

ARTICLE

## POLITICAL SENSITIVITY AND PERFORMATIVITY OF ETHICAL EDUCATION<sup>1</sup>

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**ABSTRACT:** Foucault said that governing is shaping the conduct of individuals: more broadly, says Michel Feher, specific modes of government have established throughout history different representations of the human condition, shaping values, aspirations, and ways of being. Now, the sensitivity inherent to neoliberalism is characterized by the reinforcement of narcissism, by little attention to the other, by indifference. The article presents the answer that Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou offer to this framework, based on a radical critique of the theory of recognition and the figure of the owner, «sovereign and unitary subject», who thinks he has assured safety and comfort. Their defense of the political performativity of the precarious situation – a condition that, after all, we all share – opens undoubtedly the way for thinking about ethical education today.

**Keywords:** Precarity, Political performativity, Ethical Educacion, Michel Feher, Athanasiou & Butler.

### SENSIBILIDADE POLÍTICA E PERFORMATIVIDADE DA EDUCAÇÃO ÉTICA

**RESUMO:** Foucault dizia que governar é moldar a conduta dos indivíduos: mais amplamente, afirma Michel Feher, modos de governo específicos instituíram ao longo da história diferentes representações da condição humana, moldando valores, aspirações e modos de ser. Ora, a sensibilidade própria ao neoliberalismo se caracteriza pelo reforço do narcisismo, pela pouca atenção ao outro, de quem se espera que ratifique a apreciação positiva que se tem de si. Pela indiferença. O artigo analisa a resposta que Judith Butler e Athena Athanasiou oferecem para esse quadro, a partir de uma crítica radical da teoria do reconhecimento e, é claro, da figura do proprietário, «sujeito soberano e unitário», que pensa ter segurança e conforto assegurados. Propõe ainda que sua defesa da performatividade política da situação de precariedade – condição que, afinal, todos partilhamos – abre caminho para pensarmos a educação ética na atualidade.

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**Palavras-chave:** Precariedade, Performatividade política, Educação ética, Michel Feher, Athanasiou & Butler.

## **SENSIBILIDAD POLÍTICA Y PERFORMATIVIDAD DE LA EDUCACIÓN ÉTICA**

### **RESUMEN:**

Foucault decía que gobernar es dar forma a la conducta de los individuos: de manera más amplia, agrega Michel Feher, modos específicos de gobierno han instituido, a lo largo de la historia, diferentes representaciones de la condición humana, configurando valores, aspiraciones y formas de ser. La sensibilidad inherente al neoliberalismo se caracteriza por el refuerzo del narcisismo, por la poca atención al otro, por la indiferencia. El artículo pretende presentar la respuesta que ofrecen Judith Butler y Athena Athanasiou a este marco, basada en una crítica radical de la teoría del reconocimiento y de la figura del propietario, «sujeto soberano y unitario», que cree tener seguridad y comodidad aseguradas. Pretende también proponer que su defensa de la performatividad política de la situación de precariedad – condición que, al fin y al cabo, todos compartimos – sin duda abra el camino para pensar la educación ética hoy.

**Palabras clave:** Precariedad, Performatividad política, Educación ética, Michel Feher, Athanasiou y Butler.

Anyone who is always surprised by the existence of degrading facts, anyone who continues to be disappointed (and even incredulous) by evidence of what human beings are capable of inflicting in the form of horrors and cold-blooded cruelties on other human beings, has not yet reached adulthood in moral and psychological terms. No one, after a certain age, is entitled to this kind of innocence, this superficiality, this degree of ignorance or amnesia. There is now a vast repertoire of images that makes it more difficult to maintain this moral deficiency. Let the atrocious images haunt us. Even if they are only symbols and can by no means encompass most of the reality to which they refer, they still perform an essential function. The images say: this is what human beings are capable of doing - and what is more, voluntarily, with enthusiasm, posing as virtuous. Do not forget it. (SONTAG, 2003, s/n.)

But we forget! And the denial, the disappointment, the fright in front of the evil in the world are the symptoms of this abandonment of reality, of this superficiality that implies ethical indigence and assures us a (false) good conscience. If the Pharisaism that consists in finding the virtue of one's tribe in the condemnation of the other's tribe is a multi-millennial attitude, there are moments in history when it becomes a wake-up call: it is when one discovers that this escape through hypocrisy already threatens the very survival of society, of its bonds, of its projects. We are undoubtedly living through one of these moments, when politics seems to totally lose its power of sensitization and its performativity, pushing subjects into an ever more radical isolation. These are times of a formidable challenge to the reflection and practice of human formation - and it is to the elucidation of some of the dimensions of this challenge, which help define the terms of an ethical education today, that the present article would like to contribute.

