

# What is the ‘public’ in public education? Mapping past, present and future educational imaginaries of Europe (and beyond)

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## INTRODUCTION

This special issue explores past, present and potential future imaginaries of ‘public’ education in Europe and beyond. The special issue is located in a contemporary context of political turmoil, in which one in four European voters allegedly supports populist political parties<sup>1</sup>, with the largest support for far-right forms of populism; it is also set against a historical background of several decades of significant change in the social, political and economic contexts of education, whereby schools and universities have been reimagined and reorganized so as to conform to the marketized and managerialist contours of the neoliberal imaginary; and it is set against the background of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has led to lockdowns and school closures in many countries and prompted many to question supposedly ‘normal’ ways of doing school and education in less turbulent times. The term, unprecedented, has been used frequently to talk about current times. This is a time marked not only by a turn to right-wing popularisms, often harking to neo-conservative, nostalgic notions of a glorious past and captured in slogans such as #MakeAmericaGreatAgain; #MakeChinaGreatAgain; #MakeBritainGreatAgain. It is also a time of collective left-wing rage and resistance movements such as, #decolonising education, #blacklivesmatter, #metoo, #democracy4HK, #precaritystories, and #occupy. Technological inventions and innovations, as well as extreme weather events brought about by climate change, such as the massive 2019 Australian bushfires, are challenging the very existence, form and future of homo sapiens, and other species on planet Earth. For all these reasons, the special issue is topical and timely.

The roots of the issues we explore pre-date contemporary crises. Indeed, in the last century, at least in the ‘West’, they reach further afield to the USA, and thinkers such as Walter Lippmann and John Dewey, and further back in time to events such as the Colloque Walter Lippmann – an international congress held in Paris in 1938 and the forerunner of the post-WWII Mont Pelerin Society – at which intellectuals, civil servants and business leaders met to debate the ideas outlined in Lippmann’s various books, including, *Public Opinion* (1922), *The Phantom Public* (1925) and *The Good Society* (1937). In these works, Lippmann argued that the ‘public’ is an illusion, a fantasy, while government, instead of seeking to embody this collective myth, should primarily be viewed as an administrative problem to be solved as efficiently as possible, thereby enabling people to get on with their individualistic pursuits. Dewey, in *The Public and its Problems* (1927), ironically, agreed with Lippmann’s view that the modern world was becoming too complex for any citizen to grasp all its aspects; but Dewey, unlike Lippmann, believed that the public (actually, a composite of many diverse “publics” within any given society) could form a “Great Community” and that the members comprising such a community, individually and collectively, could become educated about issues, come to judgments and arrive at solutions to the societal

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/ng-interactive/2018/nov/20/revealed-one-in-four-europeans-vote-populist>

problems confronting them. Dewey vociferously rejected Lippmann's idea that democratic life in complex modern societies is best left to experts, arguing that democratic life requires local knowledge and communal vision beyond mere expertise. Simplifying somewhat, it can be argued that Dewey's vision was evident in the progressive directions taken by education until at least into the 1980s, and remains alive in pockets of alternative education (Mills & McGregor, 2014). Meanwhile, Lippmann's technocratic vision underpins the contemporary neoliberal educational imaginary that, with its logics of competition, instrumentalism and atomisation (Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Clarke, 2012), and its faith in outcomes, measurement and impact, has come to dominate education in the wake of progressivism.

As this brief historical discussion makes clear, developing an adequate notion of the 'public' must reach beyond a hard and fast distinction between 'public' and 'private' education based on funding source that has come to dominate contemporary debates around educational provision. In particular, we need to consider the nature of the public today against a febrile and dynamic political context in Europe, with developments including the rise of new nationalisms, the growing popularity of the extreme right, and concerns around migration and movements of people into and within the European Union. These developments – simultaneously symptoms of and influences upon the changing nature of the 'public' – are crystalized in the decision of the United Kingdom to depart from the European Union; but they are by no means limited to the UK. Like other nationalist and populist developments in Europe (and elsewhere), the frustrations and desires expressed in the UK in relation to Brexit, to 'take back control' and 'regain sovereignty', are symptomatic of a loss of identification with globalization and Europe and a resurgence of demands for local and national identification on the part of the 'public' or 'demos'. This volatile and dynamic background raises questions regarding how understandings of, and visions for, public education today have changed from the past and how they could potentially develop in the future.

