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LOVES THAT KILL: DEBATES ON SCHOOL ESSENTIALISM

Amores que matan: debates sobre el esencialismo escolar

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the defense of the school formulated by Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, who conceive it as a space of non-productive free time. The hypothesis advanced is that this conception rests on a triple essentialism -nominal, rational, and affective- that fetishizes the school and obscures it as a technology that channels practices. The analysis confirms that this essentialism appeals to *scholé* as a myth, to the attribution of a rational capacity, and to the centrality of love as the ultimate foundation of legitimacy. This produces effects of reflexive impotence and blocks imagination in an accelerated scenario of digitalization and prefigurative cultures.

The study is based on a theoretical-critical analysis that draws on history and sociology, Foucauldian notions of technology and governmentality, and research on cultural evolution. Teaching is considered as an adaptive capacity of the human

species, prior to and external to the school, thereby questioning its naturalization as the exclusive habitat of education.

The findings suggest that the emphasis on love as a source of legitimacy configures a normative shield which, far from empowering teachers, intensifies disappointment and impotence, particularly in a prefigurative culture where the symbolic centrality of adults is eroded, undermining the testimonial horizon of schooling.

The article proposes identifying alternative ways of embedding teaching, suggesting three complementary paths: rejecting the school fetish through the historicization of schooling; mapping spaces where non-productive times emerge; and exploring couplings between school and post-school forms, assessing their effects on attention and equality of access to knowledge. It calls for opening educational imagination beyond mythologized recurrences in order to identify flows capable of sustaining education in its evolutionary, open, and contingent character.

Keywords: school as technology; cultural evolution; school fetishism; essentialism; reflexive impotence; prefigurative cultures.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza la defensa de la escuela formulada por Jan Masschelein y Maarten Simons, quienes la conciben como un espacio de tiempo libre no productivo. Se plantea como hipótesis que dicha concepción descansa en un triple esencialismo -nominal, racional y afectivo- que fetichiza lo escolar y la invisibiliza como tecnología que canaliza prácticas. El análisis confirma que este esencialismo apela a la *scholé* como mito, por la atribución de una capacidad racional y por la centralidad del amor como fundamento de legitimidad. Esto produce efectos de impotencia reflexiva y bloqueo de la imaginación en un escenario acelerado de digitalización y culturas prefigurativas.

Se sustenta un análisis teórico-crítico que articula aportes de la historia y la sociología, nociones foucaultianas de tecnología y gubernamentalidad y estudios sobre evolución cultural. La enseñanza es considerada como una capacidad adaptativa de la especie humana, anterior y exterior a la escuela, cuestionando su naturalización como hábitat exclusivo.

Los hallazgos sugieren que el énfasis en el amor como fundamento de legitimación configura un blindaje normativo que, lejos de empoderar a los docentes intensifica la decepción y la impotencia, particularmente en una cultura prefigurativa, donde la centralidad simbólica del adulto se ve erosionada, comprometiendo el horizonte testimonial de lo escolar.

El artículo propone identificar otros modos de anidar la enseñanza, sugiriéndose tres vías complementarias: rechazar el fetiche escolar mediante la historización de lo escolar; cartografiar espacios donde emergen tiempos no productivos; y explorar acoples entre formas escolares y postescolares, evaluando efectos sobre la atención y la igualdad de acceso al conocimiento. Se propone abrir la imaginación prescindiendo

de la recurrencia mitificada y así identificar flujos capaces de sostener lo educativo en su carácter evolutivo, abierto y contingente.

Palabras clave: escuela como tecnología; evolución cultural; fetichismo escolar; esencialismo; impotencia reflexiva; culturas prefigurativas.

1. INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on the proposal of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, who have formulated a defense of the school as a singular space of *skholē* and non-productive free time. Unlike philosophical readings that seek to continue their reflection, we explicitly adopt a theoretical approach from the social sciences: our argument is that this conception renders invisible the material and technological dimensions that condition contemporary teaching practices, while reinforcing a normative imaginary that may lead to a fetishization of the school.

