

Education Is for the People, Not the State: Moving Beyond the Public/Private Distinction

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This text aims at shifting interest from public education to the publicness of education, and it does so by discussing the very foundations of education itself. In particular this article explores the difference between the Sophists' practice-oriented understanding of education and its autotelic aims, on the one hand, and Plato's understanding that education is a tool to perfect the state, on the other hand. I argue that the Sophist's understanding of education is more productive for expanding the public meaning of education beyond the conventional understandings of the public as being tied to the state. This requires a shift from seeing the state as the only legitimate owner of the goals and aims of education for its people, to a publicness of education owned by the people themselves.

Introduction

The idea that education is meant to fulfil goals outside itself motivates education as a significant force for all those with ambitions to change society in its image.¹ Education, whether public or private, tends to be motivated by the will to establish a particular idea of society, and to define who its citizens are in order to embrace that vision. This line of thought, in which education is to be a tool for forces outside itself, was established already by Plato in 500 B.C., who considered education to be the leading force to perfect the state by educating each (aristocratic) man to perfect himself in its image (Jaeger, 1939/1965; Säfström, 2023). In this line of thought, which still largely dominates educational thinking, through traces of the archaic in the present (Bishop, 2011), education is *a managerial function of the state*, reproducing itself as a state of a particular kind in order to stay in power. Furthermore, this is the case for both public and private education.

In the following, I will give some examples that, together, make the distinction, based on how schooling is paid for and how it is organised, between public (taxes) and private (private means, donations, etc.) education, and organised within a liberal democracy (see below), somewhat problematic

¹ The idea that education is to fulfil goals external to itself is as old as the idea of education, from the Ancient Greeks (where education for Plato was the means to perfect the state, see Jaeger, 1939/1965, 1943/1986) to the progressives of modernity. See, for example, Lyotard (1979) or Rancière (1991) on the connection between modernity, progress, and education and Popkewitz (2008) on the ambitions of a state to reproduce itself in its own image, and to stay in power through education. See also Masschelein and Simons (2013) for a more recent account, even though their emphasis are slightly different than mine, see further this article.

and suggest that we instead focus on and ask questions that move us beyond public versus private education, two sides of the same coin. Instead of public education, the following will focus on the *publicness of education*, for reasons that will become clear as the paper proceeds. In the first section, I will give some examples of how the idea of public education becomes problematic, particularly if one considers education to be more than reducible to a system and/or to how such a system is funded. The second section exemplifies the inherently political nature of understanding education only as a system and as a neutral tool for whatever ideology it is used to advance. In a third section, to move beyond some of the issues following from the public/private distinction, the basis for making distinctions concerning education is shifted. Introduced is education as a force beyond schooling, beyond the idea that the state has the right to education, to rather be understanding education as a force of emancipation from the will of others, including the state. While schooling is reducible to the forces of socialisation and its content, that is, to the force of making someone the same as everyone else in the social context in which it operates. Neither education nor the school is the same as schooling. The school is a particular place where actual people interact, where people live together. In the school, in the reality of people interacting, there is always the possibility of education, that is, of emancipation taking place, since the reality of here and now is always somewhat unpredictable and cannot be reduced to schooling, cannot be reduced to the will and desires of the state. While schooling is dependent on the system and its will and desires of those in charge of the school system for its meaning and content, emancipation is always a break with those desires, in order for the subject to appear as such. Education makes subjectification possible (Biesta, 2014).

In order to shift the interest from public education to the publicness of education, the very foundations of how to understand education needs to be discussed. This is done in this text by contrasting the two major strands in educational thought, divided by how one understands practice on the one hand and ideas or aims on the other. That is, by discussing the difference between the Sophists' practice-oriented understanding of education and its autotelic aims and Plato's, where for him education was simply a tool to perfect the state, the foundational difference between the publicness of education and public-private education is made clear (see Cassin, 2014, 2020; Jaeger 1939/1965, 1943/1986, 1944/1986; Säfström, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2023). In the next section the publicness of education is discussed as following on the sophist practice oriented understanding of education, followed by a short conclusion.