## LESSONS IN INDIFFERENCE

When, in the early 1960s, Hannah Arendt published the famous analysis in which she affirmed the "banality of evil" (ARENDR, 1999),<sup>2</sup> she was, under the pretext of journalistic coverage of the trial of the Nazi executioner Eichmann, developing a philosophical thesis with heavy implications: "evil has no roots" (ARENDR, 1996, p. 57), the philosopher dared to conclude, after observing, day after day, the behavior of the criminal before the tribunal. For what she had seen in this symbol of the enormous atrocities of the regime she had faithfully served, was neither the monstrous figure of absolute evil, nor the crazy irrationality of fanaticism: just an ordinary figure, an insipid being, devoid of any trace of uniqueness, spouting platitudes and clichés

Ce qui me frappait chez le coupable, c'était un manque de profondeur évident, et tel qu'on ne pouvait faire remonter le mal incontestable qui organisait ses actes jusqu'au niveau plus profonde des racines ou des motifs. Les actes étaient monstrueux, mais le responsable – tout au moins le responsable hautement efficace qu'on jugeait alors – était tout à fait ordinaire, *comme tout le monde*, ni démoniaque ni monstrueux. Il n'y avait en lui trace de convictions idéologiques solides, ni de motivations spécifiquement malignes, et la seule caractéristique notable qu'on décelait dans sa conduit, passée ou bien manifeste au cours du procès et au long des interrogatoires qui l'avaient précédé, était de nature entièrement négative: ce n'était pas de la stupidité, mais un *manque de pensée*. (ARENDR, 1981, p. 21)

Some today disagree with Arendt's interpretation of Eichmann's motivations - or lack thereof - but this is of little importance here. If the analysis that aroused so much controversy in her time was disturbing,<sup>3</sup> it was for no other reason than that it advanced a terrifying, irreceivable hypothesis: that evil relies on deep indifference, on scrupulous obedience, on passive acceptance of what is presented, on

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<sup>2</sup> The book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, published in 1963, was based on articles written by Arendt in 1961 as a correspondent for *The New Yorker*.

<sup>3</sup> "The idea that evil may have triumphed in the world because of the banality or indifference, the absolute conformism of a man like Eichmann, was perceived by numerous readers of *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (and by others who did not bother to read it) as an affront to his respectability," says biographer Jérôme Kohn (2000, p. 13).

venal greed for security and comfort. Evil is not far away, at the borders of humanity; it is right there, circulating insidiously and invisibly in our daily actions. Evil creates nothing, brings nothing new, only reiterates - ideas, meanings, values, expressions, behaviors. Evil has no roots, because it is entirely marked by circumstances, because it is circumstance. And the thesis of the banality of evil reveals that it settles where, precisely, thought is rejected - that it feeds on the absence of judgment, on the lack of the habit of reflection, which is only formed by careful education; that it feeds on indifference.

And it is to indifference that our world seems to force us: how else can we bear the atrocious images of children killed by yet another violent police raid? How can we absorb the various and repeated evidences of the little value given to the life of black people, of the indigenous, of the dispossessed, of those forced into exodus, of the excluded, in short? How can we accept the accelerated destruction of the planet, condemned by the irrationality of economic interests? How can we live with the headlines that reveal the sheer venality, neglect, corruption, cynicism, and cruelty of those who should take care of the common good?

But aren't we ourselves, in the big cities, undergoing a training in insensitivity? How do we react in the face of the beggar? What to do when the municipal guard destroys the merchandise of the peddler with perverse satisfaction? How should we proceed when we see a person being the victim of a cowardly aggression? And when someone asks for help, believe it or not? Not being able to totally avoid these kinds of situations, we gradually get used to pretending that we don't see, imagining that any gesture of solidarity will result in an unacceptable risk to our own safety.

And, in a way, it is only natural for humans to try to protect themselves from the pain of being exposed to an unbearable reality: avoidance, however, produces guilt, and the feeling of helplessness leads to rationalization. We reserve our empathy for the few - because putting oneself in the shoes of others seems to be an almost suicidal mission in our society - and perhaps this is why Virginia Wolf (2019) announced the failure of our imagination and empathy. We look for reasons *not* to think - and, above all, not to act. Our passivity then takes the form of "solidarity," assuring us that at least we are not complicit in what has caused another's suffering: "our solidarity proclaims our innocence, just as it proclaims our powerlessness," Sontag (2003, n/n) points out. However, the difference between powerless compassion and the passivity that dulls the feeling is tenuous, as shown by the endless manifestations of support or repudiation activated by the social networks, the petitions that console our good conscience without necessarily leading to changes, without achieving any performativity. Rationalization immobilizes because it is not thought, but only a shortcut that tries to precipitate a favorable conclusion.

