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NEOLIBERALISM, EDUCATION AND THE ETHICS OF EXTINCTION

NEOLIBERALISMO, EDUCACIÓN Y LA ÉTICA DE LA EXTINCIÓN

Stephen J. Ball (*)
University College London, UK

Resumen

Este artículo aborda las complejas relaciones entre el neoliberalismo, la crisis climática y la educación. Se trata de una reflexión sobre la educación tal como es y sobre cómo podría ser de otro modo. Se sostiene que el neoliberalismo es, en muchos sentidos, "responsable" de la crisis climática y que, en tanto sistema ético, presagia nuestra extinción como especie. Asimismo, se afirma que la educación en su configuración actual —como escolarización— es cómplice del neoliberalismo en la producción de sujetos insostenibles. Frente a ello, el artículo esboza una educación "diferente", que se sustenta en y reproduce una ética de continuidad de la vida y una subjetividad ecológica.

Palabras clave: Currículum, Crisis ecológica, Crecimiento económico, Neoliberalismo, Desarrollo sostenible..

Abstract

(*) Autor para correspondencia:
Stephen J Ball
University College London
20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK
Correo de contacto: stephen.ball@ucl.ac.uk

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This paper addresses the complex relationships between neoliberalism, the climate crisis and education. It is a consideration of education as it is, and as it might be otherwise. It is argued that neoliberalism - as a set of social and economic relations; a framework of expectations and legitimations; a form of government; an ethical system; a particular version of human nature; and a set of specific subjectivities – is 'responsible' in many ways for the climate crisis and that as an ethical system it forebodes our extinction as a species. Neoliberalism extolls the virtues of individual autonomy and human exceptionalism. It does not simply create an ethical system that posits the exploitation of nature as 'natural' but the ideal of the fundamentally self-interested individual curtails any collective transformation of the resulting conditions of existence. The human is set over and against nature. Nature is there to be tamed, made obedient and exploited. Furthermore, the paper makes the argument that education in its current iteration – as schooling – is complicit with neoliberalism in the production of unsustainable subjects. Despite decades of a discourse of and policies for sustainability education the modern school is still producing subjects who view the world, 'their' world, as one of growth and progress, and see happiness as founded on material acquisition, mobility, consumption and waste. That is, schools produce 'unsustainable subjects' – quintessentially economistic, self-interested subjects. Over and against this the paper adumbrates a 'different' education that rests on and reproduces an ethics of life continuance and an ecological subjectivity. An ecological education that begins from the basis of respect for our place in the world and the rights of others who are also there. This is an open field of learning oriented to survival and collective flourishing which fosters the care of the self, of others and of the planet. 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. It necessitates ethical activity that re-politicises all those aspects of our everyday life that are related to the 'petro-economy'; and the questioning of common-sense; and experimentation with new ways of living that begin from the care of the self, of others and the environment, opening the possibility of new and better ways of life in common; based upon a post-human intelligence that looks toward a new and different horizon. That is, a very emotional intelligence that is different from but connected to reason or rational intelligence and that is invested with moral emotions, such as empathy and care. Rather than a site of discipline education might become a range of opportunities and invitations for critique, and a transformative and ethopoietic pedagogy. This is not simply a matter of what to do but crucially, what to be.

Keywords: Curriculum; Ecological crisis; Economic growth; Neoliberalism; Sustainable development.

1. Introduction

> Life is something rare and precious. There is something extraordinary about the planet that we are privileged to live on. The human species is destroying forests and we're doing it at a rate of one acre of forest every second. We're doing something immensely stupid. (*Carl Sagan's Keynote Speech at the 5th Emerging Issues Forum, 1990*, O'Neill, 2022)

> Behold the aggrieved, reactive creature fashioned by neoliberal reason and its effects, who embraces freedom without the social contract, authority without democratic legitimacy, and vengeance without values or futurity. (Brown, 2018, p. 74)

Here I want to say something about the complex relationships between neoliberalism, the climate crisis and education. That is, a consideration of education as it is, and as it might be otherwise. I shall argue that neoliberalism - as a set of social and economic relations; a framework of expectations and legitimations; a form of government; an ethical system; a particular version of human nature; and a set of specific subjectivities – is 'responsible' in many ways for the climate crisis and that as an ethical system it forebodes our extinction as a species. I shall further argue that education in its current iteration – as schooling – is complicit with neoliberalism. Over and against this I will adumbrate a 'different' education that rests on and reproduces an ethics of life continuance and an ecological subjectivity.