The central thesis holds that the defense of the school rests on a triple essentialism -nominal, rational, and affective- that fetishizes the scholastic, concealing the technologies that traverse and shape practices. From a sociohistorical reading, we aim to show both the possibilities and limits of this normative stance and to open the discussion toward alternative ways of conceptualizing teaching. From sociology and history, it is possible to understand the school as a contingent technology configured by specific conditions. This framework is enriched by studies on cultural evolution, which show that teaching is an adaptive capacity of the human species that not only precedes but also sustains the existence of schooling among multiple social and technological forms developed over time.

At the same time, we are concerned with understanding how the idea of defense (or apology) is formulated precisely in a historical context where the efficacy of the teacher's position as guarantor of knowledge is eroded: the school no longer seems to ensure cultural continuity or legitimate authority (Dubet, 2007); the adult has lost consistency as a representative of a world and its traditions (Narodowski, 2016); and school teaching is challenged by technological, social, and cultural forms that limit its formative power (Sadowski, 2020). Within this framework, such a defense could be read less as a creative response and more as a normative shield that reinforces the impotence to think the new (Fisher, 2023).

In light of this, we aim to attempt a theoretical critique focused on what these positions construct, what they leave aside, and their consequences, understanding the logic of this perspective on human teaching as one that does not seek to interrogate the regime of knowledge production (Hunter, 2013) but rather to highlight the school as an educationally privileged space.

Regardless of its theoretical contribution, the justification for this article also lies in the scarce presence of studies that critically analyze these positions, despite their significant circulation in Ibero-American academic, educational, and even

political circles. For this reason, we have focused on the most influential authors who articulate with the work of Masschelein and Simons (2014, 2015, 2017): Bárcena (2012, 2025), and to a lesser extent Skliar (2019), Larrosa (2019), Kohan (2017), and Recalcati (2016). The software *Publish or Perish* based on Google Scholar (Harzing, 2023) was used to select the most cited authors in Spanish and Portuguese.

It is true that some previous studies have pointed out that these approaches tend to downplay the relevance of historical determinants or have speculated about their consequences in the depoliticization of education (Tysklind & Tryggvason, 2025). However, these critiques often maintain the school at a normative level convergent with that defended by Masschelein and Simons. Our perspective, by contrast, seeks to problematize the very primacy of the school: we will partially take up observations regarding contextual elusion and depoliticization, but subordinate them to our central thesis. Furthermore, such observations have already been rigorously addressed by Masschelein and Simons themselves (2017).

In this sense, a clarification is in order: our position should not be understood as advocacy for the death of the school (Illich, 1971) nor as the replacement of essentialism with structural nihilism. We seek to avoid both nostalgic restoration and nihilistic void. We are aware of the narrow ridge we choose to walk: rather than proposing essences or restoring legitimacies, we aim to identify non-school technologies of teaching capable of effectively coupling with the present, just as the modern school coupled with its own context (Narodowski, 2021; Berardi, 2019). In the final section, we outline paths that allow tensions to be overcome and escape from paralyzing theoretical frameworks.

2. BEFORE THE SCHOOL: EVOLUTION, NATURAL PEDAGOGY, AND PREFIGURATIVE CULTURE

From the Enlightenment to contemporary debates on authority and responsibility, teaching has been conceived as the act of offering a world to the new and sustaining narrative continuity (Arendt, 2001). This humanistic way of understanding education, however, must be placed in the perspective of a broader and external history in which teaching appears as an evolutionary and cultural capacity.

Rather than an ethical gesture or a moral event, teaching is an evolutionary fact of *Homo sapiens*: an adaptive skill inscribed in the species' biology and shared with a few non-human animals (Tomasello, 2019; Csibra & Gergely, 2009). It has always been expressed through technologies understood as the correlated set of devices that produce power-knowledge effects in culture, bodies, knowledge, and desire. Each technology configures these devices, and in each one, specific singularities are reproduced that make it relatively predictable, establishing precise limits and expected effects (Foucault, 2004; Behrent, 2013). Among them: orality, deferred imitation, metacognition, writing, printing, and schooling.