The reflection that induces political sensibility - thought, as Arendt defined it - is something else: it is laborious, it is risky and, above all, it is introduced as an exercise in doubt, in hesitation, of which the one Isabelle Stengers called "the idiot" is capable: someone who hesitates, who installs doubt, who creates the uncomfortable interregnum that forces questioning, exposing our firm convictions about ourselves, our most unquestionable theoretical certainties. For even the best theory serves as an instrument for the refusal of thought.

Dessa forma, o idiota se contrapõe diretamente à figura do *especialista*, que, em seu apego à teoria, acaba por se fazer incapaz de reflexão: é que, tendendo a definir cada situação como um simples caso particular de uma determinação mais geral, a teoria acaba por «impedir que seus representantes sejam obrigados a pensar, que esse caso os coloque em risco.» (AUTOR, 2019, s/n) (DO VALLE, 2019, n/n; cf. STENGERS, 2007)<sup>4</sup>

It would be easier to believe, as the moderns did, in the omnipotence of the lights of reason, were it not for the multiple testimonies to the contrary. Starting with that of Arendt, who "was horrified by the ease with which certain members of the intellectual community allowed themselves to be carried away by the overwhelming wave of National Socialism without even trying to oppose it." (KOHN, 2000, p. 10) Far from preventing apathy and insensitivity, theoretical activity had led many of the "professional

thinkers" with whom she lived to withdraw from common coexistence; entertained by the noble pursuit of universal truth, these de facto specialists began to develop a kind of resistance to ordinary experience, a contempt for the events and exemplars that embodied the abstract ideal they studied.

It is certainly not the theory itself that is responsible for this, any more than the plethora of information that reaches us nowadays or the influence of social networks can be blamed. Nor does it make sense to deal with the issue as if it depended solely on individual impulse. *Our way of being is, before anything else, shaped by the way we constitute ourselves as a society.* This "spontaneous socialization" takes place indiscriminately in social relations, in the day-to-day actions, in the practices and behaviors that are instituted as "normal" and "acceptable". It is to this that education must confront, making itself an instrument for the construction of a new sensibility, a new political performativity; but, for this, it is necessary to understand how this spontaneous socialization is installed and manifested nowadays.

## THE NEOLIBERAL PEDAGOGY OF SELF-APPRECIATION

Those who want to define strict boundaries separating education and socialization, socialization and performativity - and thus education and politics - will forgive us: the deep crisis of the institutions and the logic of representation in our country (and, in fact, all over the world) suggests the importance of asking ourselves about the conditions of performativity of actions that aim to establish new directions for collective life. And those related more generally to human formation, and especially to ethical education, emerge without any doubt as central in this scenario: if for no other reason, to respond to the informal pedagogy that has been incessantly practiced, spontaneously and intentionally, within society.

Following the path opened by M. Foucault, for whom to govern consists in molding and regulating the conduct of individuals, Michel Feher has been dedicating himself, since the 2000s, to establishing the correlation between specific modes of government and the different representations of the human condition that they instituted, as they took care to control what they consider to be the "bad inclinations" and to stimulate what they define as acceptable dispositions on the part of their governed. It is thus indirectly a whole pedagogy of power that Feher highlights. Beginning in the fifth century of our era, Feher analyzes the dominant forms of sociability in three historical periods, identifying the ways in which power develops its formative action: he first identifies the "Augustinian condition," whose pastoral imposes on the Christian world the values of charity and humility as brakes on pride and concupiscence; then, after this domination of more than a millennium, the "liberal condition," which, abandoning the religious appeal, instead of fighting against it, came to rely on the force of greed and the cunning of instrumental reason to impel individuals to discover the advantages of free negotiation, accumulation, and investment, which tempered the excesses of the incessant search for personal satisfaction and the unbridled struggle for individual interests. Feher, however, evidently reserved his attention for the current reality, analyzing the distinctive features of the "neoliberal condition" and willing to "inventory the psychic resources that the policies generally associated with neoliberalism - deregulation of capital flows and financial engineering, flexibilization of the employment market, biased substitution of credit for social benefits, etc. - end up defining in the populations they target." (FEHER, 2015, s/n)

