# About what is common. The school and the many. Five lines and one escape

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Detail **"Olivillos",** mix technique.
Claudia Espinosa

**Abstract**

In the present article –and as part of a dialogue on education, with regard to it and for it– we propose to think of the school in its spatio-temporal materiality as a place for meeting others in which the life in common is set. 'Community', in this sense, is understood not as a condition, not as an a priori, but as a possibility. 'The school' as its opportunity and as a line of flight. In a present marked by uncertainty and loneliness, we propose to think of the school as a space capable of going against the grain, as a space-time in which dominant modes of relationship can be suspended to build new ones.

**Keywords:** school; community; encounter; self-management; one/many

**Acerca de lo común. La escuela y los muchos. Cinco líneas y una fuga**

**Resumen**

En el presente artículo –y como parte de un diálogo en torno a la educación, a propósito de ella y *por* ella– proponemos pensar a la escuela, en su materialidad espacio-temporal, como un lugar para el encuentro con otros en el que se configura la vida en común. Comunidad, en este sentido, no como condición, no como un *a priori*, sino como *posibilidad*. La escuela como su oportunidad y como línea de fuga. En un presente signado por la incertidumbre y vínculos cuya declinación es uno a uno proponemos pensar a la escuela como ese espacio otro capaz de ir a contrapelo, como un espacio-tiempo en el que pueden suspenderse los modos de relación dominantes para construir otros nuevos.

**Palabras clave:** escuela; comunidad; encuentro; gobierno del *self*; uno/muchos

## 1.

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Another term had just began at the Philosophy and Language School at the Buenos Aires University. We had the opening class of one of the subjects. We took a proposal to class: the students were asked to introduce themselves through an image of the present and one of the future. We intended to meet one another by sharing some of the images each one had of the present and the future. The students were asked to briefly write about them. There were some questions: "Images about ourselves or about politics?" "Shall we write about ourselves or about society?" some students insisted. The instructions were somehow open. One

of the many findings that came up that day, the most intriguing one, was a strange need to write about themselves on the part of the students. They wanted to share their lives and they wanted to do it in a way that was apart from *political* or *social matters*, as they would express it. In such a context, the images were made up of fragments of their narratives, of their feelings of success and failure, of signs of their achievements and frustrations. "Empty and lonely" was the title one of the students chose for his production about the future. "A place that is almost deserted, with no children, no street dogs, but with helicopters flying over all the time", he wrote. "One image of the present is my desk with the laptop on it and my chair which is where I work" narrated another student. "The present is an image I once dreamed about but it is terrifying because of what actually happens. I used to live in a place where I could play, run, share, walk quietly… but getting to this present and being scared… it is a mixture of feelings but the fear is still here. Where are we heading to? May be there is no possibility of change and everything is lost?"Another student wrote[1].

## 2.

Another image. This one may not be related to our school memory because we did not experience it, but maybe it is in our visual memory because it appears regularly on the media. It is about an image of boys and girls with a laptop on each desk, or even on their laps. Boys and girls who embody a libertarian ideal of learners who do not need walls, desks, a white board or teachers with the promise of an education that caters for the demands of the 21st century, boys and girls who are assisted by a *coach* to carry out research on the infinite Internet. These images summarize a series of assumptions we cannot analyze in depth now. Yet it is important to point out that this image is used to exemplify many of the statements upon which certain current policies in education are based not only in Argentina but also in other countries. In 2017, the Board of Education of the city of Buenos Aires (CABA) launched the Project *High school of the Future*, in accordance with the norms for *High school 2030*of the National Board of Education[2].

Among the main guidelines this official document of *High school of the Future* poses, it is interesting to observe the emergence of a notion that had not been systematically known so far which is *Flexible Learning Formats*, where there is the possibility of favoring an individualized plan for each student, adjusting the schedule to the needs and pace of each learner.

One-to-one models that become one-to-one pedagogies, those that aim to cater for each student: it is the individual –not the whole group– the pedagogic subject upon which the school needs to operate (Grinberg y Armella, unpublished).