Three Examples of Public Education and Its Problems

While public education most often tends to be defined as a school system being democratically organised, funded by taxes and for all (Carr & Hartnett, 1996; Higgins & Knight Abowitz, 2011), private education tends to refer to its opposite, to education that falls outside state funding, and an education for the few, those who fulfil the particular owner's ideas and visions for the private school in question. There are, though, cases that complicate such a straightforward understanding of the difference between public and private education. For example, in Sweden, the school system contains both public and private schools. It contains both public (non-profit) and private (profit making) education simultaneously regulated by the state and regulated by market forces, both funded through taxes, and delivered within a broad national curriculum which are democratically controlled. Private schools, which are profit making schools, within the national school system are seen as only partly subject to the regulations for public (non-profit) schools, since they are, first and foremost, businesses owned by corporations and/or private investors generating profit for those owners. As such, they fall under business regulations and laws rather than those governing the public sphere. Again, taxes, though, fund both types of schools. The tax-based funding system assigns a price tag to each student which generates the budget for the school in question, in addition to a base funding, whether private or public.

As a result, both types of schools compete for students, that is for increasing its budget. This competition affects both school types negatively but in different ways. While the public school strictly needs to follow the regulations for state schooling, providing facilities such as a gym and a library, and providing access to physical and mental care, and bear the costs for those, the private schools do not need to provide those facilities and services. For the private school, such facilities and services are optional. This has been, and still is, a major critique of the market driven private schooling in Sweden: their tendency to reduce costs to maximise profit for shareholders and owners rather than reinvesting in the schools themselves (see, for example, Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2018). Still, by law, they achieve the same base funding, so the private schools make a profit by reducing what the public schools need to provide. Moreover, by restricting student enrolment and avoiding costly special needs students, the private schools increase their profit even more for shareholders and owners. Due to an equalising mechanism between different types of schools, the private schools benefit from increased funding for the public school, without addressing the needs that led to the increase in funding for the public school. As a consequence, the total budget for tax-financed schooling in Sweden is hollowed out for the benefit of profit for the private schools' shareholders.

In such extreme cases, as in Sweden, the distinction between public and private schooling is blurred to the benefit of the owners and shareholders of private schools, who are given the right to transfer tax funds into profit without reinvesting that profit in the schools they run. Allowing for profit-generating private schools within the tax-financed national school system has proven not only to be a profitable affair but also to challenge and weaken the democratic strengths of a public school system, and by doing so, making some people ostentatiously wealthy (Englund, 2009; Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2018; Hogan & Thompson, 2021; Säfström, 2021; Whitty & Power, 2000).

The market-driven schooling in Sweden has proved to be utterly problematic, not only for its crass capitalist ideology of profit-making on behalf of taxpayers, and its reduction of students to profit-making entities in competition with each other, but also for its inflation of grades. The private schools compete with each other by offering students the opportunity for good grades, where those grades are, rather than being strictly a measure of knowledge, set within a value system of competition between different schools. As a consequence, the grades from those schools have been proven to be inflated (Stockholm School of Economics, 2023). The private-market-oriented school system can therefore be understood as a significant force in the decline of the overall quality of schooling in Sweden, undermining, as it goes along, the very quality of schooling as a whole as well as undermining a just and fair society (Säfström, 2021). The intense focus on measurements, learning, choice, efficiency, terms internal to neo-liberal schooling, in which capital rather than education has set the tone, has in effect been leading to the destruction of what was once a proud asset in Swedish society, a reasonably well-functioning qualitatively strong public education for all (Englund, 2009).

In the extreme Swedish case, public schooling for all is straightforwardly and openly challenged by private schooling for profit, both of which are funded by taxes and claim to take place within a democratically founded national curriculum. In the following second example, the concern is not about how the schools are funded or whether they are formed within a national curriculum, but rather about how well they live up to the common good central to a democratic society (Apple, 2018; Biesta et al., 2013).