Of course, the quest to identify the underlying core or essence of the public is something of a chimera, insofar as the public and notions of publicness are discursive constructs that are strategically mobilized in the service of various political and ideological projects. At the same time, it is important to recognize that "discursive space is never completely independent of social space and the formation of new kinds of speech can be traced through the emergence of new public sites of discourse and the transformation of old ones" (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 80). An acute awareness of the transformations being wrought on the notion of the human and its relations to economy and society led the young Marx in 1843 (2000, p. 222) to lament "the splitting of man [sic] into his *public* and his *private* self". Yet important as this distinction remains, it is our contention that, when considering the issue of publicness in the context of education, it is important to recognize the multi-dimensional nature of the notion of the public. Our aim in this special issue is to embody such multidimensionality in a number of ways – conceptually and contextually.

First, rather than defaulting to a commonsense private-public binary, our multidimensional perspective encourages us to identify at least six overlapping domains in relation to which school provision varies within and across time and space. These include: 1.) the *purposes* of education and whether it is conceived as a societal or an individual good; 2.) questions of *accountability* and the relative weight given to consumerist (e.g. to parents), regulatory (e.g. to inspection bodies) and professional (e.g. to peers) considerations; 3.) issues of *funding*, including the source of funding and whether this involves practices of competition and profit; 4.) matters of *governance* including questions of ownership, control, regulation and legal status; 5.) issues of *professionalism*, including questions around unionization, outsourcing and contracts; and 6.) issues of *access*,

including whether provision is universal or selective (e.g. via fees, achievement, or curricular specialization).

Second, the contributors to this special issue mobilise a range of conceptualisations and ideas from educational, social and political theory. These include, amongst others: Rancière (1999, 2010) and his insistence on disagreement and dissensus as necessary correctives to the enforced consensualism of the ‘police’ order; Laclau & Mouffe’s (2001) notions of hegemony and antagonism as key to any meaningful notion of the political and to political action; Hardt & Negri’s (2000) and Virno’s (2004) view of the ‘multitude’ and the ‘commons’ as vocabularies for communal organization and resource management that resist the unspoken assumptions and dominant assertions of the neoliberal settlement; genealogy as critical narratives of the emergence and transformations of subjectivity and power, intended to induce skepticism in relation to hitherto accepted dominant readings of history; and Levitas’s (2013) argument that there is a pressing need for the ‘Imaginary Reconstitution of Society’ given current global economic, ecological and humanitarian crises.

Third – and perhaps most obviously – in light of the point above regarding the intertwining and interdependence of discursive and social space, the papers in this issue highlight the range and diversity of social and institutional spaces comprising Europe and beyond. As such, they caution against easy or sweeping generalizations about global developments, such as neoliberalism, and encourage attendance to the ways in which such developments always unfold within, and are inflected by, the particular contours and unique histories of specific contexts. The European contexts that are the specific focus of papers in the collection include formerly social-democratic Sweden (Säfström and Månsson), post-communist Poland (Mendel), and the deeply neoliberal-neoconservative policy-laboratory of England (Clarke and Mills), while England and Germany provide the contexts for another paper (Wrigley). Looking beyond Europe, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand are the focus of the paper by Thompson, Mockler and Hogan, while the paper by Verger and Zancajo casts its eye across the OECD countries. Transcending any specific context, the paper by Heimans, Singh and Kwok considers the thorny issue of the relationship between education and democracy and the implications of different modalities of this relationship for public education in theory and practice.

