

## Correspondence Walter Kohan & Jan Masschelein (August 2020 – July 2021)<sup>1</sup>

Rio de Janeiro, August 19th

Dear Jan,

Thank you so much for sharing your preface to the Korean edition of *In Defense of the School: A Public Issue*, just written during these pandemic times.<sup>2</sup> Although conceived for an East Asian public, it is meaningful that you mention South America's reception of the book. It's a kind of gesture that calls my attention to the following scenario: while prefacing a new Korean edition of their book, two Belgians recall its reception in South America. Before delving further into this preface, let me in turn share something that comes to mind regarding the expression "South America".

You could very well have written the more common Latin America—as far as I know, the book has also had a good reception in Mexico—but for whatever reason you wrote South America instead. And do excuse me if you are already aware of all this, and if it does not have much to do, at least directly, with the issues raised in the preface. But it is something that came to my mind and which I feel the need to share with you. At the same time, I also think that some interesting educational issues might emerge, or maybe even the meaning of school and making of school might become clearer through these issues now coming to my mind.

One has to do with the name "America". There are several issues involved with this noun. On the one hand, you know that, contemporarily speaking, the USA has arrogated this name. They call their land America and their people Americans, when this is in fact the name of the entire continent. In this sense, Canadians, Argentinians, or Mexicans are as Americans as US citizens. And each time the USA is being called America, or a US citizen American, something affects the rest of America. It could be simply understood as a logical "part-whole" fallacy or a mere linguistical simplification, but there is much more to it than that, of course.

It might be interesting to notice that, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many Southern or Central American writers referred to the part of America that starts in Mexico and extends southward—what is now usually named Latin America—as "Our America". This is notably the case of the Cuban José Martí, who wrote his famous Essay *Nuestra América* (*Our America*), which was published concurrently in New York and Mexico City journals.

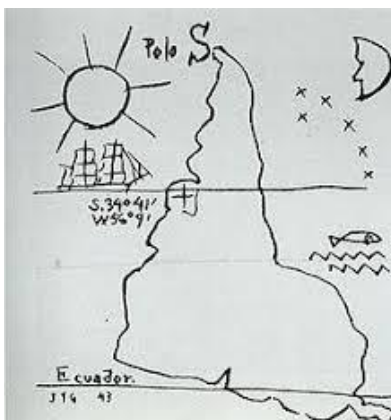
In addition, the term America is nowadays also very contested by decolonial thinkers. "America" comes from Amerigo Vespucci, one of the Spanish invaders around the end of the fifteenth century, so there is an imperialistic, epistemological, and political dimension to the act of renaming the lands of Abya Yala, the 'original' name, "America". Consequently, decolonial movements now try to go back to a name that might include both the native people and the African slaves—which the name America excludes entirely—or names that might also symbolize their oppression and extermination.

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<sup>1</sup> Reviewed and edited by Yannick Coeckelenbergh.

<sup>2</sup> The preface to the Korean edition of *In Defense of the School* can be found in *Res Paedagogica... Undefined Work* (<https://respaedagogica.be/pub/defense-world-and-family>)

The word “South” also makes me remember something Paulo Freire mentioned in *The Pedagogy of Hope*. I am not sure how this works in English, but in Spanish and Portuguese we have the verb *nortear*, which comes from the word north and whose meaning is to give guidance or be taken as a reference. And more generally, all words related to the North have a positive sense or a sense of leadership. This also works with one of the words we have for east in Spanish (*Oriente*). We have a lot of words and some of them are mostly the same in English, like *Orientador*, *orientando*, *orientación*. In *The Pedagogy of Hope*, Paulo Freire denounces the ideological sense of these uses in education and follows the physician Marcelo Campos, who invented the verb *sulear* (in Portuguese from *Sul*, south) with the meaning to guide, orient, or give guidance. He did so in a text named *A arte de sulear-se* (*The Idea of Self-guiding*). In this text he argues that in the Northern Hemisphere, the North Star, Polaris, allows for guidance. Yet in the Southern Hemisphere, it is the Southern Cross (*suleamento*) that one searches for guidance. In spite of this, he argues, the northern rule of practice continues to be taught in our schools, that is, with the right hand to the side of the source (east = *oriente*), we have on the left the West, in front the North and behind the South. With this pseudo-practical rule, we have a body scheme that, at night, leaves us with our backs to the Southern Cross, the fundamental constellation for the act of guidance—*suleamento*. Therefore, what we learn in school does not in fact allow us to be practically guided by our own sky. He wonders if it wouldn’t be better in our context to use our left hand pointed eastward, since he argues that orienting ourselves by looking to the North and its northern inhabitants is akin to maintaining a rule that bewilders us. If instead of that we were to look south in the act of *sulear*, “we [would] integrate body scheme and laterality in a coherent way between heaven and earth, perceiving our horizon, our environment”. Some years later, the Uruguayan Joaquín Pérez García drew the map of South America inverted and wrote: “our North is the South”.



After this apparently disconnected excursus, let me take up your preface to the Korean edition of *In Defense of the School: A Public Issue*, and express what seems to me the main issues you are affirming in this preface related to the times we are living: a) the defense of the school is a defense of the possibility for new generations to experience themselves as new generations; b) school experience is an existential experience of freedom (being able to/capable of) and equality (being a student like every other student) that cannot be replaced by digital education; c) school (the experience of a common world) is an emancipation from the family, and the family (the experience of a certain privacy) is a liberation from the school; d) in pandemic times there is neither school nor family experience; thus, the world is suspended, that is to say we are no longer exposed to the world or able to discover different worlds (as we would discover through school experience). Finally, since being exposed to the world is the contrary or could be construed as the contrary of socialization, of what you also call “the terror of the social”, being

left without school is equivalent for students to being left without any protection in the spheres of communication, which today involves both a concern for recognition and personal emotional states.

Now I will try to connect my excursus to your preface, and consider this paragraph where you unfold the reasons why you think South America was particularly receptive to *In defense of the School*:

“Perhaps it has to do with the fact that in that context the notion of ‘school’ is still explicitly related to both colonial experience as well as engaged attempts at social and political changes in a situation of severe social injustice, exploitation and poverty. Similar to democracy, school education is still worth defending in those contexts where the experience of living in a society that does not provide schools (or democracy, for that matter) still resonates. And, thus, school is neither taken for granted nor just something of the past, and not just a service for personal flourishing and individual development, but still strongly connected, albeit in an ambivalent way, to possibilities for emancipation and hence still very much a public issue related to a struggle for the right to school.”

There may be something interesting to think about here, perhaps something “ambivalent” just like the ambivalent way that the school is highly appreciated in South America, as you say. I can imagine two initial possibilities for the political dimension of this high appreciation of the school, and please excuse me if I oversimplify: a) conservative (the school is needed to maintain the present state of affairs); b) progressive (the school is needed to transform the present state of affairs); and, since you do not agree with either of these, you might in turn propose a third way—also a very ambivalent expression among us—and which I would call c) scholastic or pedagogical (the school is needed because ‘truly’ democratic societies need schools to be democratic). My impression is that you would agree with alternative b) in using the word emancipatory to describe what a school does, but you would understand this word in a different way and with a different scope: given a progressive setting, if emancipation is social and means a transformation towards a different social order, you would understand emancipation as emancipation from the social, and that school emancipates from the social by providing each person an experience of freedom (being able to/capable of) and equality (being a student like every other student).

I realize that I haven’t really entered into the relationship between my excursus and your ideas about school, though I’ve certainly written far too much already. So perhaps you might like to do so. This issue is obviously related to the language of school, about which you have written vastly. Would it be correct to say that all these language issues are put into question at school? Isn’t one of the pedagogical functions of the language of school to question these and other presuppositions underlying common language use? Is this also connected with the emancipatory task of the school? What about my final comments regarding what emancipation might mean? Are they more or less fair and in agreeance with what you think about the school?

Big hug,

Walter

Leuven, September 8th

Dear Walter,

I am really happy that you started this conversation, for you know how indecisive and irresolute I can be, how (extremely) slow to respond (writing still requires an effort, even after all these years at the university). I do like how you started off by referring to the experience with “South America” that we mentioned in our preface. To be honest, I (at least I, since it was written together with Maarten) was not really aware of all that is (or might be?) involved in using that name (and not Latin America), or even the two names “South” and “America”. Meanwhile, I have looked it up and learned many new things on top of what you wrote already. From now on I will be more careful when using these names.

I am not sure whether I grasped everything you wrote regarding the directions (and I would be interested in Freire’s chapter *The Pedagogy of Hope* that you mentioned, but which I wasn’t able to find in my copy), but I do understand that there are several reasons why one could argue that in school we reproduce a questionable system of orientation pivoted around the North, and that this North is associated with a “positive sense and a sense of leadership”. I know that we sometimes say or imply that the North is ‘rich’ and the South ‘poor’ (thereby forgetting plenty of very rich places in the South, and very poor ones in the North), and, maybe in some contexts, the North has indeed a positive connotation and gives a leading direction.

