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Navigating the Indeterminate Relationship Between Politics and Pedagogy.

A Response to *Education as Commons, Children as Commoners:*
The Case Study of the Little Tree Community

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Abstract

In their article, Pechtelidis and Kiouпкиolis added a case study to research at the intersection of politics, pedagogy, and the commons. Examining the Little Tree Community to deepen our understanding of how education can operate as a common practice, they raised key questions about the political possibility of subjectification in an education in the commons, leaving the question of politics and pedagogy open. Case studies in general, especially in the article format, require a delicate balance of theoretical exposition, contextual explication, data presentation, and analysis. In this response, I propose one way we might refine the politics assumed in the common pedagogy in order to prevent the communing project and its analysis from reinforcing and stabilizing the capitalist and imperialist logics it wants to struggle against. I turn to the foundational role that the production and enclosure of subjectivities, social relations, and other resources necessary for capital's continual accumulation, a process that includes enclosure, expropriation, and dispossession. This is not a critique of the political dynamics of their common pedagogical practices but rather an attempt to define the political teacher as one who navigates between the openness of pedagogy and the determination of politics.

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Introduction

OVER THE LAST two decades or so, “the commons” has reentered political and educational research and praxis in the face of what are conceptualized as ongoing attacks on public and common resources, practices, processes, institutions, and goods and resources. In “Education as Commons, Children as Commoners,” Pechtelidis and Kiouпкиolis

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added (2020) “empirical evidence” to bolster “political approaches to the educational and pedagogical commons” (p. 6). Examining the case of Little Tree, they inquired into how education serves as an educational process of communing at the level of the governance and educational activities of the school, contributing another test case of common pedagogy and adding to the small but growing body of literature doing so (e.g., Gautreaux, 2017).

Common education can help “carve out and uphold spaces of relative autonomy from the state and the market,” creating alternative and democratic or egalitarian subjectivities, social relations, and institutions (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020, p. 1). One of the primary foci in the study concerned the production of alternative forms of childhood and child-adult or student-teacher relationships. In Little Tree, for example, “teachers become here facilitators and ‘friends,’ helping students to become self-directing, creative individuals, learners and ‘commoners’” (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020, p. 8). Important here is the presumption of the equality of intelligences in that the teachers engage students as those who are just as capable as they are, rather than as future adults in need of their knowledge. This produces children as citizens in the here and now who are autonomous and self-reliant while at the same time transforming “the conventional division between teachers and students . . . beyond hierarchical orders and identities” (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020, p. 9). Furthermore, the school’s curriculum isn’t predetermined or scripted by state or private actors and is instead continually renegotiated by the participants in the project—parents, teachers, and students—in a way that begins with “the individual needs of each child ‘here and now’” and develops through dialogue with other commoners (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020, p. 8). Finally, the decisions of school life emerge from daily “children’s assemblies” that teachers convene but that operate according to rules enforced by elected students. The operation of such assemblies challenge capitalist and state discipline through “the making of a collective subjectivity [that] is actively pursued and performed by children” (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020, p. 9).

In our current moment, the most important element of the article is that the previously outlined processes are pedagogical experiences in the common rather than educational practices for the common. This is significant insofar as it does not rest its faith in a critical consciousness-raising that allegedly inaugurates students into becoming political subjects in their own right. For example, the teacher-student relationship enacts a common relationship shared around a common cause for a common good; the generation of the curriculum and the other decisions assemble a common body shared around and organized for the common good. In sum, the pedagogical politics of Little Tree establish “the dispositions of (a) direct involvement in public and collective life, (b) autonomy, and (c) self-reliance” (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020, p. 9). In this way, the common education creates a new form of citizenship that emphasizes, in Biesta’s (2014) terminology, subjectification over socialization. For Biesta, education entails (no less than) three tasks: qualification, or “the acquisition of knowledges, skills, values, and dispositions”; socialization, or how “we become part of existing traditions and ways of being and doing”; and

subjectification, or how students can become subjects in their own right by taking up “the ways in which new beginnings and new beginners can come into the world” (p. 4). Biesta insisted that the three tasks be engaged simultaneously, and Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis (2020) found Little Tree desirable because it reclaims subjectification over socialization as “children are not socialized into a predetermined citizenship identity” (p. 7).

