Against school: an epistemological critique

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The paper argues that the modern school is an 'intolerable' institution.[1] Contrary to the sensibilities of educational research that look for more and/or better schooling as a way of making education more equal and more inclusive, our position is against the modern European school as an institution of normalisation within which equality and inclusion are impossible. Foucault's strategy of reversal is used as a means of subversion to argue for an end to schooling. Concretely the paper highlights the epistemic fundamentals of the modern school and in particular the dynamics of normalisation related to the universal and the production of inequalities and isolated individuals. The paper asserts the need to be 'against' rather than 'for' the school and the abandonment of the 'redemptive perspective'. Over and against this, we propose the need to think education differently and apart from the school in order to open up other educations, and specifically education as an ethical activity, an exploration of limits, and a politics of the self.

Keywords: school; epistemology; politics of the self; Foucault; critique; reversal

Criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. (Foucault, 2000b, pp. 45–46)

1. Introduction: discomforts with the modern school

In this paper we seek to re-address the question asked by Rogan (2017); 'What's wrong with capitalism?' That is: What's wrong with school? Rogan proposes that in the twentieth century the critical political tradition moved away from a moral and totalising critique of capitalist economy and society and yielded to a primary engagement with material inequalities. This 'extraordinary' move, he says 'bespeaks the decadence of an alternative approach' (p. 2). Rogan's point is that the critique of capitalism in the twentieth century shifted away from a fundamental demolition of its 'moral and spiritual desolation' to a single-minded focus on the calculation of the relative advantages and disadvantages it generates – a shift from 'Is it morally wrong?' to 'Does it have bad outcomes?' – Who wins and who loses? We want to suggest that the critical tradition in education and criticism of the school by sociologists and others has suffered a similar displacement or avoidance of moral argumentation by calculative evaluation. First, we argue for a form of critique that requires the questioning of basic issues about the school in itself as an institution, as a

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set of practices, arrangements and techniques aimed at governing individuals in a continuous, regular and permanent fashion (Foucault, 1988a). Second, we consider consequences of schooling for the meaning of and possibilities for childhood, family life and parenting and for the sorts of ethical subjects that are produced. In the end, the issue is whether the school is a solution to the problem of education or rather a constant and ineluctable source of educational problems. This then is not a set of empirical claims about this school or that school, but rather an epistemological critique of the idea of school. There is an enormous body of empirical work that identifies and itemises the multi-dimensional and intersecting inequalities of schooling – who wins and who loses – which we take as a starting point. However, our argument looks beyond these specifics at school itself as a modern institution, as a general method of serialisation, normalisation and distribution that functions to produce a 'threshold of describable individuality' (Foucault, 1979, p. 191). As Foucault asks: 'Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?' (ibid p. 228).

The timescale of the displacement we describe is obviously different to that which Rogan explores. We refer to a brief interlude in the 1960s and 1970s when the institution of the school was subject to question – the so-called *de-schooling movement* – represented by writers like Ivan Illich, John Holt, Neil Postman and Charles Wiengartener, and in a different way Paulo Freire, as well as writer/practitioners like A. S. Neill (see Zaldivar, 2016). These critics were in different ways testing the 'contemporary limits of the necessary' (Foucault, 2000b p. 43) – that is the necessity of the school. There is also a more recent, more general and more complexly theorised body of refusal (studies) within cultural anthropology (e.g., Simpson, 2007; 2014; McGranahan, 2016) addressed primarily to indigeneity, but drawing on feminism, critical race theory, diversity (Ahmed, 2012) and sustainability perspectives. These have some parallels to de-schooling and to the critique we offer from the standpoint of de-colonialisation. In this work refusal is seen as generative and affiliative, as we also suggest later. Taylor Webb and Mikulan (2021) also discuss *fugitivity* and *escape* as forms of the refusal of learning paces. Unfortunately there is no space here to explore those parallels. De-schooling itself was a short-lived tangent in the dominant trajectory of educational criticism and the prior and subsequent focus of the bulk of critical scholarship not on whether school at all, but on what kind of school? This dominant and decadent mode of criticism operates primarily within an instrumental perspective rather than a substantive one. The major arguments put in relation to schooling and its effects and consequences are not based on a questioning of its existence (substantive), but from different technical and ideological perspectives, that focus on the estimation of disadvantages, inequalities and exclusions (instrumental). These are seen as the untoward side effects of an institution that requires technical reform, concrete improvement, and more rational organisation forms in order to be 'better' or as some would say 'more effective'. The school as an institution is taken to be a sensible and necessary building block of modern life but one that is badly designed and processually unfair.