On the other hand, I, like many other Europeans, associate a very strong positive feeling with ‘going south’ (there is even a strong longing for the South), and am not so fond of the North. (Of course, this depends a lot on context, time, place, and so on). I think that this may really be a practical issue, though it certainly is also one that has to do with how words, experiences and images (or imaginations) get associated when we are young—for these associations become a reference frame that is strong and has indeed strong implications.

However, I think that reference frames can change (which is what is at stake in study and school work), and today the issue is maybe not so much the relation to the Northern Star or the Southern Cross, but to the fact that we don’t use stars (including the sun) anymore to orientate ourselves. In fact, we don’t even refer to any ‘real’ thing or any ‘real’ location anymore (the poles, land, sea, mountains, shores, ...), but instead use a virtual grid that encompasses the globe as if we are looking at it from the outside and which ‘positions us globally’, without world, earth, or even friction. In other words, a system which invites us not to trust our senses and not to notice where we are, but, rather, leaves us completely lost when there is no satellite ‘coverage’.

Perhaps we needn’t go much further into this issue of orientation. I think it does indeed concern our relation to the world and others, and certainly affects words like north and south (in a different way than suggested by Freire), as well as our capacity to make important distinctions, without necessarily passing a value judgment but acknowledging that it does affect/effect. I try to be sensitive to the use of words and language in general, but of course my knowledge is quite limited and I continue to be rather unconscious and unaware of how many of the words I (or we) use actually resonate, and how they are touched by, and themselves touch, places and people.

Maybe this is one of the reasons that we need (or should take more) time to write (probably also to speak), and should cautiously find ways to let our writing (and speaking) reflect that famous phrase of Socrates (whom you love so much): the “I know that I don’t know”. I agree that there is an “imperialistic, epistemological and political dimension to the act of [naming and] renaming”, and that, of course, the language that we try to use for writing to each other at this

very moment, let us call it English, has a heavy colonial past (and present, for that matter) and is not innocent. And yes, we all play a role in the struggles and histories that are evolving and unfolding before our eyes, or even ‘through us’, that is through what we do and say.

One ought therefore engage in the critical activity of becoming aware of these issues that permeate our language (while not believing that we could ever completely master the meaning of what we say and do—in fact Socrates complained specifically about this effect of writing, that words can go anywhere without their authors and hence that their meaning cannot be controlled, which, as I think, works in many directions: using names mobilizes meanings and implies many dimensions, but words can also acquire very different meanings through all kinds of events and experiences). Is that not in some way what we are also engaged in through this correspondence? And is it not also part of what we could describe as writing through studious work? Studious work being about increasing the capacity to make or notice distinctions that matter (the art of noticing being what is at stake in studying).

Maybe this is also one aspect of learning a language at school, that it is not a learning by doing/using (which is the way we mainly learn our so-called mother tongue), but by working. In order to work on language (the grammar, vocabulary, poetry, style, etymology, etc.), or we might even say, putting a spin on a famous phrase of Wittgenstein, in order for language *to be able* to be worked on, language has to go on holiday, has to stop working while not being immediately “re-employed” for other predefined outcomes. Language has to go on holiday in a particular way, not to create philosophical problems (as Wittgenstein seemed to imply, at least according to some interpretations), but practical freedom. In other words, language has to go to school.

Which brings me back to your marvelous summary of what we intended to say in our preface and your very fair and also very helpful description of the “position” we tried to sketch between the conservative and the progressive. Maybe there are two things I would like to mention in addition. The first is that in both the conservative and progressive positions, the school is conceived from what it has to perform as (pre-)defined outcome. Allow me to refer also to a quote by Dewey where he states that schools often appear as an attempt to:

“shape the dispositions and beliefs of their members. Even when the processes of education do not aim at the unchanged perpetuation of existing institutions, it is assumed that there must be a mental picture of some desired end, personal and social, which is to be attained, and that this conception of a fixed determinate end ought to control educative processes. Reformers share this conviction with conservatives. The disciples of Lenin and Mussolini compete with the captains of capitalist society in endeavoring to bring about a formation of dispositions and ideas which will conduce to a preconceived goal. (...) An experimental social method would probably manifest itself first of all in surrender of this notion.” (Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*, p.200-201).

Maybe we could say that schools often appear to be instrumental to political, social or ethical projects (be it conservative or progressive ones) by virtue of the fact that such projects offer a ‘reason’ for establishing or changing something through learning. In contrast, we want to acknowledge the possibility of a pedagogical change, that is, a contingent change without any reason but made possible through the particular arrangement and event of the school.

The second thing I would like to mention is related to the emancipation of the social. Indeed, we think that what the school does is offer a “being-together-together” which is neither that of a (private or national) family nor one of friends. Furthermore, it is neither one of ‘peers’ (at least not in the first instance), nor one that can be expressed in market (‘customers/producers’)

or political terms ('citizens'). Rather, this "being-together-together" involves a plurality in a sphere of beginnings (that does not start from acknowledging different worlds (e.g., children and adults, young and old) but from assuming a *common* one) which is not the one that Arendt connects to the sphere of the political and its freedom, but one that is connected instead to the sphere of the pedagogical and its particular freedom. You could conceive of both the political and the pedagogical as public spheres, but in different ways (as we have also tried to indicate elsewhere). We think that the digital seems to have strengthened what Arendt calls "the rise of the social".

We needn't engage in a detailed discussion about Arendt and her notion of the social (which we only follow to some extent anyway), but her description of the social as the kind of collectivity where life itself is the central occupation (and not the world), where individuals are united by their common biological and psychological needs (which today might be a very strong need for recognition, related to being visible and being concerned about profiles) and their survival, where the distinction between the private and the public is completely blurred, offers us valuable insights into how we might in turn describe today "the rise of the digital" (at least to some extent). This can in turn be contrasted with what we likewise often experience and notice nowadays, a kind of "world-alienation" (without implying that it is the same as Arendt's, because, amongst many things, the way our relation to the world is technically enabled has become very different), which has also been called a way of "being-alone-together" (by Guy Debord to characterize our consumer society).

What we call the "terror of the social" has to do with how the need for recognition, which we consider totally unnatural, is in fact the instrument and effect of a power regime (a governing by self-government). Consequently, this need to be visible (on virtual platforms) and connected (in communication) implies a loss of freedom and feeling of world-alienation. We believe the present longing for school articulates a similar loss of freedom and feeling, since the school previously provided an experience through which one could escape (or be protected against) this logic of social recognition and of visibility.

So much for now, although I'm not sure I was able to actually add much to what you already indicated.

Sorry again for the delay!

Warmest regards,

Jan

*Rio de Janeiro, October 20th*

Dear Jan

This time, it was me who took forever to answer your message. In the meantime, we had a very intense experience with the organization of the X International Colloquium in Philosophy and Education (to which you have participated several times, and to which you sent a lovely congratulative message for the closing session). It was meaningful and left us, apart from a little tired, with lots of questions I would like to share with you. But before that, I would like to retake some of the points of your message, which are also very important and connected to some of the issues of the colloquium.

Let's consider your understanding of study as "increasing the capacity to make or notice distinctions that matter (the art of noticing being what is at stake in studying)". You add that in

study we learn by working and not by doing/using as we learn, for example, a mother tongue. I have some doubts with the wording of this understanding. Take, for example, “increase the capacity”: I wonder if it wouldn’t be more interesting to say, “actualize the capacity” or “increase the effective making or noticing of distinctions” to avoid the possibility of understanding capacities as something unequal or something that could become unequal through study, when it seems to me that you would agree that capacities *are* equal, whereas the conditions under which such capacities are put into work are not. In addition, I also have some doubts about the intellectual or cognitive emphasis that is being placed on words like “notice” and “noticing”. I am sure you know that these words come from the Latin (*g*)*noscere*, whose root *gno-* is also present in knowledge and other English words. I would prefer to conceive the word study as something closer to the body and more clearly related to its different senses. Or to put it in the form of a question relating back to the issue of language you raised: How does study work with body language? In what ways does body language go to school?

Finally, I would like to perceive more clearly that study, as you stress elsewhere, is something that we do with others, which does not seem to be present in your understanding. Of course, I might be misunderstanding you here, or you might think that what I conceive as study pertains to another activity, or we might simply disagree on this point.