Hana Cervinkova and Lotar Rasinski (2023) show in their chapter "Public Parents, Reclaiming Publicness of Education in the New Tyrannies" in the anthology *The New Publicness of Education* (Säfström & Biesta, 2023) that in certain cases, the privately funded schools are in fact those schools that are upholding the common good central to education and democracy, in that they are open for all and ideologically embrace fundamental democratic principles and values. Their case is taken from Poland, as an example of schooling in what they call "the new tyrannies," a conception picked up from Agnes Heller as describing recent developments in Central/East Europe, post-communist countries (Cervinkova & Rasinski, 2023). The private parentally-driven schools are motivated by a concern for the common good of the society in which they operate. While the public state schools in this case are highly selective and

dismissive of those who do not align with the state's political and religious ideology, the private, parentally-driven schools are open to all. They are not, though, funded by taxes. In this example, the public state-school system is, rather than for all, an expression of a narrow and limited understanding of what constitutes the common good and who is to be included. While the private schools are both founded on a vision of the common good and potentially include all children, the tax-funded, democratically controlled state schools are exclusionary and narrow in their understanding of what constitutes the common good and who to include into that common good.

What both of those examples show is that the private/public distinction is not enough to capture what is at stake when education is on the agenda, and shows that when schooling is a socialising tool in the service of the state, and that state wants to use education as a means to a particular politics alien from education itself, it also excludes any sound understanding of what education is about.² That is, what particularly seems to be missing in the public/private distinction above is an understanding of education *itself*, which does not already reduce education to a managerial function of the state, or the market, but an education which concerns how we live among and with other people in everyday life, regardless of the desires and wishes of a state. The idea that education is first and foremost a managerial function of a state and through which that state reproduces itself will always place education in tension between different ideologies that see it as their rightful tool to fulfil their will, regardless of what constitutes that will. Education will be reduced to a system harbouring the tension between the ideological foundations of the type of state one wishes for. It will be reduced to schooling as a socialising tool, and to conflicts over who has the right to use these tools for their ends and desires.

An example is the open conflict over public schooling in the U.S., in which the public school system finds itself in the middle of a culture war between what is pictured as a war against “woke” by a Make America Great Again (MAGA) government (Giroux, 2018). The battle (or war) concerns what the content of education ought to be to reflect the vision of the state one has in mind, and has, in this case, been leading to school boards harshly excluding anything they see as falling outside their own political and religious convictions.³

Schooling as a tool for whoever wields the power to define its content will always find itself in the middle of a struggle between different political ideologies, most often over democracy itself. Fundamentally, these struggles concern the role public education has—or ought to have—in fostering new generations in ways that reflect the ideology of those in power in the state in question, as if that ideology were all there is.

These examples give rise to some important questions we need to ask ourselves: what happens if a state turns the public school system into a political weapon in its culture wars as seems to be the case in the United States of America today? Or into a profit-making machine, as in the Swedish case? Or as restricting and making access to public education exclusionary for specific religious values and political convictions, as in the Polish case?

Even though the historical, political, and social circumstances for the three examples differ, one thing unites them: they all broadly hold that the role and function of education is to fulfil whatever is demanded of it. That education is only and exclusively to be understood as a system, process, tool, or procedure that organises and translates desires and expectations placed on education, formulated by whatever ideology happens to be in power. However, that education itself is empty, only a tool for whatever task is given to it, only a means to a given end: that education is only *the managerial function* of a state used to perfect itself. However, as such, the managerial function of schooling, in itself, is considered neutral, objective, contentless, and hollow emptiness for whatever is set for it to perform.

² For a substantial critique of socialisation as a tool in schooling, please see Säfström & Månsson (2004) in which it is argued, based on Bauman (1991), Levinas (1980, 1991), Simmel (1950), among others, that socialisation, by making the social being, erases the possible ethical relation to the other.

³ An example is the Texas book bans (September 1, 2023) on any texts or material in schools dealing with LGBTQ+ issues.

When the State Declares Its Interests—“You Know What We Want!”