## 3.

I lived next to a school for over ten years. I literally shared one of the walls with one of the classrooms. What I always liked about that closeness was the sound, it was so peculiar that it can only be understood if we appeal to our childhood memories: the shouts of the children during the break, during a celebration or during a sports game. That sound –that could be thought as one that bothered us– did not disturb us at all; in fact I enjoyed it, even though I was not fully aware of it back then. This is so, I believe, because I connect these sounds to my old school days which I really remember with great affection. I also like those sounds because they represent the way in which those voices encounter and compose a collective expression, a common voice. A voice that swings from a celebratory, friendly one to an impatient or furious one. It is always intense, though. I am referring to a primitive sensation. That sound is even overwhelming. What rings in my memory is that kind of collective speaker which reminds us that the school has always been the place where many different individuals encounter in a shared space and time. And that is exactly what they have in common.

I suggest that we think about the school –I mean *school*, not *education* because I want to think about its time-space materiality[3]– as a place to encounter others, the other, as an opportunity to produce and share the language, to place the person in history, as a time-space framework that makes up a life *in common*, with agreements and conflicts, (Grinberg y Abalsamo, 2017): the school as an opportunity[4].

**4.**

So far, there has been an imagery of a present, a past or a future that compose a scene about which the school can be interpreted.

There are also a number of terms that if arranged together, can invite us to reflect upon the school today: One/Many-Loneliness/Encounter-Uncertainty/Thought. These are some concepts that trigger a constant reflection and analysis. They are a reminder of the reasons why we are part of the school today and what its potentialities are.

We will take a detour, one that allows us to set up a framework to keep on reflecting about this imagery, an apparently suitable context for our field of studies. We will take this path as a starting point and then we will probably escape from this set frame. (Deleuze y Guattari, 1985; Grinberg y Machado, 2017), the school as chance for "other" pedagogy (Dafunchio, 2018).

**5.**

The school as an institution cannot be apart from the sociopolitical processes that have outlined the ways of management of modern societies. Foucault (1976) described the shapes that power has acquired since the 17th century since the emergence of disciplines and biopolitics. The disciplinary techniques, he claims, produce effects on the individual that is the attraction of forces that must become useful (Foucault, 1976). A technology of training, a technology of the body full of capabilities. The biopolitics techniques, on the contrary, will focus on the life of a particular community and its actions are aimed at registering and regulating processes such as birth, production, sickness or death. It is about the management of life, reproducing the living conditions of a community (Foucault, 2007). Therefore, the exercise of power always works over a body of singularities: individuals-bodies/communities.

Now, if the disciplinary society was one in which management was carried out through a number of norms and regulations of behavior through different institutions that structured the social realm (factories, prisons, schools, hospitals, mental hospitals); the control society, however, (Deleuze, 1995), must be understood as one with mechanisms of control that are more democratic of flexible. It is one with more

regulations that go beyond the social institutions through a network of norms that operate on the minds and the bodies of the subjects in a more permanent fashion (Lazaratto, 2006). Control societies, then, are that new machinery of production and subjugation, of production of subjectivity. It is simple, the author claims, to find a connection between the kinds of societies and kinds of machinery, not only because there are decisive, but also because they portray the social formations that are behind and how they are manipulated by them. If the disciplinary societies were equipped with machines that made factories work, the control societies, exercise their power through computers, key elements for social production.

In the context of these post-disciplinary societies, institutions like the school perpetuate their way of operating in a kind of constant crisis, rules become blurred and exceptions turn into rules. This crisis means change as well (Ball; 1990, 1997, Grinberg, 2008; Veiga Neto 2011; Popkewitz, 1994). It is a context in which *management* becomes both the center of attention in discussions and a change proposal in institutions. It is about management as episteme (Grinberg, 2006) according to which "others do not have to be told what to do and how to do it (…) therefore, individuals become subjects of responsibility who participate in the political sphere in every kind of context" (p. 74).