Neoliberalism is a juggernaut. It carries some of us with it - an exhilarating ride - and crushes others beneath its wheels. Those wheels travel far and wide. Neoliberalism mutates, adapts and expands its influence into every aspect of our lives; it creates and destroys, colonises and usurps. Furthermore, late neoliberalism, says Wendy Brown (2018) 'is anti-democratic, illiberal and anti-social'. Peck and Theodore sum up neoliberalism and issue a warning to those who deploy it: neoliberalism is they say:

> an emergent mode of regulation, one that has become cumulatively embedded across multiple sites and spaces such that it increasingly defines the rules of the game and the terrain of struggle, even if never acting alone or monopolizing that terrain. [But it] does not provide a warrant for all-purpose, omnibus explanation, as if to install neoliberalism as a singularly self-acting and ultimate source of social causality, like some critical variant of the orthodox globalization script of the 1990s. (Peck & Theodore, 2019, p. 246)

In other words, despite the assertions made in the first paragraph, neoliberalism does not tell us everything we might want to know about contemporary social and political life. Nonetheless, the processes of capitalisation/financialisation that are the life blood of neoliberalism, and the natural, social and personal privatisations that this brings about, have transformed our social and subjective forms of knowledge, habits, language, etc. and the economic, social, political, community, ethnic and gender relations that these give rise to. That is to say, the cosmos reflected in the term *neoliberalism* includes not only the material artifacts of the economy, but also the market relations that bind us and define our place in the world and our relation to it. It refers not only to the political realm and to an ideal of the state – *minarchism* - but to many of the different aspects of human existence. Neoliberal arts of government are perhaps less restrictive than previous ones, less corporeal, but at the same time more intense, saturating the field of actions, and possible actions. In the broadest terms it is a celebration of 'freedom' – but 'The freedom it champions has gained credence as the needs, urges, and values of the private have become legitimate forms of public life and public expression' (Brown, 2018, p. 70).

Neoliberalism is then the contemporary form of what Norgaard (2019) calls 'modern economism'; that is an economic system which over the past 100+ years has co-evolved with a reliance on fossil fuels; and an ethical framework that 'pays no heed to nature' (Norgaard, 2019, p. 124). Furthermore, the 'factors of production' within modern economism are on the one hand extracted from finite reservoirs of raw materials and noneconomic objects and on the other hand are outputs into ever-growing reservoirs of pollution (Boulding, 1966, p. 8). Norgaard goes on to explain.

> Economism has been modern capitalism's myth system, or in computer parlance, capitalism's operating system. It has stressed utilitarian moral beliefs compatible with economic assumptions that are critical to neoclassical economic theories. These beliefs include the idea that society is simply the sum of its individuals and their desires, that people can be perfectly, or at least sufficiently, informed to act rationally in markets, that markets balance individual greed for the common good, and that nature can be divided up into parts and owned and managed as property without systemic social and environmental consequences. (Norgaard, 2019, as cited in Norgaard, 2021, p. 51)

Let me pause for a moment and remind you of some of those environmental consequences – some of the 'morbid features and monstrous effects' (Brown, 2018, p. 257) of neoliberalism.

The WMO State of the Climate 2024 Update once again issues a Red Alert at the sheer pace of climate change in a single generation, turbo-charged by ever-increasing greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere. 2015-2024 will be the warmest ten years on record; the loss of ice from

glaciers, sea-level rise and ocean heating are accelerating; and extreme weather is wreaking havoc on communities and economies across the world. (World Meterological Organization, 2024)

2. Neoliberalism and the ethics of extinction

Neoliberalism extolls the virtues of individual autonomy and human exceptionalism. The human is set over and against nature. Nature is there to be tamed, made obedient and exploited. From the 18thC on philosophical and political reason was asserted against bestiality and the supposed chaos of the natural world. Descartes for example saw humans as wholly separate from and superior to nature and nonhuman animals, who were considered mere mindless machines to be mastered and exploited. 'In creating the foundations for the technological society, the brilliant philosophers at the core of the Enlightenment accidentally created a society of hapless utopians, incapable of placing human activity squarely within the range of biological nature' (Blum, 2018, para. 4).