Now, let me also rephrase what you wrote about the political/pedagogical. It seems to me you are saying at least two important things: a) change can only be contingent and emerge through schooling, not before; b) school is a specific public arrangement concerned with a free understanding and questioning of a common world. In this context, the problem of the digital would be threefold: a) the centrality of biological and social life instead of the world; b) the predominance of relationships of communication, recognition, and visibility, in which the distinction between public and private becomes blurred; c) a kind of alienation from the world and the consequent loss of freedom generated by the need to be connected and recognized. You might tell me whether this summary is accurate or not, but, in any case, it brings us directly to our colloquium.

Let me give you some background information on our colloquium before raising certain questions that emerged and which are closely related to these issues about school we have been discussing. As you know, we put a lot of energy in organizing these colloquia, and this one was particularly special for being the tenth one. Each colloquium is organized in a different way. Our previous one was dedicated to the assassinated Counselor Marielle Franco, and all keynote and round table speakers were women. This time, and highly inspired by your last symposium on study, we decided to organize the experience around study groups instead of presentations. We are growing weary of the kind of performative event that academia is turning into, where people seem more interested in being heard and adding a line to their curriculum vitae than listening and engaging in a vivid conversation.

We announced the first call for papers in October 2019 (one year before the conference) by proposing this format: all interested people shall equally participate with a 500- to 1000-word text, which begins and ends with a question and has only one single reference. We thought that the text should be short so as to concentrate on what really matters, and have only one reference to avoid two extremes: monologue texts that only talk to themselves, and, on the other extreme, texts full of references that do not really talk with any of them. The questions at the beginning and the end have to do with what we call, inspired by Freire, “a childlike pedagogy of the question”: we think that a text which opens and ends with a question is a sign of a text that does not seek closure but openness, as if it part of our task would be to always maintain thinking open.

When the pandemic arrived in Brazil last March, we had already received a good number of texts and the call was still open. After some weeks, it dawned on us that it would be impossible to organize a physical colloquium. More time elapsed and a lot of discussion ensued. Finally, we opted for a remote and virtual colloquium. It was not an easy decision. Affectivity is one of the characteristics commonly highlighted by participants at our colloquia: the encounters, the hugs, the affections of the encounters of bodies joined together to think about questions that matter. There were those in our group who said that a colloquium without bodies would not be a colloquium, just as a school without bodies would not be a school. While those who defended a virtual colloquium (not even sure whether such an online colloquium could even be organized) were mainly concerned about two issues: a) the effect of not having a colloquium and the risk of the pandemic paralyzing us and university life (this was probably felt strongest among those for whom the (public) university had been closed since March, and for whom the advent of online classes had only just begun after losing many students due to lacking conditions); b) we would rather conclude that it was impossible to organize an online colloquium after trying than before.

We therefore decided to take a chance. We didn't know—as still don't—if we can call an online meeting with all its features but *no* bodies a colloquium, but it seemed to us that the risk of doing nothing was far more dangerous than trying to organize our colloquium online while being attentive to the dangers and seductions of virtuality. We consequently decided to do it “as if it were possible” and then to evaluate, by exposing ourselves and risking something apparently very difficult or even impossible, whether what we had done had been worthwhile, whether it had been or not a colloquium. Today, we've realized a few things, or maybe just one: we are totally exhausted, and probably much more so than if the colloquium had been organized as usual.

Let me tell you a bit more about how it all went, and sorry if I am writing too much. Of course, you can always take whatever you want from this, but I just feel that I need to give you a context. We ended up receiving many texts—more than 900, actually. As we had not established any preconditions in terms of language, age, academic level, and so on, the authors were very varied in chronology, formation, and geographical origin. There were even children, young high school and university students, and teachers, from countries as far away as South Africa, Italy, Portugal, Iran, Spain, Canada, United States, Turkey and almost all of Latin America. And although guidelines were explicitly stated in Spanish, Portuguese and English, we received many texts ranging from 15 to 20 pages, some with long lists of references, and others without questions, neither at the beginning nor at the end.

Since the guidelines were very clearly stated, it is evident that some people submitted papers without following or even reading them, or considering where their papers were being sent to, for that matter. Even though we responded by requesting that texts be modified to fit the proposed format, some texts never ended up respecting those criteria, even after being submitted three or four times. In the end, we accepted more than eight hundred texts, forming seventy-one study groups. We had three language-based study groups: Portuguese, Spanish, and English. Each study group would meet for two and a half hours during three of the five days of the colloquium, that is, seven and a half hours in total. We thought that there should be mediators to guide and monitor each group, and so we also trained about 60 mediators ahead of time (some were in more than one study group) to convey what kind of experience we wanted the colloquium to reflect: time dedicated to reading, thinking and questioning the issues stated in these shared texts, in an unproductive way, with a certain cooperative and collaborative spirit and without any kind of profit or product that would give personal utility to the philosophical-educational experience. We also fostered a collective educational experience, where egos would gradually lose importance and collective work would gain meaning.



On the first day, the study groups read through each of their group's texts (with no mention of authorship), and, at the end of the day, formulated two collective questions inspired by those texts. The first day was *only* for reading and asking questions. On the second day, questions were exchanged and each group then started to think about questions that had emerged from different collectives. In addition, they began working on a strategy for the third day, when each study group would have to compose a collective text with the same characteristics as the individual texts: between 500 and 1000 words, starting and ending with a question, and with a single bibliographical reference. We did encounter a number of technical problems with Zoom, but the group of mediators embraced the proposal with such solidarity and commitment that technical problems were seen more as opportunities and challenges than as obstacles.

In addition to these study groups, we organized other open activities for those registered as well as for those who wanted to participate in the colloquium but hadn't been able to send in their texts on time. These activities sought to illustrate the colloquium's main question—what can a philosophical education be?—through different discourses: cinema, theater, dance, singing, poetry, philosophy... They problematized issues like racism, sexism, and ageism—three poisons that pervade Brazilian society and which the pandemic and governing necropolitics only exacerbate and reproduce. These activities' content had a 'political' dimension, but so did some aspects of their form, such as the example of girls and boys from peripheral schools sharing a screen with teachers, or, more generally, the program for an international colloquium with artists and educators. These activities also included "philosophical walking", which one day I would like to discuss with you, given your passion for walking. Yet since this summary is already too long, let me go directly to the issues I would like us to consider together.

I think there are at least two or three dimensions of the private/public issue. One is macro and has to do with the way big corporations have appropriated the virtual, and what is going on there with our words, desires, and emotions. In Brazil at least, the public digital space does not function properly and has not received enough funding to enable the kind of work that is done on private platforms. We even have a National Net of Research (RNP), but it does not match up to the kind of services that private platforms offer. There is a big issue at stake here: we seem to be moving from our university's public physical space (e.g., buildings and libraries) to a private virtual space run by corporations, with all the implications that many scholars (like Shoshana Zuboff and others) have pointed out regarding surveillance capitalism. This realm reinforces exclusion, at least in a country like Brazil.

We actually experienced this at the colloquium. We had thought that we could help those who wanted to participate but were prevented from doing so due to material conditions. However, we simply couldn't help. The pandemic, at least among us, has greatly deepened inequality. For the most conservative, it is even an opportunity to cut costs and attempt to get rid of an institution like the school, which is often criticized as obsolete and inefficient. However, the colloquium has helped to perceive the school as something different. At the opening session, a conversation took place between Vanise and Pyetro, a teacher and eight-year old student from a school in Duque de Caxias. During that conversation, Pyetro said that he enjoys very much school, and when we asked him what he likes about it, he answered, "I like the part where we study and eat". He could not have summed it up any better: for us at least, school has those two irreplaceable dimensions, that of study and that of food. That's why face-to-face school is irreplaceable here, since for many children in Brazil lack of school means lack of those two needs. And not only that, of course. As Arthur, another child from that same school, said in another activity, the school is also the place where we find "friends", that is, the place where, at the same time, we try to understand the world with others and ask questions about the world we are sharing. Would it be possible for this last dimension of the school to take place in an eventually constructed public virtual space?

In addition to the macro, there is also a micro dimension of the public/private issue to consider: namely that each of us enters this virtual private shared space from a private individual space, like one's home, so that each of us is really staying in a private zone, both inside and outside the computer. In fact, we realized some time ago that the outside could even function as an explicit barrier to the school, when our university was planning to begin online classes and many students told us—especially black women—that it would be impossible to have university classes at home because they would never be able to read the texts they read at the university nor say the kind of things they say at the university *at home*. In other words, they are only free to do so outside of home, in the public space of the university. One might therefore wonder if such a so-called public virtual space could even be built and inhabited by people under difficult conditions at home.

Finally, there is another element to consider: at the computer, there are all sorts of distractions that attract our attention and brings us, as I think you would say, to a lack of freedom and “world alienation”, to put it succinctly with one of your expressions. And while we are on the subject of obstacles and impossibilities, I would naturally add the lack of material bodies that so characterizes the digital. Taken altogether, I therefore wonder if these conditions are not actually obstacles to the school, or, to put it bluntly, if they might not make the school an impossibility.

