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Education and Democratization: Moving Beyond the Service of Goods to Write the Poetry of the Future

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ABSTRACT

2016 marks the centenary of *Democracy and Education*, in which Dewey argued for the mutually dependent relationship linking a legitimate education system and a thriving democracy. A century later, it seems, democracy and education have been decoupled, with both undermined by developments such as growing inequality, declining participation and trust in democratic processes, techno-rationalism that reframes political issues in terms of efficiency, and growing political extremism. Meanwhile, recent years have seen the increasing grip of market-based principles and techniques of measurement and evaluation as state-endorsed norms across various sectors and domains of society, including education, reflecting an instrumentalism Lacan described in terms of 'the service of goods'. Against this background, this paper draws on resources from political and psychoanalytic theory to rethink and reanimate the links between education and democracy, thereby encouraging and emboldening educators to, in David Harvey's words, "write the poetry of their own future".

Keywords: *democracy, education, politics, Dewey*

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INTRODUCTION

Democracy is currently at the forefront of many of our minds. This is partly the result of recent referenda, on Brexit and Scottish independence, not to mention the election in 2016 of the controversial figure of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States of America. But it is also due to a pervasive sense that, in one way or another, our democratic systems are not functioning today as well as they could or should. The same could also be said of our education systems, which, here and in many other contexts, seem to have been hijacked by the juggernauts of standards and accountability and which seem to alienate, rather than inspire, many of our teachers and students. In this talk, I want to explore the links between these two trends. I do this by looking at education and democracy through the insights offered by an unlikely third conceptual space, namely Lacanian psychoanalytic theory and its uptake in political and literary theory.

At first glance, democracy, education and psychoanalysis may seem like a rather unlikely and eclectic mixture. Part of my justification for bringing them together derives from Freud's (1937) identification of governing, educating and psychoanalysing as three impossible professions. But more positively, a common characteristic of democracy, education and psychoanalysis is a desire for freedom – freedom of thought and speech, action and association. More specifically, they each offer at least *potential* sites "by which we question and deconstruct the tyranny of imposed meanings in favour of expressive freedom" (Gentile & Macrone 2016: XXIV). With this in mind, the paper will comprise three sections: the first section offers an examination democracy. The discussion will bring to bear ideas from psychoanalytic theory, including notions of enjoyment and fantasy, as well as literary theorist Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism. The second section will turn to explore education, again bringing notions of enjoyment, fantasy and cruel optimism to bear on the discussion and introducing the notion of agonistic, as opposed to procedural, democracy. The third section will briefly share a few examples of research into prefigurative practices that seek to enact and usher in alternative realities, as well as touching on psychoanalytically inspired ideas from the work of Kaja Silveman of passionate resymbolisation and world spectatorship, which may help us to cultivate openness to the fissures and dislocations through which a democracy that can never be institutionalised may enter into our practices.

DEMOCRACY UNDER THREAT

Democracy may be at the forefront of our minds now – but so it was for John Dewey, when he asserted the mutually dependent relationship linking a legitimate education system and a thriving democracy in his 1916 book, *Democracy and Education*. A century later, 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). Indeed, some have argued that we are living in a 'post-democratic' society (Crouch 2004), something reflected in a number of critical developments.

These developments include the growing inequality in wealth and income that has accompanied the spread of neoliberalism. Neoliberalism is, of course, a contested term and one, interestingly, that is almost only ever used in a pejorative sense. As a 'shorthand' definition, however, I would endorse the one offered by political economist, Will Davies (2014), who reads neoliberalism as 'the disenchantment of politics by economics'. But returning to inequality, increasing gaps between rich and poor were recently highlighted as a threat to economic growth and social stability by the OECD (2014) and the IMF – hardly the most radical or revolutionary of organisations – as well as by authors such as Joseph Stiglitz (2013), Thomas Piketty (2014), Antony Atkinson, (2015), Danny Dorling (2011, 2014) and Yannis Varoufakis (2016), to name just a few.

