The teachers' Pascalian wager. The reasonable folly of education as a public good[1]

La apuesta Pascaliana de los profesores. La locura razonable de la educación como un bien común

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Abstract

The present paper investigates the idea of the teacher qua public official and, in this capacity, as the major vehicle for the defence of education as a public and common good in the era of the second enclosure, dominated by raging privatization. Interweaving political philosophy and educational theory, it first explores the notions of the commons and the public and their significance for the field of education and then it reconstructs the concept of "public officials" through a re-elaboration of some Deweyan tenets in order to show their role as promoters of public goods. It is argued that for teachers being a public official (in the meaning here elaborated) is not a sociological condition but a constitutive trait of their professional practice and an essential element of their moral centre. Accordingly, in the face of the decline of the public and the challenges engendered by the contemporary global educational reform movement with a neoliberal matrix, this way of being needs to be reclaimed against any demoralization, be it in the form of a Pascalian wager in favour of the reasonable folly of education as a public good.

Key words: teachers, public education, public officials, Dewey, Pascal.

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Resumen

El presente artículo investiga la idea del profesor como funcionario público y, en esta capacidad, como el principal vehículo para la defensa de la educación como un bien común y público en la época del segundo cercamiento, dominado por una feroz privatización. Entrelazando filosofía política y teoría educativa, explora en primer lugar las nociones de lo común y lo público y su importancia en el campo de la educación, y a continuación reconstruye el concepto de «funcionarios públicos» a través de una reelaboración de varios principios deweyanos a fin de mostrar su papel como promotores de los bienes públicos. Se argumenta que, para los profesores, ser un funcionario público (en el sentido elaborado aquí) no es una condición sociológica, sino un rasgo constitutivo de su práctica profesional y un elemento esencial de su centro moral. En consecuencia, ante el declive de lo público y los retos engendrados por el movimiento global de reforma educativa contemporáneo con una matriz neoliberal, debe recuperarse esta manera de ser contra cualquier desmoralización, aunque sea en forma de una apuesta de Pascal a favor de la locura razonable de la educación como un bien común.

Palabras clave: docentes, educación pública, funcionario público, Dewey, Pascal.

Introduction

There is a sense in which the present paper advances a very simple thesis, viz. a vindication of the significance of teachers qua *public servants* (or *officials* as I will prefer to say for reasons that should become clear in what follows) as a privileged way of addressing the burning issue of defending the principle of "education as a public and common good," to refer to the statement of Goal 1 of the *#LobbyingTeachers* project (see https://lobbyingteachers.com/).

The advocacy of teaching as "public service" is obviously not brand new in the educational debate. In this paper, the argument will be initially developed at the crossroads of educational theory and political philosophy. There are three reasons for this tack: first, as aforementioned, a reference to and a constant interfacing with the main thrust of the *#LobbyingTeachers* project underlies the present reflection and it is

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noteworthy that both the name of the project itself and the specification of its purposes harp on a conceptual platform that interweaves the educational and the political vocabularies.

Secondly, this is arguably not a merely stylistic curiosity but rather something to be valorized at the theoretical level: as Axel Honneth (2012; see also Oliverio, 2018) has forcefully highlighted, not only has the contemporary uncoupling of political philosophy and educational theory interrupted the modern tradition (from Kant to Durkheim and Dewey) that interlaced the two dimensions, but this has had as its upshot an impoverishment of the theory of democracy itself. While Honneth focuses on the education of new generations as pivotal for cultivating that "capacity of cooperation and moral self-initiative" which is crucial for "the common action in democratic self-determination" (Honneth, 2012, p. 430), in the context of this paper the dialogue between the two kinds of discourse[2] will concern the notions of "the common(s)" and "the public" as they are (or may be) appropriated within educational theory[3].

Indeed – and this is the third reason – by speaking of "education as a public and common good" the aforementioned Goal 1 postulates a sort of conceptual hendiadys (public *and* common), which is anything but to be taken for granted if we consider the debates in political philosophy. This remark does not amount, however, to a gainsaying of the fruitfulness of the conceptual hendiadys but it is understood as an invitation to delve deeper into it and to construe it in terms of what has been beautifully defined as "the public-private-common triangulation" (Pennacchi, 2012). And it is precisely an exploration of the status of the teacher as a "public official" that will grant a vantage point from which to engage with this triangulation in an educational key, thereby implying, if not an overlapping, at least an intimate interlacement between the notions of the "public" and "common" good when addressing education.

If the first part of my argumentation builds on a dialogue between political philosophy and educational theory culminating in the emphasis

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[2] It would be interesting to explore whether and how far the 'Honnethian' need for a re-coupling of political philosophy and educational theory can be situated within the framework of a post-critical stance in education (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020). See also their contribution to the present special issue). However, this is not a task that can be undertaken here.