To finish this (long) narration, I would like to add a couple positive points you may want to consider as well: a) the obvious but not unimportant “democratic” aspect of far more people being able to take part in an online event than in presence. In this respect, we received many testimonies from people from very remote parts of Brazil saying that they had been able to take part in the colloquium for the first time because it was online. This could imply that if we had more public policies and funding, creating a more equal public virtual space might be more feasible than a material one, at least here in Brazil; b) many people told us that they had never inhabited the university as they did this time; they said they had never registered before, physically, this virtual experience of “free time”. Of course, one might say that the experience would have been even more profound if it had occurred at the university, but I still wonder if we shouldn't also pay attention to these kinds of testimonies, which seem to indicate a potential schooling dimension of the digital. Sorry for so many words.

Warmest regards to you and Myriam,

Walter

*Leuven March 12th*

Dear Walter,

Although a long time has elapsed since I received your last letter (for all kinds of reasons I keep postponing my response), and even though we have been discussing these issues in a slightly different way (through skype), I want to start off by expressing my deepfelt admiration for the tremendous energy and effort you were able to ‘mobilize’ in order to organize—in these pandemic times, no less—another wonderful colloquium, now the tenth to date, and as always (at least those I was able to attend) in a unique format that allows for wonderful, interesting and thoughtful encounters, happenings and conversations. That you could accomplish this once more this time around is simply astonishing, and I fully agree with you that we should not simply observe and mourn, but also try out new things, new practices, new study practices even (along with new food practices, since these last two are certainly related, and not just in the metaphorical sense of “food for thought”, but in a more practical and essential way).

I want to take up some of the issues you mentioned in relation to the colloquium, but let me begin by briefly responding to your first remarks. I would like to clarify a bit this relation between studying and the art of noticing distinctions that matter. I am not sure whether we disagree or whether I was unclear, but apparently the latter is at least the case. What I would like to bring together here are phrasings by Anna Tsing (on mushrooms), Bruno Latour (on learning to be affected), and Vinciane Despret (on dwelling with birds). You are right to point out that the root of “notice” brings it close to “knowing”, but I think it is a richer and in fact bodily understanding of knowing that is involved. When you look up the meaning of “notice” in the Oxford dictionary, it reads: “the fact of observing or paying attention to something”. Moving from the context of learning to ‘smelling’ or ‘tasting’ indicates that it involves all the bodily senses. Indeed, Latour elaborates the example of learning to distinguish different odors and smells, and how this learning to be affected (e.g., in the context of developing a perfume) implies artifices like the “odor-kit”—*la mallette à odeurs*—(we would call it a kind of grammatisation) that allow exercises to ‘sense’ distinctions and shape one’s ability (maybe better than capacity) to distinguish and to make distinctions that matter (learning also *how* they matter).

When we say that school rests on the assumption of equality of ability then, I think, this means the ‘ability to begin with something’ (not that everybody is necessarily able to ‘notice’ or ‘sense’ distinctions ‘naturally’). I found it particularly interesting that Latour connected ‘affect’ with learning and artificiality, while Despret, in a detailed discussion of the history of ‘bird studies’, showed how intense study and heedful observation allowed precisely for clearer distinctions, which (seemed to) matter for birds and for trying to find out what it means to ‘inhabit’ the world of birds (including relations to the environment, other birds and species, light, etc.). I think that these studies by scientists (of birds, perfumes, mushrooms, and we could also add body language), but of course not only by scientists, is in fact part of preparing the ‘school matter’ (the grammatised subject matter).

Regarding your reference to body language, I think that, in order to go to school, one needs ‘grammatisation’—i.e., the subject matter being pre-sented in a way that we can relate to it (and in order to be studied at school, in a way, it must have been studied (*pre-sented*) already to some extent for grammatisation to be deployed or even possible—which is not just about language (and school study is certainly not only about grammar, though that is a crucial part of it), nor performance (although that is likewise partly implied). In turn, this would enrich, diversify and intensify our sense of the body or our bodily sensuality. Noteworthy in this context are the examples of ‘dance schools’ that also make use of drawings and sketches (or nowadays video) to study and practice, as well as to talk in different ways about (or deal in different ways with) what they are doing—I would say, to make distinctions that matter. Perhaps I’ve only added to the confusion, but I think (and maybe I’m once again not ‘sensitive’ enough to distinctions regarding words) that the art of noticing (in the sense of paying attention to distinctions that matter) is a crucial element of studying (besides others like effort, discipline, etc.).

So let me now take up some of your considerations regarding the ‘online’. Let me first state that, following a recent exercise we did with students on what we called the re-discovery of (or the meaning of) on campus education, I realize more and more that the way in which we (maybe I should say, I) often discuss this issue of on-line versus off-line really starts from drawing comparisons with the aim of deciding whether on-line can replace off-line, whether on-line is the same or as good as good as off-line, etc. As Maarten once said to me, it almost feels as if one must prove that off-line can accomplish something that is not possible on-line (and then inevitably follow new features that ‘prove’ that we have that something on-line after all).

I think this kind of discussion is not so fruitful. Instead, we should take the online as an *additional* way, or additional ways in the plural, which have possibilities and offer opportunities that other forms don't have or can't offer. And this approach for me is also considerably different from this other notion that is nowadays popular: blended. This idea of blended represents a very functionalist approach to education, whereas in my opinion one should really be trying to make distinctions that matter. As Arendt once indicated: I can put a nail in the wall with the heel of my shoe or with a hammer, they can perform the same function, but that does not mean that a hammer is like a shoe.

Maybe we shouldn't spend so much time discussing whether one can replace (or perform the same functions as) the other—we can probably all agree that a webinar is not identical to a seminar, a skype call to a physical conversation, or an online presentation to a lecture, but, then again, a lecture differs from a seminar, a seminar from a lab exercise (and football on TV certainly from football in Maracanã). Rather than comparing, we could start instead from asserting that, for example, a webinar is a new and different way of 'collecting' or 'gathering' things and people, and that online 'conferences' offer indeed other (or different) opportunities and possibilities (just like watching football on TV offers you another way to join in the game and reach the ball, the players, etc.). I suggest we try to name what the online allows and be attentive to the distinctions that matter—the same way a carpenter constantly discovers and refines certain distinctions regarding the wood, and how it matters for what he wants to do, or a teacher the ways of gathering subject matter—and we could furthermore think about how good webinars differ from bad ones (just like we can talk about good and bad lectures, etc.), though not in an attempt to make a webinar the same as a seminar (by analyzing the seminar and then looking for its functional equivalents and so on). Following Goffman's wonderful description of a public lecture's features, we could try to articulate the features of (good) video-lectures, etc.

What remains interesting and necessary to address, however, is, as you also mention, whether some of these features might be impediments to making school or university. On the one hand, I believe that under certain conditions and with specific arrangements and protocols we can indeed 'make school' online—that is, we can arrange gatherings that bring about at least some of the school's operations in the way that we understand them. While, on the other hand, under different conditions some operations might become difficult or even impossible. For example, as you mentioned, if the online means working from a laptop at home, then the school's operation of separating students from their families and social contexts becomes much more difficult to accomplish.

Perhaps we should not aim so much for 'substitution' either. In fact, we have always indicated that the internet is a tremendous 'profanation' machine that makes knowledge available in unprecedented ways—and therefore has an enormous scholastic potential, though we need particular practices and arrangements to realize this potential (just as a trivial example, consider the difference between watching a collective screen together versus a personalized one alone).

But I digress. You have certainly experimented with a new format, which, of course, was very different from the Rio-based conference; but why should they be the same, or why even compare them? It is not about replacing one with the other (even if in this case the reason had to do with replacement), but about experimenting with forms (collections of things and people, practices) in order to make public and gather a thinking public. I recently read the *Manifesto for Teaching Online* (published already some years ago but recently updated). It is an intelligent and rich book, but I now feel that it loses in appeal when pleading for the online by trying to show that it can be as 'effective' and 'affective' as 'live' teaching, while it is clear from the descriptions that it can indeed be very interesting, effective and affective, yet is simply very

different—it is obvious that being alone with a screen in a room is different from being together with a lot of other bodies in a classroom. In other words, the online is just another thing, but one which should *add* something to the world of education instead of simply replacing or reproducing something else. Moreover, a screen in a room with others is also doing different things than one in a room where one is alone, etc. Allow me to refer to Despret and Stengers once more, who, when describing genes, claim that one ought to think of genes as capable of modifying particular situations through encounters, and thus of being modified in return by these very encounters, rather than conceiving them as doing the same thing (i.e., performing the same function) wherever they happen to be situated.