From that point on humanity has been and is literally 'making' the planet. Nature is made quantifiable as a calculable carbonic human construction. This humanism has provided an intellectual-social infrastructure and moral foundation for the exploitation of nature – without joy or awe or empathy. Indeed, 'the line drawn between the human animals and other animals is one of, if not the most, important division in the biopolitical terrain' (Stanescu, 2013, p. 135). This is the centre-piece of what Boulding (1966) calls the 'cowboy economy'; 'the cowboy being symbolic of the illimitable plains and also associated with reckless, exploitative, romantic, and violent behaviour, which is characteristic of open societies' (p. 7). Boulding contrasted this with 'the "spaceman" economy, in which the earth has become a single spaceship, without unlimited reservoirs of anything, either for extraction or for pollution, and in which, therefore, man must find his place in a cyclical ecological system which is capable of continuous reproduction of material form even though it cannot escape having inputs of energy'.

The cowboy economy, modern economism, neoliberalism (whatever name we use) produces and is reproduced by a very pointed and particular system of ethics – *the ethics of extinction* we might call it: a nihilistic ethics made common sense and inescapable. Within this the relation to oneself is articulated as restlessly individualistic and acquisitive; the relation to others is competitive; and the relation to the environment rests on ignorance or ignoring and complacency, and unfettered consumption and growth. As Robert Norgaard puts it 'our economic beliefs, both moral and those with respect to reality, and the econogenic drivers they facilitated have been critical to the rise of rapid environmental change' (2021, p. 51). Locked into this acquisitive nihilism, neoliberalism 'cannot be appealed to by reason, facts or sustained

argument, because it does not want to know… Having nothing to lose its nihilism is not simply negative but is festive, even apocalyptic' (Brown, 2018, p. 75). The apocalypse is of no interest to the neoliberal mind.

> Believing ourselves to be separate from the fate of nature, the inner logic of capitalism has resisted any recognition of limits to the expansion of markets; capitalist enthusiasts have believed, against all intuition and evidence, that the Earth will never be exhausted. (Blum, 2018, para. 10)

This is then 'an unearthed heroic worldview of 'push harder, more often' (Gillespie, 2020, p. 75) based on 'human exceptionalism', setting humans over and against nature, as human activity leaves it markers on the geological record – the Anthropocene. As Boulding (1966) puts it in all of this the future is discounted and 'If we discount our own future, it is certainly not unreasonable to discount posterity's future even more … If we discount this at 5 per cent per annum … the vote for our grandchildren reduces almost to insignificance' (p. 11). He went onto add that 'of course the ethical thing to do is not to discount the future at all, that time-discounting is mainly the result of myopia and perspective…' (p. 11). And he suggests that this discounting 'explains, perhaps, why conservationist policies almost have to be sold under some other excuse…' (p. 11). Peck and Theodore (2019) go further; they say: the neoliberal 'project seems to have given up on its own future as the horizons of even nominally free-market action and imagination seems to be collapsing' (p. 263). Pollution, climate change, the extinction of animal species and the deterioration of living conditions are "side effects" of the rational, scientific and financial domination of nature. These "side effects" effect us all – but do so differently. Climate inequalities vary within and between countries. Socially and economically disadvantaged groups bear the brunt of climate change and other environmental risks. 'Whether making comparisons between or within countries, the poorest and most vulnerable tend to be more exposed, lose a greater share of their wealth when disaster strikes, and have fewer resources to cope with the consequences' (Colmer, 2021, para. 9).

