirrored – again, not entirely but to a recognisable and worrying degree – in education. In order to make this argument, I draw on the psychoanalytic notions of ideology, enjoyment and fantasy, drawing in particular on work in political theory that links these notions to social questions of power and politics (Dean, 2009; Glynos, 2001; Glynos & Stavrakakis, 2008; Stavrakakis, 1999, 2007; Žižek, 1997). The benefit of adopting these notions is to highlight the pervasive presence of illusions and the forms of violence – epistemic, symbolic and material – that sustain them. However, despite the seeming pessimism this suggests, I conclude with a plea for continually striving to renew the links between democracy and education – as the title of the paper indicates, ‘in spite of it all’¹ – by not only critiquing the current dominant models of democracy and education but also by seeking to traverse and let go of the fantasies that keep us tethered to our unfreedom.

A note on ideology, enjoyment and fantasy

In broad terms, psychoanalytic theory can be understood as articulating a lack of ‘fit’ between the individual and the social, which means that the former can never be perfectly adapted to the latter, no matter how much government, education or therapy

¹ The phrase ‘in spite of it all’ is borrowed from the recent special issue of *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, edited by Emile Bojesen, entitled ‘Education, In Spite of it All’.

she or he is subjected to (Donald, 1992, p. 3). This lack of fit reflects a deeper constitutive split between the universal and the particular, framed in terms of a tragic dialectical dance between “fantasy and traumatic failure” (Daly, 1999, p. 233). For instance, all attempts to identify the (universal) notion of the subject with any particular historical or cultural subject fall short and come adrift in the face of the gap or void around which such particularities must wrap themselves: “the subject is precisely that which cannot be fully constituted through subject-positions; a universal (de-)constitutive void (\$) which ultimately resists all forms of particularistic interpellation” (Daly, 1999, p. 233). The gap, or void, which prevents the suturing of the universal and the particular is the traumatic Real – “the symbolic order’s point of inner fracture, the Real is what resists being symbolized, a kind of surplus or leftover which remains when reality has been thoroughly formalized” (Eagleton, 2009, p. 144). We might think of the Real as an ‘immanent blockage’ that prevents both the subject and society from ever being self-identical by implanting an insurmountable alien-ness. In this sense, despite our ongoing attempts to accommodate ourselves to reality we remain perpetual misfits.

Ideology, in these terms, involves forms of misrecognition of the Real, reflected in attempts to incorporate it into, and reconcile it with, the intelligible structures of reality. Ideology thus goes beyond logic or discourse, even as it seeks to manage or domesticate this ‘beyond’ within the confines of logic and discourse. We can see this in relation to recent attempts to articulate specific ‘British’ values – attempts which either miss their point by positing values such as ‘democracy’ and ‘respect for law’ that clearly exceed ‘Britishness’; or which exhaust themselves and end up tautologically referring to ‘British’ customs and the ‘British’ way of life.

Ideological projects such as nationalism can thus be understood as consequences of our constitution as un-natural subjects of language and discourse. In Lacanian terms, our entry into the symbolic order of language as subjects brings the loss of our pre-subjective sense of oneness with the world and the purported enjoyment that accompanied that state. Of course, as subjects, we never experienced this state because it was pre-subjective – prior to our formation as social beings of language and the law – and hence our positing of this enjoyment before and beyond language is, paradoxically, a retroversive consequence of our becoming subjects of language

(Shepherdson, 2008). Yet we spend our lives seeking to recapture the intense enjoyment associated with this purportedly lost object, and it is the existential ‘lack’ associated with this loss that fuels the insatiability of desire – even as we misrecognise objects of pleasure as sources of enjoyment – whether it be for the latest smartphone, ‘taking back control’ (to quote the UK Brexiteers), or improved national outcomes in the *Program of International Student Assessment (PISA)*. Enjoyment here should not be equated with pleasure – indeed, the latter serves as a means of moderating the tempestuous qualities of the former (Schuster, 2016, p. 118) – but instead “might be understood as a kind of existential electricity which not only animates the subject but which also threatens to destroy him/her” (Daly, 1999, p. 227). One way of understanding institutionalized cultural phenomena like education and politics is as social strategies for managing enjoyment, in part by converting it into less unruly forms, such as the desire for approval and belonging.