[3] Honneth's argument in many respects may be seen as representative of that instrumentalist take on education that Biesta invites us to go beyond in his paper in this special issue. However, I would tend to argue that the fundamental thrust of Biesta's endeavour and the main concerns of the present paper could ultimately be put in a fruitful dialogue, which should be postponed until another occasion.

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on teachers as public officials (in a specific philosophical-educational acceptation), in the second part the focus shifts to an investigation of teachers in the horizon of what we can call their "professional subjectification," to adopt – not without an idiosyncratic twist – a felicitous phrase of Gert Biesta (2014, p. 135), which captures the profoundly moral dimensions of professional teaching practice. Indeed, vindicating the discourse of the "public and common good" represents a denouncement of the raging privatization of the world which we are currently witnessing and which goes hand in hand with the "unbounded individualism" (Pennacchi, 2012, ch. 5) dominating in our societies and infiltrating the school community even when schools remain juridically 'public.' In this respect, it is a genuinely political topic, albeit overflowing with educational resonances. However, this highly political theme will be tackled by marshalling Barber's (2007) reflections on "the infantilizing ethos of capitalism," which ultimately contributes to eroding the significance of teaching as a moral practice and, accordingly, to the "demoralization" of teachers (Santoro, 2018). I will argue that the "recovery of teaching" (Biesta, 2017) entails also the reclaiming of its *public* mission and that the latter belongs to the very subjectification of teachers as professionals. Dialoguing with Santoro's insightful perspective, I will lay an emphasis on the meaning of being a teacher in the era of the privatization of the world (which undermines the common and public character of the professional practice). I will suggest that, in the time of the eclipse of the Public, something like a Pascalian wager in its favour is required from teachers – and, thus, a substantial act that needs to be understood not merely as political but as involving (also) an 'existential thickness'. In present day scenarios, this wager may have become, therefore, an intrinsic vector of the teachers' professional subjectification.

The outlined argumentative architecture will be structured in three sections: in the first, I will briefly reconstruct some contemporary debates in political philosophy that emphasize the *difference* between the vocabulary of the commons and that of the public and I will reconnect them to two recent 'alternative' views of the schooling emerging in educational theory; in the second, I will zoom in on the question of the teacher as a public official, by marshalling a Deweyan tripartite understanding of the office, elaborated elsewhere (Oliverio, 2018). If the first section aims at extricating the two vocabularies of the commons and the public good from the link that the aforementioned hendiadys

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assumes, second section re-integrates – via the Deweyan reconstruction of the idea of the 'office' – the two dimensions and the teacher as a public official will be viewed as the instantiation (and the promoter) of education as a common *and* public good. Second section operates as a sort of hinge of the argumentation, insofar as, on the one hand, the profiling of the teacher as a public official will allow us to make sense of the conceptual hendiadys, while not passing over the difference between the two vocabularies in silence (and, in this respect, it looks back to the dialogue with political philosophy); and, on the other, second section will represent a stepping stone to the perspective of the professional subjectification, which will be deployed in the concluding section, where the figure of the public official will be assayed in the light of contemporary challenges which often seem to doom teachers to demoralization. Appealing to a Pascalian wager as a response to this predicament ultimately adds up, therefore, to reclaiming "the reasonable folly" (Cassano, 2004) of education as a public and common good.

The commons and the public: 'enclosed education' vs 'the school as a public issue'?

The question of the common(s) has returned to the centre of political activism and theorizing during the last few decades. Since the epoch-making article of Garrett Hardin (1968) on *The Tragedy of the Commons* (which was not, however, a reflection in political philosophy or practice), through the studies of Elinor Ostrom (1990), up to the most recent theorization (see Dardot & Laval, 2019), the theme has acquired increasing relevance in the economic, philosophical and political debate, linked with worldwide actions in defence of the commons – whether material, like water, or immaterial, like education. It has not been an academic or scholarly fashion but rather a response to "the second enclosure movement" (Boyle, 2003; see also Coccoli, 2019), which is ongoing at a global level through a process of the expropriation of common resources and an incessant thrust towards privatization.

From this perspective, the appeal to education as "a common good" could be considered within the horizon of this endeavour of resistance to contemporary neoliberalism. And yet, the phrase which is the point of the departure of the present paper, viz. "education as a public and

common good," complicates the picture, as it deploys not only the conceptual armoury of the "commons" but also that of "the public." To put it bluntly, the problem is the status of that "and" that links (but also distinguishes) the two adjectives. It may obviously be argued in all legitimacy that both adjectives are to be understood as opposing the privatization of education and they simply reinforce each other so that it is an exercise in hairsplitting to further elaborate on this aspect; however, it is moot whether they may be merely juxtaposed without exploring their relationship. Thus, it may be appropriate to briefly sketch out some recent debates in political philosophy in order to construct a conceptual platform that could help to make sense of that "and" connecting the "common" and the "public" when education is in the spotlight.