> We're in this global environmental mess because we have declared parts of our planet to be disposable. The watersheds where we frack the earth to extract gas are considered disposable. The neighborhoods near where I live in Los Angeles, surrounded by urban oilfields, are considered disposable. The very atmosphere is considered disposable. When we pollute the hell out of a place, that's a way of saying that the place—and the people and all the other life that calls that place home—are of no value. (Hopkins, 2020, para. 11)

Neoliberalism does not simply create an ethical system that posits the exploitation of nature as 'natural', the ideal of the fundamentally self-interested individual curtails any collective transformation of the resulting conditions of existence. It is not that such actions are prohibited or entirely restricted by the dictates of a sovereign or the structures of disciplinary power, they are simply not seen as possible, they are closed off by a society made up of nihilists, animated by Homo Economicus. As Foucault argues, neoliberalism operates less on actions, directly prohibiting them, than on the condition and effects of actions, on the sense of possibility, what we can do. As a consequence: 'the future is a matter of indifference or, worse, an unconscious object of destruction … unfettered by concerns with truth, with society, or with the future' (Blum, 2018, para. X).

In other words, neoliberalism works to detach individual well-being from the collective fate. Our personal and familial interests are isolated and separated from shared problems – making those problems difficult to address and solve – in a similar parallel fashion we are detached from the natural environment and rendered into social/economic rather than natural beings. Neoliberal power works by dispersing bodies and individuals through privatization, competition and isolation. As Wendy Brown (2018) argues:

> individualized/market based solutions appear in lieu of collective political solutions: gated communities for concerns about security and safety; bottled water for concerns about water purity; and private schools (or vouchers) for failing public schools, all of which offer the opportunity for individuals to opt out rather than address political problems. (p. 66)

Privatization is not just neoliberalism's strategy for dealing with the public sector, what David Harvey (2birdsswimming, 2009) calls accumulation by dispossession, but a consistent element of its particular form of governmentality, its ethos. Institutions, structures, issues, and problems that used to constitute the public become privatised[1]. Concomitantly this involves forgetting connections, interdependency and the systemic functioning of society and the environment (Meadows, 2015). Furthermore, Grace Hong (2015), drawing on Audre Laude, sees neoliberalism is 'an epistemological structure of disavowal' detaching cause and effect making the cause into a solution, the villains into saviours. By means of claiming that damaging practices are things of the past'. In Hong's narrative, neoliberalism acknowledges, only to undermine; e.g. 'green capitalism'. Tannock (2020) and others have pointed out the participation of petrochemical companies in the promotion of STEM education in schools, based on a petro-pedagogy 'based on corporate and capitalist interests' (p. 474).

[1] Indeed, the collective, when it appears in all of this, as noted above, is rendered into numbers, indicators of economic activity, GDP, as opposed to experience, and these are now set over and against the enumeration of extinction – global warming, etc.

3. Education and the climate emergency

> Believing that the present practices of environmental education can do all the work needed to save the world does not offer much hope for the future. (Wolf, 2014, p. 348)

The climate emergency threatens our continuance as a species and our conviviality as diverse humans. This is where 'the actions of life meet the limits of the biosphere' (Olssen, 2009, p. 219) or as Carl Sagan puts it, 'Extinction is the rule. Survival is the exception'. And schools are one site in which the ethics of extinction are mundanely reproduced. In Hays and Render's words (2023): 'The new millennium is dramatic, ever-changing, and both exciting and threatening. Conventional education offers correspondingly little: it is conservative, staid, and slow to change, seemingly more concerned with replication and perpetuation than evolution and transformation' (p. 115).

The recent report of the UN panel of experts on the climate emergency (2022) argues strongly for the need for *a new way to live* in order to mitigate climate change effects and the climate injustices attendant upon these. It is taken to be obvious that education should be at the heart of bringing about these new modes of living (Jorgenson et al., 2019; Kopnina, 2020; etc.). But this fails to acknowledge the complicated and contradictory ways in which education is implicated in maintaining the status quo and inhibits the production of subjects with relations to themselves, others, the community and the environment that in any way address and respond to the threat of global extinction (Bylund et al., 2021; Komatsu and Rappleye, 2017; etc.).

Despite decades of a discourse of and policies for sustainability education (which is more evident in texts and exhortations than actual practices), the modern school is still producing subjects who view the world, 'their' world, as one of growth and progress, and see happiness as founded on material acquisition, mobility, consumption and waste. In other words schools produce 'unsustainable subjects' – quintessentially economistic, self-interested subjects. The school produces students who are against the world rather than 'in' or 'of' it, and students who think 'for/of' themselves rather than 'for' others and 'for' the planet. Mommers (2020) argues that 'Half measures only make matters worse' (p. 74) and cites the 'non-commital attitude' of education (p. 80) as an example.