Liberalism had converted Christian piety, remedy for the remission of the faults due to original sin, into a form of humanism that valued empathy and gratuity - restricted, however, to the circle of home intimacy... It is the subjectivity proper to what Feher (2015, s/n) called "enlightened egoism". Neoliberalism, as for him, seeks to "suppress the cleavage between the intimate and the entrepreneurial being," making the principles in both spheres homogeneous. (FEHER, 2007, p. 21). So that the neoliberal subject is no longer a consumer, but a producer, an entrepreneur of himself: it is the realm of the logic of "entrepreneurship", elevated to the condition of maximum virtue of the neoliberal ethos, which we know so well. (p. 21)

In a famous essay on the origins of liberalism, C. B. MacPherson had characterized liberal subjectivity as that of "possessive individualism"<sup>5</sup> which characterizes the subject as "owner of himself". For liberalism, the individual is the one who essentially defines himself as

...the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as an owner of himself. The relation of ownership, having become for more and more men the critically important relation determining their actual freedom and actual prospect of realizing their full potentialities, was read back into the nature of the individual. The individual, it was thought, is free in as much as he is proprietor of his person and capacities. The human essence is freedom from dependence on the wills of others, and freedom is a function of possession. (MACPHERSON, 1962, p. 3)

Neoliberalism radicalizes the meaning of this property: the decline of the free worker corresponds to the subjectivity proper to the notion of human capital,<sup>6</sup> by which the individual is led to invest in the valorization of their own resources, capabilities and "competencies". Coming from classical liberalism, some values that resisted any calculation of interest - such as solidarity, justice, sharing - have now become obsolete, everything bending to the search for the valorization of the self (FEHER, 2007, p. 21).<sup>7</sup> The subject's life becomes a great strategy aimed at building self-esteem: "each of his behaviors and each event that affects him, in the most diverse existential records, are likely to lead him to appreciate or depreciate himself" (id.), so that all of them condition the selection of behaviors and models of self-esteem, defining equally their priorities, their aspirations and strategic choices.

This is how neoliberalism introduces, Feher concludes, a new form of sociability, characterized by the legitimization of the need to appreciate oneself, by the exploitation of narcissism and by little attention to the other - from whom the individual expects, however, to ratify the evaluation that he has of himself. Along with this extraordinary reinforcement of narcissism come, of course, moral laxity, institutional paternalism, and the redoubled appeal to consumption. And the adherence, conscious or veiled, to the way of life, values, and aspirations shaped by governments that have practiced and continue to practice what A. Mbembé (2018) has termed necropolitics.<sup>8</sup>

The neoliberal pedagogy floods our minds with words and dubious expressions that both serve the most hardened *marketing and* are shamelessly sold as recipes of an "education for success": "entrepreneurship", "do your best", "know how to value yourself", "seek your place", "be the master of your body"... Notice the extraordinary strength of this modeling, everywhere active in society, and which invades the educational field proposing more than its *slogans*, its logic of competitiveness and self-centeredness. Its strength, however, is also its greatest weakness: by imprisoning the subject in the solitude of his narcissism, which sooner or later melancholy or resentment will come to inhabit, it can do nothing against collective life - the very life that education can build as a habit in the lives of subjects from the earliest age. And wouldn't this be the best name for an ethical education today?

## NEOLIBERALISM AND THE LIMITS OF RECOGNITION: POLITICAL PERFORMATIVITY

In a beautiful book entitled *Dépossession*, Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2016) dedicate themselves precisely to the critique of this "sovereign and unitary subject" that Modernity invented, with

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<sup>5</sup> According to Étienne Balibar (2010), if the concept was not invented by MacPherson (1962), in *The political theory of possessive individualism*, at least it was from there that it came to have the prominence it gained thereafter. The very term "individualism", as Balibar recalls, was invented in the early nineteenth century, with the pejorative sense that carried the idea of selfishness.

<sup>6</sup> (a) consists of a stock of competencies modified by everything that affects me and what I do; (b) the notion that everything I earn - salaries, dividends from investments, favors, opportunities - are nothing more than the interest on the capital I constitute; (c) the valorization of my capital is no longer measured only in monetary terms, but takes various forms. (Feher, 2007, p. 18)

<sup>7</sup> This is the victory of the sentiment that Jean-Jacques Rousseau (s/d, v. III., p. 156) had dubbed "self-love", harmful because it is curiously made up of exacerbated narcissism and dependence on the opinion of others...