To dramatically simplify (and putting in brackets the technicalities alien to the educational interest of this paper) we can distinguish two views. First, there are those (Cacciari, 2010; Mattei, 2012; Coccoli, 2019) who appeal to the idea of "the commons" as an overthrowing and an abandonment of the modern public-private dyad construed as the opposition between the state and the market that "colonizes entirely the imagery, by exhausting respectively the domain of the public and that of the private in a sort of zero sum game" (Mattei, 2012, p. 41)[4] in which alternative understandings seem to be impossible. As Coccoli (2019) has put it, "[t]he suppression of the dimension of the common is at the origin of that complementary opposition of public and private that represents, apparently in a complete way, the political and juridical structure of Western modernity" (p. 186).[5]

This way of framing the opposition, which connects it with the rise of "possessive individualism," would exclude in principle the "qualitative and ecological dimension" (Mattei, 2012, p. 37) of life. By "ecological" is here meant something "organized around a communitarian structure in equilibrium, in which the whole (the community) is not reduced to the aggregation of its parts (the individuals) but presents its own features, which receive their meanings precisely from its capacity to satisfy common needs" (*Ibidem*). In such an ecological model, the qualitative dimension prevails over the quantitative and the being-together over

[4] All translations of passages from non-English works are the author's.

[5] As Bobbio (1995, ch. 1) has famously argued the private-public distinction should be traced back to the *Corpus iuris Iustinianeum* and, therefore, it is not a modern invention. For a fruitful discussion of this distinction from the perspective of philosophy of education, see Higgins (2018).

the possessing of something alone: "The common good, indeed, exists only in a qualitative relationship. We do not «have» a common good (an ecosystem (...)) but, in a certain sense, we «are» (participants in) the common good ((...) we are part of an ecosystem)" (ibid., p. 57).

The first casualty of this "great transformation" – from the ecological being in a communitarian structure to possessive individualism, from the qualitative to the quantitative – is the "general intelligence presiding over the ecological exchanges of production" (Ibid., p. 38). Remarkably, in this argumentation against modernity and its upshots, pre-modern ways of living are indicated, if not as a model to recover, at least as an option that demonstrates the limitations of the modern outlook. In this sense, some have spoken of a form of "neo-mediaevalism." What concerns us here, however, is that in this view the notion of "the common" is *not* co-extensive with that of the public, actually representing an alternative to it, as it aspires to go beyond modern dualisms (ultimately rooted in the subject/object dichotomy).

This approach has been criticized as a return to "a pre-modern worldview, a romantic regression to the Middle Ages, seen as the place of a happy and ecologically balanced communitarian life" (Vitale, 2013, p. 7) and, thus, a second – and different – view of the discourse of the commons has been advanced. While concurring with the attack on the rugged individualism and privatization taking place in contemporary societies, which is the main target of the heralds of the return to the commons, this second stance recoils from ways of thinking that might put the entire modern project at risk and it reclaims the permanent value of the Enlightenment heritage, consisting in the advocacy of the significance of "different viewpoints, the willingness to dialogue in a public scene and the capacity of self-scrutiny of one's own convictions" (Ibid., p. 8). In other words, the fear is that the appeal to communitarian life scotomizes the perils of the dynamics of exclusion, conformism and suppression of differences that the evoked ecologically balanced community (conceived of as a sort of *Gemeinschaft*) may conceal.[6] The common good should be re-interpreted, instead, as "the general interest of a political collectivity that is articulate and conflictual [and should be read] as that kernel of

[6] In order to avoid oversimplifications and ossified dichotomies, it should be noted that also authors tendentially belonging to the first camp here examined have recognized this risk (see Coccoli, 2019, p. 355).

shared interests at the global, universal (I would say cosmopolitan) level" (Ibid., p. 67).[7]

What flummoxes the critics of the most radical appeal to the commons is that the call for an ecological stance seems to result in an anti-science attitude and in a refusal of the public sphere as modernity has thought of it, viz. as the domain of the exercise of a dialogical and argumentative reflectivity, which may (and should) be agonistic, thereby warding off the risks of fundamentalism (Pennacchi, 2012, p. 1512). Moreover, against the cult of the immediacy of a communitarian life one should reclaim the merit of the mediation of the Public – bearing in mind that, if "the Public is not identical with the state, the state has been decisive for the development of the Public and of the public sphere" (Ibid., p. 1670). Accordingly, "the common – the rethinking of which allows us to escape from the blunt private-public dichotomization (on which that of the state-market is modelled) – lives in a triangular scheme and dies if it claims to devour and swallow up any other dimensions, by putting itself forward as the only pole, thus transformed into an absolute" (ibid., p. 1768).