Modern schooling is an 'education' that is detached from *l'actuel* – the real and immediate. The issues that define our future (or lack of it) are ignored or submerged in the language of *learnification*, that is the reduction of education to learning, 'the redefinition of all things educational in terms of learning—such as calling students learners, calling schools learning environments or places for learning, referring to adult education as lifelong learning, and seeing

teachers as facilitators of learning' (Biesta, 2019, p. 549). Schools teach the climate emergency, one subject among many others based on sustainability goals that focus mainly on humans rather than nature and predicated on the avoidance of eco-anxiety[2]. *L'actuel* is transformed into a technical or technological (and emotional) problem - and thus neutered and abstracted from politics, experience, history and futurity (Biesta, 2004, 2010). It is rare to find schools that explore the manifold relationships between climate change and climate economic inequalities (Jorgenson et al., 2020). As Komatsu et al. (2023) argue, schools around the globe tend to use technological, cognitive and/or behaviourist approaches to educate for sustainability. That means, learning without unlearning. What we have is a kind of educational netherworld that fails to relate to the issues of life and death, and that is unable to contribute to making subjects able to act or reflect or care about the climate crisis and our extinction as a species. Individual and individualised learners are left to deal alone with increasing feelings of uncertainty and the privatization of ambivalence (Bauman, 1991). The deep grammar of school encloses and makes superficial the urgency and profundity of our plight. Students can continue their lives without guilt or responsibility or anxiety, never 'seeing beyond linear processes and dualistic beliefs about individual power and powerlessness' (Gillespie, 2020, p. 135). Against this Komatsu and Rappleye (2017) argue that:

> We need to radically rethink our starting assumptions about modern mass schooling, … 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. (p. 168)

Modern schools are fundamentally ill-suited for the delivery of an education within which the modern rationalities of growth, winning, individualism, competition, etc. and their attendant identities and subjectivities, might be subject to 'insolent assertion' and critical scepticism. And yet, such insolence and scepticism are a necessary basis for thinking beyond the normal. 'At the heart of the problem is a *de facto* endorsement of business-as-usual in education – a continued reliance on modern mass schooling as a solution to climate change' (Silova et al., 2018, para. 9). The question then is how can we begin to think differently about education and *continuance*, in relation and together?

Once we become aware of what modern education is in these terms, questions can be raised

[2] Gienger et al. (2024) argue that educational approaches that are concerned with eco-anxiety and those encouraging environmental action' risk counteracting each other and ultimately fail to address the root cause of children and young people's experiences' (p. 1619).

about how it might be different. However, this is not matter of offering alternatives, rather, let us begin elsewhere, from Michel Foucault's notions of self-formation and the care of the self - a practice which works on the specific relation individuals have to themselves and to others.

4. Education, self-formation and the ethics of continuance

As Foucault (1997) explains:

> .. if you take proper care of yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen of a city… [of a planet] if you know what things you should and should not fear, if you know what you can reasonably hope for and, on the other hand, what things should not matter to you, if you know, finally, that you should not be afraid of death... (p. 31)

> … then we you/we cease to impose your/our fantasies, appetites and desires upon others. *Self-formation is not a matter of what one knows, but how one lives. It is not about knowledge but about ethics* and 'a very real and very necessary and different ontological relation to ourselves and to truth' (Moghtader, 2016, p. 86). 'Care is freed from the pedagogical scheme of one's preparation to adult life' (Chignola, 2019, p. 112) and becomes instead a way of telling the truth, of reproach, of antagonism, of undoing, of giving effect to words, of understanding ourselves differently, of seeing the historical contingency of things. To change the world and our relation to it, we must change ourselves, and education (but not school, see Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2025) is one site and mode in which that change might be undertaken. In attempting this we must come to see our well-being as inextricably linked to the well-being of the others and the planet in an interdependent dynamic. 'Far from being a lonely and selfish process, self-care fosters generosity and solidarity, enables stronger and more meaningful ties with others' (Sicilia-Camacho & Fernández-Balboa, 2009, p. 455). And as Olssen (2021) says, the process of self-formation rests on 'a relation between the individual and the future of society as a system' (p. 118) – the possibly of a sustainable future (see for example Jorgenson et al., 2019, on *environmental action*).