The concept of “cultural evolution” (Birch & Heyes, 2021), as the accumulation and transmission of knowledge, techniques, and norms in interaction with genetic and environmental factors, long predates the modern notion of “transmission” typical of humanistic thought. Indeed, recent studies show that human beings carry within their biological equipment a “natural pedagogy”: research shows, for example, that one-year-old infants already display teaching practices (Strauss, Calero & Sigman, 2014). From this perspective, teaching is an evolutionary function linked to the collective survival of humans, and reading it as a symbolic episode of intergenerational emancipation is only one possibility among many.

The very idea of the intergenerational deserves to be revisited. At this point, it is crucial to recover Margaret Mead’s (2019) contribution, who distinguished between postfigurative, cofigurative, and prefigurative cultures. While in the first, knowledge descends from adults to the young (as, for example, in the early stages of schooling), in today’s prefigurative cultures, relevant knowledge is produced or anticipated by younger generations, not because “kids know more,” but because in a society of constant and violent change, it is the youngest who, being formed in and by these changes, can offer better responses to the demands of reality. In this way, downward transmission ceases to be an invariant feature and is revealed as a specific historical configuration. In the current scenario, adults are no longer “ambassadors of tradition” because tradition itself loses significance (Mead, 2019).

Bárcena (2012) is right: “By considering the young as ‘elders’ and releasing the adult from responsibility, the terms are inverted and a state of non-differentiation between generations is produced.” However, this scenario does not seem to be promoted by public policy or a generalized intersubjective consensus, but rather it is the epiphenomenon of new evolutionary forms of cultural accumulation that are impossible to counteract (whether we like it or not) by politics or by a new intersubjective consensus.

Over this long duration, humans have organized teaching in multiple formats: familial, tribal, ritual, religious, guild-based, individual, etc. The school, far from being the natural origin of education, is one among these historical technologies, a singular form of coupling (De Landa, 2017). Its consolidation as the dominant form occurred only in late Euro-American modernity, when nation-states established a device based on age grouping, simultaneous instruction, sequenced curricula, and specific architectures (Hamilton, 2015). This responded to cultural, technological, and productive transformations: for the first time in history, large population masses were separated from their parents and forbidden from performing productive tasks, in order to be educated in spaces regulated by the emerging nineteenth-century states under the mandate of social control and obedience (Paglayan, 2024). Since then, the school has been configured as a technology for the governance of knowledge and bodies, simultaneously producing knowledge and regulating populations (Hunter, 2013; Narodowski, 2021).

From a sociohistorical point of view, school teaching can be seen as a coupling of power-knowledge organized by regimes of knowledge production, classification of bodies, and modulation of behaviors, inseparable from its governmentality (Foucault, 2004; Narodowski & Campetella, 2023). Ignoring that this school technology is traversed by productive variables and, today, by processes of digitization and automation of labor, including intellectual work (Caffentzis, 2020), leads to a fatal disregard for the real conditions of school teaching and learning.

Understanding teaching as an evolutionary capacity of the species, prior to the existence of the school, allows the educational to be decoupled from its modern form. If teaching has never depended on a single technology but has instead adopted multiple historical forms, the school ceases to be thought of as the natural habitat of the educational act. Hence the need to question how certain technologies monopolized the transmission of legitimate knowledge and what consequences arise from maintaining that naturalization in a context marked by new logics of knowledge production and distribution.

Recognizing it as one technology among others, a contingent product of cultural evolution, allows both the conditions of its emergence and the limits of the scholastic to be analyzed, opening the possibility of exploring alternative technologies without sustaining the ineluctability of schooling as a necessary and inherent phenomenon.

The school may not be what some educational intellectuals want it to be because, as a historically established technology, it shares the fate of all technology; that is, it has specific boundaries -often impermeable or difficult to transgress- instituted through an organization of knowledge arising under specific conditions of the modern world and configured through a state matrix (Narodowski, 2021).

Recognizing that it is one technology among other possible ones, an effect of *Homo sapiens'* cultural evolution and therefore contingent, will allow education to be rethought beyond the limits imposed by schooling, interrogating its conditions of emergence and possible trajectories, including, why not, obsolescence or disappearance: not in the sense of a political proposal *à la Ivan Illich* (1971), but as another contingency, another probable evolutionary adaptation.