There is something important missing if we get stuck in the public-private distinction, reducing education to its organisational form. It gets even more problematic if the educational form is understood as objective and neutral, either as a neutral structure scaffolding what is supposed to be going on in schooling, or as an objective process, without meaning or value of their own, only giving direction to be fulfilling whatever goals are to be managed. That is, the distinction between public and private is hardly helpful in arguing for education as in itself being an expression of the common good and not only a tool for something external to itself, as will be developed below. When education is only to be understood as schooling, a form through which the desires of the state, or the market, are transferred into aims and goals of a school system, it tends to neutralise what is essentially an expression of political will. This process of neutralisation of the political will is the main reason for its popularity across the political spectrum, as well as the belief that it can solve any problem humanity faces, ironically including those affecting the planet today, while bringing peace and eradicating poverty (UNESCO, 2025), all highly political endeavours, but all considered possible to educate away.

The following is an example of a situation in which the neutralisation of political will seemed to play a significant role in modelling the totality of a state school system, particularly teacher education: In 2010, I was Dean of teacher education at a middle size Swedish University, at a time when schooling, teachers and teacher education was very much under attack from liberals, conservatives, Christian democrats and a fascist party, all of whom aimed to transfer the public school system into the market-driven one we have today. As a representative of all teacher education in Sweden and as part of the steering committee for the teacher education organisation *lärarutbildningskonventet* (Teacher Education Convention), I had an audience with the state secretary of education. We discussed the suggested reforms to teacher education, which aimed to align it with the changing school system and prepare teachers for a market-driven school system (Säfström & Månsson, 2022). In the discussion, I highlighted the strong empirical, theoretical, and historical school research that has existed and continues to exist in Sweden, and not least through the then somewhat new wave of didactic research revitalising the whole field to its core (Englund, 2008). I argued, based on that research, that their proposed plans would increase inequality, lower educational quality, and potentially erode the democratic foundation of society. His only response was, “*We do not care! You know what we want!*” (my emphasis)

Moreover, what they wanted was to form the entire school system—from kindergarten to universities and teacher education—in line with their political ideology, which they also succeeded in doing, creating this unique, market-driven system for profitable schooling.

The discussion with the state secretary of education is, of course, in this context, nothing more than an anecdote by a frustrated scholar of education, but what makes it worth recalling is that it shows exactly how disrespectful the administration was to educational research and researchers of education.⁴ The anecdote is also interesting for reason that that they were able to do so, is because education was understood only in terms of schooling, a tool for an ideology alien to education itself, but in perfect sync with the will of the state in question.

The ideological use of research is not new or that uncommon, but in Sweden it was massive and hegemonic in its reach. See, for example, Bengtsson (2009) who shows how the liberal party, responsible for education and research in the government and which the secretary represented, preferred to use what then was called brain research to further their political agenda. The minister used a prominent brain

⁴ In Sweden the discipline of education is called *pedagogik*, and has its roots in the continental traditions of education rather than Anglo-American, even though nowadays it is a peculiar mix of different traditions. See, for example, Biesta (2011) on the distinction and Säfström (2021) for a critical take on the recent developments of *pedagogik*.

researcher to be confirming the political agenda, without being able to show exactly how that support followed from his research (see further Bengtsson, 2009; Säfström, 2021).

The discussion with the state secretary exemplifies what research has shown to be the case, that the shift to a profit-making schooling is often based on a repression of school based research conducted by educational researchers, in combination with a massive critique of teacher education, and a severe debunking of the teachers themselves (Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2018). The administration also argued for only one type of research, evidence-based research, despite the fact that their understanding of what evidence means or can mean was lacking, severely restricting the field of research to be funded (Evaldson & Nilholm, 2009).

The right-wing block, including the liberal self-proclaimed school party, who only remain in power today thanks to backing from the far right Sweden Democrats party (the party once founded by Nazis), did change the totality of the educational system in Sweden, from universities to kindergarten, by pushing for market-based schooling and by emptying those systems of education and democracy (Lundahl et al., 2013).

Against the understanding of the role and function of public or private education to fulfil aims and goals outside itself, Masschelein and Simons (2013) point out that schools, the very idea of schools, were introduced in ancient Greece as *scholé*, as “free time”, and as a place for withdrawal from business as usual in everyday life to a place of study. It is where one studies the world at a distance, where students study without being confined by the responsibilities and hierarchies connected to everyday life in a particular city-state. The school itself, its very form, is therefore, they argue, an equalising, democratic form of equality.