If ideology involves the misrecognition of the impossibility of any complete or self-sufficient identities, whether individual or social, fantasy involves attempts to attribute this impossibility to an external (and hence potentially eliminable) rather than an immanent (and hence constitutive) object-cause. Fantasy thus identifies a concrete other who can be held to account for the (misrecognized) external blockage. Fantasy thus represents the illusory prospect of unity and closure once the external obstacle is removed – full national sovereignty will be secured once we leave the European Union and ‘take back control’, for instance, while educational success for all will follow from teachers’ adoption of ‘evidence-based best practice’; yet at the same time, owing to the *immanent* rather than *contingent* nature of the blockage of the Real and the constitutive impossibility of unity or closure, the illusion of fantasy relies on identifying and demonizing the scapegoated other who supposedly prevents the realization of the fantasy. Corrupt EU officials in Brussels or recalcitrant teachers in schools thus fulfill the role of the other as “someone who gives body to the very excess of enjoyment which, in our innermost being, denies us homeostasis” (Daly, 1999, p. 230).

The unfinished project of democracy

The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered and rediscovered, remade and reorganised (Dewey, 1937 [1987], p. 182)

As both a concept and a practice, democracy has clearly enjoyed a long life, reaching back at least to Ancient Greece. But ancient democracy was fundamentally different to modern versions in that the former was ‘direct’, with the governed – so long as they were male citizens and not female citizens or children or slaves – involved in the decisions of government, whereas modern democracy is indirect, or representative, democracy (Cartledge, 2016). Throughout its long history, democracy has, of course, had its critics. Plato criticised Athenian democracy for undermining good government by pandering to the ignorant poor, while in twentieth century critics such as Walter Lippmann (1922, 1925) attacked modern representative democracy on similarly elitist grounds, arguing that the complexity of society coupled with the expert knowledge needed for competent decision making rendered the ideal of representative democracy impossible. Echoing Plato’s call to restrict the business of government to the wise elders, Lippmann argued that experienced administrators and qualified insiders, such as industrial leaders, were best placed to run the affairs of the state. Dewey (1927) criticised Lippmann, suggesting that his recommendation to replace participatory democracy with a technocracy of experts reflected a failure of political imagination. In particular, Dewey believed that Lippmann’s arguments about the role of the media in the manufacture of consent in modern democracies underestimated the potential of a progressive education system to contribute to the creation of a truly democratic public sphere comprising institutions in which people would be enculturated into democracy through participation in democratic processes of deliberation and decision-making.

Lippmann’s contributions had a significant impact, however, prompting the convening of the 1938 Colloque Walter Lippmann, an international congress organised by philosopher Louis Rougier and held in Paris to discuss Lippmann’s ideas. Attended by, amongst others, Friedrich Hayek and Ludwig von Mises, the Colloque was a forerunner to the post WWII forum, the Mont Pèlerin Society. Indeed,