3. RATIONALITY, WILL, AND LOVE

A theoretically lucid, argumentatively sophisticated, and academically influential proposal in defense of the modern school order is that of Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, who reclaim the school as a unique institution, capable of suspending the logics of the productive, familial, and social world, and of offering a specific form of non-productive free time. For them, the scholastic is a privileged space in which the subject as such is enabled to appear, insofar as they are removed from external determinations and exposed to a disinterested relation with the world.

Their starting point is indisputable and could in principle be equated with what was set out in the previous section: "the school is a historical invention and, therefore,

it may disappear,” although the consequence articulates with a rational will: “but that also means it can be reinvented” (Masschelein & Simons, 2014, p. 3). To give their proposal consistency, they affirm: “We want to reserve the notion of school for the invention of a specific form of free and non-productive, indefinite time to which one cannot have access outside school” (Masschelein & Simons, 2014, p. 12).

In a later work (Masschelein & Simmons, 2015), they take up Bernard Stiegler’s (2010) contributions to better justify the tension between historical invention and normative reserve. They go back to ancient Greece, noting that a singular form of knowledge transmission was invented there: the school, and that what was specific to that invention was the creation of a non-productive space “otium/scholé for the people,” a format of emancipation that separates a time and a space of its own, distinct from the home (*oikos*) and from society (*polis*).

The authors resort to the *eidōs* of the school in order to isolate a minimal structure of meaning that would allow the school institution to be recognized beyond its historical transformations. However, this recourse does not seem to overcome the tension posed: it is not easy to demonstrate, according to the broad consensus of historians and political scientists already mentioned, that the political and social organization of the Greek school of the fifth century BCE bears any kinship with the school of modernity or with the large school systems of the twenty-first century, except for the name.

Moreover, Roland Barthes (1987), through the example of the Ship Argo, has already shown how an identity can persist while changing matter, but this would be the opposite case because it would be pure *Doxa*: expressions that manifest explicitly in consciousness, naturalizing the historical, imagining the real, repeating themselves eternally so as to prevent creative transformation, as we shall see. Indeed, this could be a Barthesian example of how modernity operates from the study of myth (Barthes, 1987), where the school appears purged of any impurity that would link it to a specific regime of governmentality (Foucault, 2004).

Another problem raised by historical studies has to do with the difference between classical texts on *skholé* and their actual implementation as social practice, not because the second is necessary for the first but because this comparison adds greater difficulty to constructing a concept such as “school.” Hamilton (2015) concludes that the surviving artifacts that might confirm the institutionalization of ancient school practices are absent. Drawing on Teresa Morgan’s exhaustive work (1998), he asserts that “it is impossible to identify any surviving philosophical text as a ‘school text’ as distinct from a ‘professional’ philosophical text” (p. 17) and that, unfortunately, “we have scarcely any archaeological sites even tentatively identifiable as ‘school rooms’” (p. 28). The inference is central to our argument: “in sum, we know almost nothing about the institution of education in the classical period” (p. 19; translation from English by the author). In other words, there are no reliable signs that the ideal was realized other than in a mythified form.

This does not aim to discard the discourse on *skholé* as a philosophical category: the issue is its linkage with modern schooling. For this connection a rigorous historical justification is required that confirms invariance over time. The normative gesture does not merit being denied *a priori*, but the privilege of socio-historical analysis allows the proposed pedagogical program to be weighed. That is, the normative value is not rejected, but rather projected onto its conditions of possibility.

Consequently, the vision presented as historical ends up resting on an ethical and volitional gesture: the reinvention of the school is possible, yes, but only if it preserves the essence that embodies the reserve purified of any stain that might tarnish its good name which, in turn, is rooted in its etymology, *skholé*. Later works by Stiegler himself (2021) relativize this recovery of the school as historical invariant: his perspective of the *pharmakon* aims at the contingent, the way in which matter is organized; technology appears as a constitutive support of psychic and collective individuation, yet always ambivalent: remedy and poison; therefore, the scholastic *eidos* is fatally subject to each wave of grammatization.