Concomitant to the necessity of the school, since the de-schooling interlude (and indeed before), the many so-called reforms of schooling, intended to achieve a more inclusive, just and equal education, would appear to have had little or in some cases perverse effects – producing more or different inequalities: of access, of treatment, of outcome, of resources, etc., and perpetuating forms of symbolic violence (see Ball, 2013; or Slee, 2018, for an overview). Our thesis here then is that in parallel with other social domains, like the economy, a moral and radical critique has been

displaced by a discourse of equity and inclusion that rests on a taken for granted epistemological point of departure: that the school is a good (and/or necessary) institution, and the best/proper site of education for children, with negative side effects related to inequalities and exclusions that can be remediated by improvement or reform (see Flint & Peim, 2011). Furthermore, the redemptive discourse (Ball, 2020) of school improvement/reform/change/innovation is indicative of (or perhaps responsible for) the lack of attention given to other possibilities for educating that do not begin with school; other ways of 'socialising' children, and indeed other ways of being human – of relating to ourselves and to others. The history of the failure of school reform, is the failure 'to open up deeper questions' (Rogan, 2017, p. 3) – like what education means today and what is it for and what it might mean if we were to think without the hindrance of the necessity of the school?

One consequence of the failure to open up substantive questions, for researchers and social and political movements seeking to reform or improve the school, is submission to a constant cycle of hope and despair, of progress and defeat, of challenge and incorporation. As educational researchers within the European enlightenment tradition, with a few exceptions, we find it impossible to walk away, to admit defeat and move on. There is always more hope to be had, new possibilities of reform to explore. Despite constant criticism and despite continual reform failure:

> A vague romantic impulse remains, which just about sustains the educator, which just about fends off a shift into cynicism. This impulse is the product of a belief that despite it all, education is still motivated by an essential goodness. (Allen, 2017, p. 5)

We assert that this belief and the hope it sustains are misguided; the problem is not with the ambitions of goodness, but its vehicle – the school and schooling, as the default signifiers of education. The project of inclusion mis-reads the school as a site of opportunity and possibility, and we are always disappointed (Slee, 2018). The essence and *raison d'être* of the school is in fact normalisation and perversely inclusion may contribute to that end.[2] In other words, the school, and education as currently conceived and represented by the school, as a site of equity, is a lost cause. That is, despite all the debates around segregation, inequality and exclusion, despite or because of innovation, what is sought, desired and struggled for in movements of school reform, of virtually all sorts, is not something different but rather another version of the same thing, using the same architecture and paraphernalia that provide for and deliver, in new and old ways, division, exclusion, normalisation, and categorisation.

Here we seek to take up a different position in relation to the school – not 'for' school, but 'against' school, and we will rehearse its 'moral and spiritual desolation' an exercise in refusal rather than criticism. We take the school to be, intolerable and irredeemable. It is irreparable. To reiterate, this is not addressed to the bad school: the neoliberal, the unequal, the failing, the excluding school, but to the epistemology of the modern school *tout court* and the conditions of possibility that produce it. Rather than its form or mode of delivery our focus is on the epistemic bases from which school emerged, was consolidated and still operates. We argue, following Foucault, that these constitute a form of violence that acts upon our subjectivity, our relation to ourselves, and our possibilities of self-recognition. The difficulties involved in writing and reading this statement are telling in themselves. The school is deeply ingrained into our modern psyche as necessary and inevitable. Saving the school is for many researchers and writers on education their project and purpose. We want to discard that purpose and suggest instead that the school is one node in a network of

'intolerable' institutions – part of the carceral archipelago of modern society – and requires our opposition rather than our support. Our point here is that the school is not as necessary as all that, indeed that it is a block, an obstacle, an inhibition to freedom and to 'learning'.

