

## **MANIFESTATIONS OF THE POST-CRITICAL: FROM SHARED PRINCIPLES TO NEW PEDAGOGICAL PATHS**

*Manifestaciones de lo post-crítico: de principios compartidos a nuevos caminos pedagógicos*

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### ABSTRACT

In this introduction we give an account of the reasons for writing *the Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*. These stem from our experiences in the field of educational research, as well as our work with teachers and future teachers, which we felt increasingly reflected the exhaustion of the critical paradigm in the humanities and social sciences, as discussed by Bruno Latour, Jacques Rancière and others. We summarise the main claims of the *Manifesto*, i.e. the principles we defend there, and explain why we find it important to do so. We elaborate on what we mean by principles with reference to the concept of «requirements» developed by Isabelle Stengers. We conclude with an overview of the projects that have emerged since the publication of

the *Manifesto*, illustrating the various ways in which the post-critical perspective has been taken up in educational research. In particular we highlight how this has been taken up in the development of specifically educational accounts of higher education, teaching, and upbringing.

*Key words:* critical pedagogy; educational theory; educational philosophy; upbringing; teaching; change; notetaking; higher education.

## RESUMEN

En esta introducción explicamos las razones por las que hemos escrito el *Manifiesto para una Pedagogía Post-Crítica*. Son razones que tienen su origen en nuestras experiencias en el ámbito de la investigación educativa, así como en nuestro trabajo con docentes y futuros docentes, al considerar cómo en ambos contextos puede apreciarse el agotamiento del paradigma crítico en las humanidades y las ciencias sociales, en la línea de lo discutido por Bruno Latour, Jacques Rancière y otros. A continuación, resumimos las principales afirmaciones del *Manifiesto*, es decir, los principios que ahí defendemos, y explicamos por qué nos parece importante hacer esa defensa. Desarrollamos qué queremos decir con el uso del término principios en su relación con el concepto de «requisitos» de Isabelle Stengers. Concluimos con un resumen de los proyectos que han seguido a la publicación del *Manifiesto*, ilustrando las variadas formas en que la perspectiva post-crítica se ha incorporado a la investigación educativa. Destacamos especialmente cómo se ha retomado esta mirada post-crítica en el desarrollo de perspectivas específicamente educativas sobre temas como la educación superior, la enseñanza y la crianza.

*Palabras clave:* pedagogía crítica; teoría de la educación; filosofía educativa; crianza; enseñanza; cambio; tomar apuntes; educación superior.

## 1. WHY POST-CRITICAL?

The original *Manifesto for a Post-critical Pedagogy* emerged from a shared sense of dissatisfaction at the enduring dominance of a particular register of critique in educational research. Broadly speaking, such research seeks to reveal yet further levels and instances of our subordination by dominant ideologies and unequal power relations, and our complicity in these. A common sense of indignation at «what is wrong with the world» abounds. Rightly so. And this is not to take aim at the purpose and quality of such research. However, as stated in the now much-quoted phrase from Latour (2004), such critique — informed broadly by Critical Theory, poststructuralism, and Critical Pedagogy — has «run out of steam». In the way in which it is often applied, at least, it no longer gains purchase on our current conditions; hence, not only has it not led to the revolutionary change it seeks, but

also it adds to the further entrenchment of indignation, resignation, and cynicism. It deprives us of hope.

Yet, although since writing that initial *Manifesto* our grounds for political hope may have been further destabilised, we maintain that education — as an activity that characterises our relations from the moment of birth — is premised on hope. As grownups, educators, professionals, we continue to invest in practices of initiation, of passing on knowledge, values, and practices that we value and wish to protect on the basis that we find this worthwhile. Who this «we» is not universal; nor are the practices. But what we three sought to do, in the *Manifesto* and in the projects that have followed from it, is offer an affirmative account of those practices that do exist — in spite of the neoliberal capitalist rationality, in spite of inequalities — and specifically those practices that are educational and constitutive of education as we know it.

This is by no means a purely conceptual matter. Not only in our own research but also when working with teachers and other educational practitioners, particularly at postgraduate level, and initiating them into the body of critical (education) theory, though it no doubt expands their self-understanding, we have an overwhelming sense that we risk only depriving them of hope, too. It starts to become uncomfortably clear that the choice for educational practitioners — ourselves included — is between critical consciousness of the wrongs we are engaged in, or seeing education as technical competence in ways that refrain from ethical judgment and define education in terms of outcomes. Teachers, understandably, then want to know how to act and not to get into the traps indicated by the critical knowledge. But the theory itself makes these traps seem somewhat inevitable (since, it is argued -Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990), *all pedagogic action is, objectively, symbolic violence*). But it seems as if there are only these two options: either one conforms to the demands of a technical theory that puts forward a set of tools ready to be used, or one that implies practicing education means complicity in subordination and sustaining inequality and injustice.