While it can be plausibly argued that it is precisely the "semantic nebulosity" of the notion of "the commons" that has turned it into an "empty signifier," thereby granting it the power of sustaining a series of important and seemingly disparate struggles the world over (Coccoli, 2019, p. 320), I have wanted to dwell upon the two aforementioned different positions to let the relevance of the conceptual hendiadys stand out. On the one hand, there are those who embrace the vocabulary of "the commons" as staunchly alternative to that of "the public," the latter being taken as coextensive with a modern mindset which has been making our societies unsustainable in any respect; on the other, there are those who, while agreeing upon many concerns of the advocates of the commons, tend to spot some dangers in endorsing a total abandonment of the modern framework (especially regarding the reference to a public sphere) as it may result in most unwelcome regressive movements and in a sort of nostalgic yearning for organicist communities. In the reading here proposed, the former camp sees the public as ultimately accomplice with the gesture of the "enclosure" – of which the contemporary process of privatization would be a calamitous renewal – and, accordingly, they

[7] I cannot expatiate on this point here, but a claim like that in the quotation may be easily read through a Deweyan lens (see especially the § 5 of chapter 7 of *Democracy and Education*).

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open up a chasm between the commons and the public, whereas their critics insist on the need to combine the two vocabularies, by salvaging the best of that of the public.

It would be foolhardy to claim that in present day educational theory we can identify positions that perfectly match the two here outlined. However, the work of Robbie McClintock (2012) represents what may be the most substantial and thought-provoking engagement with the topic of the commons and its reverberations on education. Without rehearsing here his complex and sophisticated theoretical device, I will confine myself to pinpointing only a couple of aspects: first, while cognizant of the aforementioned contemporary revival of the theme of the commons (ibid., pp. 82-84 for his remarks on Hardin and Ostrom), the US educationalist seems to undertake a more wide-ranging appropriation of the issue, by suggesting the notion of the *conceptual enclosure*: "An observer postulated boundaries in time and space enabling him to concentrate on what lay within them, to inventory the various attributes of things observed there, and to search for causal relationships determining how one thing within the bounded space acted on another there according to a temporal sequence" (ibid., p. 28). This idea is intimately bound with that of "area mapping," construed as the act of "establish[ing] boundaries differentiating what lay within the boundaries from what lay without" (ibid., p. 31) and as "the way of thinking in what was then called the modern era, the print era, what we now see as the era of enclosure" (Ibid., p. 32).[8] In this sense, modernity itself is an "era of enclosure" not only at the economic and political levels but also in its innermost manners of relating to the world. In this horizon, it is not therefore surprising that "[n]umerous acts of conceptual enclosure provided most people the basic generative metaphor for thinking about schools and what took place within them. (...) *Conceptual enclosure was an essential step in the construction of modern schooling*" (ibid., pp. 28-29. Emphasis added). It is not far-fetched to draw the conclusion that, in McClintock's view, the modern (compulsory) schooling is fundamentally "enclosed" education:

[8] McClintock's reflection is fictionally situated within a sort of utopian narrative and this explains the use of the verbal tenses: the past refers to our age, the present, instead, to 2162 which is the year in which the author(s) of the thoughts, problematizations etc. presented in the volume is/are imagined to live.

> Schools enclosed educative activities conducted by teachers guided by the curriculum, with its scope and sequence, acting on groups of children, graded by age and other characteristics. Educators defined outcomes and postulated causes; and then they devised accounts of how the causes operated and the outcomes came to be. Virtually everything that people had to say about the educational aspects of human life involved the demarcation of boundaries enclosing instructional work, classifying the salient characteristics that children should manifest and achieve within the spaces of the classroom and the duration of the lesson (McClintock, 2012, p. 43).

Hence, in order to revive the spirit of the commons (by taking advantage of the technological possibilities offered by media other than print and its 'area mapping' style), we should disengage (= dis-enclose) education from schooling in its modern version:

> *In a substantial future, one different from an extension of the present*, the educational role of the schools would become highly contingent. It would depend significantly on whether people judged schooling inimical or supportive to the emergence of important capabilities in their lives. (...) If an alternative system of education were to emerge, it would provide persons of all ages with sophisticated resources to support the self-organization of human capacities taking place in their lives (McClintock, 2012, p. 159. Emphasis added).

Some caveats are in order: first, as aforementioned, it would be reckless to consider McClintock's elaborate positions as the simple educational counterpart of the most radical version of the appeal to the commons. To mention only one aspect, if the advocates of the latter often seem to flirt with an organicist mindset, nothing is more alien to the US educationalist who, while endeavouring to go beyond the deadlock caused by the conceptual enclosure of modernity, does not indulge in any backward-looking escapism and, indeed, deploys ingenious readings of Kant and Hegel in order to provide a different spin to the modern project. Secondly, at the typically educational level, mine might have been an oversimplifying and uncharitable rendering of McClintock's views about schooling as enclosed education, insofar as his attack could be not so much on the school device *per se* but on that specific configuration that it

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has assumed in modern times. And yet, one cannot resist the impression that ultimately his way of creatively appropriating the themes of the enclosure and the commons in an educational key risks amounting to a dismantling of the very mission of the school.