According to López Petit (2009), the ways of being that characterize this time, are combined in a deep uncertainty: when society is "just a term used to define a myriad of individual social behaviors and destinies" (p. 24). Human beings –left to themselves– have no other choice but to struggle not to become excluded. This uncertainty is experienced then, as insecurity (constant fear of losing one's job, of growing old, of going out into the street, of living). Such permanent insecurity reveals our vulnerability and how lonely we are in this world. "We have internalized the idea that politicians have put in our minds, the belief that our fate depends exclusively on ourselves." (López Petit, 2009: 25).

From a pedagogical perspective, Simons y Masschelein (2013) have used the concept of *govermentalization of learning* to describe how the status quo has turned learning into both a government and a self-government matter. Ac-

cording to the authors, in this era, individuals are responsible for their own learning. Learning to learn, is then, the denial of the school reconfigurations. The authors observe the emergence of a managerial attitude towards learning. That is to say, "learning is considered a process that can and must be handled by the learners themselves." (Simons y Masschelein, 2013: 96). In this sense, the *entrepreneurial nature* of learning is linked to the current idea of freedom in this political context, therefore, the state is not opposed to freedom, but it operates through one particular kind of freedom.

How is it possible then to think about the school in a context in which learning tends to separate itself from teaching? (Noguera Ramírez, 2012) How is it possible then to think about the learner as an individual as more important than the learner as a community member? How is it possible to be with others, to (co)exist with others in a context that tends to scatter us in a framework of a more public but a less collective way of living? How is it possible in such a scenario to think about the institutions that shape and condition our existence which are still part of our lives?

## A possible escape

"For Aquiles and the tortoise to meet it is necessary that the duration of Aquiles' movements finds something in his own joints and the tortoise finds something in its own, so that the encounter is produced"

Gilles Deleuze (2009)

In old Latin *comoine[m]* meant 'together', 'in common'. *Commune* [neuter] meant 'community'. *Communis* (in latin *commonis*) is a compound word *com + munis* which means '(co)responsible', 'cooperative', 'someone who collaborates in a task'.Rae

Let us go over some of the tensions in social processes which are radicalized today; One/Many-Loneliness/Encounter-Uncertainty/Thought. How is it possible to ask questions that foster thought that does not necessarily take us to a melancholic past or to a promising future? A possible way out may be to leave the idea of education, the school in this case, in temporal terms "what it is and what it is not yet"; and take a more temporal perspective that can cope with these tensions (Biesta y Säfström, 2011).

If the kind of sensitivity we often find is configured through uncertainty or loneliness (the self drawn back on itself) we suggest that we think about the school as that "other" place that goes against the grain, one time and space in which the dominant ways of interacting with others are suspended so as to establish new, different ways of relating to others. Many students perceive the school as a frontier, as a borderline[5]. In that space and time, within the



"Olivillos," mix technique. Claudia Espinosa

school walls, different things happen, things that do not happen outside schools.

Here we think about the school as an encounter space of the many and the diverse in a profane time and space where profane things happen (Simons y Maschelein, 2014), this means these things that happen there are not related to their regular use and are susceptible to (re) appropriation. The profane, from an unsecular perspective, the authors claim, "refers to everything that has been misappropriated, in other words, something that has become public (p. 40). Therefore, by profanation, knowledge, is available for public use.

Going back to our starting point: the school and its time and space is and has been an opportunity to encounter others. Now, it is a *potential opportunity*, *not a factual one*. However, it is highly valuable. According to Tatián (2015), for Spinoza to exist means to exist with others. Individuals are in constant encounters with others who are not indifferent to their own lives.

*Community and education, community and school* have been historically related under the term *education community*, an interesting complex concept which invites us, nevertheless to (re)think the construction of what is common at school. For Spinoza Community is not a place where individuals belong but it is a collaborative construction, it means freedom.