<sup>8</sup> The term first appears in Mbembé (2016, p. 29-60).

the help of philosophy and liberal doctrine, and that became the anthropological type characteristic of capitalism: the individual who, as we have seen, defines himself as "owner of his own person and his own capacities" - which means that he "therefore owes nothing to society... [since ] freedom exists as the exercise of possession" (MACPHERSON, 1979, p. 15). This subject is the embodiment of the policies that practice the summary exclusion of those who possess nothing or who have been alienated from what was theirs - since "where there is no possession, there can be no individual either" (p. 22). At the historical root of our social organization lies, therefore, this poor but effective syllogism, by which the dispossessed are denied even the right to the recognition of the value of their existence.

...que faire de l'idée que nous sommes propriétaires de notre personne? Les personnes sont-elles des sortes de biens qui peuvent être possédés, et serions-nous seulement capables de comprendre cette formulation juridique sans la réalité historique de l'esclavage et des formes d'individualisme possessif qui appartient au capitalisme ? (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 14)

The relationship between this sovereign subject and colonialism is evident, but only perceptible from the point of view of the dominated: because the illusion of freedom overshadows in the owner the reflection about his condition and the implications of his actions. Assuming this point of view, the authors intend to question this colonial conception of human subjectivity that, anchored in the valorization of sovereignty, territory, and property, has as its counterpart the systematic expropriation of those who, yesterday as today, are condemned to exile, to the loss of their land or their community, who are subjected to the expropriation of their own bodies, to military or economic violence, to poverty, to the precariousness of their lives. (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 9)

This terrible, yet so naturalized, regime of injustices transformed into the state's right to decide who and how to kill is maintained, says Athena Athanasiou, thanks to the intense "performative bioproductivity" of neoliberalism, capable of "making possible modes of subjectivity and inculcating normative phantasms and truth effects about the 'good life' of proprietary subjects..." (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 35). Neoliberalism thus accomplishes the production and management of forms of life adapted to its continuous reproduction, inculcating psychic, economic, and political models of existence and annihilating others, now considered dysfunctional... Neoliberal governmentality is sustained by this pedagogy that entails the formation of humans inclined to maintain favorable aspirations and sensitive to the constant repression of aspirations considered harmful to the *status quo*.

Wouldn't the possession of the self, of one's own body, however, be one of the great illusions disseminated by the liberal way of being? "We claim ownership of our bodies, even though we recognize that we can never own them." And this is because "our bodies go beyond us...", implicating us in the social processes by which we are exposed, dispossessed, attracted and touched, affected and able to affect. We are dispossessed, Butler argues, by the same "normative powers that organize the unequal distribution of freedoms, whether territorial displacement, desiccation of livelihoods, racism, poverty, misogyny, homophobia, or military violence." (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 56)

Starting, then, they too, from the Foucauldian thesis that to govern is to shape and manage subjectivities, the authors draw attention to the harmful effects of hegemonic racial, gender, and sexual norms, which define an "apparatus of recognition" that "never ceases to work to encompass, arbitrate, and commodify 'difference' and thereby depoliticize and legitimize the unequal configuration of subjects, lives, and the world" (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 63).

For this very reason, the authors denounce the conformist and normalizing nature that accompanies the so-called theory of recognition and its way of seeking to annex the realms of subjectivity and human relations, imposing on them, under the guise of "tolerance," the limits of possible acceptance. In this regard Athena Athanasiou ponders

... ce don't nous avons besoin, ce n'est pas de la création d'identités tolérantes et tolérées, susceptibles d'intégrer le marché de la reconnaissance, c'est au contraire de la déstabilisation des idéaux régulateurs qui constituent l'horizon de cette susceptibilité BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 64-65)

The notion of recognition-which, as A. Kojève (1947) has argued, originates in Hegel in the context of the discussion of the "struggle for recognition" (*Anerkennung*)-is, however, directly tributary to the mental environment of German idealism in which the philosopher lived (Honneth, 2002, p. 232). Resumed nowadays by authors such as Axel Honneth (2002) and Charles Taylor (1994), it maintains its influence in analyses mainly inspired by contemporary German philosophy. For this very reason, Athanasiou observes that, starting from a pre-existing abstract conception of the human, the classical definition of the politics of recognition leads to the concealment of power relations. Taking the notion in reverse, then, Athanasiou relates it to the viability of life itself, to better think about how power relations end up defining in advance who will be recognized as "viable and recognizable" human subjects and who will not - deprived, then, of all intelligibility (*Anerkennung*). For, Butler reminds us, Frantz Fanon (1952, p. 190) has long demonstrated that there is, in the context of coloniality, no possibility of recognizing those who are held in subalternity.