Finally, to end let me briefly come back to the fantastic lecture you gave last week at the conference in São Paulo on Jacotot/Rancièrè and Freire. There are a lot of ideas worthy of further elaboration, but for now let me just refer to the very last paragraph (and keep in mind that I only have access to a DeepL translation), where you mention the force of an experience of school which is not to be captured by theory or even politics. I think this resonates very well with the reference I made earlier that week to the way in which Kristin Ross, inspired by Rancièrè, described the experience of the Paris Commune, which emphasized the meaning of that experience as such. It resonates as well with the beautiful passage you described about the Angicos experience and with something that Cohn-Bendit said about May 68 in an encounter he had with Sartre:

*« L'important, ce n'est pas d'élaborer une réforme de la société capitaliste, c'est de lancer une expérience en rupture complète avec cette société, une expérience qui ne dure pas mais qui laisse entrevoir une possibilité : on aperçoit quelque chose fugitivement, et cela s'éteint. Mais cela suffit pour prouver que ce quelque chose peut exister. »*

I think this can also be related to certain comments of Arendt on 'public happiness', but let us keep that for later. As we have been discussing maybe writing something together about Freire, it could be something to start from.

Warm regards,

Jan

*Rio de Janeiro, March 14th*

Dear Jan,

I am immediately answering your last response so as to not lose track of some ideas that came to mind and introduce in our conversation other ideas we have been discussing in parallel. I think what you say about the online/offline relationship is very educational: instead of comparing them, just consider them to be different or alternative experiences. Furthermore, the issue is not about comparing but understanding what is specific to this other form of making school, which now deserves renewed attention given our present pandemic. Some of the questions we might give more attention to are: Can we make school *through* it? In what specific ways? Is there something like an 'online school'? What is its form? What are its main limitations and strengths?

But let's move to Freire and the end of your response. I do think Angicos is an experience of school and also of democracy in a way that probably goes beyond Freire's own understanding of school and democracy. In the case of school, that is pretty obvious since at the time of this

experience Freire was not even thinking about school but about literacy and education. I think it was an experience of school quite similar to the one you mentioned in your intervention at this same conference in São Paulo, a collective experience of equality and freedom starting from the assumption that “anyone can learn anything”. A moving and powerful evocation occurred in the video I showed at the conference when Francisca, a former student of Angicos, described Paulo Freire’s going to prison and then into exile as there being no more school, as if school had “ended” and Paulo Freire was in fact a school, or “the [experience of] school” as she knew it. More precisely, “*the school*” because there was nothing close to it in Angicos. And he probably was the only school at that place and time, or, to put it differently, he created and then suffered “political” conditions of school or the reactions provoked by an experience of school. I do believe Freire’s experiment was an experience of equality, suspending the time of exploitation to inhabit a time liberated from production in order to learn to read and write words as well as the world, and to be able to inhabit the world in another way; an experience in which anyone can learn anything when they feel that those who teach trust in their capacity; in other words, school as a common journey with no anticipated destination. An experience that goes far beyond the teachings and expectations of those who propose, coordinate, and theorize the school. Of course, we can always enter into a more detailed discussion of this experience of school.

And I also consider Angicos to be a political experience in a different sense of the word. First, just like those beautiful words you offered from Cohn-Bendit: an experience of complete rupture with society, which does not last but lets us glimpse a possibility. As we learned from Jacotot, what happens once can always happen again. This demonstrates the political strength of such an experience. It shows that (another) politics is possible. Something we are constantly told is impossible suddenly appears as possible. And when something apparently impossible happens (like poor farmers learning, and learning as equals), then some people might start to realize that this is not only possible but necessary. I also think it echoes Rancière’s sense of democracy as the “*gouvernement des incompetents*”: to govern through a rupture with the logic of inequality.

However, this interpretation might be a little different from Freire’s concept of democracy and the political goals he sought in that experience—which he actually attained: after Angicos, 300 people would vote and participate in democratic life, understood as the system of government, parties, elections, etc. Angicos could even be construed as a democratic experience in yet another sense, by considering, for example, the way that power was exercised or the kind of power relationships that were exercised in such an experience. These understandings might be closer to Freire, who believed that these kinds of practices could transform the political system and change society into a more democratic and fairer one. Obviously, in their understanding of democracy, Freire and Rancière are very far apart, for Rancière held that there are no emancipatory and democratic systems: equality, the political, or democracy can only be exceptions and not the rules that govern social life.

Perhaps this shows another political force of school, one that completely escapes its idealizers and theoreticians and is only experienced by its practitioners; a force that crosses those who inhabit and recreate it, one that escapes any attempt of capture, that breaks any pretension of totalization or enclosure, of domestication; and that makes school something that is at the same time improbable, uncertain, and unpredictable, that is politically impossible to capture. Angicos might exemplify—as did the Paris Commune, May 68, Haiti’s revolution, the mothers of May Square in Argentina, and the Penguin Student Revolution in Chile, to give examples of this side of the world—paradigmatic or exceptional instances of the political, and, more specifically in the case of Angicos, the political of school.

I wonder how you will receive these ideas and how you will problematize, unfold, or build on them, dear Jan!

Warmest regards,

Walter

*Leuven, June 4th*

Dear Walter,

First of all, it was really nice to also ‘see and hear you again’, even if online. It strengthened the longing for a real meeting (and football on the beach!). And yes, as usual I am late again in responding... However, it appears (based on an article in a popular journal) that I can now disclaim any responsibility for this delaying, since there is a ‘gene’ that causes this habit of procrastination.....

Let me take up your description of the experience of Angicos. What strikes me is how you speak of “a common journey with no anticipated destination”. Even assuming that there was no experience of school proper in Angicos, one must admit that taking part in the gatherings organized by Freire was likely accompanied by a strong feeling of not knowing what one was actually participating in. Assuming furthermore that this experience was not obligatory, one might imagine that there must have been a strong sense of curiosity, and perhaps even a kind of promise related to attending these gatherings in order to get people going there. Yet a promise that was not about a destination, if I follow your description. So, I would really be interested in hearing more about this experience, as you suggested to elaborate on, as well as the concrete circumstances, the ‘mood’ that was related, the ways this was phrased (the exact words that were used) or ‘imaged’.

And, yes, I agree that we can approach it as ‘political’; however, we have to specify what we mean by that. You indicate different options, such as experiencing a possibility (in a sphere of impossibility), a space of equality (maybe democracy), an exceptional experience, or an experience of exception. I am a bit reluctant, as you know, to talk about politics in relation to school because it risks to make us always look at school from an external perspective and to ‘measure’ the school with ‘adult’ experiences (adult here not taken in the chronological sense). It remains somewhat of an enigma to me why we are so eager to talk about politics in relation to school. And, of course, I am aware that this sounds as being part of the (Brazilian) movement for a ‘neutral’ school, but you know that this is not what I mean. But, if one agrees that there is no escape from the political, that education cannot be ‘neutral’ (as Freire is often quoted saying)—meaning that one must always decide between one kind of thinking or another, support or question a certain view on humanity (against or from another), side with certain people or certain values and ideals, sustain a certain direction of societal development, form certain kinds of people (instead of other kinds), and so on—then, in a way, one seems to suggest at once an oppositional (binary?) logic along with the impossibility of a non-political time and space, which would matter nevertheless (and even not be indifferent politically).

On the one hand, I would be inclined to follow Rancière, who states that, for example, the issue of equality (of power) is naturally an issue present in many contexts and situations (or “*scènes*”), and that the political is just a particular moment (and not a sphere) related to the constitution of particular collective subjects in a particular action, an action where the people are at once the subjects and objects of action (the demos), and that this moment only occurs now and then.

What happens in a classroom between the teacher and her students has to do with inequality/equality, but it is not political in that sense.

On the other hand, it could be interesting to claim that scholastic speech or discourse is in fact ‘*neutre/neutral*’, by following Roland Barthes’ description (in “*le discours neutre*”) of an “active, operative, or performative” concept (which has nothing to do with indifference, or neutrality) that can be part of a strong commitment and poetics (and Rancière is always claiming that his view of politics is poetic and not rhetoric, since rhetoric tries (more or less) to ‘defeat’ opponents whereas poetics strives for sharing/*partager*). It would be related to the idea of *co-présence*, for example, in simple alphabetic enumerations and listings (e.g., “music” is close to “mushroom” in the dictionary: they are co-present without any ‘logic’, reason, or binary relation). An enumeration as *co-présence* opens up or invites infinite ‘fictions’. It displaces the node of oppositions to kinds of undecidedness that open up worlds which cannot be ‘closed-off’, so that it has a “world-effect” (“*effet-monde*”). Barthes starts from the *ne-uter* (*not*-either [one or the other]). It is not about interpretation (right or wrong, being more right or wrong), but about ‘fictioning’ (like the school essay: not right or wrong, but one, and one, and one...)—“*le meilleur Neutre, ce n’est pas le nul, c’est le pluriel*”. It can realize a certain ‘suspension’ of language, not by being indifferent, but through a way of speaking that continues to add, that is an escalation and proliferation—and in this way, turns speaking into a kind of ‘speech for pleasure’ (maybe as the child does? I think that you can describe this much better than I can).