Students must not only learn about sustainability but also experience what it is like to lead sustainable lives. Sustainability 'is not just another issue to be added to an overcrowded curriculum, but it is a gateway to a different view of pedagogy, of organizational change, of policy and particularly of ethos (Sterling, 2004). Kahn (2010) goes further and endorses a

radical ecopedagogy where students progress from learning about problems in their local environment (mapping species, taking samples of pollution, etc.) to taking action by contacting sources of pollution, informing local authorities and the press, and exerting an influence where they can – much of this learning would be unlearning, relearning and de-schooling. This would involve a reversal of the usual framework of authority that the school represents – one of hierarchy and submission – and rather requires that we resist authority and actively seek to dismantle universality. The task of education in these terms is to convince someone that they must take care of themselves and of others; and this means that they must *change their life*.

In contrast to what we might call the economistic or neoliberal school and the ethics of extinction we might begin to imagine an education constructed from a common interest in what Olssen (2021) calls *life continuance*. This would rest on the intertwining and interdependence of ourselves, others, community, and environment within which individual well-being is co-produced and co-related to common interests and communal survival – and thus *continuance ethics*. This would mean relinquishing our exceptionalism as humans – that is no longer seeing ourselves as *apart from* but rather as *part of* the natural world and engaging with and making creative responses to ecological crises. This is a post-human ethics that could create 'new imaginative ways of understanding relations between lives' (MacCormack, 2016, p. 1). Continuance ethics require practices of cooperation and mutual care and respect and a relational, interdependent, and systemic ontology where all persons, lands, communities, oceans seen as are interconnected; a co-construction within which no-one person, group, animal, or nature is spare, excess or inferior; thus an education that is oriented to co-producing and co-creating new paths, realities and proposals for life continuance. 'What does not yet exist is a general awareness of the importance and necessity of these understandings of education for the practice of 'taking care of the future' in complex cosmopolitan times' (Osberg, 2010, p. 160).

As Varpanen et al. (2024), put it 'The ecological crisis places an unavoidable ethical imperative for the conscientious adult: to learn a way of existing that supports life rather than destroying it' (p. 53). To use another term, what is crucial here is what Osberg calls an 'ethics of responsibility' – a commitment to a shared future based on collegiality and creativity. That is, a substantive form of responsibility that 'implies a commitment to ensuring the ongoing *existence* or at least the *quality of existence* of other living beings' (Osberg, 2010, p. 160). Or, as Olssen (2021) asserts: 'We are all responsible for climate change now, whether we caused it or not' (p. 140).

This taking care would entail, as Osberg says, an education 'based not on the moral convictions of some, but on the idea of an experiment with the possibility of the impossible'. The exercise

of speculative fabulation (Haraway, 2013) 'Terms that might embody the kinds of change necessary include paradoxical, metaphorical, extemporaneous, inverted, even chaotic…' (Hays & Riender, 2023, p. 138). Which would meaning having '[our] own centrality displaced' (Varpanen et al., 2024, p. 59). This would necessitate in Olssen's words (2021), 'cooperative and collaborative activity centred upon experiential, creative responses to contingent sets of relations to cope with uncertainty in a never-ending quest' (p. XVIII). This is education as an ethical and political activity that begins with the recognition of the subject as a form rather than a substance. This form is constituted through practices and the work of making ourselves an object of reflective action enacted daily and immediately. That is, a new grammar and aesthetics of living in which education and politics are processes of co-learning, decision taking, limit testing, and conflict resolution in real contexts in relation to actual problems portending an uncertain future and our extinction. Here education is neither oriented to the celebration of the past nor a means toward a future of ineluctable growth. This is an active engagement with various impossible futures; an engagement that recognises our shared fate and the rampant inequalities that cut across that fate; an education that works for reparation rather than for extinction; an education for the common good in the most general sense – our continuance as a species; an escape from the processes of subject formation that we currently call schooling. An education that not only *words* but also *worlds* differently as Donna Haraway (2016) puts it.