According to Masschelein and Simons (2013, 2015), the very form of *scholé*, of school, is an embodiment of *time as free*. Any state and nation organising education in order to reproduce itself, therefore, needs to tame that form, to tame education to fulfil its will, its ideology and politics. The history of education, and all state driven reformations of school systems, therefore, can be read as a series of attempts at “taming” (Masschelein & Simons, 2013, p. 51) the very inherent free time of school, whose freedom makes it possible to study the world, and to give full attention to issues and things otherwise passing by in everyday living and making it possible to liberate oneself from the reproduction of one’s given place in the social order and instead take a stance in relation to that order. And again, since the state educates to stay in power (Popkewitz, 2008), to reproduce itself as a particular type of state, it necessarily needs to be taming the free time of the school form, and so is the case even if, as Rancière (1999) would claim, there is better or worse “police orders” to which the taming needs to adhere to.

As such, *scholé* both makes democracy possible and can be understood as an expression of democracy itself but always somewhat restricted by the reproductive powers of socialisation embedded in schooling. The main task of education then, for Masschelein & Simons (2013), is to release a democracy in which the common good is already implicit in the school form and as such the main guarantee of emancipated citizens living together in a democratic society.

In focusing on the school form, and despite the insights into the democratic importance of that form, Masschelein and Simons (2013) still seems to understand the school in its managerial function, adding that such function has the capacity within itself to produce democracy. Even though I am sympathetic to their analysis, I will take another approach: That is, to shift to an educational thought founded by teachers teaching how to move with others rather than philosophers philosophising over how to perfect the state through the school system as such. That is, as will be developed further below, to shift from Platonic traditions of educational thought to a Sophistic one. This is not to claim that the Sophists were unproblematic, or perfect, but that their thinking and practising education started with the reflection over and in the practices of teaching in everyday life. Furthermore, they reflected over what teaching could be in that reality of life in which no one is or can be perfect, rather than on speculating on how to perfect the state, by perfecting the male aristocracy ruling such state (as it did for Plato, see Cassin, 2014, 2016; Cosigny, 2001; Jaeger, 1944/1986, p. 259 and below; Säfström, 2023).

Schooling the School While Education Liberates

While schooling refers to a state's desire to reproduce itself in its own image, whether public or private, education is not self-evidently located between a particular state and the individual. Education, as first formulated by the Sophists, is instead about living well *with* others different from oneself in everyday life and in an environment on which one depends, rather than a tool for perfecting the state (Cassin, 2014; Säfström, 2023). That is, we need to take education back from its Platonic visions of being *the* tool for those in power to bend people to its will, and then to make it an expression of how well people live *with* others from whom they differ, in ways that support the plurality implicit in the common good of the everyday of living.

In everyday life, the school is a place where the imperfections of our actual lives are played out, despite the hopes and ideals of perfection embedded in schooling. Perfection is alien to the reality of the school; it idealises how life should be in the perfect state of things, or could be if it were not what it *is*. The Sophists began with the everyday—how one lives with others and in concrete environments. Education for them, therefore, concerns *the practice* of living well together with others, and teaching concerns how to move (Cassin, 2014) together with others, not necessarily in the same way (Bauman, 1999b) but in ways that moves us all along. The Sophists were democrats for whom pluralism and equality are not contrary to but interdependent with the common good (Jaeger, 1939/1965).

Schooling is, in the words of Emile Durkheim (1956), the force and organisation of socialisation, that is, the transmission of specific values and norms which are defined from the outside, from a central idea of what it means to live in a particular society and which make it possible to identify someone as part of that society. In consequence, if schooling operates in an authoritarian society formed through modernity and capitalism (Bauman, 2000), it means to live well in that society, its members need to embrace those values and norms of modernity and capitalism as part of their reality and identity and to embrace the will of the authoritarian state as expression of their own will.

Such schooling verifies an authoritarian identity as an expression of the real itself.