Looking at the papers in more detail, the first two contributions, *Pedagogic Rights, Public Education and Democracy* (Heimans, Singh, Kwok) and *The marketization of education and the democratic deficit* (Säfström and Månsson) draw on French philosopher Rancière’s work on democracy to think with and about the ideas of ‘the public’, ‘publics’ and ‘emergent publics’. By drawing on Rancière’s work both papers distance themselves from the now everyday or common sense understanding of ‘the public’ in reference to schooling, that is, government funded vs private, fee-paying schools. In addition, both papers distinguish between democracy as a form of political governance and associated with the election of representatives by the people every few years. Instead, both papers go back through time to link the notion of emergent publics to the demos in ancient Greece. So, for example, Heimans et al., argue based on their reading of Rancière, that the term demos appears in the writing of Homer and refers to speech acts by those people ‘who were beyond the count’, who took the liberty of speaking, even when they didn’t have the authority or power to speak. In taking up such speaking positions, those beyond the count, disrupted the sensible – who could speak, when, where, about what and how. Democracy then is about disrupting the sensible ordering of what is thinkable, doable, sayable, by those who act on the basis of their inherent equality. But about the term public? Public education is enacted through and in bounded public space and time ‘in formation’, so wherever people are free to play with ideas and objects unconstrained by the demands of work and household pressures within the protected confines of education institutions. Such freedom of creative play is sorely

missing in the institutionalisation of much contemporary education- though the bounds often remain.

The central purpose of the paper by Heimans et al., is to flesh out an argument about democracy and public education by elaborating on the concept of pedagogic rights. This concept was developed by Basil Bernstein and presented at a conference in Santiago de Chile in 1986 where he shared the platform with Rancière. Chile was still governed under a military dictatorship (September 1973-March 1990) at the time of the conference, but moving towards a democratic constitution. Bernstein's work on pedagogic rights attempted to explicitly link his early work on the evolution of education systems to broader political questions about democracy. The three rights proposed by Bernstein, *enhancement, inclusion and participation*, are now familiar concepts in education policy documents. For Bernstein, however, each right is linked to a 'level', for example, the level of the *individual, social and political*. This is important as current neoliberal policy discourses assume that each pedagogic right is operationalised at the level of the atomistic, possessive individual. Moreover, Bernstein outlines conditions, *confidence, communitas and civic discourse*, by which each right is operationalised. Thus, the individual level is understood from a relational perspective, where without *confidence and trust*, students and teachers cannot enter and engage in pedagogic relations. Enhancement is about confidence in the system of pedagogic relations and the education system, for individuals to be able to push against boundaries, and in so doing, experience and explore with confidence tension points and be open to alternative possibilities. This also means being able to recognise material and discursive boundaries and modify and change these boundaries, and in so doing challenge what is sensible, sayable, doable and thinkable. Heimans et al., argue that Bernstein's theory of pedagogic rights, along with Rancière's work, on the assumption of equality and the right of those with 'no part' to take a part by dissenting against current classifications and orderings, offers ways to think about democracy in action. The will of the people or the demos, to assert their rights, on the basis of the assumption of equality and to engage in acts of dissensus rather than consensus, is core to the publicness of public education.

Säfström and Månsson also draw on the work of Rancière, but they do so, to demonstrate how the marketisation of schooling in Sweden has produced a democratic deficit. They propose that the Swedish education system was based on a democratic principle with educational equality at its core, but has moved increasingly to being based on an aristocratic principle where existing inequalities are reproduced and sedimented. In addition, they propose that teacher education is now expected to follow schooling practices rather than the other way around, with both neo-conservatives and neo-liberals advocating similar policies for schooling and teacher education geared to the dictates of the market. The language of learning, or learnification, means that education is narrowed to learning and teaching is narrowed to learning outcomes or attainment. Not only does the language of learning now dominate education, but all aspects of life. Such a totalising ideology of individualisation and learning is a problem for society as it removes the 'public' from public education and lays the ground for non-democratic and divided societies. Drawing on Rancière's work, specifically his notion of the assumption of equality not only in social life, but also in nature, the authors argue that this assumption underpins democracy and the public of public education. The shocking insight of this assumption about democracy is that power has no other justification except for power itself, there is no natural inequality that justifies the distribution of power, or that one group should dominate all others. Säfström and Månsson (page xxx) argue that the democratic principle in education is characterised by understanding teaching in three ways: *firstly, as the form through which the publicness of the public take place; secondly, by the insight that areté, or how culture is embodied, is not 'inherited' but taught; and thirdly, that equality is an assumption to be verified within the practice of teaching.*