The growth in economic inequality has been accompanied by a resurgence of the influence of money in politics and by what Owen Jones (2015) describes as a series of revolving doors connecting positions of power with access to wealth. Not surprisingly perhaps, these developments have been accompanied by declining participation in democratic processes and diminishing trust in political actors in

Western and other contexts (Mair 2013). This declining faith in politics has been directly linked to the outcome of the Brexit vote and the recent election of Donald Trump, but it can also be seen in the related trend of growing extremism in Europe, North America, Australia and elsewhere, including religious extremism and growing support for extremist political parties, particularly those of the popular right.

Underlying the frustration that these developments reflect, is the translation of democratic deliberation and decision making into techno-rational matters, framed in terms of instrumentalism and efficiency and expressed in the impersonal language of targets and indicators. Today's democracies work, in this sense, by placing certain economic fundamentals, regarding growth, investment, profit and competition, off-limits, as far as disagreement and debate are concerned, so of course the expanding cohorts of wealthy plutocrats extoll the virtues of democracy – after all, it can't hurt them, since it has largely been tamed and domesticated. As Wendy Brown (2006, 2015) has argued, recent decades have witnessed a process of de-democratization, whereby democracy is emptied of its substance without being formally abolished.

The increasing grip of neoliberalism's instrumentalist ethic that elevates market-based principles and techniques of measurement and evaluation and enshrines them as state-endorsed norms, is evident across all sectors and domains of society from health care to housing and transport. And, of course, we are only too familiar with this instrumentalist ethic in education. The measurement and evaluation of the performance of education systems, schools, teachers and students in relation to tests such as PISA and SATS, or in relation to the targets and indicators of performance utilised by OFSTED, has had the consequence of narrowing the curriculum in order to concentrate resources on improving performance outcomes. But, as I and many others have argued, it has also led to the decontestation and depoliticisation of education as a field, as the means of evaluating education performance have become ends in themselves. Questions about the nature and purposes of education are thus removed from democratic purview, raising questions about the vitality of contemporary links between democracy and education (Biesta 2013; Clarke 2012, In press). For as Dewey argued, "democracy cannot flourish where the chief influences in selecting subject matter of instruction are utilitarian ends narrowly conceived" (1963: 209).

Working hand-in-hand with neoliberalism's instrumentalist ethic and its calculative performance regimes, is a competitive logic that has become enshrined as the core principle underlying the progress of both individuals and societies (Dardot & Laval 2013; Davies, 2014). Drawing inspiration from Herbert Spencer and his misappropriation of Darwin's ideas of natural selection, neoliberals have insisted on the insertion of competitive mechanisms into all areas of institutional life in the name of 'driving up standards' as the catch phrase has it. This is despite the fact that for Darwin, as Patrick Tort (2008) has shown, civilisation was characterised by social instincts such as empathy and collaboration that are capable of neutralising and overcoming the elimination inherent in natural selection (Dardot & Laval 2013: 33). The unfortunate effect of neoliberalism's Spencerian 'survival of the fittest' discourse has been to

delegitimise aid and assistance to the disenfranchised who are deemed to be responsible for, and hence can be abandoned to, their fate.

At this point, we might well concur with Jodi Dean's comment that "what democracy might mean, or the range of possibilities democracy is meant to encompass, remains unclear, to say the least" (Dean 2009: 75). She goes on to note how – and it gets worse – "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 flagrant contradiction between the false promises of inclusion and access to 'the good life', on the one hand, and the reality of growing inequality and disenfranchisement, on the other, is captured powerfully by Lauren Berlant's notion of cruel optimism. Berlant uses this term to refer to a situation where we are exhorted – by society and by our own internalisation of societal norms – to follow courses of action and pursue aspirations that are not only unlikely to be realised by which are actually harmful to our well-being. Everyday examples of cruel optimism are the fad diets, which hold out the promise of a 'new you'. Not only are these promises unfulfilled, but also, our attachments to them are typically toxic to our physical and emotional health.