Schooling is the tool through which a state reproduces itself by implanting an image of itself, as the socio-psychological structure of a given reality in which the individual fulfils him or herself as an expression of such structure (see further below and Jaeger 1944/1986, p. 259; Säfström, 2023). The better the match between the individual and the pre-set socio-psychological structure, the better one is socialised and the better one fulfils the desires of the state while being more fully oneself. Teaching within this definition of schooling means to help the individual to find her or his place in the natural order of the modern capitalist state. Schooling then also operates as a de-politicising force, neutralising what is essentially political ideology—the will to become “the real”—and, through that reality, establishing certain people as already above the rest. Since reality constructs itself, people naturally fall into levels, and schooling only executes this process, pairing everyone with his or her place in the social hierarchy. Everyone gets what they deserve by fulfilling their destined place in the social and political hierarchy.

The school on the other hand, again, refers to an actual school—a place where people meet and where things other than expected can happen. Socialisation can fail. That is, the actual school is a place where relations between people in everyday life are played out and is, as such, not totally predictable. There is always the possibility that something other than what was desired or planned for happens, which teachers and parents, for that matter, know all too well (Säfström, 2023). It is therefore also the case that success and failure in actual schools look different from what is desired by socialisation. It looks different from what is demanded by socialisation and, more often than not, concerns liberation and emancipation from demands placed on the individual rather than scoring high or low on tests (Biesta, 2014; Säfström 2023).

It is, therefore, important to consider the actual school where people of different ages and roles interact, where meetings and relations between people are not predictable, and where the possibility of

going beyond what is required by schooling is the challenge. Schooling operates through relations between categories such as “the teacher” (how many actual people does that refer to?) and the student (how many people does that refer to?) instead of meeting someone beyond those categories face to face. That is, a space where expectations and desires formed somewhere else do not apply in full, or are ignored and deconstructed by the fallibility, unpredictability, and ambiguity of actual people relating to and moving together in concrete environments, and, as such, being far from perfect (Cassin, 2014). That brings us to education, since education is always concerned with how to live well with others who are not the same as us, with emancipation from being ruled by others as a condition to live well with those others, and with preparing for the ability to take a stance. To liberate oneself from being formed through a socio-psychological structure mirroring a specific state of power at a particular point in time. To be able to judge for oneself how to and with whom to live one’s life. Education is about living in the everyday of life *with* other people, negotiating how to move on, differently but together with those others. Education, in the Sophist tradition, in short, is fundamentally an embodiment of and an expression of democratic practice.

The Publicness of Education: A Radical Suggestion

The problem with some traditions of educational research, to my mind, is the convergence of research with schooling, as expressed through a Platonic socio-psychological structure that locates and fixates education between the individual and the state. If such educational research is not critical, it tends to reinforce state power, regardless of whether it is focused on learning (Säljö, 2023) and/or the content of the curriculum (Wahlström, 2016), or the love of the world (Hodgson et al., 2018). Such educational research runs the risk to be reduced to a tool for the state to perfect itself and to stay in power regardless of its people. What can be called schooling research already accepts a starting point in which education is reduced to a managerial function of the state, regardless of whether the state is good or not and whether the research is critical or not. If the state in question is founded on an idea of the common good for which it is to serve, which was a sign of the Nordic welfare states,⁵ then all seems to be good and pointing to a well-functioning democracy. If not, it means a repressive state has all the tools necessary to form an obedient citizenry in which only a few can live a good life and in which the many are deprived of their rights to a good life.

We therefore need to take education back to the people to whom it belongs. That is, to emphasise that education itself is about how to live well with others different in the mixture of the everyday and in an environment on which we depend for our lives, and not about perfecting the state. Moreover, that regardless of how that state understands itself, regardless of which type of democracy⁶ it confesses to, and regardless of whether it is a better or worse “police order,” as Rancière (1999) says.

The fundamental problem, as I understand it here, is the seemingly unquestionable idea that education is to be understood in terms of schooling, and that schooling, understood as neutral, necessarily fosters new generations into a given socio-political structure. Moreover, the socio-political structure is understood within a philosophical reality as representing or mirroring reality itself (Rorty, 1980), and as objectively and ontologically fixed, as fixated. It is the Platonic idea stating that the role of schooling is

⁵ And of course, today, in the aftermaths of the neoliberal wave, all those societies are somewhat problematic in this respect, see for example Petersen et al. (2021).