2. The problem is not the arrangements of schooling, but the school in itself as an institution of normalisation – a Foucauldian approach

The school is one of the major institutional sites of our social intelligibility, it provides a language, a method and a system of representation that constructs 'a regime of truth' for who we are and what we might become. That is, it constitutes 'the terms that make self-recognition possible' (Butler, 2005, p. 22) and pre-empts our subjective possibilities. Our relation to ourselves and to others are in part realisable only in its esoteric discursive currency – as qualifications, categorisations, performances. We are located, evaluated and labelled in an entanglement of physical, cultural, cognitive and emotional elements that the practices of the school enable – this is the framework for experience and for social relations as we 'learn' and learn what learning is. The school (together with other cognate institutions) makes us natural, objective and transparent in social and political terms. Key aspects of our singularity are produced through constant aggregation, sorting and comparison – always in relation to multiplicities. The school is a particular site, a point of concatenation, at which the subject is concentrated and enacted, through patterns, clusters and models – we call them levels, sets, streams, bands, specialisms, withdrawal units, etc. We rarely have any distance from this subjectivity because we are – in a knowledge society – an outcome of the school as a modern documentary, technological, socio-cultural system. It hails and labels us, and we must respond as a social entity, a learner, as a social fact (of competence, level, qualification, score, achievement). In sum, the school is a 'bundle of relations which tie ... power, the truth, and the subject' (Foucault, 1996, p. 37).

Given all that, what is needed in the struggle for a different 'order of things' in education is not accommodation but *reversal*. Foucault's strategy of reversal involves taking a traditional interpretation of a historical or social event, or in this case an institution, and look at it in an opposite direction. He means reversal here in the sense of a subversion or an over-turning (Foucault, 1981), as a means of refuting and inverting assumptions of origin, a refusal.

> The principle of reversal hence may be seen as a way of *politicising the de-politicised,* self-warranting accounts of discourse, as way of making discourse visible, and visibly connected to multiple prospective origins and forms of realisation. (Hook, 2007, pp. 18–19)

Here, following this strategy, we point out some of the dimensions of our subjectivity that the practices and techniques of school normalisation produce in/as 'the student' or 'learner'. That is, we essay an ontology of our present 'schooled' subjectivity in order to make visible, to re-politicise, some of the key practices of normalisation and its concomitant – exclusion. Practices that, in the school and other institutions, render us as normal (or abnormal), as exceptional/gifted or as having 'special needs', as educated/educable, or not. As Rabinow and Rose (2003) remark, this necessarily implies questioning 'the very constitution of these domains … and the ways in which they had come to define the territory and limits of what we must accept and what we could contest and transform' (p. 4). The goal of this reversal is a

modification of our relationship to the school game of truth. We seek to violate the claim that the school embodies universality both as this pertains to the structure of reason and the truths of human nature. In other words, we address the school as 'a question that remains for us to consider' (Foucault, 2000b, p. 182).

The specific focus of this exercise of reversal is the modern school rationality, the truth and logic that are interpolated in virtually all contemporary institutional forms, procedures and practices. That is, an episteme that generates certain discourses, and the modalities of subjectification which arise from them. The materiality (buildings, desk, rooms, technologies), the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment techniques of schools have an epistemological character that embody particular conceptions of society, knowledge, childhood, education, etc. These discourses and means were founded and refined in Europe and exported elsewhere.

3. The school episteme or the modernist truth of schooling

The dimensions outlined below, that constitute the epistemic apparatus of schooling, overlap and interweave and are separated out here heuristically for presentation.

3.1 The first dimension of this school episteme or regime of school truth is its self-evidence.

The meaning of the school, the school as institution, and concomitantly and by default what it means to be educated are all 'contingent assemblages put together under "blind" historical circumstances' (Hunter, 1996, p. 147). Indeed, to a great extent the discourses of schooling from the eighteenth century onwards, are other to education itself – essentially they are political and economic or more straightforwardly a solution to the problem of government.