Among the many valuable insights and provocations in this article, what I find most interesting is the desire to refuse collapsing or absorbing pedagogy into politics. In response, the authors endorsed an expansive idea of politics, one that includes “social activity, which deliberately intervenes in existing social relations, structures, and subjectivities in order to intentionally shape them by challenging them, transforming them, displacing them, managing them, or upholding them against challenges” (Pechtelidis & Kioupkiolis, 2020, p. 2). By raising questions about the political possibility of subjectification in an education in the commons, it leaves the question of politics and pedagogy open, a sign of generative experimentation and relevant scholarship. Case studies in general, especially in the article format, require a delicate balance of theoretical exposition, contextual explication, data presentation, and analysis.

In this response, I want to propose one way we might refine the politics assumed in the common pedagogy to prevent the communing project and its analysis from reinforcing and stabilizing the capitalist and imperialist logics it wants to struggle against. By revisiting the standard Marxist account of enclosure on which much educational commons research rests (e.g., Bourassa, 2020; De Lissovoy, 2011; Ford, 2015; Juárez & Pierce, 2017)—including some of my own—I turn to the foundational role that the production and enclosure of subjectivities, social relations, and other resources necessary for capital’s continual accumulation, a process that *includes* enclosure, expropriation, and dispossession. This is not a critique of the political dynamics of their common pedagogical practices but rather an attempt to situate them within our current conjuncture.

So-Called Primitive Accumulation: Commons and Enclosures

Left or critical literature in political theory and education, as a whole, emanates in many ways from certain readings of the last section of Marx’s *Capital*, titled “The So-Called Primitive Accumulation,” particularly as chronicled by Harvey (2004) and Federici (2004). It’s important to emphasize that Marx’s analysis focused on “so-called” primitive accumulation—both a critique of its conception in bourgeois political economy and a new historical-materialist conception—because the most general reading of this section presents it as a universal and finalized origin story of capitalism (e.g., Harvey, 2004), which is carried over into education. Revisiting and clarifying this part of *Capital* not only provides greater clarity about Marx’s critique of capital and the pedagogy of that critique but also draws out the ways in which capital has, does, and must continually rely on an outside to enclose.

First, it’s important to note that Marx’s (1967) explanation of capitalist development in England was part of his account of how capital produces (and reproduces) its own natural laws and

presuppositions. Marx used England as the primary case study for *Capital* because it was where “the natural laws of capitalist production” were most dominant over other modes of production and were more observable (p. 19). Yet the reason capital was so developed in England wasn’t because England was a self-enclosed entity but rather because of its location within the global balance of forces—as a colonial power. He attributed it to, among other things, “conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder” (p. 668), national and international debts, the enclosure of the commons and the violent disciplining of peasants into wage laborers, “the discovery of gold and silver,” “the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population,” “the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins” (p. 703), and “slavery pure and simple” (p. 711) in the United States.

The question Marx (1967) addressed in this concluding section of the text, however, is much broader. He introduced it with these words:

We have seen how money is changed into capital; how through capital surplus-value is made, and from surplus-value more capital. But the accumulation of capital pre-supposes surplus-value; surplus-value pre-supposes capitalist production; capitalistic production pre-supposes the pre-existence of considerable masses of capital and of labour-power in the hands of producers of commodities. The whole movement, therefore, seems to turn in a vicious circle, out of which we can only get by supposing a primitive accumulation. (p. 667, emphasis added)

He likened it to “original sin” because the entire process through which capital produces and reproduces itself (and hence its laws) can only be theorized by repeatedly supposing an origin outside of capital: the separation of people from their ability to reproduce for themselves and the concentration of the means to reproduce society in the hands of the capitalists. Capital *presupposes* its own presuppositions and can never enclose the commons. More crucially, this brief section of the book merely demonstrates the enclosure of the commons through force and violence. As Marx (1989) later clarified in a Russian literary monthly, at the end of *Capital* he provided only a “historical sketch” particular to one part of Europe and, thus, isn’t “a historico-philosophical theory of general development, imposed by fate on all peoples” across time and space (p. 200).

In the opening chapter on “the so-called primitive accumulation,” Marx (1967) wrote that it “is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production. It *appears* as primitive, because it forms the pre-historic stage of capital” (1967, p. 668, emphasis added). Because capital’s reproduction is a “vicious circle,” however, this pre-history must necessarily repeat itself, although of course in different ways. In other words, capital continually requires the violent expropriation of the commons, the production of a mass of people with nothing to sell but their capacity to labor, and state and other forms of organized violence. For capital to expand, it needs an exterior—a commons—to enclose and appropriate, as capitalist accumulation is not distinct from primitive accumulation. The politics of any

educational response should attend to the pitfalls and possibilities these dynamics open.

Common Education for Capitalist Enclosure?