In relation to democracy, it could also be argued that it too serves as a form of cruel optimism that repeatedly fails to deliver on the hopes, which are not only embodied in, but also incited by, the rhetoric and slogans of our politicians. In this sense, like politics more widely, 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 (2015: 207).

If this wasn't bad enough, the replacement of politics by economics and performativity, both of which privilege matters of efficiency over questions of purpose, can be linked to the rise of extremism in various guises. As Terry Eagleton notes, extremism "is among other things a reaction to a politics which has grown vacuously managerial" (Eagleton 2006: 55). In the UK context, the recent Brexit campaign 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: 16). The 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: 123).

But then, democracy has always been a paradoxical term as the young Marx knew when he wrote "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: 89). Chantal Mouffe brings a poststructuralist sense to this paradox, noting how the self-sufficient unity of the demos is impossible to the extent that it relies on plurality and on the establishment of boundaries between inclusion and exclusion. In this regard, one certainty in relation to Brexit was that it revealed in the starkest terms the divided and fragmented nature of the demos in the UK. But Mouffe also highlights the need to establish limits to popular sovereignty in any democracy, in the name of democratic values such as liberty, and the irreconcilable tensions between freedom and equality.

Wendy Brown, on the other hand, rejects the idea of limits to popular sovereignty, noting that "democracy is an empty form that can be filled with a variety of bad content and instrumentalized by purposes ranging from nationalist xenophobia to racial colonialism [as we saw in the invasion of Iraq], from heterosexist to capitalist hegemony", though she also notes that "it can be mobilized within the same regimes to counter these purposes" (p. 209). In contrast to Wendy Brown, for whom democracy equates to the rule of the demos, John Keane (2009: 868) 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". For Keane, as for French political philosopher, Jacques Ranciere, democracy involves an empty place of power that, once occupied, becomes something other. Theorists like Wendy Brown, John Keane and Jacques Ranciere capture something of the way that, at its core, democracy has always been *excessive* – replete with radical and unsettling forces that challenge notions of balance and orderliness. It was for this reason that democracy was viewed by ancient philosophers like Plato with deep suspicion, as something excessive and threatening to the rule of the wise elders.

In psychoanalytic terms, this excess is associated with enjoyment, or *jouissance* – an intense form of pleasure/pain associated with going beyond, or transgressing, limits or constraints. This partly explains why activities like smoking and drinking offer satisfaction of a different order to, say, eating broccoli. The former are tinged with risk and potential sacrifice in a way that the latter just isn't. 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' – UKIPP supporters want to see themselves as rebellious and victimised nationalists, not as magnanimous, obedient or elite ones (McGowan 2013). Figures such as Nigel Farage and Donald Trump, achieve success by seeming to embody this transgressive enjoyment. But why should transgression, risk and sacrifice provide enjoyment?

For Lacan, our entry into the symbolic order of language as subjects brings the loss of our pre-subjective sense of oneness with the world. We thereby become unnatural beings, remaining forever at a remove from the natural world of which can never have *im*mediate, or un-mediated, experience. Signification alienates us from our environment by inserting a layer of mediation into all our experience. Even something as seemingly straight forward as an apple is entangled in discourses and associations, whether of health, technology or original sin, which

makes our encounter with it different from that of the animal that just eats it. Of course, as subjects, we never experienced this supposedly lost state of oneness with the world that the animal enjoys, because it was pre-subjective – prior to our formation as social beings of language and the law. 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. Indeed, one way of understanding cultural phenomena like education is as social strategies for managing enjoyment/jouissance, in part by converting these into less unruly forms, such as the desire for approval and belonging.