Following this logic, current digital technologies neither prolong nor linearly contest the mythical *scholé*, but rather reorganize “decoupled” matter, in the sense that De Landa (2017) gives to assemblages: unstable configurations of heterogeneous elements. The key, then, does not lie in the permanence of the school and its necessity, but in how technologies configure and are reconfigured at each historical moment.

To overcome the tension, one should inquire into the historical structures that have shaped the scholastic in terms of its state inscription, its articulation with capital, its cognitive functionality, or its character as a demographic and labor regulator. On the contrary, the authors propose to restore an ideal form by means of the same Enlightenment conviction that led the great Bohemian pedagogue and theologian Jan Amos Comenius to assert the same concept in 1657: “Thus far we have lacked schools that respond perfectly to their end” [“Scholas sini suo perfecte respondentes, defuisse hactenus”] (Comenius, 1986, p. 27).

The apology/defense of the scholastic, then, is sustained by an essentialist supposition: the idea that it can operate as a suspension of the real by a sort of rational will, an ethical decision by those who inhabit it whereby it is possible to neutralize the old logics of surveillance and sanction or the new ones of performance, control, and normalization, without modifying the conditions that produce them, but instead betting on the form itself, capable of creating and resisting the world by the conscious declaration of its difference. Kohan (2017), commenting on J. Masschelein, explains it better: “In other words, where the philosopher says ‘you must change your life,’ the educator says ‘you are not in-capable,’ ‘you can pay attention to the world.’ The pedagogue would be the one who takes the student to the school, the place where the world un-folds and power is dis-covered.” The supposition of the “un-folding” or of the “dis-covering” is exempt from any attempt at verification.

Thus, school agents-mainly teachers- are assigned the responsibility of maneuvering the suspension by creating free time amid the bureaucratic, technological, affective, and material demands that institute daily work: “At school, we focus on mathematics for mathematics’ sake, on language for language’s sake, on cooking for cooking’s sake, on carpentry for carpentry’s sake. This is how we calculate an average, how we conjugate in English, how we make a soup, or how we build a door. But all that happens independently of any external goal that has to be immediately achieved” (Masschelein & Simons, 2014, p. 18).

Confidence in an omnipotent will capable of overcoming the limits of the technological framework of the scholastic: the teacher suspends the world, implying a categorical faith in a sovereign rationality redeemed from constraints or turning constraints into impetus, assuming that scenarios have borders that can be infringed by means of an inexhaustible centrality of desire and reflection.

This is also expressed in its reverse, what the authors understand as “domestication” (2014, p. 51): the problem is not the school in itself, the school named school, but its degraded, diverted, non-virtuous forms. Hence the proposal to restore its functional integrity through the renewal of its mythical purpose: to create equality, to block the outside, to sustain free time in a view that assumes that the school technology can be contained, directed, or reversed by a lucid, conscious, and autonomous self. This is a normative restoration, based implicitly on the Comenian pansophic ideal whereby human knowledge is for all human beings (Comenius, 1986; Čížek, 2019).

The gesture of restoration finds its affective anchor in a central element: love. According to Masschelein and Simmons, “love for the subject matter, for the craft, for the activity, for the world, does not derive from the value that that subject matter, that craft, or that activity has, but sustains them, affirms them, and keeps them available” (2014, p. 43). Love is the ultimate foundation of the school experience: one does not teach merely because of what is transmitted, but because of what that transmission entails: loving.

The formulation finds resonance in widely disseminated works in Ibero-America: Skliar (2019) speaks of the school as a “homeland of affections”; Larrosa (2019) asserts that “love for the craft of teaching (...) cannot be separated from love for the school.” Here it is useful to distinguish between the love-as-availability proposed by Masschelein and Simmons and the erotic-love formulated by Recalcatti (2016) from a Lacanian perspective, where desire and transference constitute the core of the teaching experience. Although different in their formulation, both coincide in affection as a foundation of legitimacy, and our argument points precisely to this move: the appeal to love, whether as availability or as erotics, avoids interrogating anything that puts it at risk.