the loose body of beliefs now known as neoliberalism² can be traced at least as far back as the inaugural meeting of the Mont Pèlerin Society (MPS) in 1947 where, in the comparatively tranquil setting of the Swiss village of Vevey, Friedrich Hayek and his fellow Mont Pèlerin Society members – including such familiar names as Karl Popper and Milton Friedman – envisaged, and began preparing for, an ensuing battle of ideas over the coming generation (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009). This was a battle framed by Hayek (1944) as one between freedom and serfdom. For Hayek, the main threat to freedom, and the individualism on which freedom, in his view, depended, was posed by collectivism and central planning, including not only by the distant, if living, reality of Soviet-style communism but much closer to home in the contemporary liberal welfare economics represented in the US by the legacy of Roosevelt and in the UK by the agendas of Keynes and Beveridge (Tribe, 2009, p. 76). As he warned in the opening pages of *The road to serfdom*, “we have progressively abandoned that freedom in economic affairs without which personal and political freedom has never existed in the past” (1944, p. 10). Although marginal for several decades in the post-war years, the ideas promulgated through the Mont Pèlerin Society and its global networks found their political champions in Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher leading to “the accretion of neoliberal attitudes, imaginaries, and practices that have come to inform everyday life in the first few decades of the new millennium” (Mirowski, 2013, p. 90).

Neoliberal thinking is focused around the key democratic value of freedom, particularly freedom to choose and freedom to compete. Surveying the contemporary political landscape and the rise of populism, reflected in events such as the United Kingdom’s Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA, it is hard not to notice the prominence of references to democracy and related notions of freedom and sovereignty in the name of ‘the people’ whose ‘will’ must be respected. Yet at the same time, a fantasmatic discourse can be identified that we might characterise as a ‘yearning for yesterday’³ whose achievement is being blocked by

² The term ‘neoliberalism’ was one that these same scholars had elected to adopt at the Colloque Walter Lipmann, in Paris, 1938, in order to convey their sense of the need for a revived and reconstructed liberalism to meet the economic and political challenges of modern times (Davies, 2014; Polanyi, 1944).

³ See, for example, <https://global.handelsblatt.com/opinion/turkeys-yearning-for-yesterday-750302>

nefarious others – EU officials in the case of Brexit and mainstream politicians in the case of Trump. Indeed, reflecting on recent politics developments highlights the relevance of Paul Hoggett’s comment on how pervasive the past is in the present: “how the premodern (and particularly the sacred, magical and mythical) constantly inserts itself into the body of the modern: in nationalism and the myth of the chosen people, in the renewed vigour of modern charismatics, [and] in the millenarianism of totalitarian ideologies” (2015, p. 175). The lure of a fantasmatic return to the past is lies at the heart of calls to ‘take back control’ or to ‘make America great again’.

The rise of backward looking forms of populism has been described as fundamentally anti-democratic⁴. But at the same time, contemporary populism serves as a powerful critique of the limits of contemporary forms of democratic politics⁵ by exposing the gap between official ideologies and felt reality, between the ideal and the lived reality of democracy; indeed, this gap reminds us that “what democracy might mean, or the range of possibilities democracy is meant to encompass, remains unclear, to say the least” (Dean, 2009, p. 75). Dean goes on to note – and it gets worse – how “real, existing democracies privilege the wealthy. As they install, extend, and protect neoliberal capitalism, they exclude, exploit, and oppress the poor, all the while promising that everyone wins” (p. 76). This trick is achieved in ‘real’ democracies by placing certain economic fundamental principles and policies – regarding, for instance, profit, competition, growth, investment – off-limits, as far as democratic disagreement and debate are concerned. Thus, contingent policy choices are often justified through the deployment of ‘common sense’ language; the policy decision to impose austerity, for instance, is defended in terms of addressing the need to ‘balance the books’, despite the fact that a significant consequence of the policy is highly ideological, i.e. the redistribution of wealth to the already wealthy. With key economic fundamentals secured from political intervention, capitalists and plutocrats of all political persuasion can extoll the virtues of democracy, safe in the knowledge that their wealth and privilege are assured.