Since it is also related to simple survival, recognition is, however, a claim that cannot be dismissed; there is, then, an impasse: the total absence of recognition puts existence at risk, but the conditions of liberal recognition do not fail also to constitute a danger no less effective for survival. A paradoxical situation, which impels Butler to ask how one survives liberal recognition... (Butler & Athanasiou, 2016, p. 74-75) This is not a rhetorical question; there are not a few cases in which the "exceptions judged abject" by the official normative discourse give way to a powerful self-construction, which the authors call the poetics of the exceptional self. The examples are innumerable, which Athanasiou and Butler examine in anti-capitalist political struggles such as *Occupy* and the Arab Spring, in the march of illegal immigrants in the USA in 2006, in the manifestations of art of *queer* affiliation... The self-construction they refer to operates in full intelligibility, converting abjection into performativity. It is clear, however, that, at the opposite extreme of the pretended - and always pretentious - sovereignty that the neoliberal subject claims for itself, this poetics of self is not invented individually: *only in the sphere of collectivity* can new forms of intelligibility be instituted, which subvert the commandments of social "normality." (p. 66)

Thus, from the failure to recognize the dispossessed of everything - nationality, citizenship, territory, material goods, body... - emerges the occasion for the rupture with the sovereign subject and for the development of a sensibility (*responsiveness*) and a *response-ability* that finally constitute politics. (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 64)

Athanasiou sums it up:

Une lecture hâtive postulerait sans doute une distinction simpliste entre une poïétique de soi centrée sur le sujet et une éthique de la reconnaissance centrée au contraire sur l'autre. Mais la poïétique de soi ne concerne pas plus le « soi » que la reconnaissance ne concerne « l'autre ». La poïétique de soi ne concerne pas simplement le « soi » – comme c'est le cas dans l'individualisme héroïque et auto-suffisant ou avec la formule libérale alternative « tout est possible ! » – : elle apparaît comme une occasion performative dans un processus ouvert d'auto-formation socialement régulatrice, par lequel, dans diverses circonstances, le soi lutte au sein du et contre les normes par lesquelles il est constitué. De telles luttes ne peuvent être menées qu'à travers et avec d'autres, selon des modalités qui nous ouvrent aux autres (et notamment à d'autres sois), à des sois laissés pour compte, qui ne peuvent être intégrés aux typologies onto-épistémologiques du soi propre et propriétaire. La poïétique de soi me paraît être, au même titre que l'éthique, une possibilité par laquelle le soi est dépossédé de sa position souveraine à travers l'ouverture d'une relation à l'altérité. Si nous nous faisons, nous défaisons et nous refaisons, cela ne peut intervenir qu'avec et à travers les autres. Notre poïétique de soi s'inscrit dans l'horizon d'idéaux régulateurs qui déterminent qui peut ou ne peut pas être un soi intelligible (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 66-67)

## THE SCHOOL OF SENSITIVITY

This brief journey through some analyses about the ways in which neoliberalism manufactures sensibilities, molding values, aspirations, and ways of being, is particularly important



because, still very much influenced by the cognitivism that, in the speeches, everyone rejects, the reflection and practice of education do not draw the due consequences from the ascendancy that capitalism maintains over social life, via the formatting of more or less docile individuals, capable of adhering, in whole or in part, fervently or unconsciously, to the neoliberal creed.

It is thus more often the task of psychoanalysis, philosophy, or political theory to analyze this powerful phenomenon by which subjectivities are shaped. This is, however, evidently a question that is of direct interest to the field of human formation: Far from the modern ideal of an "educative society" along the apollonian lines of Greek democracy, from an early age we are socialized to the values and aspirations proper to neoliberalism; the large-scale reproduction of a type of narcissistic individual, indifferent to the fate of others and the destruction of the planet, complacent to the injustices and violence of necropolitics, ready to put his lust for success ahead of any other value, operates in the world we share.

In the face of this picture of global dimensions, stamped by the rise of authoritarian and brutal leaders, the victory of crude utilitarianism, the advance of irrationalism, the worsening of economic disparities, and the institutional martyrdom of immigrants, indigenous people, blacks, gays, *what can human formation do?* How can we offer resistance, stimulating values that counteract the sick individualism, the endemic passivity, the indifference towards others? Or, to take up Butler and Athanasiou's inquiry: *after all, "what makes political sensitivity [responsiveness] possible?"* - questioning that, translated in the most direct terms of our interests, would decline as, "what, after all, makes ethical education capable of preparing political performativity?"