Maybe I am mixing up too many things at once and not really addressing what you pointed out, though I feel it is related to what you call this “other political force of school”. I think we should perhaps try to further clarify this experience of Angicos and avoid the references to May 68, students revolts, etc., because that may be getting us away from the scholastic experience itself. What do you think?

Warmest regards,

Jan

*Rio de Janeiro, June 22nd.*

Dear Jan,

Thank you so much for your new intervention, your thoughts, and also your questions on the experience of Angicos. I am as curious about it as you are. Last week, I had a nice conversation with Marcos Guerra, who coordinated the team of instructors at Angicos. I also talked to Eneida, who was the only child taking part in the course. As Marcos told me yesterday, there were sixteen different places in the village where the courses took place: some were schools, some churches, some others just houses or even a room in a house that was rented out for the course. They just met where they could, in spaces that were offered without placing too many requirements on actual conditions.

Eneida was only six years old at the time. Her parents were taking part in the course, but since doors were left open and she was curious about what was happening inside, she entered the room on the second day and actually ended up attending the remainder of the course, thereby learning to read and write. Not that there weren’t any schools at that time in Angicos, but the village was 75% illiterate; so most people, which were farmers, either did not go to school or were actually rejected and expelled from schools they tried to enter. It was a very poor area and the priority for everyone was to work the land. So, yes, I would say it was a revolutionary event.



Imagine a group from the province's capital going from house to house and inviting everyone to partake in an educational experience of learning to read and write in forty hours. These forty hours were spread over several weeks, since they could only meet every night for no longer than one hour or one hour and a half at most, having in some cases to even interrupt the course due to external causes (like rain, harvest, and so on). In a small, remote, and quiet city, that was seen as quite an extraordinary event.

Why did people accept this invitation? For several reasons I think, starting with the fact that being literate would enable them to vote, as well as to read the Bible and newspapers, and not be ashamed of having to ask someone to read a or write a letter for them. There therefore were real expectations around this concrete common promise of being able to read and write. In fact, it was not a promise regarding a place of destination, but a tool or instrument, and participants seemed to have different expectations on how to apply those tools. Along with that tool, they also learned something else, and this is where more controversial issues might arise. If you word this as critical consciousness (or 'conscientization'), then the idea of a final destination might be implied (event though I do not think it necessarily involves a Freirean perspective). However, I wouldn't word it like that; I believe—and I realize that I still need to study and think more about this experience—that what they learned is precisely a kind of new relationship to themselves: firstly, they learned that they are capable of reading and writing just like any other 'educated' person, and, secondly, I think that, once they realized that they were capable of something they had never expected to be capable of, something they had been told—even in schools!—that they were not born with the capability to accomplish, they then started asking themselves: Why would I not also be capable of this other thing, and this other one, and this other...?

In terms of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, I would say that what you learn is to break the links to the circle of stultification. You liberate yourself from an oppressive relationship first of all to yourself and the way you have been subjectified. You unlearn about yourself. However, an extra element in the experience of Angicos, very different from *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, is that you learn this with and from your peers. It is a collective task. So that you also learn (or unlearn) a relationship not only to yourself but to the community you belong to.

Marcos said some very interesting things in our conversation. For example, he used the word "remember" to describe what students learned. This involved not so much incorporating new things but rather taking away what seemed to be obstructing, an experience that resembled a common unlearning of oppressive relationships. There were certainly many other elements in Angicos mentioned by Marcos as political in a more traditional way, but I do not consider that they obfuscate this other dimension I am stressing.

I haven't read Barthes' essay, but some of the ideas you describe—like co-presence, open worlds, fictionality, proliferation—resonate strongly with the way I see Angicos. Maybe my reading of Angicos is too childlike, too inspired by childhood. And in a sense I do feel like a child when I think about Angicos, as if I were just starting to understand something and trying to find the words to express it. I am not sure how all this sounds to you. There are lots of other interesting elements related to Angicos that I hope we'll get to think about some more. I am planning to go there as soon as possible, so maybe we can take this up further after I have had a more vivid experience of the context and met with some of the course's former students—there are only five or six still alive.

Warmest thoughts and feelings,

Walter

*La Bâtie, July 20th*

Dear Walter,

Have you had the opportunity to visit Angicos yet? I assume you have not. Meanwhile, we've now taken up in parallel our conversation through email. Allow me to quote from one such exchange before I address your last letter, since I feel it's an important point we should not lose track of. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of June, you wrote:

“I had a very nice conversation with Marcos Guerra. More than one hour with this wonderful man who is now 80. He was chosen by Paulo Freire as coordinator of the Angicos monitors when he was 22 in 1963. He was then a law student. I am going to transcribe the conversation and must confess that many things he said surprised me (and might surprise you, too). For example, the course was divided into 16 groups and took place in 16 different locations, which included schools, houses, churches, or anywhere that was available really, and always at night, one or one hour and a half every night... No more, because most students had to work the next day and go to bed early to wake up early... In a few houses, there was no light so they provided some energy from a car... None of the monitors were pedagogues (but mostly students of law, philosophy, or dentistry), and Paulo Freire actually preferred not to have professional teachers because he claimed they were (de)formed by a ‘banking’ model... They received no specific formation in applying a method; instead, a lot of importance was given, among other things, to “listening”... They were prepared to listen... During two months in Angicos, the course took place at night, but every morning people would meet to talk about the previous night and later on in the afternoon walk around the city to listen to what was being said about the course... One thing you will love is that before the course even started, they went up to the tower of the church to map the city and draw lines through which they could announce the course... Marcos sent me a kind of notebook from one of the monitors, which I have attached... There are also some images they used at the course... The images were first discussed (or ‘dialogued’) by generating words, while the more focused activity of reading and writing these words came later... So they started by reading the world first and ended with reading words later...”

To which I responded (by email) on the 17<sup>th</sup>:

“Thank you so much for sharing your first experience of conversing with Marcos Guerra. It is fascinating in many respects. It is indeed surprising that there were no pedagogues or teachers, since they were considered ‘deformed’. I recognize here an argument that I heard once from an association that works with young delinquents, by taking them on a four-month walking pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella (this association started doing that at the beginning of the eighties, but still does it today, and which I take up every year in my course as an example to discuss ‘education’). There is always someone who accompanies the youngsters (often no more than two of them, and sometimes just one) along the journey, thereby also walking four months. They likewise prefer not to have professional caretakers, social workers, or pedagogues, because they feel that these professionals always already ‘know’ why the youngsters became delinquents, what is wrong with them, etc. (They already have too many sociological, psychological theories, etc.) Your conversation therefore sounds really similar. As for the mapping, yes, I like it, in order to be able to relate ‘words’ and ‘worlds’—in a certain sense, it is a way to unload as well as reload words with world.”

Since you wrote previously that you would like us to continue thinking about Angicos, perhaps we could consider it as part of a (de-historicized, non-chronological) history of school as event, which articulates school learning as a specific form. I am not sure whether, as we have mentioned elsewhere, it is in line with Foucault's notion of *événementialisation*, which allows something to appear in its singularity at many occasions in the same plane. Yet it is similar to what Michel Serres suggests by the observation that even though some stars in the sky at night are farther away than others—just like some events are further away in time—they remain nonetheless visible in the sky (or history) and can therefore be seen as constellations (of events), or as signs of the Zodiac (that is, as still having a singular form). And maybe we could even approach it as a 'scene' in the Rancièrian sense. In fact, Rancière comes back time and again to certain 'scenes', such as the plebians' secession at the Aventine Hill in Rome or Jacotot's educational experiment in Leuven, which are both described as singular events that are enactments of a form which reveals itself in certain crucial constituents of that very event. You wrote before that, in Angicos, Freire (or at least the 'experiment' he directed and carried out together with others) seemed to have been "*the school*", so, perhaps it could be interesting to write about Angicos as Rancière wrote about the experiment in Leuven. Not as a primal scene in the psychoanalytic sense, but as scene where a new beginning is created (maybe as a kind of touchstone), the new beginning of school. And maybe it is *school for/with adults* (which may well have a lot to do with "unlearning", a term you employed and that has become immensely popular nowadays in many contexts, such the arts, de-colonisation debates, climat-change debates, etc.).

You mentioned that only one child participated (Eneida), but maybe that is also worthy of further consideration. If one speaks of "unlearning", then some learning must have already taken place, or if, as I wrote, school is about unloading and reloading words (with worlds), some 'loading' of words must have already occurred (and in this sense, we could call it education for grown-ups—as Stanley Cavell called it). Therefore, the (first) 'loading', if we can put it that way, would itself be about opening up a world, learning a new world (new words, other words, and other worlds). Perhaps I am suggesting a distinction that is not so clear cut (and maybe every form of learning entails unlearning after all), although I feel there may be a difference, and that it could well be related to an understanding of the 'political' of school.