> Schooling in itself had been a disciplinary response to the need to manage growing populations; within the progressively discriminating space of the schoolroom the productive regulation of large numbers of pupils also required new methodologies … the apparently 'simple' transfer of knowledge from one person to another cannot be disentangled from those authoritative processes which seek to instil discipline into the deepest recesses of the school system, into the moral fibres of its inmates. (Deacon, 2005, p. 89)

Once government was conceived in terms of the optimal management of a territory and its population in the eighteenth century, the politics of schooling brought into existence education as a set of institutional practices and 'as a means for the moral training of the population with a view to enhancing the strength and prosperity of the state and thereby the welfare of the people' (Hunter, 1996, p. 149). That is, the origins and rationale of modern schooling and its pastoral disciplinary procedures are the production of nation-state subjects, productive and useful workers and moral and responsible 'Christians' – a 'moral orthopaedics' as Deacon calls it. 'Schooling taught not only punctuation, but also punctuality, and not only reading, but also hygiene; it taught that learning should not only entail gratification but also requires chastisement' (Deacon, 2005). We misread the school if we attempt to reconcile it with social concepts like inclusion, equality, critical thinking, solidarity or well-being – and here lies our disappointment.

3.2 Related to the first, the second dimension of the modern school episteme is the clear separation of society and nature, civilization and chaos, reasoning and emotion, childhood and adulthood – that is, a set of boundaries and binaries that circumscribe the form, purposes and modalities of education.

One of the tenets of the modern school was to create a clear distinction between light and shadow, civilization and barbarity, infancy and adulthood. The project of schooling was to transform the young from the state of nature, untamed childhood, to a state of culture as assiduous pupil. That is, a move from the magical to the rational, from the *enfant sauvage* to the reasonable and reasoning learner – 'reason as despotic enlightenment' (Foucault, 1980). This is one moment and one site in the formation of modern humanity, indeed a place in which we are made 'human, all too human' (Nietzsche, 1996). This is very much an imperial project (see Stedman Jones, 1974).

In Foucault's terms (2000b) the 'thought of the universal' (of the necessary, the obligatory, the transcendental) came to prevail over the 'thought of the singular' (of the contingent, the arbitrary, the merely empirical), and to disqualify and subjugate the latter. The school is the enlightenment institution and the institutionalisation of the enlightenment *par excellence* and carries within its architecture all of the contradictions of enlightenment thinking (see Chiswick, 1981). Further, in relation to the universal a system of divisions and classifications were established around the norm and in relation to the abnormal – what Foucault calls 'epistemological power' that is an 'observational knowledge, a clinical knowledge … a certain technical knowledge of production which will enable a strengthening of control' (Foucault, 2000a, p. 83) – most obviously realised in the form of the examination (Hoskin, 1990).

3.3 The third epistemic dimension is the construction of the universal.

The school episteme works from and reproduces a set of universals that articulate and normalise one way of being. In the contemporary school one overbearing version of that universal is male, white, western, heterosexual, middle class, without 'special needs', etc., (Anyon, 1983; Bourdieu, 1984; Simpson, 2014; Slee, 2018; Gillborn, 2019; etc.). The intersection of these normativities may be a point of privilege or one of abjection. From this basis of universality, the modern school episteme ignores, excludes or stigmatises other possibilities of being (or diversities), of culture, class, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, diversity, ethnicity, ability etc. The deep roots of the universal as a defining characteristic of the modern school prefaces the continuing exclusion and rejection of 'other' human bonds, needs and attachments, from 'other' places, cultures and histories, and delimits and polices the field of valid experience and identity (see Ortner, 1995).

These universals are anthropological, that is to say, the school proposes exclusive recognition of the rational subject, although the definition of rationality may change over time. That which is currently predominant/hegemonic is that of an improving, competitive, self-interested creature – *homo economicus*. There is no 'historicity of the thought of the universal' possible here. Furthermore, the assertion of the universal comes loaded with moral baggage, as noted previously. Normalisation is not simply an ensemble of tactics and an idealisation of conduct, it is a moral judgement. Or, as Foucault (1977) put it:

> The judges of normality are present everywhere. We are in the society of the teacher-judge, the doctor-judge, the educator-judge, the 'social-worker'-judge; it is on them that the universal

reign of the normative is based; and each individual, wherever he may find himself, subjects to it his body, his gestures, his behaviors, his aptitudes, his achievements. (p. 304)

The word *normal*, Hacking (1990) writes, 'uses a power as old as Aristotle to bridge the fact/value distinction, whispering in your ear that what is normal is also all right' (p. 160). Obviously, if there is a *normality*, a right moral way of being and acting, there must also be a non-normality, a bad morality, that is, a failure. In school terms, normality is intertwined with success at school, and abnormality with failure. Failure as attributed to both pupils and families (Dubet & Martucelli, 1996; Bernstein, 1990), is not just a matter of ignorance or poor performance it is a moral deficiency. The school experience for those who fail: those 'with behavioural difficulties', who are 'hard to reach', who lack character or resilience or aspiration, who have special needs, is the experience of not being truly and properly human. The dark side of the school experience – punishment, exclusion, abuse, assimilation, shame, civilisation, etc., are related to this moral displacement and the identification of values and behaviour that do not fit within the school universal. The hidden curriculum of schooling is made up of those truths that speak about what being a normal human is (Skelton, 1997).