The nature and quality of that which capital encloses and expropriates for its continued reproduction aren’t given for all time and change according to the evolving requirements of capital. Before proceeding into these contemporary requirements, however, I must add that capital requires not only a mass of people with nothing to sell but their labor-power but more precisely a mass of people with nothing to sell but *specific forms* of labor-power. This is one place education assumes a central role in the reproduction of capital, for education—formal and informal—produces people with not only the requisite skills and knowledge but also with the habits, dispositions, beliefs, and so forth necessary for the production of capital. Just as the processes of enclosure and primitive accumulation differ depending on time, place, and social relations, so too do the forms of labor-power it produces and encloses.

In today’s conjuncture of global capital, one of the most valued forms of labor-power is the lifelong learner who is flexible, creative, collaborative, autonomous, independent, and self-acting. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, for example, has written that “the role of social and emotional skills is becoming more important . . . People need to engage with new ways of thinking and working and new people” (OECD, 2018, pp. 3, 4). The specific capacities required for competitiveness in the economy are “open-mindedness,” “conscientiousness,” “emotional stability,” “engaging with others,” and “collaboration” (OECD, 2018, p. 5). Just because international capitalist think tanks are encouraging education in these skills (through loans and financing, debt forgiveness, and other means) doesn’t mean we should oppose them. It does mean, however, that we can’t value them in and of themselves as desirable political dynamics of common education, as capital finds profitability precisely the openness and creativity of subjectivities and social relations. We can think about this in relation to Virno’s (2004) take on post-Fordism, through which capital reconstituted itself by accommodating oppositional movements that rejected the disciplinary structures of Fordist work and society. In response to the crises created by industrial capitalism and the industrial model of production, Virno argued post-Fordism subsumed the demands of social movements, from their opposition to stable long-term employment and their longing for collaborative education to “familiarity with learning and communication networks” (p. 99). As a result, today’s working life isn’t a constant and disciplinary one but a constantly changing one, as long-term jobs in the same workplace or economic sector are replaced by shifting and temporary short-term, flexible jobs across different sectors.

In that sense, without any political orientation, the lessons drawn from Little Tree might provide more pedagogical lessons for capitalist enclosures. They work to produce a new autonomous and self-acting commons and to create subjectivities aligned with post-Fordist needs that capital can then enclose. As Means (2013) wrote in an early article on the commons and education, in today’s economy “premised on privatization, intellectual property and

speculative finance, creativity becomes a key resource for the invention of new markets, products, and patterns of work and institutional management” (p. 49). Little Tree teachers who help students become “creative individuals, learners and ‘commoners,’ who draw on the commons of knowledge” as “they also embark on their own innovative explorations” might help produce the creative forms of labor-power capital requires (Pechtelidis & Kioupkliolis, 2020, p. 8).

Because Little Tree emphasizes “helping students to become self-directing,” they can also work to produce the kind of innovative lifelong learners capital needs today (Pechtelidis & Kioupkliolis, 2020, p. 8). Harney and Moten (2021) have helped link these pedagogical attributes to primitive accumulation and enclosures in *All Incomplete*. The demand for constant improvement and innovation “comes to us by way of an innovation in land tenure” where “for the encloser, possession is established through improvement—this is true for the possession of land and for the possession of self” (p. 29). From the perspective of “total education,” we need to improve and innovate, because “we are never straight enough,” so that “any failures in the market, the state, or institutions can be traced back to us” (p. 65). They linked the need to become lifelong self-directed learners in search of ever-new innovations to gentrification, as subjects of gentrification identify neighborhoods, communities, populations, and schools as lacking in requisite creativity and initiative. In a sense, Little Tree could accomplish this by “educating children in ways that enhance their autonomy and self-reliance” (Pechtelidis & Kioupkliolis, 2020, p. 8). More to the point, by privileging subjectification over socialization, their common education could produce the kind of open and indeterminate citizens capital requires today (Ford, 2021).

The Political and Pedagogical Commons

Yet to assume such practices necessarily work to reproduce an outside for capital would require adherence to the historical determinism against which Marx warned us. Attending to Marx’s analysis of primitive accumulation reveals the key political opening for Little Tree’s common educational praxis insofar as it demonstrates the historical temporality capital enforces and hides repeatedly. Reading Marx’s account of so-called primitive accumulation as an accomplished fact is dangerous precisely because the reproduction of capital’s social order depends on taking open historical processes outside of its direct control for granted. When we think how capital must necessarily assume its own assumptions, we reveal the holes within the boundaries in which capital tries to encase itself. “Yet precisely by therefore according such an essential place to history,” Walker (2016) pointed out, “capital acknowledges at all times its fundamental weakness or the defective moment in its logic” (p. 22). The historic national liberation and socialist struggles of the past centuries continue to bear political force because they utilized the struggle between oppressor and oppressed to reveal and interrupt such temporality and, more importantly, erected political structures to produce alternative regimes of value. At this point, however, the relationship between pedagogy and politics again enters the fore.