⁴ <https://newrepublic.com/article/135757/anti-democratic-urge>

⁵ <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/12/populism-vs-post-democracy/>

This situation has led a number of recent commentators, such as Colin Crouch (2004), to describe our current era in terms of a ‘post democracy’, characterized by an increase in the volume of democratic rhetoric alongside a series of assaults on the core themes of democratic society rights, equality, freedom and popular sovereignty. In this sense, democracy has been ‘disenchanted’ by economics, with competitiveness in terms of wealth creation as the overriding criterion by which any political program is now judged (Davies, 2014). Or as Wendy Brown puts it,

insofar as economization of the political and suffusion of public discourse with governance eliminate the categories of both the demos and sovereignty, the value – even the intelligibility – of popular sovereignty is rubbed out. Economization replaces a political lexicon with a market lexicon. Governance replaces a political lexicon with a management lexicon (p. 207).

If this wasn’t bad enough, the rise of extremism in various guises can be linked to the replacement of politics by economics and performativity, both of which privilege matters of efficiency over questions of purpose. As Terry Eagleton notes, “extremism is among other things a reaction to a politics which has grown vacuously managerial” (Eagleton, 2006, p. 55). Over time, as people see no opportunity for airing grievances or addressing core concerns, they are likely to become susceptible to political rhetoric that identifies a convenient (and often powerless) other, such as refugees or immigrants, who can be blamed for their woes. Indeed, the appeal of popular rightwing parties can be understood in similar fashion, in terms of a desire to derive enjoyment from the transgressing the limitations imposed by democracy, such as those established by ‘political correctness’ and deriving enjoyment from attributing blame and responsibility to the demonized other. The supporters of populist parties such as UKIP want to see themselves as rebellious and victimised nationalists seeking redress, not as magnanimous, obedient or elite ones (McGowan, 2013), and populist leaders, such as Nigel Farage, Marine Le Pen and Donald Trump, achieve success by seeming to embody this transgressive enjoyment though their opposition to government elites. Yet “what the opponents of government would have, rather than a democracy, is the total community in which separate identity is lost. And this total community is imagined to be the way, as adults, we can return to the primitive world

of seamless gratification” (Levine, 2017, p. 116). As Levine goes on to note, “democracy can have no place in fantasies of this kind” (p. 116).

In this sense, it can be argued that the rise of neoliberal performativity has provided both nationalist sentiment and racist violence with newfound legitimacy, embodying what Henry Giroux and others describe as ‘proto-fascism’, i.e. an ideology and a set of social practices that scorn the present “while calling for a revolution that rescues a deeply anti-modernist past as a way to revolutionize the future” (Giroux, 2004, p. 16). Such co-implication of democratic governments in anti-democratic practices led Slavoj Žižek, as long ago as 2001, to comment that democracy should now be considered a reactionary term and argue that it “is more and more a false issue, a notion so discredited by its predominant use that, perhaps one should take the risk of abandoning it to the enemy” (Žižek, 2001, p. 123).

Yet Žižek’s provocative statement ignores the fact that democracy has always been a paradoxical term, as the young Marx knew when he contrasted actually existing democracy, involving the bureaucratic administration of the state, with democratic self-determination: “it is self-evident that all forms of state have democracy as their truth and for that reason are untrue to the extent that they are not democracy” (Marx, 1975, p. 89). John Keane (2009, p. 868) also highlights the paradoxical qualities of democracy when he insists, “democracy champions not the Rule of the People – that definition of democracy belongs in more than one way to the Age of Monarchy and the Era of Dictatorship and Total Power – but the rule that nobody should rule”. Chantal Mouffe (2000) brings a poststructuralist sensibility to the democratic paradox, noting how the self-sufficient unity of the demos is impossible to the extent that it relies on plurality – on forging ‘unum’ from ‘pluribus’ – and on the establishment of boundaries between inclusion and exclusion. Dewey himself recognized the paradoxical status of democracy as an ideal incapable of realization, noting that “democracy in this sense is not a fact and never will be” (1998, p. 295).