An ecological education begins from the basis of respect for our place in the world and the rights of others who are also there. It celebrates and fosters our 'always-multispecies self' (Haraway, 2016); and life-affirming practices, as an 'as-yet-undiscovered art of existence in the Anthropocene' (Varpanen et al., 2024, p. 54). Again, this is not simply a matter of what to do but crucially, what to be. 'The aim of caring for oneself is to reconstruct the political and social framework in which modern subjects attend to the way they live' (p. 88) – with others, in the world, in relation to, as part of nature. Rather than trade on unacknowledged metaphysical normativities, as happens in the neoliberal school, education as self-formation might be one arena in which practical possibilities for action in relation to *life-continuance* are investigated and experimented with. This begets us as a different kind of subject, a moral subject, an active subject, an ethical subject who is 'faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions and diverse comportments may be realised' (Foucault, 1993, p. 221). This is an open field of learning oriented to survival and collective flourishing which encourages 'the fire of innovation, transformation and resistance' (Chignola, 2019, p. 125). The care of the self, in these terms, is made up agonistically rather than didactically, in a process of ongoing insubordination, curiosity and possibility. Rather than a site of discipline education might become a range of opportunities and invitations for critique, and a transformative and *ethopoietic* pedagogy. This stands in stark contrast to economism, which constantly under-estimates 'the extent to which people are members of, and derive their identity from, public

shared structures of community' (Olssen, 2009, p. 97). In a world of scarcity and environmental danger the complex interconnections of biological, social and material life have never been clearer and 'the new crises facing mankind alter the calculus of "self" versus "common" interest and increase the shadow of the future on human affairs, introducing [or not] a new objective sense of shared purpose' (Olssen, 2009, p. 206).

What I am gesturing towards, with no great originality, is an education that co-constructs a different subjectivity – an *ecological subjectivity*; one that is oriented toward common interests and a common fate, a caring for others and for other species with whom we cohabit the world – and the fostering of what Stratford (2024) calls, an *anthropocene intelligence*. A post-human intelligence that looks toward a new and different horizon. A very emotional intelligence that is different from but connected to reason or rational intelligence and that is invested with moral emotions, such as empathy and care (see, for example, Dalmiya, 2002; Plumwood, 1993; Warren, 2000; Whyte & Cuomo, 2017). The post-human future, Donna Haraway (2003) claims, will be a time 'when species meet', and a time in which we take the interests and rights of things that are different to us seriously. It is our duty now to protect the biosphere. We must: 'act so that the effects of [our actions] are compatible with the permanence of genuine human life' (Jonas, 1984, p. 11) and the lives of other species. This reconnection would be a basis for very practical ethics focused on 'eventual effects" and 'real consequences' and on an obligation to the future – a futurised ontology creating 'continuance agendas' oriented to survival and well-being. Something like what Hays and Reinders (2023) call 'critical learnership, or 'learning forward' an 'anticipatory learning' made up of:

> …innovative educational practices that make students aware of their own entanglement with everything that surrounds them and of diverse ways of knowing and being nature, which provide a holistic way forward. [that] de-center human agency, stretch knowledge beyond the confines of rational thought and reconceptualise what nature is and where it can be found. … with the aim of building the ontological reflexivity needed to reimagine the anthropocentric human-nature relationship in and through education. (Geinger et al., 2024, p. 1637)

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. An education that promotes the material and relational conditions of possibility for a subject formation that enacts 'transformative learning for sustainable living' that requires us to 'inspire, challenge and question ourselves as co-inhabitants of the world, to ask the questions we all struggle to find answers to and to find sound knowledge, intuition and wonder in our search for solutions' (Blake et al., 2013, p. 5349). This is something different from the platitudes of Education for

Sustainability that continue to privilege the quality of human life over other living forms and species and play down the contribution of economic growth to the current environmental crisis, 'setting "humans" apart from and "above" the "environment"' (Fox & Alldred, 2019, p. 4).