Masschelein and Simons (2014, p. 76), with lucidity and honesty, acknowledge that their defense of the school could be interpreted as a “*petitio pro domo*” (*in fact*,

pro domo sua, following Cicero's Latin expression); that is, a defense of personal interests, given that they are pedagogues and, because of that, claim to love the school, its teachers, and its students. To respond to the objection, the authors warn that it is not a corporate interest but a public matter because the school fulfills a radical social function by embodying the distinction between free time and productive time, where equality becomes visible.

This shift, however, presents some problems: it needs to purify technology again by rejecting the "capitalist school" (sic, p. 59) in order to embrace its democratic and "communist" (sic, p. 77) potential. It is here that the fetishism of the scholastic is expressed: a displacement of desire toward an idealized object, where attributes need not correlate, not even negatively, with a social order. That is, the move toward the public is linked with politically normative postulates that do not require verification, not even against actually existing democratic and communist systems.

The gap in historicity, then, is saturated with generic ideological principles, and, in these terms, it is worth noting that when conditions are adverse and proclamations become unattainable, that fetishized drive is invoked, which runs the risk of becoming a glue that hides, or at least subjectively mitigates, the conditions not only socio-economic but also those for sustaining the school technology itself. If the school can no longer fulfill the promises of equal access to knowledge, equity, or the construction of the common, its defense in the name of love remains a form of symbolic resistance: it is sustained not for what it is but for what it represents, for what it invokes, for what it ought to be.

The authors do not interrogate the factors of a deterioration that they glimpse in certain characteristics of the era except, very roughly, the "capitalist" features, and the affective discourse preserves the scholastic even if its efficacy is compromised. Love appears as the last refuge, as an irreducible remainder that keeps the promise alive even when everything else is in danger. Bárcena Orbe (2025) is the one who best articulates this idea because he compresses it in a mode free of syrupy or dithyrambic phrases: "When educating, we transmit that double love and that double care, and, in doing so, we influence the other and establish a kind of testimonial pact" (author's italics).

That is, a school is loved that does not exist according to its own normative terms, and it is sustained so that it continues to represent that essence. The scholastic becomes an empty reference: it is invoked as if it still operated or could operate effectively, without even conjecturing the possibility of its occurrence, which is our basic scientific standard. In fact, the authors acknowledge (Masschelein & Simmons, 2014, p. 48) that the school does not transmit or transmits what is not intended, but they do not inquire into its effective possibility: the essentialized language ends up absorbed by the performative logic of contemporary pedagogical discourse, which Baudrillard (2024) has characterized as a third-order simulacrum, where signs circulate without real reference.

Thus, the defense of the school out of love and the love of and for teachers seems to justify the continuity of a form without conditions and to make the affective gesture a support strategy that, paradoxically, is condemned to deactivate any attempt to detach the medium -the school, now fetishized- from the ends that are sought, by virtue of the defense of the essential status that was granted to it.

We could say, with a certain irony, that there are loves that kill. We anticipated that for Barthes (1987) the doxastic, in its eagerness to sustain, ends up suffocating any possibility of examination and transformation that questions the defended format. The point here is not an indictment of affection, but of its compensatory use: when what would be expected of critical discourse is openness to imagination, to the unthought, it is folded back; when it would be worthwhile to interrogate school technology for its contingent character, it is frozen; and where unthought alternatives could be enabled, they are canceled. Thus, love for the school and for the teacher ends up obstructing reflection on the radically new, not because love does not matter, but because its invocation entails a denial of mourning for the absence of that which is exalted or recalled.

4. REFLECTIVE IMPOTENCE AND THE DECLINE OF THE TESTIMONIAL FIGURE

The anthropological horizon of this educational theory is a humanism that places the adult as responsible for sustaining the continuity of the world, yet conceived outside any condition of possibility. The teacher appears as an enlightened residue who acts beyond the conditions of school technology, even though it is precisely that technology which configures them.

To this is added another problem: the adult figure, once close to the exemplary, has lost its symbolic consistency in a “world without adults” (Mead, 2019; Narodowski, 2016). This is not simply a crisis of authority but an anthropological mutation in its social and cultural-evolutionary sense: in a society that has stripped many of its meaning-reproducing agencies of their functions, the adult no longer represents a model to follow but rather an identity questioned for its possible obsolescence and deprived of a transcendent horizon. Exemplarity, as part of the foundation of the scholastic, offers a dead end.