We did not wish to maintain the practice — or perception — of educational theory as being concerned with debunking what educational practitioners do, with the political wrongs in which they are complicit, and so further entrenching a division between theory and practice. Rather, we sought to affirm education as such, and hence, also to affirm what they do, educationally, as educational practitioners.

We were by no means starting from scratch in trying to articulate such an approach, however. Internationally, various attempts can be found to overcome the impasse between technicist compliance and critical debunking. We saw our work as part of this wider movement but sought *to make this emerging current of thought*

*manifest*. The formulation of the idea of post-criticality was not meant as a way to initiate a new school or movement: we used the term «manifesto», conforming to the etymological roots of this word, as we wanted to *show* something, to put something on display and to make it «manifest». Hence, in the *Manifesto* we expressed some general principles and sketched the idea of a post-critical pedagogy as a theoretical position extant in the field but also as a provocation for thinking.

## 2. WHY PRINCIPLES?

The *Manifesto* is structured around five inter-related principles: 1) there are principles to defend; 2) pedagogical hermeneutics; 3) the shift from critical pedagogy to post-critical pedagogy; 4) from cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) to hope in the present; 5) from education for citizenship to love for the world. The term «post-criticality» was a provisional name, since it seems still to position us in relation to the critical, and other «post-» schools of thought, and doesn't in itself suggest an affirmative position. We haven't yet come up with a better one. The term is accurate, however, to the extent that it points to the role of critique in post-critical thought: the latter would not emerge without the former. The affirmative stance of post-critical pedagogy, rather than testifying to a blind naivety, refers to what Ricoeur (1992) terms a secondary naivety.

The position is not anti-critical, but rather moves us away from political concerns to educational ones, as we indicated elsewhere:

We share with critical pedagogues the belief that there is no necessity in any given order of things, and that we always can begin anew with the world. Nevertheless — in line with Arendt (1968) — we don't agree with the assumption that education is simply political action, i.e. that it essentially serves some political aims (regardless of whether these are employability, the knowledge economy, or democracy, equality, and freedom). We do argue that critical pedagogy, as traditionally conceived, might actually work against the possibility of educational transformation. (Hodgson *et al.*, 2018, p. 8)

In setting out the principles as we do in the *Manifesto*, we hope it is clear that post-critical pedagogy is not primarily aimed at a *critique of critical pedagogy*. First, the scope of the post-critical turn we advocate is much broader than a focus on a specific school of thought (e.g. pedagogical currents in the wake of Paulo Freire or German critical theory); our concern is with the much broader phenomenon in educational thought that a particular form of critique has become almost a default position today. Critical pedagogy is but an emanation of this. Second, in refocusing on the possibility of educational transformation, we are concerned with affirmation of what we *can* and *do*, of what is possible, educationally, in education. Hence, rather

than question the insights that critical pedagogies have offered or their relevance, the *Manifesto* only makes sense if one fully affirms one of the basic principles to which both Freire and Critical Theory subscribe: the way in which the world is given shape today is not final — «Es muss nicht so sein» — to recall Max Horkheimer's (1992) postulate. We can but educate if we assume that there is no necessity in the given order, and that things can substantially change. Hence, focusing our attention on educational practices, in an affirmative vein, enables us to rethink our relationship to those practices and, perhaps, to affirm hope in the present.

So, the «principles» that form the *Manifesto* invite us to speak — again — in a positive way about education; taken together they invite both researchers and educational practitioners to think and speak about education in an affirmative key. Again, the word «principle» may seem too strict and foreboding but as should be clear from the very first of these principles we formulate («There are principles to defend»). These are not meant to be normative in the sense of an «ought» that we expect people to apply in concrete situations. They are only normative in the sense that they might guide and inspire those who experience this sense of critique as having «run out of steam» (Latour 2004), as no longer gaining purchase on the constitution of education today, and who want to go on nevertheless.

We could also refer to these principles in terms of «requirements» in the sense meant by Isabelle Stengers (2010):<sup>1</sup> when confronted with a challenge as serious as the end of critique, we need to think in ways that are genuinely *new*; thought cannot be informed by already existing guidance. Hence, thinking has to set particular guideposts for itself, *requirements*, that will aid us in coming up with ideas that respond to what we experience and that force us to think beyond the confines of what is given so as to stay true to what we experience today.