With the rise of capitalism, and democracy's suturing with the latter as 'democratic capitalism', its excessive nature and its capacity to serve as a source of transgressive enjoyment, has been largely domesticated. This reduces the scope for identifying democracy with enjoyment, leaving support for democracy reliant on people's more limited capacity for identifying with the good. Meanwhile, as we see in China, and arguably in the neoliberal West too, capitalism is less and less reliant on democracy in order to 'deliver the goods', with the promise of satisfaction provided by 'excessive' consumption rendering democracy 'excessive' to capitalism's needs. Indeed, capitalism operates at a fundamental level by holding out the promise of future satisfaction and thus of overcoming our constitutive alienation from the world. In other words, neoliberal capitalism frees us from freedom's burden by directing our desires towards compliance and consumption (McGowan 2016). It thus offers us the promise of redemption through the accumulation of assets, income and goods – or in education, of knowledge and qualifications. Yet it does so in ways that keep us as subjects clinging tightly to our own ongoing dissatisfaction, enslaved to the fantasmatic promise of future fulfilment (McGowan 2016). For enough is never enough – as Mick Jagger knew, satisfaction is the one thing we cannot get – and in this sense, neoliberal capitalism never delivers and offers only a 'bounced cheque' (Vadolas 2012). Ironically, this is also the key to capitalism's staying power as a mode of economic, political and social organisation – *enough can never be enough* and so the system, fuelled by the promise of future satisfaction, just keeps on going, endlessly searching for the perfect commodity which promises an end to the search.

NOSTALGIA AND FANTASY IN DEMOCRACY AND EDUCATION

Aside from the future, the other location of unrealisable fantasmatic satisfaction is the past. In this sense, looking back at Brexit and surveying the post-Brexit political landscape 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 [such as Trump] and in the millenarianism of totalitarian ideologies" (2015: 175). Indeed, the mythical evocations of extremist and populist forms of politics are a key source of their appeal in that they seem to offer a sense of stability and belonging that capitalism does not, and more importantly, *cannot* provide.

The same nostalgia seems to haunt education. We see this, for instance, in Theresa May's push for a return to grammar schools and selective education; we see it in the way Victorian notions that children should be seen and not heard have taken on a new life in schools where silence is imposed in classrooms and corridors; and we see it in the way the disciplinary logic of 'spare the rod and spoil the child' has found new expression in punitive and authoritarian regimes that proudly announce their 'three strikes and you're out', 'zero-tolerance' culture. These and other developments raise questions, not only around the relationship between democracy and education, but about the very meaning of education.

Let's turn then to this question of what we might understand by education and how it might or might not relate to democracy. Historical and contemporary education – at least in the form of formal schooling – might be characterised as a form of what Ansgar Allen (2014) describes as 'benign violence'. In schools, time is segmented, and space is partitioned; knowledge is divided and standardised, while bodies are disciplined and uniformed. And though we might like to think of schools as communities of inquiry, Coffield and Williamson (2011) remind us that neoliberalism has overseen the recasting of far too many as little more than exam factories focused producing the best grades possible; if this is understandable, given the pressures of contemporary policy, it is regrettable nonetheless. In Foucauldian terms, schooling can be read as a technology for producing docile subjects through the application of the means of correct training and their internalisation in the form of technologies of the self. We might indeed ask why anyone should expect schools to be spaces of democracy, given the role of schools in reproducing and unequal social structure and their history of training individuals to accept their insertion into a hierarchical society. But in Foucauldian terms, power relations are never total and may elicit defiance or resistance, rather than compliance; agitation for democratisation is one form such resistance may take, though democratisation, in turn, may result in retrenchment, resentment or paralysis in addition to or instead of inspiration (Fendler 2010: 199).

Schooling can also be read as another version of cruel optimism that binds and attaches subjects to their own disappointment (Moore & Clarke 2016). We are told that every child matters and that all have the potential to succeed. As teachers, we enter the profession intent on making a difference to individual lives and contributing to social improvements. Embodying this optimistic discourse, the Conservative party's March 2016 White Paper envisioned a scenario in which we would find educational excellence everywhere. Yet systems of schooling are governed by the same logics of scarcity and competition that we see in capitalism. Averages require performances to be deemed below, as well as above, average. The condition of success for some is the necessarily failure of others. Increasing success rates bring predictable accusations of grade inflation, while many of those acquiring degrees find themselves saddled with debt and facing employment conditions requiring far less knowledge and skill, and offering far less remuneration, than their expensive qualifications would suggest they might expect to command.