From this perspective, democracy is not so much the expression of the ‘will of the people’, but rather, something that emerges “when we experience the ultimate groundlessness of political power itself, when we experience the absence of any foundational social authority making itself felt” (McGowan, 2013, p. 194). It arises

when we recognize the absence of any metaphysical foundation underpinning society, thereby acknowledging the latter's divided nature, and consequently assume responsibility for our social and political organization. Indeed, in articulating her notion of the fundamentally antagonistic and divided nature of the demos and the impossibility of democratic unity, Mouffe draws on Lacanian arguments about the irreducibility of the Real which dooms any political project based around symbolic articulation of the 'good' to failure (pp. 137-140). In contrast to either the populist fantasy of re-discovering national unity or the neoliberal substitution of a technically-oriented economics for politics, this requires a democratic politics that "does not dream of an impossible reconciliation because it acknowledges not only that the multiplicity of ideas of the good is irreducible but also that antagonism and violence are ineradicable" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 139). Rather than pursuing grand schemes for creating a harmonious society or installing the perfect democracy, the questions move to the more troubling register: how to manage the constitutive antagonism at the kernel of the individual and society? what to do with ineradicable violence? As John Rajchman (1991, p. 70) asks, "what sort of community can we have as divided subjects?" Acknowledging, rather than suppressing, these questions has to be a starting point for democratic politics that is willing to forego fantasies of totalisation or reconciliation and to see itself as an unfinished and unfinalizable project. But the specters of dislocation, antagonism and emptiness are not unique to democracy – they also haunt education.

Education and the lure of fantasy

It is perhaps no accident that as the social and economic support structures afforded by the post WWII welfare state have been dismantled, education has come to occupy a pivotal position in political discourse – think of Tony Blair's catchcall 'Education, Education, Education' – elevated as the key to societal fulfilment and revered as the path to personal advancement. Yet like democracy, education is in danger of becoming, at best, a somewhat vague term, emptied of meaning by being overfilled with multiple and contradictory associations and expectations, including, amongst other things, empowerment and repression, individuation and socialisation, emancipation and regulation, inquiry and transmission, creativity and standardisation. Education can be all of these things but it cannot be them all at one and the same time.

In addition, like democracy, education today seems to be entangled in the lures of a backward-looking politics of fantasy. We see this for instance in the calls by UK Prime Minister Theresa May for a return to grammar schools and selective education. We see it in Victorian notions that children should be seen and not heard that are taking on new life in schools where regimes of silence is imposed in classrooms and corridors in the USA and the UK. And we see it in the return to the disciplinary logic of ‘spare the rod and spoil the child’ that is finding new expression in punitive and authoritarian regimes that proudly announce their ‘three strikes and you’re out’, ‘zero-tolerance’ culture as part of the militarisation of schools (Berliner & Glass, 2014; Nguyen, 2017; Robbins, 2014). These and other disturbing developments, which are justified by references to ‘closing the gap’ and ‘raising aspirations’, raise questions and highlight issues regarding the relationship between democracy and education; but they also raise questions about how education might be inflected in a new key, involving more democratic, less authoritarian, discourses. How might it come to be characterised by more egalitarian and participatory, as opposed to hierarchical and exclusionary, practices? Or is the Deweyan vision of schools as engines of social democracy just another illusion – a cruelly optimistic fantasy through which we reconcile ourselves as educators to our part in its brutal machinery?

Certainly, surveying the authoritarian strains in historical manifestations of education – at least in the form of formal schooling – we might characterise it as a form of ‘benign violence’ (Allen, 2014). Contemporary neoliberalised versions of education sustain this violence in the form of relentless circuits of audit, performativity and competition, supported by the resurgent punitive disciplinary regimes noted above.

However, thinking of education as something that exceeds the institutional limitations of formal schooling invites more open, and optimistic, definitions such as that provided by Peter Moss (2014, p. 93), for whom education

involves the creation or realisation of the self as a subject, not following a predetermined route but creating something new and unique; it strives to bring about a subject able to think and speak for herself; but it is also about the self in relation to others and the wider society, so that self-realisation is not confused with autonomy but presumes interdependence, obligation and responsibility.