Our formulation of principles is, then, a response to the conditions in which we find ourselves today. The alternative, it seems, is to give in to cynicism and to espouse, what Klaus Mollenhauer (1986) terms, a «hermeneutical pedagogy»: one based on the impossibility of understanding the other and the belief that to claim to do so is to do violence to the other and, hence, that to educate is to inflict such symbolic violence. Or to condone a «cruel optimism» (Berlant, 2011): one that situates the good (in) life in a never attainable future. Rather than responding with further — albeit important — critical analysis, instead we ask: On what basis do we continue to do what we do? On what basis do we defend what we do in education, in educational terms? When the criteria against which our professionalism is

1. We would like to thank Hans Schildermans for this insightful suggestion.

judged are increasingly not ours, it makes sense to ask: what educational criteria, or principles, *are* we guided by?

The exercise of articulating the principles of a post-critical pedagogy, then, is an affirmative and *hopeful* gesture. But, as we explain, hope should not be defined as an expectation or desire for what is still to come. Educational hope is *hope in the present*: a new future becomes possible only in so far we are willing to embrace the «now»: by affirming things and practices we hold dear and valuable. As the last principle of the *Manifesto* states, this requires that one takes a particular stance towards the world, which with Hannah Arendt (1961) we call, love for the world.

This refers not to a vague sentimentality, nostalgia, or utopianism. Rather, this sense of love relates, again, to the attitude of thinking educationally — rather than politically — about education:

The way in which we relate to the world as educators seems to be completely different from that of politics. Education originates in our love for the world, in the acknowledgement that there are some good things in the world that are worth preserving. Naturally, their preservation is not just simple indoctrination or transmission (that would come down to destroying these things — to turning them into meaningless, empty shells used purely as an instrument of power). In order to preserve them we need to enable the next generation to take up these things, to rejuvenate them, to make them alive once again. As such, educational love is always double: love for the world goes hand in hand with love for the new generation. We must pass on what is good, but in such a way that newcomers can truly start anew with it. In other words, love is not mere attachment to what exists, but also a sincere attitude of generosity towards the next generation: we invite them to care for and to be interested in what we hold dear, but at the same time we leave it up to them to relate to it, possibly in ways that are unforeseeable. (Hodgson *et al.*, 2018, p. 15)

The notions of hope and love may seem abstract, obscure, matters of aesthetic philosophy rather than educational practice. The reality of thinking post-critically is, however, quite mundane. As the response to the *Manifesto* so far has shown, it articulates a concern of many educationalists today. And, the choice to translate this concern into the five principles we have listed is just an honest attempt to clarify today's *Zeitgeist*, and to initiate a conversation.

### 3. NEW DEVELOPMENTS

In that sense we seem to have been successful. In addition to this Special Issue, the *Manifesto* has been translated into German and has been the focus of a number of international symposia. The authors themselves have developed a number of more specific lines of enquiry that put these principles into practice, not only in a

theoretical sense but also in the way these projects have developed. They affirm the possibility that there are things of value in education today worth protecting.

### 3.1. *Higher education*

One of the first projects to emerge sought to «reclaim the educational in the university», an institution much maligned in the critical literature in the era of marketization, precarity, and the consumerisation of studenthood. With several colleagues we focused instead on the university as constituted by specific educational practices and experiences — such as the lecture, particular academic subjects, particular forms of gathering, being a student — in order to articulate their specificity as educational practices and experiences. Many of the chapters touch on those aspects of the university constitutive of it but left out of sight in our preoccupation with what can be measured (and with developing critical analyses on what is wrong with such a preoccupation). In addition to the practices of reading, writing, and so on that constituted the individual chapters, we wanted to also affirm the possibility of collaboration and conversation in the university and co-wrote the conclusion to the book with the contributors, based on discussions at a specifically-convened symposium. The resulting book, *Post-critical Perspectives on Higher Education: reclaiming the educational in the university*, should be out later in 2020 (Hodgson, *et al.*, 2020).