Inequality is not only rising in Sweden at a fast pace, but this inequality is inextricably linked to new populist racisms, and so tearing apart the very 'publicness of the public' and unravelling the social fabric of democracy. What then is core to the social fabric of democracy? The ethical or moral core of democracy is the ability to perceive the other as equal, that is, the premise of the assumption of equality. Given equality is so inextricably connected to democracy and the publicness of public education, what is equality? According to Säfström and Månsson (page xxx) equality *...is essentially about each and everyone's ability and capacity to live a life here and now, to speak, and live together with others, to share meaning with those others; it is through enacting this capacity that equality shows itself in practice, ... If democracy is the very possibility of a liveable life, to be able to claim one's equality with everyone else's in an expanding public; if it is the ability, possibility and right to divide that which present itself as an undividable mono-culture excluding a large part of the populations, then education and teaching are the very praxis of such democracy.*

Mendel's *On the haunted "public" in public education in Poland* draws on Derrida's notion of 'hauntology' to identify the traces of the 'public' in Poland that are from a different historical period, are strange to the present, but nevertheless still impact upon it. A particular example is the growing elitism evident in school reforms (or deforms) supposedly designed to democratize schooling in that country. Poland's pre-1989 history is one where 'equality' was a dominant theme of the one-party government in relation to education as elsewhere in society. Equality though did not cause elites to disappear – they still existed, albeit based upon demonstrations of party loyalty. With the advent of 'democracy', equality was replaced by 'freedom' as the dominant theme shaping public discourse. Freedom here has been used in (neo)liberal ways that focus on the individual. This has led to the development of private schools and the differentiation of state schooling based on academic criteria. Populism, as with other jurisdictions covered in this special issue, has also had a major impact on Polish politics. This populism is evident in the de-professionalization of teachers (through a negation of their expert knowledge) and a mandated nationalist curriculum. Throughout the paper there are references to the specters that haunt public education in Poland – these include the ghosts of Enlightenment versions of humanism. Aligned with other papers in this special issue there is a concern in Mendel's paper with justice and with how things could be other than they are – she suggests that an engagement with 'cosmopolitan learning grounded in posthuman ethics' might help to envisage what that could be.

The contribution by Clarke and Mills, *"We have never been public": Continuity and change in the policy production of 'the public' in education in England*, offers a historic perspective on the notion of the public and its deployment, highlighting the shifting discourses and practices within which the idea of 'the public' has been mobilized and made meaningful over several centuries. As part of this genealogical reading, the paper notes how rhetoric of the public in 18<sup>th</sup> century England was linked to the ideas of progress and civilization as requiring the creation and maintenance of property from 'nature' – themes reflected in the establishment of two key public bodies: the East India Company as the state's resource requisition operation and the Bank of England as the overseer of its credit regime. In this way, the notion of the public became entangled with notions of resources and credit. Looking at more recent times, the authors highlight how recent educational reforms in England have sought to reshape public education in England by extending central government control of curriculum and assessment, while replacing local government control of schools with a quasi-private system of academies and multi academy trusts. These developments have been legitimated in terms of neoliberal ideas of competition, choice and autonomy while being enforced by a neoconservative reassertion of state authority. As such, these developments exemplify how "as an ideology of power that only ever acknowledges its reliance on market mechanisms and their homologues, neoliberalism can only realize its objectives by proxy, that is by outsourcing the imposition of contractual obligations to