3.4 Related to the third dimension, is a fourth, about inequalities.

As Crozier and Davies (2007) propose, the modern school is above all a place where inequalities are verified, it is not a place where they are reduced or challenged. The modern school operates as a site for the 'description of groups, the characterisation of collective facts, the calculation of the gaps between individuals, their distribution in a given population' (Foucault, 1977, p. 190). And it is the creation of universally objective social categories in relation to this distribution that legitimate numerous 'treatment programmes' for those who fall within or are placed outside of their boundaries. These categories and programmes feed the proliferation of subjectifying discourses in which the truth of the individual is produced. Teachers, psychologists and others deploy their professional gaze, their 'arts of seeing', to render the student as a category, a type (see 3.6). The pedagogical gaze de-socialises and objectifies the student as a cognitive entity, who can be properly understood only by the expertise of the teacher, manifested in various forms of examination and diagnosis.

3.5 The fifth dimension of the school episteme is individualisation.

This is evident in what Foucault (2009) calls the appearance of 'specific modes of individualisation' (p. 239) as part of a shift in the mode of government rationality in the eighteenth century. Social truths were no longer related to a family or community but to isolated individuals. It is at this point that the school is a key technology in the production of individual subjects, but en masse, a form of batch production, 'an agglomeration of individuals' (p. 36). The school is one site among many for the management of the population, its regulation, as a multiplicity of individuals. This duality of the individual and population, discipline and regulation, is the nexus within which equity is made impossible. The model of social relations which the school enacted gives ontological priority to the individual over and against the social in a multitude of ways.

The modern school is about the practical production of humans as cognitive individuals and subjects rather than as relational subjects. That is, 'the individual,

with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, forces' (Foucault, 1980, p. 74). The episteme of the school is about the creation of a space/gap between ourselves and others. That is the enlightenment promise. The individual becomes the new basic, taken for granted and irreducible unity of social life. Us is a sum of individuals and isolated Is. As the modern school was established as a form of institutional bricolage, a rickety combination of pastoral power, confession, accounting, military organisational forms, the individual urban labourer was produced through powerful and violent policies against the commons, the poor laws, etc., that embodied a 'dangerous' pre-modern common and collective episteme. Within the modern episteme, the individual emerged as a key constituent of 'society' and the procedures, architecture, technologies, etc., of the school made its specific contribution to this.

3.6 The final dimension of the school episteme is the role of the agents of socialisation.

In the infrastructure and practices of modern school, the task and duty of education is entrusted to professionals with specific techniques and certified legitimacy – teachers/pedagogues/psychologists. These are 'intellectual techniques for rendering (pupils) thinkable and practicable and constituting domains that are amenable – or not amenable – to reformatory interventions' (Rose, 1996, p. 42). They enact versions of the 'science of the state' (Foucault, 1996, p. 42), and over and against these other forms of un-professionalised knowledge, held by families, relatives and communities are rendered immaterial in a double sense. These 'other' knowledges are morally bad (values, practices, etc.) and technically inadequate (common-sense, folk knowledge) – although some families and family practices and values are approved-of and valued, given the *imprimatur* of the school and co-opted. 'Other' knowledges are filtered out, and in the process the student, as object of knowledge, is reduced to what is 'educationally' relevant (Vincent, 2001). The flow of knowledge across the home-school boundary is invariably one-way – the family relationship is rarely able to live up to the expectations of the pedagogue (Crozier & Davies, 2007).