Is a consideration of education as a common good doomed to a demise of the scholastic project as a whole? This does not seem to be the upshot of the reflection of Masschelein and Simons (2013) who arrive at a relaunching of the *raison d'être* of the school. It is noteworthy that this happens through a deployment of the vocabulary of the public, which is mobilized to make sense of the innermost *eidos* of the school:

> Important here is that it is precisely these public things – which, being public, are thus available for free and novel use – that provide the young generation with the opportunity to experience themselves as a new generation. The typical scholastic experience – the experience that is made possible by the school – is exactly that confrontation with public things made available for free and novel use (Masschelein and Simons, 2013, p. 38).

It is true that the Belgian educationalists' understanding of the notion of "public" cannot be overlapped with that introduced earlier and has rather to do with an appropriation of Rancièrian and Agambenian motifs. However, what I am interested in highlighting is that Masschelein and Simons portray the school as a third space in comparison with the private realm of the household and the community as the domain of what is already common: "A community of students is a unique community; it is a community of people who have nothing (yet) in common, but by confronting what is brought to the table, its members can experience what it means to share something and activate their ability to renew the world" (Masschelein and Simons, 2013, p. 73). Thus, the scholastic experience promotes a different kind of community thanks to the engagement with what is made public, that is, detached by common usage and turned into something to study. In this sense, the scholastic device as the place of collective study[9] is what makes possible the instauration of the 'and' of the conceptual hendiadys (common *and* public good).

[9] It is to remark that, while McClintock (1971) has been one of the staunchest advocates of the notion of study, he seems fundamentally to play it out against the school (essentially reduced to an instructional machine).

Through Masschelein and Simons we can attain a purely pedagogical view of the conceptual hendiadys as quintessentially inscribed in the scholastic experience itself. In the wake of the previous explorations in political philosophy, however, the present argumentative trajectory will address this thematic constellation turning to a more specific question: in what sense do teachers as professionals inhabit that triangulation (private-common-public) which recognizes the rights of the commons, without sacrificing the significance of the public on their altar? In what sense do they contribute to furthering the link that connects and distinguishes the public *and* common good that education is? In what sense is this the pith and core of their mission qua teachers?

In the next section, I would like to outline briefly a Deweyan version of the triangulation I have spoken about as the horizon within which to situate the task of the teachers.[10] I will endeavour to delineate the figure of the teacher as a *public official* who, precisely in this capacity, attends to the preservation of the value of education as a public *and* common good. Or to put it succinctly: endorsing the movement of the commons against that of "the second enclosure" does not need, at the educational level, to lead to a demise of the scholastic project but rather to a re-affirmation of teaching as a public service[11].

The teacher as a public official

We owe to Philippe Meirieu (2008) an interesting reflection on the teacher as a public servant. His point of departure is that "in principle, in a School worthy of the name, a true 'master' can only be so legitimately if he is a 'public servant'"[12] (p. 1) insofar as he[13] promotes the advancement from the private to the public space. Indeed, for the French educationalist,

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[10] Due to the constraints of space, I will not be able to show to what extent Dewey's tenets would still be topical for the debate about the commons at a typically political level . See Honneth's (1998) re-appraisal of Dewey's view of the Public as still one of the most promising options. For a brilliant discussion (along different lines) of the contribution of Honneth to a reconstruction of Dewey's educational thought, see Thoilliez (2019).

[11] I see the endeavour here undertaken as in accordance, in many respects, with the fundamental thrust of the ideas of Maria Mendel and Tomasz Szkudlarek in their contribution to this special issue.

[12] For the English version of Meirieu's paper I will draw upon that retrievable on his website (http://meirieu.com/ARTICLES/autorite_english.pdf).

[13] When presenting and discussing Meirieu's reflections on the teacher as a public servant, I will use

> "[t]he association of the teacher's authority with his status as public servant frees him from political contingencies and enables him to put into perspective the technocratic pressures which often hem him in. It records his subject knowledge and his administrative obligations within a perspective which gives them meaning. (...) In short it confers upon him an identity by placing him in a valuable verticality: a verticality which enables him to escape the horizontality of the scholastic market" (Meirieu, 2008, p. 2).

The notion of verticality is strategic in Meirieu's argument, which puts a strong accent on the "lack of symmetry between pupils and educators" (p. 9) so that the school cannot be a "democratic institution" but is and must be "a place where democracy is learned" (*Ibidem*). This does not imply any nostalgia for the old-fashioned kind of legitimacy of the teachers' role, based on a verticality construed as indisputable authority; however, Meirieu draws our attention to the fact that no teaching is possible without a kind of verticality which cannot be replaced either with the ability to manage the difficult situations in the school and a technical view of professionalism or with "corporate reactions" (p. 4).