Anyway, I would love to participate in an endeavor to describe and document the Angicos scene in greater detail—maybe even make a documentary?—and would be especially keen to describe it as a scene of school in the Rancièrian sense I just tried to indicate, not as 'the' primal scene, but maybe as a beginning scene. Moreover, I would accentuate this scene as a scene of unlearning (which is indeed a very crucial issue with regards to climate change, etc.), but not unlearning as a kind of critique or even rejection of school as is most often the case in the actual debates I referred to earlier, but precisely *as 'school'*. While Freire has been described as the "Socrates of the tropics", perhaps we could (also) call him the "Jacotot of the tropics"? I realize that the odds of my joining you on your journey to make a documentary are rather low (there are too many practical issues involved, I would assume), but it may well be worthwhile and feasible to start thinking of writing a possible 'script' for such a documentary?

Warm regards from a sunny La Bâtie,

Jan

*Rio de Janeiro, July 20th*

Dear Jan,

Regarding the making of a documentary, it is indeed a wonderful idea, yet I have some doubts since several documentaries have already been made. Professor Favero from the Fluminense Federal University (UFF) has actually recovered some of the original recordings, and there are other more recent documentaries as well. Of course, this doesn't mean that we couldn't make another one, but I think that we need to first study what has already been done, and then talk about what kind of documentary we would do, for what purpose, etc. There is also the technical issue: if we attempt to make a documentary, I would prefer to work with a professional as well to ensure that we end up with a technically polished documentary. As for the script, would you like to already start drafting what you have in mind?

Warmest regards,

Walter

*La Bâtie, July 22<sup>nd</sup>.*

Dear Walter,

We visited Wim yesterday at Montavoix in the Jura mountains, the place where he works. It's been a while since I last visited (due to the pandemic). He showed us around and indicated the incredible way in which the forest is being transformed (one could say, in fact, increasingly destroyed and deserted) as a result of climate change. Since he has been working there every day for a long time now in that same place, he is a 'privileged' observer. This brings me back to the "unlearning" you referred to in relation to Angicos, and what I wrote about a possible documentary.

I was indeed probably a bit too quick, and not really aware of all that exists and has been done already, including the videos you indicated and which I now have watched, along with a lot of interviews with people from Angicos. However, I did not have in mind to make such a 'historical documentary', but, rather, to 'construct' and 'tell' the 'scene of Angicos' in a way that would be inspired by how Rancière 'constructs' and 'tells' the 'scene of Jacotot' through a form of writing that merges both historical material and Jacotot's words with Rancière's own work and voice (words), so as to also be an intervention in the present.

Just as your book<sup>3</sup> envisions Freire's life as a philosophical/pedagogical life, maybe it could be a way to approach or write the 'scene of Angicos' as a pedagogical or scholastic one (rather than a political one). I would say that to 'make' such a 'documentary' would be in itself a work of study, starting with trying to suspend the (more or less known or familiar) stories and finding ways to not interpret the existing images, the words (in the interviews) from the stories, but trying instead to 'isolate' scenes and describe them on their own, to have 'islands' of images

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<sup>3</sup> Kohan, W. (2021) *Paulo Freire. A philosophical biography*. New York: Bloomsbury.

and words that could then be related to each other in a different way that might tell us something about the ‘school of unlearning or the unlearning school’.

Furthermore, we could visit/consider Angicos (and the material around it) as an archive that could be visited just as Rancière visited the archive of the labor movement. In a way, your visit to that archive already revealed the mapping and the ‘un-professional’, but one could try to look at it even more as an experiment, that is to say, not as a planned project by Freire and others but rather as a continuous response to urgencies (like the manner Jacotot realized his experiment not as ‘intentional project’ but as a response to a situation he was confronted with and which ‘made him think’).

In order to try to do this, I think we really need to first find a way to meet and work together (along with others and students) physically on material, to create our ‘archive’ and have a ‘workshop’ similar to an ‘atelier’ in the true sense of the word. I don’t know, maybe I am too naïve and ignorant, too much taken away by the ‘scene of Angicos’ (with the mapping, the invitation, the mood it created, the setting...), which offers me a different way ‘into Freire’ than the usual one (of reading the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*). I might also be simply wrong here, and if you find any of this to be rather ridiculous, or even dilettantish of me, just let me know—to a certain extent, I only wrote down what came to mind, without doing much work on the matter beforehand.

Warmest wishes,

Jan

*Rio de Janeiro, July 22nd*

Dear Jan,

Rancière and Jacotot have certainly been a great source of inspiration, and you may recall that before the Freire book I wrote *The Inventive Schoolmaster* (based on Simón Rodríguez), which was even more inspired by Rancière. I took an episode in Rodríguez life, like Leuven for Jacotot, and wrote a biography around the idea of invention (whose Latin origin I ‘invented’ as linked to hospitality: in-ventus (arrived inside) as it usually relates to creation). Freire’s book is less inspired in Rancière, though it still partly is since I devote a chapter to tracing connections between them, of which I think there are many. Yet Freire is singular and different in other significant aspects (and I feel closer to Freire than to Jacotot in many ways). This genre of “philosophical biographies” is certainly very inspired by the style of *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*.

Regarding Angicos, I think I understand the kind of story you want to write and I very much like the project. However, my main concern would be taking the political out of the pedagogical: I simply cannot see how we could tell a non-political story of Angicos, and still be talking about Angicos or Freire. We could problematize the meaning of political in this context, and could eventually reconceptualize it (which, in a way, is what I have been trying to do), but we shouldn’t forget that Freire saw the claim that education is political as axiomatic. Even though he does not often speak about school per se, I feel he would likewise axiomatically view the school as political, which I understand is precisely what you are trying to deny. So, we might have an issue here.

I do not see how we can overcome it. We needn't understand politics as he did (or anyone else, or in any traditional way for that matter), but telling a nonpolitical story about Angicos does not seem to me to do justice to it. I don't feel like cowriting such a story; rather, I would prefer to write it as 'another' politics (whether loving, equalitarian, open-ended (without destination), childlike, etc.). Of course, there may be other elements involved, but I would also consider them part of a 'new' politics—a way of making *polis*—and not as the absence of the political. This is my main concern. It might just be an issue about words. I felt inspired by your description of “the school of unlearning” or “the unlearning school” along with your discussion of mapping and the un-professional, but I cannot connect them to the overall idea of doing away with the political altogether.

I feel more and more attracted to Angicos for some reason—perhaps this is related to my love of childhood. In addition to the interviews with Marcos Guerra and Eneida (the child in Angicos), I've recently been invited to several online events in Angicos, and feel more and more connected to this project. This year, I even have a new PhD student who is a teacher in Angicos, believe it or not, and in one month or so, I might be able to travel there. I will receive my second dose of the COVID vaccine in three or four weeks (I should have received it this week, actually, but have had to postpone my appointment due to my confirmed COVID infection), and I should then be able to travel there and spend a few days or a couple of weeks. I have already contacted the city's Secretary of Education—with whom I've now become close—and she told me that she would contact the sons and daughters of the Angicos students still alive, which number around 5 or 6, and check if they can receive me. I am planning to meet them if possible, and realize there is not so much (chronological!) time left for that, because these people are getting ready to leave this world. There used to be 300 of them, and now there are just 5 or 6 left. I am sure you would love to listen to their stories.

Warmest wishes,

Walter

*La Bâtie, July 22nd*

Dear Walter,

I would like to respond directly to your last message because I feel you may have overemphasized the “rather than political” in my email, and seem to be quite upset by it. I do agree that Freire without the political would be difficult, and I do agree as well that education in general cannot be separated from politics—in a way the school is one of the most important political inventions ever—but then one must specify what is meant by politics, and also why education is not politics in the same way a parliamentary session or any other kind of gathering that touches upon the *polis* might be. I have no problem in discussing political implications, but I don't find it very helpful to simply think (and imply as is often the case) that school education has the sole effect of preparing youngsters for the kind of future we have in mind (either explicitly by indicating the competences of a good citizen, or indirectly by contributing to 'humanization'), which is not to say that this isn't important or isn't the case. There certainly are very different kinds of learning going on at schools, and many of these can happen either at school or elsewhere (and have different 'political' effects). But I feel that it is more interesting to look for the political *in* the pedagogical, rather than the political as simply an outcome or effect. I think that there is something very political—in the sense of touching upon our living

together not as a family or a community, but as a singular plurality/plural singularity—in the ‘happening’ of school itself at that very moment, and not only in whatever it brings about afterwards. What attracts me most in Angicos, or at least in what I’ve learned about it from you so far, are the concrete activities and actions, along with the means/things that were used, and the settings created (and not only the words that accompanied them, though they are also very important).