If we seek an education gestured towards in this definition – one that is open to possibility and oriented towards inquiry and the discovery of new knowledge and insights, rather than merely oriented towards the transmission of the already known – then, as Dewey realised, a democratic politics, with all the caveats noted above as to what democracy might mean, is the only form commensurate with the very ontology of possibility (Amsler, 2015; Donald, 1992). At the same time, as noted already above, I am mindful of the tendency common to both democracy and education to fall short of the expectations and how, in the case of education, “inflated promises about both the fulfilment of the child and the development of society are endlessly broken in practice” (Donald, 1992, p. ix). This is, in part, a reflection of the lack of fit between the individual and the social, meaning that “the self cannot be perfectly adapted to social norms, even through ever more pervasive techniques of education, government, or therapy” (Donald, 1992, p. 3). In one sense, this suggests that education is a doomed enterprise, redeemable only through violence, fantasy or some combination of the two, though I would also note that both educational outcomes and practices tend to be more democratic in more equal societies (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009), which highlights the importance of political and economic democracy as a precondition to educational democracy (Blacker, 2013). But one way we might make education less oppressive and authoritarian than it has so often been is to recognize and seek to undo the power of the fantasies that we use to frame education.

To put this another way, right-wing populism may be locked in a fantasy scenario, the non-realizability of which can conveniently be blamed on a number of scapegoats, from immigrants to metropolitan elites. But those of us who might consider ourselves progressive critics of contemporary democratic capitalism and its deleterious influence on education, are not immune to fantasmatic thinking, involving, in part, the overvaluing of belief and the turning of a blind eye to action (Fisher, 2009). Thus, for example, we believe that our identities are reflected in our anti-capitalist beliefs rather than in our thoroughly capitalist behaviours as consumers and actors in the structures of capitalism. Similarly, in relation to the obsessive-compulsive circuit of testing, assessment and data collection that much education has become reduced to, the system is reproduced through the activities and procedures of schooling and education in which we play an active part, rather than through our beliefs; indeed to the extent

that we hold fast in our beliefs that this form of education is a charade, for which we pin the blame on convenient ‘others’ like Michael Gove, we may secure the intellectual distance that enables us to continue to participate in and reproduce the neoliberal regime of schooling and society. We may also derive a frisson of enjoyment from our students’ or our institutions’ performance in the derided circuits/circus of performativity, just as we do from our publication and citation data. In this sense, much of our anti-neoliberal writing in education and social science share something of the hysterical tenor – written with the reassuring safety that our words will not change the world – as the more overtly hysterical complaints of the popular right.

An initial step then in resisting the neoliberalisation of education requires us to accept our insertion into its machinery at the level of fantasy, enjoyment and desire and our complicity in terms of our actions. This is no easy task, however. Indeed, far from bringing about the changes we ‘believe’ in, extracting ourselves from the neoliberal machine may risk our coherence as educational and professional subjects leading to a literal crisis of subjectivity. Fantasies and fatmastic thinking may limit our movement by “holding us captive to the idea that the basic structure of our lives is determined in advance rather than constituted in the process of living” but at the same time they cater to our need for a secure and reassuring sense of ourselves and our place in the world (Ruti, 2009, p. 101). Hence, traversing the fantasies associated with neoliberalism is not something individuals can realistically undertake alone.

Resistance requires a collective rather than a purely individual response. As Amy Allen reminds us, “what is missing is the realization that a possible way out of this attachment to subjection lies in collective social experimentation and political transformation, rather than a Nietzschean emphasis on the heroic individual” (Allen, 2008, pp. 11-12).

Democracy and education in spite of it all: Recognising and traversing fantasies

The intensified form of neoliberalism known as austerity represents not just a fiscal, but an intellectual, form of discipline, one that stultifies the individual and collective imagination with its insistence that there is no alternative to the stratifying and competitive logics of the market (De Lissovoy, 2015). In this sense, neoliberal political economy is its own form of education, training subjects in the fatalistic

discipline of capitulation to the powerful aura of the market in order to embrace what Mark Fisher (2009) describes as capitalist realism – a world in which capitalism is the only reality and in which there are no alternatives.