social conservatives" (Cooper, 2017, p. 63). By way of this genealogical reading, Clarke and Mills suggest that ideas of British universalism – ‘the public’ – are far more complex and contradictory than they first appear. Specifically, the paper highlights how ideals of freedom, equality and inclusion, rather than being opposed *to*, have gone hand-in-hand *with*, realities of authority, inequality and exclusion in education and society. This obviously raises questions regarding possibilities for creating another, less authoritarian and patrician, more democratic and egalitarian, form of collective. The final part of this paper wrestles with the challenges of the imaginary reconstitution of public education in England in the twenty-first century during a period of rising attraction to populist politics (as also evident in Poland). They as Wrigley below, are drawn to the concept of the ‘common school’ underpinned by concepts such as ‘care’ and ‘solidarity’.

Wrigley in his *Learning in a time of cholera: Imagining a future for public education* is also concerned with how public schools could be other than they currently are. Drawing on Marxist theory and Wolfgang Klafki’s curriculum theory, he develops principles for constructing ‘the common school’. Concerned with the ways in which contemporary neoliberal (and neoconservative) schooling is both damaging to students and teachers, Wrigley suggests that ‘class’ has to be brought into the conversation. Recognizing that class has at times been utilised problematically, he argues that for most young people in public schools the education they receive is not in their class interests. These young people, constructed as human capital, experience school learning as ‘alienated labour’ – and for many this can lead to disengagement due to the exclusion of their everyday realities from the curriculum. In challenging the dominant curriculum discourses in England, he draws on the little used, in the English-speaking world, German curriculum theorist Klafki. For Wrigley, imagining a different public education entails the construction of ‘common schools’, these school’s shaped by Kalfki’s principles, would not be differentiated, would have a curriculum that is concerned with major issues of the time, and would be focused on improving young people’s capacities (intellectual, ethical and technical). Wrigley’s essay is a hopeful one and, like his earlier work, suggests that another type of school other than those currently dominating the English landscape is possible.

Thompson, Mockler and Hogan’s contribution, *Making work private: Autonomy, intensification and accountability*, reports on a multi-jurisdictional study conducted in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and England that involved interviews with 130 school and system leaders, policymakers and union officials. Building on previous work out of the same research project which developed a complex typology of privatisation in the provision of schooling (Mockler, Hogan, Lingard, Rahimi & Thompson, 2020), they argue that the intensification of teachers’ and school leaders’ work is both a consequence of increasing school autonomy and competition and a micropolitical manifestation of privatisation in education. The paper explores the complex relationship between regimes of school autonomy, accountability and audit, and the increase and intensification of teachers’ and school leaders’ work, investigating the ‘on the ground’ consequences of these large-scale policy reforms for these key players. The paper argues for an increasingly rich and nuanced understanding of the ‘publicness’ or otherwise of schooling as a multi-faceted phenomenon that extends well beyond issues of school funding, ownership, or governance, and provides a rationale for including a focus on the nature, quantity and intensity of work in such assessments.

Finally, Verger and Zancajo’s paper, *The instrumentation of public subsidies for private schools: different regulatory models with concurrent equity implications*, surveys the provision of education across OECD countries to explore the multi-faceted and vernacularised consequences of public funding for private education. It argues that publicly-subsidised private schooling impacts public schooling in

a range of ways, including the expansion of school choice and consequently, competition between schools; the drawing away of middle class students from public schools, including ‘white flight’; the encouragement of corporate managerialism in public schools, associated with the blurring of public and private education; the de-coupling of education funding from provision of schooling; and the growing threat to conceptualisations of education and schooling as public rather than private goods. Taking a ‘policy instruments’ approach and based on a systematic literature review, they delineate four regulatory frameworks for publicly subsidised private education in operation across the OECD, motivated variously by the goal of freedom of instruction, a desire for equivalence between public and private education, the promotion of market competition between schools and school sectors, and the desire for greater school autonomy. While Verger and Zancajo observe that these frameworks give rise to different (and localised) forms of privatised schooling, they argue that all four models hold negative implications for equity of education provision, instead giving rise to school segregation and stratification which manifest and sustain disadvantage. They conclude with a survey of recent ‘pro-equity’ reforms, considering what it would take to reshape school systems around more equitable provision, and what stands in the way.