But what kind of verticality is possible in the era of democracy, which seems to rather invoke the embracement of purely horizontal relationships? The answer of Meirieu reads as follows: "*In this case it is not the democratic ideal which represents verticality, but which makes democracy possible*: the founding and improving of those institutions which establish the 'common good', and the education of our children to enable them to live within these institutions and to make them progress. *Verticality is the state of a horizontality which is not a war of individualities*. And, in this respect, the School can embody such a verticality: insofar as it is not reduced to a sophisticated system for managing change, or to a juxtaposition of fragmented teaching (...)" (p. 7. Emphasis in the original). Thus, it is the school that, in a sense, institutes that verticality without which we would be delivered to merely marketized relationships or to "those conflicts inherent in a horizontality with no references" (p. 8). And it is from this perspective that the teacher

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the masculine pronoun in accordance with his text.

is a "public servant," insofar as he contributes to the building up of the public space[14].

These remarks of Meirieu are significant because he is able to address the question of the status of the teacher as a public servant not in a sociological but in an educational way: being a public servant is not merely a social condition but it belongs to the very definition of what being a true teacher means. It is not therefore ancillary to the being-a-teacher but part and parcel of it. Moreover, situating the interpretation of the-teacher-as-a-public-servant within the horizon of the issue of verticality is a crucial move not only because it does away with many contemporary shallow pedagogical mantras but because it places the question of being-a-teacher in a non-technocratic perspective: when the inquiry into what being a teacher means and implies is at stake, the reference to strategies of management of the school environment and relationships, issues of efficacy and effectiveness and methodological 'recipes' are not sufficient, important as they may be.

And yet, Meirieu's articulation of the understanding of public service may not be fully satisfactory, as it remains ensnared in some modern dichotomies and mindsets.[15] His emphasis on the construction of the public space is welcome but it risks bypassing some of the concerns of the advocates of the commons, while we need a view of the public service that situates it within the aforementioned triangulation (private-common-public). In the rest of this section, I would like to suggest that some Deweyan tenets can offer a perspective which maintains the positive aspects of Meirieu's conceptual platform but completes it along the lines sketched out in the first section. This interpretive move will require a shift from the vocabulary of the "public service" to that of the "public office."

To begin with, we should recall how Dewey addresses the issue of the public. When distinguishing it from the private, he takes his cue from a fairly simple example, namely the difference between "private and public buildings, private and public schools, private paths and public highways, private assets and public funds, private persons and public officials. It is

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[14] I would suggest reading Bianca Thoilliez's elegant arguments about the three teaching practices of conserving, passing on and desiring as an extremely interesting and promising way of pedagogically articulating this verticality (see her contribution to this special issue).

[15] See Meirieu's explicit reference to Kant (p. 9) and the implicit one present in the idea of an education for democracy. On Kant as representative of the idea of education for democracy see Biesta (2006, ch. 6).

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our thesis that in this distinction we find the key to the nature and office of the state" (LW 2: 245)[16]. This almost incidental statement is noteworthy because Dewey indirectly establishes a sort of complete identification between 'public' and 'official' (if private *vs* public; and private *vs* official; then public = official). The scope of this connection is, however, soon qualified:

> It is not without significance that etymologically "private" is defined in opposition to "official," a private person being one deprived of public position. *The public consists of all those who are affected by the indirect consequences of transactions to such an extent that it is deemed necessary to have those consequences systematically cared for. Officials are those who look out for and take care of the interests thus affected*. Since those who are indirectly affected are not direct participants in the transactions in question, it is necessary that certain persons be set apart to represent them, and see to it that their interests are conserved and protected. (LW 2: 245-246. Emphasis added)

This specification prevents a simple equivalence: the public is not completely to be identified with the official but it is to be understood as a domain which is *organized by means of officials*. The public is the name selected for "[t]hose indirectly and seriously affected for good or for evil [who] form a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name" (LW 2: 257). The public and the official would then be two notions *intimately related rather than completely identified*.

And yet, things are not so plain, above all in a democratic state. Indeed, when suggesting that a citizen-voter is an "official of the public as much as (...) a senator or sheriff" (LW: 282), is not Dewey postulating that in a democracy the relationship between 'the public' and the 'official' tends asymptotically to become identified, so that each and every one is an official of the public? One could object that Dewey is here speaking about the political realm and this statement is exclusively the expression of his aspiration to more participatory forms of democracy. However, if we take seriously that asymptotical tendency, do we not arrive at the

[16] Citations of the works of Dewey are to the critical edition published by Southern Illinois University Press. Volume and page numbers follow the initials of the series. Abbreviations for the volumes used are: EW *The Early Works (1882–1898)*; MW *The Middle Works (1899–1924)*; LW *The Later Works (1925–1953)*.

dissolution of the role of teachers as public officials, namely people dedicated to the organization of the public in the specific domain of education (or, to put it more accurately, of formal education)? Would it be a position so distant from McClintock's, albeit attained through a different argumentative path?