This pessimistic view of schooling is reflected in the work of David Blacker in his (2013) book, *The falling rate of learning: Education and the neoliberal endgame.* Writing from a US perspective, Blacker argues that, as a result of

automation and the offshoring of many formerly middle-class jobs, Western governments no longer feel the need to support the ideal of universal public education. Blacker argues that the push for privatisation and deregulation, the loading of students with increasing levels of debt and the silencing of students' voices are all forms of educational eliminationism – a concept with intentional echoes of the Nazi party's policy of eliminating Europe's Jewish population.

On the other hand, as David Harvey notes, massive investment in education is the sine non qua for capitalist competiveness and has been a key feature of, for example, China's remarkable recent development. The same is true for other Asian economies like Singapore. Education is thus, as Harvey puts it, "in the cross-hairs of capitalism's concerns" (2014: 187), required in order to meet its need for a skilled workforce. But education around the world has become a big business in its own right and capitalism is, as ever, keen to pay for as little of it as possible. Hence, the trends towards privatisation and the growth of fee paying are likely to shift the burden of education onto the populace in these contexts, as it has in many neoliberal ones. This has the additional consequence, as we have witnessed in England, of replacing democratic control of schooling by the demos and its elected representatives with control by private interests.

However, thinking of education something that exceeds the institutional limitations of formal schooling invites more open, and potentially optimistic, definitions such as that provided by Peter Moss, for whom education is about realising potentiality:

> education is holistic; it 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 (Moss 2014: 93).

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 – we should heed Sarah Amsler's argument that, in contrast to the realpolitik world of neoliberalism, a democratic politics is the only form commensurate with the very ontology of possibility (Amsler 2015). But as we have seen, democracy can all too easily become business as usual directed towards the service of goods, reduced to abstract rights, formal legalism and seeking to occupy a mythical 'center ground' of 'middle England'. This is the utilitarian, pragmatist ethic, which deems radical change as unrealistic and which reduces democracy to regular elections, popular representation and the protection of certain freedoms.

An alternative to this procedural or liberal model of democracy, can be found in agonistic models of democracy (e.g. Connolly 1995, 2002, 2004; Honig 2001; Mouffe 2000). Agonistic democracy challenges the sedimented grip of the status quo by elevating what its theorists refer to as *constituent* power – the power of the democratic body of the people – over *constituted* power, or the institutional and procedural forms that currently hold sway. In addition, agonistic democrats argue that meaningful democratic practice requires recognition of: a) the need to

engage a plurality of voices; b) the value of contestation and dissensus and; c) the inevitably tragic nature of life grounded in acknowledgement of human finitude and fallibility which entails that any choice or decision always comes at some cost, bringing losses alongside any gains (Wenman 2013). Agonistic democrats are hence alive to the disavowals of violence and denials of power relations that lurk within assertions of unity and consensus; they know that change can and does happen, but they are also aware that it often comes at significant personal and social cost.

As a result, for agonists, democracy is a far more vital matter than is often the case in popular media representations of politics in Western democracies. In political theorist, John Keane's words, "when democracy takes hold of people's lives, it gives them a glimpse of the contingency of things. They are injected with the feeling that the world can be other than it is – that situations can be countered, outcomes altered, people's lives changed through individual and collective action" (Keane 2009: 853).

But while the sense of optimism and possibility in such words is palpable, and while I would never want to urge the resigned fatalistic acceptance of the status quo in politics *or* education as necessary or inevitable, let alone desirable, it is equally important not to underestimate the challenges facing democracy and more democratic forms of education. Right-wing populism may be locked in a fantasy scenario, the non-realisability 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 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/jouissance 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.

COLLECTIVE EXPERIMENTATION AND TRANSFORMATION THROUGH PREFIGURATIVE PRACTICE

A first step then in resisting the neoliberalisation of education requires us to accept our insertion into its machinery at the level of 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, to extracting ourselves from the neoliberal machine may risk our coherence as educational and professional subjects leading to a literal crisis of subjectivity. Fantasies and fantasmatic 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 these fantasies cater to our need for a secure and reassuring sense of ourselves and our place in the world (Ruti 2009: 101). Hence, traversing the fantasies associated with neoliberalism is not something individuals can realistically undertake alone. Resistance requires a collective rather than an 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: 11-12).