Yet as I commented already, I might totally be wrong and our situations too different after all. Let me try to rephrase my position for you: what I am concerned about most is to clarify what it means to be in the position/mood/experience of a school student. Furthermore, in my opinion this differs drastically from being a political subject since being a student is precisely about *suspending* the state of being a subject; in other words, it is not akin to being a citizen, child, son, daughter, etc. In addition, being a student does not refer to some general notion, for example, one in which learning would be preeminent, since in such a case the classroom might conceivably be replaced by any other room, and being a student would then be defined and described essentially without any relation to school. This would in turn imply that school is just one possible place and time for learning (the preeminent element of being a student), and school would then either been seen as facilitating or limiting the possibility for learning (which might not even require the school to begin with).

In contrast, I think it is worthwhile and important to try to articulate precisely what ‘school’ does and what it means to be a school student, and to try to clarify what is political about this experience, since it is very political indeed (in a certain way). And I would suggest (but, again, I might be totally wrong) that Freire was a pedagogue, that he invited the people of Angicos to go to school, while simultaneously reinventing school (*making* a particular situated gathering that implied a particular experience related to that gathering), and one could even say reinventing it as a political intervention owing to the particularities of that gathering (and not just the explicit goals, intentions, projects, discourses, or explanations related to it). He made school begin anew—*school* matters here—and making school begin anew is not just a question of learning or studying, or becoming aware of something in general.

I have no idea if any of this helps or if it just adds to the confusion. Perhaps I am only playing with words. That is at least not my intention; nor is it to de-politicize school education, but rather to try to articulate why school (and not only learning, unlearning or studying as such) might be important, including being politically important in its own way. I am not trying to simply replace it either (for example, by a digital equivalent that would have the same ‘function’), precisely on account of its own political significance and meaning, which are to be reinvented in my opinion as Freire would likely agree.

However, our recent email exchange might also indicate that this may not be the best way to discuss these matters. I am very much attracted to the ‘other Freire’ (related, of course, to the familiar Freire) that appeared in your book, and I can better understand what fascinated me with his pedagogy from what you have related and shared about Angicos. I first ‘met’ Freire in the seventies when he was awarded a doctorate honoris causa at our university. His liberation pedagogy was then strongly associated with a liberation theology (renowned in Leuven) at the time through the translation of his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which I think most of us had not really ‘studied’ to be honest, and was connected in various courses to the then prominent discourse of ‘pedagogues’ making people conscious in order to realize a better world.

When I later took the time to actually read the book, I was immediately struck by a kind of preaching tone (somewhat related, for example, to the way Adorno once suggested leaving cities to educate the countryside), and the number of sentences that seemed to me either simplistic or simply incomprehensible (only much later did I realize that it was a very bad translation). At the same time, it was difficult to simply ignore him, although I wasn't exactly sure why. You certainly helped me out on that one, but maybe this has led to something you don't really recognize anymore.

Warm regards,

Jan

*Rio de Janeiro, July 22nd*

Dear Jan,

Thank you for your message! I appreciate your time and understanding (not giving up on me yet and helping me better understand the issues at play.)

Sorry if I might have appeared upset, which I certainly wasn't. Perhaps my mood is being unconsciously affected by a kind of COVID feeling of suspension—in an already suspended period of time. It may well have been a good thing that this confusion made you write more, and I think I understand you much better now, or at least I hope so. Thank you again for trying to help my limited understanding of your thinking/words. There is a paragraph I would like to comment on:

“I do agree as well that education in general cannot be separated from politics—in a way the school is one of the most important political inventions ever—but then one must specify what is meant by politics, and also why education is not politics in the same way a parliamentary session or any other kind of gathering that touches upon the *polis* might be. I have no problem in discussing political implications, but I don't find it very helpful to simply think (and imply as is often the case) that school education has the sole effect of preparing youngsters for the kind of future we have in mind (either explicitly by indicating the competences of a good citizen, or indirectly by contributing to 'humanization'), which is not to say that this isn't important or isn't the case.”

I would like to especially comment on the part: “I don't find it very helpful...” I think it would be very helpful if we could clearly and openly formulate a new political sense of education/school (or the “political in the pedagogical” as you say), which of course does not have to imply any sort of predefined destination or future preparations for the young, etc. Doing so appears highly important to me, and it might even turn out to have an impact on educators and students, who nowadays seem to not really believe in education/school anymore. I mean, they might simply be tired of traditional political approaches, even the popular Freirean way of approaching the political “dimension” of education/school (with Freire stressing time and again that doing politics is not a dimension of education though education is essentially political). This might even bring Freire very close to your suggestion that “it is more interesting to look for the political *in* the pedagogical, rather than the political as simply an outcome or effect”. I still need to ponder and better understand that phrase along with many other things you wrote,



yet I think that may well be a key point, “the political *in* the pedagogical”. My excuses once more if I misunderstood you as denying the political in the pedagogical.

When you write:

“I think it is worthwhile and important to try to articulate precisely what ‘school’ does and what it means to be a school student, and to try to clarify what is political about this experience, since it is very political indeed (in a certain way). And I would suggest (but, again, I might be totally wrong) that Freire was a pedagogue, that he invited the people of Angicos to go to school, while simultaneously reinventing school (*making* a particular situated gathering that implied a particular experience related to that gathering), and one could even say reinventing it as a political intervention owing to the particularities of that gathering (and not just the explicit goals, intentions, projects, discourses, or explanations related to it). He made school begin anew—*school* matters here—and making school begin anew is not just a question of learning or studying, or becoming aware of something in general.”

This seems for you the key issue at stake. If I am not mistaken, would you allow me to say that what matters most to you in this respect is asking the question: What is singularly political about (making) school? I need to think more about this question.

There is something enigmatic in you saying of Freire that “it was difficult to simply ignore him, although I wasn’t exactly sure why”. Just like you, I’ve always had a lot of difficulties with Freire. I even mentored a dissertation based on Foucault and Nietzsche that was a critique of Freire’s humanism, while I was in Brasilia a little over 20 years ago. There were many things around him and his texts I was not attracted to at all. I’m still not sure exactly why I wrote about Freire recently and participated in different homages to him, though I did get to meet some really interesting people, and experience Angicos, which has left a lasting impression on me. So, I’m also a bit puzzled about my relationship with Freire. Very recently, his eldest daughter Madalena, who is now 75 and a renowned educator, sent me a very moving letter. She said she had been looking for me “as the daughter of Paulo Freire and as an educator” to thank me kindly for the new and vivid study of his work, and to let me know that she had read my book in just one breath. When I feel optimistic, I like to imagine that my book liberated Freire from certain Freires, and maybe that was what her daughter was trying to tell me. I still wonder at times what is so attractive about Freire. I can identify some reasons why I stay close to him, but like you I have difficulties saying why I cannot leave Freire aside—and now after thinking with him so intensely it might be impossible...

I think your idea of an exploratory workshop would be fantastic, were it only to consider such a documentary’s feasibility, desirability, aim, etc. It would be a great learning experiment, at least for me.

Warmest regards to you and Myriam, and enjoy your time caving!

Walter

*La Bâtie, July 22nd*

Dearest Walter,

Don't worry too much about my time. On the contrary, maybe we could rejoice in the idea that Freire wrote—and is still writing—one of the 'lines' of our lives, and that our lives intermingle as we engage in education in many different ways. It is in a sense liberating (like opening up paths) to discover that there was or still is in Freire something worth articulating and re-collecting (despite my own often suspicious attitude towards him and his work, which you seem to share to some extent). Like I mentioned already, what you wrote in your book and shared with me about Angicos brought to life a kind of freed Freire (as you so aptly say), and made me suggest such a workshop, which would be great to carry out (with your new PhD student and others). It might be timely indeed to reconsider the political in the educational, if I read your remark correctly about students and educators not believing in education anymore.

Allow me perhaps one last incidental remark. I should be more precise when talking about the political in the pedagogical and clarify that it is not about education per se, but about school education. We wanted to defend the school, not education in general, and therefore maybe you are right that we should try to articulate better what the political in the scholastic means (related to the scene of Angicos). I am now just thinking—since I would like to really limit my flights in the coming years—whether we could consider such a workshop during the week before your conference (end of August, beginning of September 2022). But maybe it will be too much and too difficult. Just a thought. Perhaps we could work on it already ahead of time—I don't know, let us take it up later.

Jan

*Rio de Janeiro, July 23rd*

Dear Jan,

What a lovely way of ending this correspondence: with an invitation and a proposal... to study... to a school study to study school. We couldn't end this conversation more promisingly. Let's hope for it!

Walter