This essentialism can be read as the subjective administration of impotence: adults no longer offer a world; instead, they manage its loss as best they can. Far from being bearers of an ordering experience, they often appear erratic, interpellated by technologies that reorganize knowledge, language, and affectivity according to logics that are non-adult and, often, not even human. Returning to Mead (2019), the adult of the prefigurative culture -where tradition is always at risk of obsolescence or subordinated to its updating-contains vestiges of what is ceasing to be (Narodowski, 2014).

To insist on exemplarity and love without acknowledging this mutation amounts to placing the educational promise in a figure in decline. Its mandate kneads

restorative nostalgia in Svetlana Boym's (2001) sense, the kind that forcibly brings back the murmur of the past: instead of interrogating the conditions of possibility of the symbolic position, it is taken as a starting point, as if the adult, the teacher, were still in a position to offer the new to the new, always and everywhere.

It is useful here to recall Fisher's (2023) concept of "reflective impotence": an opaque awareness of the dysfunctionality of the real, which, in this case, leads to the idea that the school does not function as it should but with an awareness that produces not transformation but paralysis. Does the teacher perceive the simulacrum? Do they intuit the futility yet continue acting as if those achievements were still attainable? Impotence is not ignorance but knowledge without effect, thought without consequence, critique without exit.

It is there that a new mode of legitimation emerges not for teachers, but for the discourse that sustains them under the rhetoric of commitment, love, presence, and otherness. *Pro domo sua* becomes a technique of subjective containment: a way of maintaining the appearance of meaning within a space traversed by the decomposition of the scholastic, the delegitimization of teaching, and the growing automation of pedagogical practice. It is striking how the reflective impotence of the educational intellectual resists confronting the vertigo before evaluation algorithms, the digital segmentation of knowledge, or the systematic disengagement of students when attention itself has become a scarce good for which there is relentless competition. As they peer into the abyss, Masschelein and Simmons (2014, p. 59) see there "the school and the capitalist teacher".

5. THE SUBJECTIVE REVERSE OF LOVE FOR THE SCHOOL

Far from empowering, disappointment grows disenchantment. The essentialized representation, stripped as such of contradictions or narrated as if they could be synthesized, dehistoricizes the concrete experience of teaching work: since this vision is explicitly disconnected from the analysis of real conditions of existence, it offers no tools to think and concretely transform them. As a result, what may be unfolding is a scene difficult to inhabit, an unattainable model that falls as a moral demand upon those who sustain an extensive, complex, and sometimes distressing framework.

This configuration allows us to conjecture the emergence of forms of subjective guilt: if the teacher fails to "produce equality," "open to the common world," or "create free time," the problem might be attributed to their lack of vocation, insufficient love for the subject matter, or weak presence not because this outcome is perversely intended, but as a reaction to a strong imperative. The question that cannot fail to arise in the teacher attentive to these authors, committed to these ideas that they take to heart, could be brutal and silent: *Why can I not promote what these great intellectuals say must happen? What have I done to deserve this?*

This mismatch brings us back to reflective impotence, and the gap between the promise and everyday practice can be introjected as personal deficiency (Dubet, 2007). Several studies show the growth of disappointment among the teaching population and that its causes are numerous and heterogeneous (Grossman & Oplatka, 2021; Perryman, 2022; Şahin, Demir & Şevik, 2024). Obviously, this is not to argue that such a condition results directly from the approach under analysis, but it is urgent to investigate the possible effects of grand apologetic narratives about school and teaching on the growing feelings of frustration.

In this scenario, the teacher's figure ends up as a kind of sacrificial hero, summoned to sustain, in solitude, the unfulfilled promises of a school inscribed within a rigid essence. The consequence is not the expected one -the recovery of the desire to teach-but rather its silent deterioration. The teacher is expected to embody a world without the conditions to sustain it, to generate equality with or without resources, to create attention without interruption, to love their subject and their students and to allow themselves to be loved by them. To articulate their action in collective terms when individuation and customization are hallmarks of the era. Instead of imagining new forms and identifying existing ones to sustain the relationships they advocate, a fetishized and emotionally costly model is reinforced.