Part of the answer that the authors provide refers to how the condition of precariousness drives political life: expropriated, displaced, colonized, persecuted, made impossible, the populations of those who live on the bangs of the privileges of citizenship are left only the "*mise-en-scène* and [the] *mise-en-œuvre* of a publicly exposed corporeality" (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 138). In other words, for these, politics is a place of the most extreme vulnerability, since it is *with their bodies* that they claim visibility and, in this exercise, they present another definition for what is now called, by force of a huge euphemism, "public space." By putting themselves at risk, the precarious resignify the meaning and the distribution of the public and the private, without forgetting the traditional rules of participation, of divisibility, of partiality, of belonging, of relationships, and of cohabitation, to the greater annoyance and despair of those who see in exclusions only instruments to defend their privileges. For any threat of greater visibility of the "inconvenient," of "occupying" the public - even if it is in the form of simple traffic, and not, as so often, as a manifestation of the bodies that refuse not to occupy any space - is met with repulsion, with fear, and therefore, with much violence.

In this sense, therefore, dispossession is a condition to which one is subjected, and if it can give rise to resistance and the construction of a collective performativity, it does not therefore fail to indicate a condition of great suffering - so that it could never constitute a political ideal - as, in time, Butler & Athanasiou (2016, p. 7) observe.

More than abstract "contents" and values, ethics education should therefore take care of the daily construction of bonds of solidarity among students, emphasizing in every activity the institution of the feeling of collectivity. Let us dare to take seriously Bruno Latour's (2017) injunction: we must ground ourselves! As long as ethics is thought of in terms of universal, disembodied values that say nothing of the lived experience of subjects, it will be at the service of an impotent and self-centered cannot become a practice of reflection and openness to the community. A social condition, dispossession is the common suffering of most students in public schools in the country, which can be understood as a mode of failure and intimidation, of pure abjection and dumbing down, or, on the contrary, as a force of determination for the discovery of performativity and the capacity of resistance of human collectives.

In a second sense, however, the authors recall that dispossession is a common condition of human existence - since, as Plato said, being in life consists in "affecting and being affected" (PLATON, 2008, p. 1849). Despite the enormous effort that the neoliberal subject makes to assert himself as sovereign and upright, to protect what he thinks are his legitimate and inviolable possessions, existence is fragile, exposed to unavoidable risks; despite the illusion of self-sufficiency, to be human is already, from the first day of life, if not before, to be involved in a process of socialization that requires to be

implicated in the lives of others and by the lives of others (CASTORIADIS, 1992, p. 2011). It is this reality that moral narcissism believes it can deny, seeking to constitute itself in an invulnerable and insensitive self - in short, in an "indifferent body," as Nadia Yala Kisukidi (2017) observed, proper to those who make possessive individualism their way of being, and thus only feel what they think is their truth, their interest, their passion. Unlike the bodies forced to oppose a plural and performative resistance to the techniques, norms, and strategies of their submission and annihilation,<sup>9</sup> the indifferent body is one that has not constituted any political sensibility, because it refuses its vulnerability, or tries to protect itself from it as much as possible; it is thus that, "wherever people feel safe... [they] will also feel indifferent" (SONTAG, 2003, s/n.). Therefore, also in this broader sense, political sensibility is the ability to think about being in common; it is not an abstract way of analyzing, not the possession of a sum of knowledge nor the ability to make beautiful speeches, but a *way of being* characterized by the openness to the other resulting from the fact of inhabiting a cosmos necessarily inhabited by multiplicity. How, however, to be dispossessed of the (phantom) of its sovereign self, which urges the subject to an incessant flight out of the world - from the only world it inhabits and shares with other humans?

If an alternative can be offered to neoliberal socialization, it is directly related to the awareness of one's own fragility, of the temporariness of all that one has as possession, as security, as solid acquisition.

L'humain est toujours ce qui survient du fait de ces multiples vulnérabilités – aussi bien du fait de ses relations aux autres que de son exposition aux forces normatives qui organisent les matrices sociales, politiques et culturelles de l'humanité. (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 36)

Our humanity is shaky not because a multitude of differences shake and put at risk our certainties and possessions, but because this is our primordial condition. There are many circumstances that remind us of this reality, today potentiated by the epidemic outbreak as unexpected as it is indomitable, by the lack of environmental control, by the economic and political instability. And it is especially *with our bodies that we apprehend it*.

From an early age we learn, very unfortunately, the extreme fragility of our existences, of our world; but the risk is that, following the dominant movement, we try to seek an illusory refuge in narcissism, in the isolation of individual response, betting on the anticipated possession of a success that is always postponed and, to do so, we take our feet off the ground, abandoning all contact with the Earth we inhabit.