⁶ My point here is not to discuss the different types of democracy (see Säfström & Biesta 2001), even though Rancière (1999, 2006, 2007) and Butler (2015, 2020) and other radical democrats have influenced my thinking, rather than for example Rawls (1996) or Habermas (2023), to mention some others, but to make the point that essential for any understanding of democracy, and here I remain with Dewey (1916), is the way in which education within such conception is able to verify the equality of which both democracy and education are interdependent of. An equality that is practised rather than idealised.

to reproduce a particular social structure in which each position possible in a social hierarchy is reproduced in order to stabilise the social as a whole, and in consequence guarantee that those in power stay in power, while the powerless stay that way (Bloom, 1991, p. 98; Cassin, 2014, p. 123). It is, of course, interesting that the powerless in this tradition of thought are not those who are not intelligent enough to rule others or gifted enough to contribute to a well-ordered society. However, according to the Platonic-Aristotelian orthodoxy, those powerless people are already defined as such within this reality, regardless of their intelligence or abilities. They are men of lower standing, particularly the Sophists, and “women, children, animals and slaves” (see further Cassin, 2014, p. 6). Because those people are not really human but rather to be compared to *plants*, according to Aristotle, not only some plants/people, but nature itself is made inferior to a certain strata of the population representing the state as such (Säfström, 2026). Such strata, for Plato as well as Aristotle, are only and exclusively aristocratic men. The Platonic-Aristotelian orthodoxy is giving meaning to an educational tradition of thought that is fundamentally patriarchal, exclusionary and reproductive, and as such anti-educational, even if philosophically stringent. The Platonic and Aristotelian domination over educational practice is not founded on an idea of education per se, but on an idea of how to exercise power to stay in power. To perfect man to perfect the reproduction of the state:

The perfect man can be shaped only within the perfect state; and vice versa. That is the ground for the universal correspondence between man and state’s inner structure, for the resemblance between both patterns. To construct such a state, we must discover how to make such men. (Jaeger, 1944/1986, p. 259)

The Lacanian concept of “fixtion” seems to be useful here, that is, that which we understand as fixed and unchangeable, is rather that which we have chosen to fix, to fixate as given and unchangeable (see Cassin, 2016, p. 38). Therefore, rather than starting with the Platonic and Aristotelian fixation on the idea that education is to perfect the state—or its contemporary capitalist version, the market—by perfecting the individual in its image, the Sophists begin in the everydayness of our shared lives. For them, education is what we teach in order to live well *with* other people, different from ourselves, and in environments that differ from place to place. They were wandering teachers, wandering between city-states and teaching all who could pay. They were not aristocrats themselves, as Plato and Aristotle. However, more often, men of humble origin, or women, and sometimes freed slaves, were paid as they were the very first professional teachers in Western culture (Cosigny, 2001). For them, it was not the ideal world that gave you the power to rule others, but rather how well you “moved” with other people in the “mixture” of the everydayness of life. As such, they had to “take account of the diversity of opinions, the mediocrity of peoples’ actual behaviour, and finitude in its lived reality” (Cassin, 2014, p. 117), rather than any idealistic projections of a perfect life of the state.

Once we look around from within the mediocrity of our actual lives, not its idealistic hopes, we are bound to involve people, animals, plants, clouds, and mountains, engaged in the mixture of a world beyond its idealistic representations. We need to teach how to move *with* others in such a world, in which those others are not only people but all living beings.

For Plato, there was no plurality possible which did not already represent the whole from which each part got its meaning; it was only one organism in which each part strived to perfect the whole. Moreover, the whole *is* the state. For the Sophists, there were no organisms, not one body to be reproduced over time, but only the “mixture” in which different people interact with other people and in specific environments. Such a world was also the world John Dewey (1916) saw and by which he understood education and democracy as being two indispensable sides of the same “experience” of living with others in such a world. A world of difference and plurality, and a world in which Dewey asked us to “stop, look and listen,” to pay full attention to the present moment we share with others in this world at precisely this moment in time. The publicness of education emanates exactly from the practice of this shared moment.