> Hence, the disciplinary web within which the school constituted only a single node tended to extend itself throughout society, in the process developing a whole margin of lateral controls. (Deacon, 2005, p. 96)

Professional knowledges, and/or technologies are productive/critical in relation to a subordinate/productive learner subject. They bring about an essentialised subject of ignorance, a residualised subject made meaningful only in relation to the teacher and teaching. In these regimes of practices, the work done by scientific knowledges and dividing practices constantly carve out new objects of power. These relations of power are articulated most clearly not in imparting knowledge or organising student activity but in the assessment of content acquisition and progress. As Foucault puts it: 'the age of the "examining school" marks the beginnings of a pedagogy that functions as a science' (Foucault, 1979, p.187).

Given all of this, to continue to hope for a school that is truly and durably equal or inclusive is to ignore the epistemological foundations of the school as an institution and as a node in the disciplinary web of population management. Rather we should look for an end to the modern school, look beyond school, and in a certain way look to our own end as modern educationalist subjects and 'refuse what we are' (Foucault, 1982). Only in and through that refusal can we being to think ourselves and our social

relations differently. That is to say, we should give up on hope, accept that the modern school is intolerable, and move on. Reform is indeed a key trope of social regulation, both in maintaining attachment to institutions and extending their reach and scope. Reform does nothing to change the deep structure of schooling. Our efforts to 'save' the school can only lead to despair.

4.   Against and beyond modern school, not 'for' it

4.1 Introduction: thinking beyond the epistemology of schooling.

One point of departure for new and different educative possibilities is signalled in one of the last paragraphs of the *Order of Things*, where Foucault says (2002): 'As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end' (p. 422). And this ending, he says, is 'nothing more, and nothing less, than the unfolding of a space in which it is once more possible to think' (p. 373). In other words, it is only when we can see an end to the current 'modalities of order' that a different and 'positive basis of knowledge' (p. xxiii), becomes thinkable. It still remains extremely difficult to speak outside of or beyond the modern epistemic logic which privileges the institution of the school as a site for the production of modern subjects, including ourselves.

What is needed here is a form of critique that is 'radical, uncompromising and non-reformist' and that 'refuses any attempt at arriving at a new disposition of the same power' (Deleuze & Foucault, 1977, p. 216). As suggested earlier, this requires us to undertake a reversal and a negative refusal. The art of reversal here involves politicising all the aspects of the truth of the school and its consequences, and abnegating the self-evidence of the school – our task in the previous section. This was done in order to open up basic questions that can serve to destabilise both the modern school episteme and its particular forms and manifestations of power – pedagogy, curriculum and modalities of governance – and to refuse the forms of self-interested individuality that the school fosters. In addition, for us, this means refusing our own subjectivity as a 'redemptive sociologists' (Ball, 2020; Clarke, 2020) committed to and engaged in the project of reforming and improving the modern school. These refusals require that we challenge everything that makes us what we are, without any of the comforts of another way of being. We must give up on all those orderly truths that have defined our purpose and our relation to and for education. We must seek disengagement from or renunciation of our 'intelligible' self and become willing to test and transgress the limits of what we are able to be. This is modest yet momentous, in the sense that it requires us to question our own validity, to give up on essentialism and fixity and 'restore to things their mobility' (Foucault, 2016, p. 129). This is a struggle against the anonymity of power and its 'dispersed and discontinuous offensives' (Foucault, 1988b) – its practices and its truths and their effects and outcomes. But to be clear, there is no escape from power only the struggle against particular forms and manifestations of power.

However, there is a further difficultly here. For what we are arguing for is a space in which it is possible to think education differently, without, as is usually expected, specifying in advance what that difference might be – a process rather than a programme.

> The necessity of reform mustn't be allowed to become a form of blackmail serving to limit, reduce, or halt the exercise of criticism. Under no circumstances should one pay attention to those who tell one: 'Don't criticize, since you're not capable of carrying out a reform.' That's ministerial cabinet talk. Critique doesn't have to be the premise of a deduction that concludes, 'this, then, is what needs to be done'. It should be an instrument for those who fight, those who resist and refuse what is. (Rabinow & Rose, 2003, p. 84)

To paraphrase Miller (1993) we think of education 'as a city to be built, rather than a cosmos already given' (p. 140). We cannot specify what needs to be done, but with Foucault, we would like to build a radically different education oriented to 'the struggle against the forms of subjection – against the submission of subjectivity' (Foucault, 1982, p. 782).