The idea of collective social experimentation in the service of political transformation is captured in the notion of prefigurative practice articulated by Gramscian scholar, Carl Boggs, and taken up more recently in the work of Peter Moss and Michael Fielding in their book, *Radical education and the common school: A democratic alternative*. For Fielding and Moss, prefigurative practice is focused on profound educational and social change. It involves strategic action, which may begin with incremental steps, but which is infused with a spirit of transgression and is aimed at deeper, longer-term personal and institutional transformation.

I want to briefly share some examples of what may constitute prefigurative practices. The first is drawn from recent work that seeks to engage teachers in research projects in their school contexts (Hammersley-Fletcher, Clarke, & McManus in press). These projects were initially linked to school improvement plans but over time and with the support of the researchers, teachers gravitated towards projects that had more personal, as well as professional, significance in relation to them as biographic actors. The benefits of participation in the project for the teachers involved included: developing the confidence to ask uncomfortable questions and to elicit and engage *plural perspectives* in relation to these questions, thereby enlivening their own and their colleagues' professional practice and identities; an acceptance of difference, disagreement and contestation as constitutive and constructive elements in rethinking areas of policy and practice; and engagement in the cut and thrust of research without the expectation of finding any final or perfect solutions and with growing confidence that mistakes are part of the learning journey and not disasters.

A second example is drawn from the work of researchers from Vic University, Spain, who are working with schools in their region of Catalonia on a number of projects seeking to bring about more democratically oriented forms of schooling (Collet-Sabé 2017; Collet-Sabé & Tort 2015). One such project has involved seven schools that have sought, over the past two years, to improve the ways they work with parents and families. Specifically, they worked closely with families in an attempt move away from habitual discourses of parents and families as problems, and instead to become inclusive spaces for parents, families, students and teachers to work collaboratively together on shared projects and issues of

concern. These are just two small examples from practice and, as such, they cannot possibly do justice to the diverse work in a range of global contexts, such as post-Pinochet Chile, where educators are engaged in efforts to rethink and reanimate the relations between democracy and education.

As a conceptual complement to these examples, however, I want to briefly explore a way of theorising resistant action by way of a consideration of the ways in which the existential lack I highlighted earlier, might be linked to democratic agency via creativity and the (re)signification of beauty and care. The point I would make here, following Claudia Ruitenberg (2008), is that democracy can never be institutionalised and is never firmly 'in place' – rather, it enters to intervene, disrupt and reveal the unexpected, unanticipated or ignored.

As noted earlier, in Lacanian theory our emergence as subjects of language comes at the price of our loss of unmediated immersion in reality. But our subjectivity also brings with it the correlative creation of an unstaunchable, if largely unconscious, longing to return to this retroversively-envisaged homeland of harmonious oneness with the real. It is in this sense that Lacan argues that we are subjects of desire. Yet ironically, our primordial loss is also a precondition for care – in Kaja Silverman's words "only if we pay this exorbitant price [of exile from unmediated reality] early in our lives can things and people 'matter' to us" (2000: 38-39). By way of analogy, it is only because we are finite beings that our time in the world takes on urgency and our projects can assume value. If we were immortal there would be no particular point in doing anything.

Specifically, Silverman distinguishes between two forms of desire. The first is 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; this is the fantasmatic realm occupied by those who would take back control or make America great again. Silverman contrasts this with a less self-centred desire which seeks to re-experience the jouissance, or pain-tinged pleasure, 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" (p. 62), but rather as an extension, in ever new directions, of the capacity to care. 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" (p. 62). This notion of passionate resymbolisation is consonant with the emphasis on pluralism and contestation in the agonistic reading of democracy outlined above. It also resonates with Giorgio Agamben's notion of 'study', as the purposeless pursuit of knowledge for the useless pleasure, rather than the utility, that it brings. From this purview, the world is pregnant, not just with meaning, but, to quote Silverman again, "with *beauty"*. She goes on to argue, "our capacity to signify beauty has no limits. It is born of a loss which can never be adequately named, and whose consequence is, quite simply, the human imperative to engage in ceaseless signification" (p. 146). To be open to this human imperative in all students is to be open to the moments when, in Ruitenberg's terms, democracy may enter. But tellingly, in light of my earlier points about resistance requiring a social, rather than purely individual, stance, she argues that "only as a collectivity can we be equal to the demand, not only to find beauty in all of the world's forms, but to sing forever and in a constantly