Following Foucault (1983), this necessitates ethical activity that repoliticises all those aspects of our everyday life that are related to a 'fossil civilisation' that is becoming a 'death civilisation' and the questioning of common-sense and experimentation with new ways of living that begin from the care of the self, of others and the environment, opening the possibility of new and better ways of life in common (Bollier & Helfrich, 2020). Education must begin by addressing the 'relation between the individual and the future of society as a system' (Olssen, 2021, p. 118). Olssen (2009, p. 219) goes on to say, in relation to this, 'we need a revised conception of shared purpose or global public interest.

5. Creating a space in which to think… Abandoning hope, reform, innovation

> We are living through a transition in planetary life with the potential to transform Earth rapidly and irreversibly into a state unknown in human experience (Barnosky et al., 2012, p. 52)

The ethical system adumbrated above constitutes a new episteme that might sustain different forms of education and concomitantly different forms of government and produce new possibilities for subjectivity. That is, an escape from the processes of subject formation that we call schooling. This is not about working toward the present future but an active engagement with various impossible other futures. As Lewis (2012) puts it

> I am suggesting that at this historical moment what is needed most in critical educational theory is a push toward the farthest edge of the educational imagination in order to reconceptualise 'common education' detached from both state control and private ownership. (pp. 852–853)

Education in these terms would become embedded in a relational, interdependent, and systemic ontology which would require us to question common-sense and experiment with new modes of education and ways of living that begin from the care of the self, of others and the environment, opening the possibility of new and better ways of life in common and our survival as a species; the making of 'planetary citizens' and an understanding of what it means to be a biological creature that has the natural world as its habitat. That might make possible a post-humanist subjectivity and an ethical position that extends care and concern to things that

are different from us, a shift away from the currently dominant background structures of thought. Straume (2019) argues that:

> …educational responsibility in a contemporary context (…) may provide a sense of meaning to young people's lives; not only in the obvious sense as feeling useful, but also in a deeper sense as a feeling of belonging or 'commoning'. Learning how to live more sustainable lives and to participate in meaningful and effective political activities responds to the many of the problems described as political passivity. (p. 548)

The argument here rests on the idea that caring for oneself must involve more than protection of individual rights and liberties. It necessitates the protection of the ecological well-being of others, with whom we are in relationship and interdependence – other humans, but also other species. It is h*ow* we relate to others that matters morally. A different education must be based on an ontological imagination beyond the Cartesian dualism of human and nature. The modern project and modern science were made possible by and asserted within a dualist ontology in which animals, plants and the environment human could be plundered and exploited without consideration or remorse. The suffering and exploitation of nature were not only justified but encouraged (Hickel, 2021). As Moore argues (2013): 'Efforts to transcend capitalism in any egalitarian and broadly sustainable fashion will be stymied so long as the radical political imagination is captive to capitalism's either/or organization of reality: Nature/Society' (p. 3) and Willamo (2005) says, we cannot learn to understand the principles of sustainability if we do not understand our own basic nature, if we forget that we *are* nature. Escaping the *anthropocene* will require a dynamic and polycentric reconnection between subjectivity and morality (Norgaard, 2021) and an education that can play its part in constituting a human imagination beyond the current modern/capitalist episteme, one that accepts that 'The weft of the environment is life itself, at the interface between nature and culture. The environment is the crucible in which our identities, our relations with others and our 'being in the world' are formed' (Sauvé, 2005).

Resisting or challenging neoliberalism and saving our species and our planet means resisting our own practices and confronting ourselves at the centre of our discomforts. If one follows the logic of critique we end up finding out that we are precisely the ones to be blamed. Thinking and acting differently involves constant and organized work on the self, that is, the 'establishment of a certain objectivity, the development of a politics and a government of the self, and an elaboration of an ethics and practice in regard to oneself' (Foucault, 1997, p. 117).

There is no programme to be outlined for this. Rather this is the starting point for an education that experiments with 'the possibility of the impossible'. There is no foreclosure, no 'defined

liberation' or 'planned agency' in play here. Rather the need to experiment with the possibility of being different; an exercise of freedom and a space and opportunity for self-formation. A sequence of moments and spaces in which 'critical learning' is possible – ethical heterotopias, real and unreal. A critique that might produce an 'other side of education', a space of transgression. Experiments in living intended to re-create ourselves, and the world. That is, both a letting go and risking what might be produced through other forms of thinking and thought. Work to be done at the limits of ourselves.

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