> It is not something that happens in spite of the individuals that make it up. It is a production, a desire, an *appetitus*. It means to be in community with something or someone, with others. It is an intrinsic composition that affects the individualities that are interrelated in this composition.
>
> (Tatián, 2015: 18-19).

For Spinoza, this idea is the ultimate goal of politics of how free individuals relate among themselves. Its realization will be incomplete and partial since the subjects not only compose their lives, but they also isolate themselves. "Every society is actually a combination of conflict and community" (Tatián, 2015: 19). When two or more individuals compose their potentials according to their passions, they get into a community. Maybe that is exactly where the unique opportunity of an institution like the school lies. The community, a life in common, like a possibility, not as fact. There

is not such a thing as education community a priori, what individuals have is a possibility to encounter others. The school is seen as a potential encounter with others, with knowledge, with one's own thoughts and those of others.

In a course taught in Collège de France in 1977, Barthes asked himself: How can we live together? In such a question, there is an invitation that has been open till today. For Barthes (2003) living together means "the paradox, the contradiction of sharing differences–the utopia of a socialism of distances" (p. 49). He claims *Ideorythm* is a composition derived from a perfect distance, that area in between two opposites: solitude and integrative excess, there is a distance between one's own rhythm and that of others. It is a complex combination of desires and affection. It is exactly there where the challenge of the school lies. The challenge for those of us who work there: to build and keep that time and space in which many meet and to embrace the potentialities it offers. It is the challenge of living a life in common, of having a collective voice. A life in common as socialization. It is about setting up a life in common, a collective voice. For Spinoza, it is like a rite of passage that aims to moving forward towards positive transitions: from passive to active transitions, from sadness to happiness, from uncertainty to freedom, from individualities to a collective idea (Tatián, 2015).

That transition from *I* to *We*, from an individual voice to a collective one, from the perception of oneself to the perception of others and from that of others to that of oneself.[6] The school is seen as an escape from a current context that seeks to separate us to become more individualistic: What potentialities does the school have today? That is exactly where the political question about the school lies.

If, according to Spinoza (2011), common notions are what we have in common with others, and allow us understand them and to produce knowledge, the school can offer the chance to turn those voices, each and every one of them, into a collective one, a collective scream, one that does not disregard individualities (the rhythms). One that is capable of composing desires, intensity. It is the place where to start dialogues that offer knowledge experiences and thought opportunities. It is the place where individuals who go through such experiences are transformed, as Foucault observes. (Trom-

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badori, 2010) These days, the greatest challenge for educators maybe then to set up a community, a life in common, the encounter of the many.

## Notes

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1   All the references mentioned in section 1 are quotes of the written corpus produced by students of Sociology of Education taught during the first term of 2009 at the Buenos Aires University.

2   Available at *http://www.buenosaires.gob.ar/noticias/secundaria-del-futuro* (consulted on 02-27-18) and *https://cdn.educ.ar/repositorio/Download/file?file_id=21afd523-2d09-4da5-8965-418cb016034f* In a different political context, the one-to one model has been one of the most important initiatives of the National Board of Education in the last decade, which through the "Conectar Igualdad Program" gave out netbooks to students and public high schools all over the country.

3   Currently there is a growing tendency to separate education from school, school from classrooms and teachers (Fernández Enguita, 2018, among others). Here the exercise is precisely the opposite: it is an invitation to think about that encounter within the school classrooms.

4   The reflections in this paper are part of a major framework of research and teaching carried out in public high schools severely disadvantaged urban areas located in San Martín, in the Province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. From this project, which includes an audio-visual project of formal and informal conversations among teachers and students, we are convinced that the school in an opportunity to encounter others and thus it paves the way the chance to build something in common with others.

5   "I do not want to finish school. Never. Even more, I want to fail so that I can stay here longer (…) All I have is found here, my friends, my girlfriend, my teachers(…) Here I am taken care of, I am exposed to all kinds of things where I live. I am afraid of being related to other people's wrongdoings" (Interview to a boy in his last year at school, (6th year) 2017).

6   The *selfie,* like an obvious expression of the self for oneself.

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