The publicness of education is about the *with*, that wonderful word that establishes education as concerning at least two, and not only the transfer of One, as in the Platonic-Aristotelian traditions of educational thought and practice. The *publicness* of education concerns how well we live with ourselves and others in concrete environments, in the mixture of people moving along, but not necessarily in the same way (Bauman, 1999b). It also concerns how well we embody the common good that makes democracy possible in that movement.

With the Sophists, equality is not reducible to a political move, but rather the very way in which everyday living is justified as such and therefore the meaning and content of education: to teach is to verify the equality of the other (Rancière, 1991). A sophist tradition of educational practice is about the equality expressed through the publicness of education.

Teaching Publicness

There is nothing outside, beyond, above or against the publicness of education if we follow the Sophists. Education and the teaching moment are *autotelic* and are realised through the making of teaching by the teacher and the students together (Dōgen, 2006). The practice of teaching, taking shape within the moment of education, is not to guide towards a goal outside itself, defined as such from powers directing education, but is to guide in the unfolding of the present moment, and therefore, connects people, animals, plants, mountains and clouds across difference exactly there and then. The radicality of this, which can be understood as a specification of the concept of publicness in education, is that it allows for what Rancière has called *le partage du sensible*, to allow for the sensible dimension of living, of all life to be meaningful. That is, it allows for the sensible dimension of living, uniquely one's own and shared simultaneously with all living. The making and sharing of the sensible mark teaching as an educational endeavour, which, again, is realised by a teacher and a student together. The unfolding of the present moment, in which the senses give meaning to what is unfolding, is also the moment in which we are taught from within. It is the moment in which we realise that our own sensibilities are also those of others. As such, it connects us to praxis, to the force through which history moves forward (Bauman, 1999a; Cassin, 2014, p. 94), and which allows us to build profoundly democratic societies.

What a teacher does in their teaching is to verify that someone is speaking, clarify that speech to connect it to other speaking beings, and guide the process by which a shared reality unfolds, distinct from an ideal reflection or mirror image of a perfect state of mind. The present moment unfolds as inherently plural—different ways of moving in the world—but always as expressions and embodiments of equality itself. That is, the moment of education is an event of togetherness that is completely shared between teacher and student, and as such, complete in itself, education is profoundly *autotelic*. It is even beyond shared, and somewhat an *existence* within the act of teaching as such. An *existence* that makes the teacher and student appear through the teaching event, and in which the teaching of that event is an embodiment of freedom, of being in time. That is, education itself, education as education, is an expression of, and an embodiment of, being time. The freedom of the other is expressed through his or her unquestionable right to exist and to appear in the present. The teaching moment —the moment of teaching — is a double act of extending freedom through the verification of the freedom of all beings. The publicness of education is an expression of that collectiveness made possible by equality, through which education, as well as democracy, exists as a possibility of new beginnings.

Conclusion

The neoliberal wave that has washed over us since at least the 1980s and left disaster in its wake—by weakening public institutions and whittling away the solidarity needed for a democratic society to work—

has reformulated the ambitions of public education (Lynch, 2006). It did so by, among other things, shifting education from a public sphere into a private sphere, accentuating individualisation, competition, and profit for education owners and customers while sharing this fundamental idea: education is to create a future which is not here, and that future is defined exclusively by the powers directing education from the outside. As a consequence, education tends to be reduced to a managerial function, as shown in this text, either of a state or a market. Therefore, such an idea also empties education of its force from within by taming education, as we saw above. The shift from public to private tends, in the examples given in this article, to be more of a change in degree than a fundamentally different understanding of what education *is*. Education, whether public or private, is still measured by how effectively it achieves goals set by forces outside education itself. The school and its task are not only, if at all, a system or a tool for reproducing the state. The task of the school is rather to direct full attention to the grammar of the societies in which we live and from such insights read those societies to be able to live well with others different from ourselves. Moreover, being able to live in such a way as to unfold the common good and to participate with others different from oneself in moving ahead based on such concerns. Therefore, instead of the public/private distinction, even though it can do some work, we need to be talking about the publicness of education itself. That is, to move from the system, the organisation of, to what education itself *is*, in order to realise the immanent force of teaching and education. Education is for and by the people themselves.

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