A potential problem with the definition of politics that Pechtelidis and Kioupkliolis (2020) offered is that, in our current conjuncture, it is precisely *too* open. The political effectivity of any kind of practice—educational or not—is dependent on time, space, and social location. In today’s landscape, positioning politics as *any* transformation or interruption in the social field seems ineffective because of the radical enhancement of capital’s dynamism and flexibility. In this case, politics is the struggle for power that combines direction, ideological content, and organizational and mass struggle to realize a positive program for transforming society. Politics is necessarily oppositional in that it’s *for* something and *against* something else. Pedagogy is multifaceted as it names the forms and relations of education. Without recognizing this tension and negotiating it, politically motivated pedagogical projects and theories remain impotent against the immense power of capital and the state. Thus, if we find value in the lessons in educational communing gleaned from Little Tree, we have to orient them in a political direction and as part of political struggles. After all, organized political struggles are the only thing that have—and do—prevent capitalist enclosures of the commons. Pedagogy provides the experience in the possibility of a radically different world, an immersion in the void between the current and another world, while politics assembles the forces, determines the strategies and tactics, and constructs the vision to achieve that other world.

These politics are determined by the collective masses in struggle. At the same time, they neither are determined through an absolute equality among all of those involved nor are predicated on inclusion. Not only is the political struggle for the commons a struggle to *exclude* forces of enclosure, but without historicizing principles like equality, horizontalism, and openness, we can end up reinforcing existing structures. Pechtelidis and Kioupkliolis (2020) focused on challenging the hierarchy between adults and children, or teachers and students, insisting that “the path of children learning and knowing by themselves is also a way to emancipation, where the mind learns to obey only itself” (2020, p. 5). Yet for pedagogy to be political, it requires some political orientation and framing; it requires content, and that content can’t be left up to anyone who wants to show up and participate, which is why politics requires exclusion. We wouldn’t want ultra-right forces, landlords and developers, imperialists and capitalists determining the curriculum of any education for the commons. Pedagogically, this means that the role of the teacher in political education should not be a “companion” but a leader. We can’t transliterate equality from a political sector to a pedagogical one, and we should be clear and explicit about who leadership is, for only then can we truly have accountability.

None of this is to devalue the important work done in the article but to provide an alternative analysis of our conjuncture to better think the distinction and relationship between pedagogy and politics. One way to understand this problem and one potential pedagogical response might be Vlieghe’s (2015) conception of education as “creation without creativity.” Key here is the distinction between poesis and praxis. Poesis refers to the revelation that something new can exist and praxis refers to the creation of

something new according to the will (whether individual or collective). As evidenced by international imperialist think tanks like the OECD, today praxis dominates at the expense of poesis. Thus, those who argue that education should resist standardization (or the disciplinary apparatus of top-down structures) find themselves in the same company as their opponents.

Implicit here is a critique of the elevation of subjectification and openness: “If what is at stake in education is indeed this capacity for bringing newness into being, stressing the values of originality and creativity might do more harm than good” (Vlieghe, 2015, p. 46). On my reading, the pedagogy of Little Tree’s common education rests in its ability to expose students to the process of communing in the here and now, revealing how the world can be and indeed is otherwise than it appears—exposing, in other words, capital’s repeated efforts to seal the limits of its logic. As capital is an inherently contradictory system, however, it creates its own possibilities of dissolution and destruction. This is precisely the value in Marx’s critique of so-called primitive accumulation. By demonstrating that capital’s origins must be continually presupposed and imposed, he taught us that there are innumerable openings for interrupting and overthrowing it. I want to suggest that placing Little Tree’s common educational praxis within capital’s contingent and ultimately impossible origins is a pedagogical opening for a common politics against capital. Politics requires exactly the imaginative opening Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis relayed, but the politics of such pedagogical praxes depend upon the political direction that emerges from such a crack because without such content they might end up producing the kinds of labor-power capital desires to enclose today. Put differently, “subjectification” is pedagogical while “socialization” is political. Political education in the commons and against enclosure, then, hangs in the balance the political teacher navigates between the two processes, a navigation that, as Pechtelidis and Kioupkiolis rightfully insisted, must overall remain indeterminate while respecting the distinctions within which it occurs.

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