In comparison with this (plausible) interpretation, I would insist that Dewey – admittedly approached through a hermeneutical twist – provides us with conceptual tools to think of the teacher as a public official, while also taking into consideration some of the dimensions highlighted by the advocates of the commons. In particular, I will refer to some aspects of the tridimensional view of the "office" elaborated elsewhere in reference to Dewey (Oliverio, 2014, 2018), by distinguishing between *officium*$_0$, *officium*$_1$, and *officium*$_2$.[17]

I will touch only on the first two dimensions. In the first text in which the question of the office is addressed, Cicero's homonymous treatise, the notion refers to an anthropological plane.[18] I cannot expatiate here showing in detail how Cicero's tenets can be read through a Deweyan lens but I will only specify that by *officium*$_0$ I refer to that dimension which (my Deweyan) Cicero connects with the emergence of the mind and of the sphere of meaning as related to life in common and association (*societas vitae*) and to language/communication (*oratio*). *Officium*$_0$ is thus construed as the condition of possibility for the rise of a human life as something not merely lived and sensed but as something in which things, insofar as they are meaning-ful, can (and should) be 'managed,' 'ruled' (Cicero speaks of *res gerenda*) and life is 'instituted' as life in common (*ad institutionem vitae communis*, we read in his *De officiis*). It is to note that community is not already there but we should look at this movement the other way round. In Deweyan terms: "There is more than a verbal tie between the words common, community, and communication. Men live in a community in virtue of the things which they have in common; and communication is the way in which they come to possess things in common" (MW 9, p. 7). In this respect, despite the possibly infelicitous use of the verb "to possess," Dewey's tenets could resonate with some relevant themes put forward by the theoreticians of

[17] While built on the mentioned tridimensional model, the argument here presented actually deviates in some points from the previous treatment of the topic. However, I cannot linger over this difference.

[18] Agamben (2012, p. 89) has sagaciously pointed out this aspect within a different kind of inquiry.

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the commons but, at the same time, he would not lapse into a conception of the community as a sort of closed *Gemeinschaft*, which suppresses variety and individuality.

Moreover, while Dewey would recognize this backdrop as vital, he would not deem it to be exhaustive of the life in common, especially in a complex society. It is here that the dimension of $officium_1$ steps in. This is the dimension of the *office* of the *officials* as those who take care of the indirect consequences and thus promote the organization of the domain of the public. In the reading here advanced, being an official in reference to a specific area of social life entails systematically caring for the significance of that area for the welfare of the entire common life, way beyond immediate interests.

The 'level' of $officium_0$ as the institution of the life in common is the moment of communication as participation, which ultimately consists in the relationships between old and new generations (MW9, ch. 1, §§ 1-2). It has, therefore, a constitutive educational tenor, which is reconstructed and reinforced by teachers as officials, once the complexity of society demands the establishment of formal education and the school as a special social environment. Accordingly, I would suggest reading Dewey's insistence on the need for formal education not to decay into scholasticism (in the derogatory meaning of the word) not as an appeal to a liquidation of the school but as the highlighting of the reconstruction-in-continuity obtaining between $offcium_0$ and $officium_1$. To re-adapt Meirieu's tenets, we have to do, therefore, with a movement of verticality ($officium_1$) that helps to re-organize the horizontal relationships. However, this movement is not the breaking in of something completely unrelated to what 'precedes' ($officium_0$) but – in the logic of the 'dimensions' of the office – it is a renewal at a different level (including now a 'public' dimension) of the dynamics of the instauration of the life in common.

In this sense, understanding teachers as officials means stressing their role as those who preserve the meaning of education as "a common *and* public good." Leaving the plane of abstract conceptualizations and referring them back to contemporary challenges, it means that teachers' efforts to be faithful to the integrity of their profession implies (also) a kind of political role. We can capture the latter with the words of Dewey when reflecting on *The Crisis of Education* (LW 9, pp. 112-126) in the troubles of the 1930s. I will quote at some length a magnificent passage

from this text, as it illustrates the position which I am endeavouring to outline by reclaiming the role of the teachers as officials:

> (...) if the teaching body yields without a fight to show the difference between true and false economy, without an effort to show up the motives of organized finance, the teachers will not only harm themselves and the cause of education, but will also become the accomplices of politicians in continuing to do business in the old way at the old stand. Above all, *it behooves the teachers in behalf of the community, of the educational function which they serve,* and not merely because of their personal interest in a fit wage for what they do--self respecting and honorable as is that motive--*to make clear beyond a peradventure that public education is not a business carried on for pecuniary profit, that it is not therefore an occupation to be measured by the standards which the bankers and real estate men and the big industrialists seek for themselves* in working for personal gain and measuring success and failure by the ledger balance, but that money spent on education is a social investment--an investment in future well being, moral, economic, physical, and intellectual, of the country. *Teachers are simply means, agents in this social work. They are performing the most important public duty now performed by any one group in society. Any claims which they can rightfully make are not made in behalf of themselves as private persons, but in behalf of society and the nation*. These will be what they are and are not in the future largely because of what is done and not done in this day and generation in the schools of the country. (Ibid., p. 123. Emphasis added)

The Deweyan inflection of the conceptual hendiadys (common *and* public) lies, therefore, in the interweaving of *officium*$_0$ and *officium*$_1$, viz. in the recognition, on the one hand, that the institution of the common life is the inescapable backdrop for any kind of office (in the sense of *officium*$_1$), unless it finally deteriorates into mere officialdom[19]; and, on the other, that *officium*$_0$ – as being a participant in a common good/life – may be insufficient to counter phenomena regarding indirect

[19] By officialdom I refer to the bureaucratic understanding of the role of the teacher as a public official which is poles apart from the view here advocated, which refers to a political and moral dimension.