4.2 Un-think education to open up other educations.

This takes us into a worrying, indeed frightening space in which we must 'un-think' education and recognise as fragile and contingent many of our modernist certainties. That un-thinking, is in itself a means of both escape and self-formation. It constructs a space in which knowledge itself is uncertain, truth is unstably linked to power, and our intelligibility is constantly in question. This is another reversal then – one that embraces risk, failure, uncertainty and difference as core ontological postulates (Ball, 2019). We must even face the possibility of our *stupidity* (Colebrook, 2013) in order 'to bring forth a future distinct from what we already are' (p. 649). It is a starting point for re-envisioning somewhere we might (or might not) call school, as a site for the practice of ethics rather than their assertion. As Wain (2007) says, 'For both Nietzsche and Foucault, ethics, as the work one does on oneself and education are one and the same thing' (p. 167). Furthermore, Leask (2011) suggests that in Foucault's later work there are possibilities which indicate that pedagogy can be reconsidered not as a technique for the manufacture of imposition but as 'the theatre of subject creation, of new "practices of the self", new kinds of relations – especially via continued resistance to domination' – 'crap detecting' and 'teaching as a subversive activity', as Postman and Weingartner (1971) put it. Education in these terms is a political and aesthetic project of self-formation. And one key element of this project is the acquisition of what Olssen (2017) calls 'agentic skills'; such as 'the capacity to understand and access global knowledge systems; the awareness of multi-perspectival orientations to self and culture, based upon an understanding of diverse human experiences, as well as the ability to construct new ideas' (p. 517). At face value, many teachers would subscribe to such a 'curriculum', but our analysis suggests that in practice the school as an institution renders it always ultimately unthinkable and impractical.

All of this rests on a fostering of ethical learners with a healthy suspicion of the present, while at the same time being able to acknowledge their own fallibility. That is, the adoption of a critical stance that makes possible experiments in living intended to re-create ourselves, and the world. This involves both a 'letting go' and 'risking what might be produced through other forms of thinking and thought' (Taylor Webb & Mikulan, 2021, p. 6). Olssen (2017) suggests that this has parallels with Dewey's sense of learning as 'a cooperative and collaborative activity centred upon experiential, creative responses to contingent sets of relations to cope with uncertainty in a never-ending quest' (p. 510). Learning becomes an exploration of limits – mapping, testing and crossing them when possible. However, in such work done 'at the limits of ourselves' we may never be able 'both to grasp the points where change

is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take' (Foucault, 2000b, p. 303). The criticism of limits and the possibility of moving beyond them are always themselves limited; but rather than seeing this as a problem, we should acknowledge that this is what enables us to always begin again, to fail better. This is a permanent orientation of skepticism; 'a mode of relating to contemporary reality' (Foucault, in Rabinow, 1987, p. 39). There is no template to follow here, no guidelines for an educational programme, rather some poorly marked tracks and vague signposts that are starting points. As Foucault suggests we cannot conceive of alternatives within the discursive possibilities we currently inhabit. Rather, we are bound by epistemic rules and closures that enable and constrain us to think within certain versions of what is and might be true – the conditions of possibility of modern thought, established practices of remembering and forgetting, an exteriority that is prior to any conscious activity of a meaningful subjectivity. As he explained: 'I think that to imagine another system is to extend our participation in the present system' (Foucault, 1996, p. 230). All of the above rests on a recognition of students as independent ethical beings capable of reflection and decision-making and of taking responsibility for their identity and their social relations and at the same time accepting the necessity of failure, dissonance and conflict – a kind of consequentialist pedagogy. Education, the teacher (sic) and pedagogy (sic) are articulated as the formation of moral subjectivity that gives priority to ethics rather than to truth. It consists of an ongoing critical insubordination aimed at destabilising truth, rather than knowing it. It proceeds by historising excellence and beauty rather than simply appreciating them. Thus, 'what is at stake is the production of a certain kind of experience, a reconfiguring of experience' (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1993, p. 6) – that we might name as education. This is, 'the art of living dangerously' (p. 58). In other words, this is the *care both of the self, the others and the world,* the work of the 'politics of the self' and of self formation, a continuous practice of introspection, which is at the same time attuned to a critique of the world outside and our social relation in the world. Komatsu and Rappleye[3] offer an example in relation to the global climate emergency:

> We need to radically rethink our starting assumptions about modern mass schooling, one rooted in the modernist western paradigm, and consider whether education is in fact a solution or a cause of the trouble we now face … it is clear that the Earth does not need more 'educated' consumers of knowledge – a mere refurbishment of the long-standing Western-turned-modern assumption that knowledge alone will allow us to reach the 'good' life. Instead, we must first fundamentally change ways of being, then (re)describe the world including education in those terms. (See Komatsu & Rappleye, 2017, p. 168)

This is essentially a social process, 'a form of freedom that only comes into being as we try to form ourselves with and in front of others' (Infinito, 2003, p. 162). It occurs through self-reflection and dialogue and disagreement, or as Olssen (2003) puts it: 'Ethical action also takes place in a community' (p. 1), in as much that care for the self also involves care for others and the world. In Foucault's (1994) words:

> The care for the self always aims at the good for others ... This implies also a relation with others to the extent that care for self renders one competent to occupy a place in the city, in the community or in inter-individual relationships ... I think the assumption of all this morality was that one who cared for himself correctly found himself, by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relationship to others and for others. A city in which everyone would be correctly concerned for self would be a city that would be doing well, and it would find therein the ethical principle of its stability. (p. 7)

'Such a community is both *borderless* and *complexly differentiated*', it is what Olssen (2003) calls a 'thin community' and, he says 'In such a conception difference and unity are balanced' (p. 2). Inclusion is thus supplanted by 'relationality and diversity as fundamental social and political attributes' (p. 2). In some ways, the UNESCO (2021) *Futures of Education* project and its articulation of education as a 'reframing of humanism for shared futures' echoes this and seeks to ask existential questions about the role and purposes of education and to argue for 'intellectual decolonization and epistemic diversity', and suggests that 'we have reached the end of a historical cycle and new educational patterns have begun to form' (p. 14). Over and against this, what we are attempting to signal here is the need to refuse the past once and for all, rather than reform it. As a 'methodology', with Taylor Webb and Mikulan (2021, p. 4), we seek to escape the temptations of specification.

Conclusion

Here then we abandon the fantasy and folly of a final resolution of struggles and conflicts over equity and inclusion. We refuse our own academic subjectivity produced and articulated by these modern school '*fantasmatic ideals*' (Clarke, 2020) in which relations of power are dissolved. On the contrary, with Foucault (1994) we say:

> I don't believe there can be a society without relations of power … The problem is not of trying to dissolve them in the utopia of perfectly transparent communication, but to give oneself the rules of law, the techniques of management, but also the ethics, the ethos, the practice of self, which would allow these games of power to be played with a minimum of domination. (p. 18)

Our practice and thinking as 'educationalists' must move beyond the decadent consolations of redemption and simple deontological premises and struggle instead 'to actively negotiate the future' (Olssen, 2017, p. 516) with openness and flexibility.[4] As Gros puts it in Foucault (2012, p. 355), education as a political and ethical task, 'becomes precisely a care of the world, the "true life" calling for the advent of an "other world"'.

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Notes

[1] We refer to the modern school in Foucault's sense of modernity as an attitude and a power/knowledge regime. That is, a form of power that developed since the sixteenth century, drawing on and expanding an older technique of 'pastoral' power that has it's origins in Christian institutions (Foucault, 1982, p. 782).

[2] A further argument could be developed that inclusion is itself a technology of normalisation. Byrne (2014, pp. 235–236) argues that within the social inclusion movement 'the burden of change continues to be placed upon children with disabilities, their "ability" to adjust to naturalised pedagogies, to "cope" and overcome their impairment to become "one of us" as opposed to a somewhat burdensome "minority of one"'. See Peters and Besley (2014) and Allman (2013) for a discussion of the political discourse of social inclusion. Allman (2013) suggests that the birth of the modern rhetoric of *l'inclusion sociale* began in French thought with Lenoir to seek 'a means to reintegrate the large numbers of ex-industrial workers and a growing number of young people excluded from opportunities to join the labour force in the new economies of the 1970s and beyond' (p. 8) and 'social inclusion and exclusion can function as apparati that problematize people on the margins, and by extension, contribute to their governance and control' (p. 1). Olssen (2003) replaces inclusion with diversity.

[3] https://www.norrag.org/facing-the-climate-change-catastrophe-education-as-solution-or-cause-by-iveta-silova-hikaru-komatsu-and-jeremy-rappleye/

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