Public education, inequality and democracy have been key themes picked up in all the papers in this special edition. Each of the papers challenges the discourses of the market, the language of individual responsibility, accountability, knowledge commodities and learnification, now permeating all sectors of education. Central to our collective concerns has been the rise of extreme wealth inequalities across the globe since the 1980s with the rise of ‘global hypercapitalism’ (Picketty, 2020), and the increasing vulnerability of whole sectors of the population. Writing about the US, Case and Deaton (2020: 11) suggest that automation and globalization have not only reduced or stagnated wages for those without a college degree, but also produced an ‘epidemic of death’, what they describe as ‘deaths of despair’. Deaths by suicide, drug abuse and alcoholism, they propose are on the rise in the US, and particularly so amongst middle-aged, white non-Hispanics, without a college degree. People in this category, formerly white working class, are now increasingly unemployed or underemployed in short-term casualized jobs. These people are likely to report being depressed, in pain, and on some form of medication, unable to enjoy life and work. Education has not been a way out of poverty for these people, while it has offered others more secure employment and better life opportunities. The narrative of meritocracy, of studying hard at school to attain results that can be converted into wages in the workplace, and in turn a good life, is an unobtainable fantasy for whole sectors of the population. Case and Deaton (2020) argue that whole sectors of the population in the US do not believe that a change in political parties and policies will make things better or hopeful. The rise of right-wing populism, particularly Trump’s populist politics, tapped into this collective sense of despair, but offered more of the same, the increasing marketisation of education.

Alternative, dissenting voices to the dominant neoliberal narratives around education, economics and social life are increasingly erupting across the globe. These voices of dissent often start at a local level, sometimes taking off and spreading across the globe through the aid of mobile technologies and social media platforms. There are many examples of such resistance and activism. A lone student holding a placard, #schoolstrike4climate, refusing to attend school until there is change. Movements across Europe organized against financial austerity measures, job losses, stagnant wage growth, casualization of work, and border restrictions against refugees and migrants (Mumby et al., 2017). Such anti-austerity and precarity activisms, particularly those informed by women’s movements and feminist politics, have not only challenged the dominant neo-liberal narrative of ‘trickle-down’ economics, but also formulated a new term around citizenship – ‘care-tizenship’ (Casas-Cortes, 2019). The term, ‘care-tizenship’ attempts to redefine

the dominant individualizing narrative of neoliberal education/economic policies. It suggests ‘a community of practice forged by ties of caring relationships, mutually attending to basic needs in a context of increasing vulnerability local, migrant and emigrant populations’ (Casas-Cortes, 2019: 19). The term, developed through grassroots activism, initially formulated in the activist movements in Spain as a placard message, ‘a citizenship otherwise’ morphed into the phrase ‘care/itizenship’. The ‘activist concept of caretizenship’ can be interpreted as a creative ‘erasure’ and ‘democratic re-iteration’ of the conventional notion of citizenship (Casas-Cortes, 2019: 21). Creative erasure implies deconstructing the ordering of the sensible generated through the concept ‘citizenship’ and creating a new concept ‘caretizenship’ to posit something affirming, yet remain skeptical and questioning of the new.

Scholarly debates about the publicness of education, emergent publics, the voices of the people/demos, rising inequalities are core to imagining alternative education futures. The papers in this special edition offer alternative narratives to the dominant neoliberal education policy discourses and practices. They are activist in the sense of questioning and challenging the ordering of the sensible in dominant narratives of education across the globe.

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