new way the jubilant song of that beauty" (p. 146). This, surely, suggests that we have, at least the *potential* – to the degree that we are willing to acknowledge and embrace it in solidarity, if sometimes in disagreement, with others – to shape the world, as much as the world shapes us, and thus to fulfil the obligation Harvey claims we have 'to write the poetry of our own future'.

CONCLUSION: EDUCATION AND DEMOCRACY BEYOND 'THE SERVICE OF GOODS'

To conclude, then, 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 austerity 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.

In facing this scenario, we cannot take refuge, following the model of contemporary right wing populists, in the comfort of an imagined golden era of yesteryear, for there was no such golden era and even if there was the past cannot be recreated in the present. But this does not mean that the study of the past is futile for it surely has lessons to teach us. Indeed, past traditions and memories may serve as sources of inspiration that can be rethought and reworked.

My discussion has highlighted how democracy today has been tamed and domesticated through its suturing with capitalism. I have argued that, particularly in its more recent and draconian guise of austerity, neoliberalism comprises a form of (re)education that seeks to compel us to accept an economistic reading of the world and of ourselves as subjects within it – a worldview dominated by logics of scarcity and competition amongst individualistically conceived actors, be these individuals, institutions or nations. I have also suggested that subscribing to this worldview involves accepting a fantasmatic deterministic reading of ourselves and the world – one that crucially reduces our scope for critical thought and agentive action by encouraging us to equate neoliberal structures and strictures with reality itself. This has reduced the scope for democracy in education as schools are increasingly positioned as exam factories, operating in the interest of what Lacan described as the 'service of goods'. And just as capitalism promotes the fantasy that the next product or purchase will satisfy our desires by being 'it', so education and schooling hold out the promise of individual and social redemption through the accumulation of knowledge. I have also proposed that traversing this fantasy requires acknowledgement of the ways in which we are inserted into the machinery of neoliberalism at the levels of desire and action, rather than overly focusing on ideology as belief and being satisfied with a notion of resistance that is limited to this level.

The challenge for *democratic politics* is to articulate an alternative vision, and find an alternative voice, rather than repeating the restrictive and reductive lessons offered by neoliberal austerity. To achieve this requires the imaginative deployment of conceptual, intellectual and practical resources. The challenge for

critical educators lies in the way neoliberal logics pit individuals (be they students, teachers, schools, sectors or systems) against one another within a high-stakes environment; by placing them in something akin to the prisoner's dilemma, in which they literally have everything to lose, it thereby secures their attachment to their own subjection. Overcoming this challenge requires trust and collaboration, but it also requires a willingness to disagree and to accept that there are no perfect scenarios, which brings us back to the common ground of agonistic democracy and the possibilities for creative experimentation through prefigurative practice.

But it also brings us back to notions like love, at least when this admittedly knotty phenomenon is read, as it is by Kaja Silverman, as "the provisional conferral of ideality upon socially devalued bodies" (1996: 4); for democracy requires reciprocal engagement with the plural perspectives of others and the world beyond. But in contrast to the Faustian exchange of neoliberalism, in which we gain (illusory) mastery and transcendence in return for accepting the inexorability of scarcity and competition, agonistic democracy offers potential site of plenitude and generosity, a space in which the world itself is (re)constructed by our subjective and inter-subjective engagement with it. It thus offers something we might describe as a worldly, three-dimensional education in contrast to the flat two-dimensional version prevalent under neoliberalism and austerity.

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