But if neoliberalism is all about individualism and competition, democracy, to the extent that it is centred on the common, offers a potential counter-discourse. Whilst neoliberalism is an imaginary of scarcity and limitations, democracy offers an imaginary of possibilities. The challenge for education is to articulate an alternative vision, and find an alternative voice, to the restrictive and reductive lessons offered by neoliberal austerity. To achieve this requires the imaginative deployment of conceptual, intellectual and practical resources. But, as already noted, it also requires a frank confrontation with our own complicity in, for example, the objectification and stratification of people – our students – through assessment practices, which translate activity into hierarchically arranged grades, thereby reifying and reproducing the fetishisation of numbers in the form of the score and the result. It also requires recognition of our ideological and material investment in the cruel optimism of so much education, embodied in slogans and policies like *Every Child Matters* and *No Child Left Behind* – for clearly, not every child matters to schools, or at least not equally, while many children are left behind as a consequence of the stratifying and categorising policies purporting to ensure their success.

Yet we cannot hope to grapple with these issues until we see our students, and particularly ourselves, not only in relation to conscious knowledge, but also as subjects of unconscious desire. Disconcertingly – for educators like to see themselves as champions of justice – this requires recognizing ourselves as subjects who “have an unconscious investment in the power of social authority that leads to a surplus of obedience, an obedience that goes further than the authority itself requires” (McGowan, 2015, p. 13), notwithstanding our protestations to the contrary. It also means letting go of notions of promethean agency in relation to education, teaching and learning and instead coming to embrace such seemingly counterintuitive notions as ‘passive education’, including “learning from the aspects of experience that structural forms of education *do not acknowledge*” (Bojesen, 2016, p. 7) and allowing our institutionalised identities to become, at least partly, unmoored and untethered. It

means acknowledging, and to some degree embracing, the constitutive role of lack and loss in our being.

For ironically, our primordial loss – our exile from access to unmediated reality – that comes as the price of our constitution as subjects of language and the signifier, is also a precondition for care. In Kaja Silverman’s words “only if we pay this exorbitant price early in our lives can things and people ‘matter’ to us” (2000, pp. 38-39). Specifically, we need to recognise the distinction between the sort of narcissistic desire, which seeks to iron out the inconsistencies and complexities of the world and which views others as objects for bolstering a tightly-held image of the self, and a less self-centred desire which seeks to re-experience the pain-tinged enjoyment of its originary loss through its receptivity “to the resurfacing in the present and future of what has been – not as an exercise in solitary narcissistic solipsism, but rather as an extension in ever new directions of his [sic] capacity to care” (Silverman, 2000, p. 62). This latter form comprises “something like an ethics of desire – an ethics grounded in a passion for symbolization, in a delight in the manifold and ever new forms that the past can assume” (2000, p. 62). As Mouffe (2000, p. 139) argues, such an ethics, “which strives to create among us a new form of bond, a bond that recognises us as divided subjects”, is particularly suited to a pluralist democratic conception of politics. But critically, if it is to traverse the fantasies that keep us tethered to ideologies of limitless growth, exponential accumulation, unfettered access and harmonious reconciliation educators must also be willing to entertain the uncomfortable surprises and jolts by which we are brought face to face with our unconscious desires and our complicity in practices and processes which we would prefer to disavow. For such a psychoanalytic ethics, neither democracy nor education can save or redeem us; but we can at least try and resist approaching them with our ‘eyes wide shut’, to quote the title of Stanley Kubrick’s final film (1999), by embracing our inevitable loss and by learning to enjoy what we don’t have and don’t know. It means not *quite* giving up on democracy and education, in spite of it all.

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