### 3.2. *Teaching*

A central focus throughout the book, *Towards an Ontology of Teaching: Thing-centred Pedagogy, Affirmation and Love for the World* (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019), is on what we actually do as teachers / students / academics, but that seems to be repressed, neglected, or forgotten by the contemporary discourses (both critical and technocratic) of education. Teaching is a definitive educational practice that is often treated instrumentally in educational research, that is, as a factor that contributes, or not, to learning outcomes. The basic assumption is one of distrust, and some scholars would go so far as to advocate teacher-proof education. Critical educational research on teaching is aimed at revealing that teachers, due to the inevitable power imbalances that are enacted in concrete teaching situations, actually oppress students instead of educating them. Shifting the emphasis of how we speak about teaching from the political to the educational, Joris Vlieghe and Piotr Zamojski decided to develop an alternative account of teaching that starts from the idea that teaching *is* a meaningful practice, that it has *in and of itself* an educational sense. Instead of criticizing the teacher from an outside perspective (e.g. teaching doesn't contribute to emancipation), they begin from the position that it is possible to articulate *from*

*the inside out* what teaching essentially is. They take the phenomenon at face value and try to elucidate — on the basis of what we experience (when we teach and are being taught) — what it is a teacher does. This project discusses specifically pedagogical aspects of teaching, such as, drawing attention to things of the world that matter and testifying to an attitude of full affirmation of the world.

In a symposium in *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Tyson Lewis (2020), Hans Schildermans (2020), and Stefano Oliverio (2020) added their voices to this conversation, from which — among other things — it emerged that post-criticality might gain greater relevance by taking an ecological point of view into account (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2020a).

As stated, such work is not purely conceptual, but is grounded in practice, experience, and language. One of the examples that strongly puts on display what it entails to be a teacher is the figure of Leonard Bernstein, whose teaching performances during the show *Young People's Concerts* were analysed in detail by Vlieghe and Zamojski. The article «Towards an immanent ontology of teaching: Leonard Bernstein as a case-study» (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019b) draws out a post-critical analysis of teaching with reference to Bernstein, whose words and gestures as a music teacher materialise one of the core principles of the *Manifesto*: that love is at the heart of what education is about.

A further exploration of educational love from a post-critical perspective can be found in Vlieghe and Zamojski's contribution to the special issue on love in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education* (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019c).

### 3.3. Note-taking

Another specific practice that is overlooked by educational discourse is note-taking. Together with other colleagues, Vlieghe and Zamojski (2020b) have contributed to a forthcoming special issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* devoted to affirmative studies on the educational meaning of making notes (Marin, Sturm and Vlieghe, in press).

### 3.4. Upbringing

The discourses of learning, instrumentality, and critical responses to these, are by no means limited to formal educational settings and relationships. What it means to raise children has undergone substantial reframing with the advent in recent decades of the discourse of «parenting», in which the parent-child relationship is reduced to an instrumental dyad whose purpose is optimal learning outcomes and risk prevention. The broader experience of raising children and the agents involved in

it — socially, materially, pedagogically — are left out of the picture. Naomi Hodgson and Stefan Ramaekers sought to develop an affirmative pedagogical-philosophical account of upbringing that precisely brings these existential and experiential dimensions back in to view.

In their *Philosophical Presentations of Raising Children: the grammar of upbringing* (2019) they use particular films as themselves grammatical investigations of what we do when we raise children: initiating in to language and world; being representative of values and culture; the experience of separateness and uncertainty. In doing so, they draw predominantly on Cavell and Wittgenstein, and so bring the post-critical into conversation with different paradigms of philosophical and educational thought. A review of the book, along with the authors' response, has recently appeared in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* (Gibbs, 2020; Hodgson and Ramaekers, 2020).

### 3.5. *Theoretical intersections*

We can see this also in one of the most recent developments of the *Manifesto*, a conversation between post-criticality and Rorty's neo-pragmatism in a symposium published in *Ethics and Education* (Oliverio, 2019a). This work, by Bianca Thoilliez (2019), Stefano Oliverio (2019b), Kai Wortmann (2019), and Marina Schwimmer (2019), testifies to the unexpected original cross-overs that are possible with other strands of thoughts.

The launch of the *Manifesto* itself took place at a symposium of colleagues that initiated conversations that became the book *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy* (Hodgson *et al.* 2017), comprised of the *Manifesto* and six replies by friends and colleagues from philosophy, history, and sociology, and our own responses to these replies. Conversation and collaboration have been constitutive of the *Manifesto* and the thinking and practice that has followed from it. This present invitation to discuss the idea of post-criticality in the present issue of *Teoría de la Educación. Revista Interuniversitaria* further testifies to what makes scholarship what it is. It affirms, in itself, the possibility for maintaining practices that we value and of hope in the present; that scholarly conversations and explorations of the pressing issues of our time are worthwhile.

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