It is certainly not needless to point out that too often the work of education feeds this kind of attitude - by giving survival to a notion of sovereign humanity, defined by ownership of the world and all that lives therein; by purporting to remedy the insecurity and suffering of those entrusted to it, nurturing false expectations of individual success and full fulfillment.

Here too, ethical education draws from collective work the strength to install the subjects in "another scene" in which one is no longer the center:

Lorsque l'on est malgré soi touché par ce qu'on voit, ce qu'on sent ou ce qu'on comprend, on se trouve toujours transporté ailleurs, sur une autre scène, dans un monde social dont on n'est pas le centre. (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 8).

When lived in isolation, the awareness of precariousness is a condemnation from which one cannot escape; but when faced from the perspective of a collectivity, it can, paradoxically, free us from passivity and from the immobilizing feeling of impotence; undoing our daydreams of power and sovereignty, it is the occasion for a critical displacement that brings to light the perishability of our certainties, the instability of our comfort, and our profound dependence on others regarding our

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<sup>9</sup> "There is," Butler (2015, p. 15) notes, "a plural and performative corporeal resistance in action that shows how bodies are being actuated by social and economic policies that are decimating their livelihoods. These bodies, however, in showing this precariousness, are also resisting these same powers; they promote a form of resistance that presupposes vulnerability of a specific kind and opposes precariousness" (BUTLER, 2015, p. 15).

existence and our destiny. Forcing us to become sensitive and attentive to others, precariousness becomes potency to act, performativity that, however, is not the possession of a single individual, but is realized as a collective practice of consolidation of an affective disposition that is always openness and sensitive exposure to the other:

...c'est la notion de "disposition" – avec toutes ses implications d'engagement affectif, d'adresse, de risque, d'excitation, d'exposition et d'imprévisibilité – qui fait le lien entre performativité et précarité. (BUTLER & ATHANASIOU, 2016, p. 97).

It remains, however, to know how to mobilize this affective disposition that, for everything and in everything, goes against the established ethos, inaugurating new practices of intelligibility and recognition that are not based on possession and indifference, but on care and responsibility... It seems evident that, given its amplitude, this challenge is not only for the school; if, however, as we believe, it can be one of the first and most effective instruments put at the service of this change, then it is up to it, besides the effort of self-questioning of its deep idealism, to react to the "loss of the world" that Gumbrecht (2010, p. 9) identifies in our tradition - the "loss of the world". 9) identifies in our tradition - due to the excessive valorization of the cognitive dimension to the detriment of the sensitive - and which implies the inability to deal with what presents itself in front of us, "before our eyes and in contact with the body." (p. 9)

It is in this point that the reference to art is fundamental; understanding the body and the dimension of the senses as necessary platforms for the flight of reason, as simple stages for the instrumental mastery of cognition, the inherited anthropological schemes deprived pedagogical practice of its potential of performativity, restricting its effectiveness in the process of socialization of subjects. This was not - *et pour cause!* - Unfortunately, however, given the context in which the "body arts" (including both the so-called art education and physical education) were admitted into school, their role is, in most cases, only accessory, in the shadow of the "important" subjects, which are better suited to the ambient pragmatism. They would, however, have much to contribute, already from a pedagogical point of view, since, by necessarily calling upon the experience of the senses, they reintroduce the body, the requirement of listening to the testimonies of the senses, of dealing with incarnate subjects, who manifest in their always unpredictable reactions the diversity of ways of being that would otherwise be covered up by didactic formalism. The arts of the body, however, should be taken as much more than a didactic resource; they support the construction of a different kind of socialization, opening space for the possibility of building new relationships with the world and with others and, perhaps, of installing a disposition of openness and recognition of the diverse. It is necessarily the body that allows the approach of that which, from the outside, exposes us to its beauty, its unique humanity, its provocative and uncomfortable presence. In short, the arts of the body compel a movement out of oneself and thus inaugurate the experience of vulnerability - a gentle form of dispossession.

Être dépossédé par la présence de l'autre et par notre propre présence à l'autre est la seule façon d'être présents les uns aux autres. Ainsi, être présents les uns aux autres est quelque chose qui intervient aux limites de l'autosuffisance et de la connaissance de soi... (BUTLER, 2016, p. 23).

To inhabit the world; to become a body, to become a body with everything that leads one to see that existence, finally, always surpasses us and awaits us there where we don't expect it.

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## **DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST**

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest with this article.