After all, in 2024 there were ninety-seven million teachers, the profession with the largest number of members in the world (International Task Force on Teachers for Education 2030 & UNESCO, 2023). Should they all love and be loved? Would we expect all of them to rise each morning ready to suspend time, to deprivatize knowledge, to produce the common, to embody love for the teaching of their subject, and to transmit generational values?

6. WHAT NO LONGER IS, WHAT DOES NOT YET EXIST

The proposal of Masschelein and Simons, despite its conceptual sophistication and the insights we have discussed, ultimately rests on a triple essentialism: a nominal one, by reserving "school" for a set of virtuous qualities; a rational one, by placing in the scholastic form a capacity for voluntary suspension of worldly logics; and an affective one, by making love the foundation of its legitimacy. All three function as shielding mechanisms against exhaustion and, in doing so, inhibit the perception of possibilities and limits, changes in regimes of governmentality, and potential obsolescences. Above all, they block the capacity to identify or imagine new teaching technologies.

From a sociohistorical perspective, the issue is not to restore an idealized and mythified school, but to interrogate the conditions under which teaching actually occurs, relying on the fact that it is a capacity embedded in human evolution and cultural accumulation, not an exclusive privilege of the school institution. In a prefigurative society, where digital and technological mediations proliferate, clinging to

an essentialized technology risks becoming normative nostalgia rather than a critical horizon it distills, unintentionally, a *de facto* nihilism.

At this point, we may point to three complementary paths that allow for a non-nihilistic view. First, to denaturalize the scholastic fetish by describing its conditions of production, specifically to understand the scholastic as one technology among all those that *Homo sapiens'* cultural evolution has generated (and continues to generate at an accelerating pace), rather than as its ultimate, desirable, or non-negotiable form.

Second, to map spaces where "non-productive time" effectively emerges -whether inside or outside classrooms- and to understand why it occurs there and not elsewhere. Why some of these spaces are permanent and others contingent. Why some overflow and others are protected. This entails paying attention to the emergence of sometimes subjectless flows, practices of knowledge circulation and cultural creation that exceed the scholastic framework and cannot even be reduced to simple networks of exchange: new phenomena that generate knowledge horizontally, without hierarchies or unifying axes. More than *networking*, they are contingent assemblages (De Landa, 2017) in which multiple actors and resources interconnect without a center or bureaucratically codified purpose, producing trajectories impossible to reabsorb into the vertical, standardized structures of state-schooled technology.

Finally, to explore combinations that articulate the scholastic with post-school technologies and non-hierarchical circuits of knowledge, assessing their effects on two central dimensions that Masschelein and Simons (2014) defend as possibilities for constructing the common: students' attention and equality of access to knowledge. Both mark a key point of tension. The first becomes a decisive problem because the school competes with flattened and deterritorialized information flows and must sustain a regime of concentration in an environment saturated with stimuli. Equality of access remains a crucial criterion, since non-hierarchical circuits tend, supposedly, to reproduce inequalities, while the historical claim of the scholastic has rested on its equalizing vocation.

However, these dimensions should not be understood as virtues guaranteed by the school; to affirm this would be to return to the normative horizon. Rather than intrinsic attributes, they must be considered open problems, whose treatment depends on contingent and accelerating technologies and cultures. These arrangements are often beyond the reach of educational policy or the rational will (individual and collective) of educators and educational intellectuals. The work of Bárcena Orbe (2025) illuminates this debate by reminding us that educational experience does not respond to a pre-set method but to a path whose course is defined by the subject's interest and attention: "to travel in this way is a means without end or predetermined destination." The metaphor of the journey forces us to ask whether the real school, not the idealized one, but the historically situated one, with its limits and frictions remains the best vehicle to sustain that journey, or whether it is worth experimenting with new technological combinations.

Ultimately, the task is to shift the discussion from the apologetic defense of the school to the recognition of the technological flow of teaching. To think education without guarantees is not to renounce its power, but to open the possibility of imagining that which does not yet exist.

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