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consequences and, thus, reclaiming the consolidation of a public space. Accordingly, to bring the era of enclosure to an end in education should not amount to dismantling the school but to recovering its significance as "a public issue" (Masschelein & Simons, 2013).

If the Deweyan response to the crisis of education – in the aforementioned passage – consists fundamentally in a call for a sort of political engagement of teachers as public officials (thereby offering an instantiation of that coupling of politics and education whose need Honneth has recently reclaimed), in the following I will follow a different (but complementary) path: I will focus on the role of public officials as consubstantial to the very professional practice of teachers and, thus, to their professional subjectification. This shift of focus is related to some contemporary phenomena that impact on the very fabric of the communication between the old and young generations and make harder the struggles of teachers when pursuing their mission. It is to this that we have now to turn our attention.

The wager on the public beyond the demoralization of the teachers

Dewey may have seen it coming: in the aftermath of the Second World War he presciently diagnosed a "retreat to individualism" as a "crisis in human history" (LW 15, pp. 210-223), largely relying upon one of the sources of the contemporary discourse about the commons (namely Polanyi's [2002] *The Great Transformation*). However, he could not anticipate what we may call with a touch of irony "infantilism as the highest stage of capitalism," to re-adapt a Lenin title. I am referring to the brilliant analysis that Barber (2007) has dedicated to "the infantilizing ethos of capitalism." I will not be able to depict the whole of his multifaceted examination but I will unravel only some thematic threads relevant for the present reflection.

His point of departure is the "ethos of induced childishness[,] an infantilization that is closely tied to the demands of consumer capitalism in a global market economy" (Barber, 2007, p. 3). This jeopardizes the democratic project, insofar as,"many of our primary business, educational, and governmental institutions are consciously and purposefully engaged in infantilization and as a consequence (...) we are vulnerable to

such associated practices as privatization and branding (...) Thus, our democracy is little by little corrupted, our republican realm of public goods and public citizens is gradually privatized" (pp. 12 and 20).

To make his point clear Barber signals the existence of a clear gulf between a consumerist and a democratic ethos and, significantly, he matches this distinction with that obtaining between childishness/infantilism and grown-up-ness:

> Citizens are grown-ups. Consumers are kids (...) Grown-up citizens exercise legitimate collective power and enjoy real public liberty. Consumers exercise trivial choice and enjoy pretend freedom. Consumers even when childish have a place in a free society and express one part of what it means to live freely. But they do not and cannot define civil liberty. When they are defined as doing so, free society is put at risk. Privatization does not just reenforce infantilization: in the realm of politics, it is its realization (Barber, 2007, p. 162).

Barber's argumentation is teeming with references to education, although fundamentally his treatment of it is cursory. However, it is noteworthy how far his reflections may resonate with some influential ideas of the contemporary debate. As early as in 2001, by mobilizing Arendtian categories, Jan Masschelein – from a different perspective – indicated how far the discourse of the learning society, which has incessantly monopolized educational theorizing and practice, is accomplice with the ethos of *animal laborans* and the circuit labour/consumption, which impedes any emergence of a public domain. While Masschelein appropriately highlights that this predominance ultimately amounts to a logic of survival, we can say that the phenomena portrayed by Barber are the other side – seemingly more cheerful and happy-go-lucky – of the same process of the erosion of the public. On the other hand, Biesta's (2017, p. 4) identification of the task of education with the effort "to mak[e] the grown-up existence of another human being in and with the world possible" provides us with conceptual tools to meet – in a genuinely educational way – the challenges depicted by Barber. Moreover, Biesta's (2017, p. 18) emphasis on the contrast between being subject to one's own desires and becoming a subject of one's own desires and on the need to shift from desires (as impulses) to desirability is key

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to thinking of an education which is not subjugated to the infantilizing ethos but endeavours to reclaim the democratic project in a contemporary scenario.

Due to the main thrust of the present paper, I will approach Barber's tenets from a slightly different vantage point, while maintaining as a necessary background the (admittedly sketchy) remarks of the previous paragraph. First of all, on account of the tripod of "infantilization, privatization, and civic schizophrenia" (Barber, 2007, p. 260) it is to highlight that "[n]ow even democratic models of citizenship are subordinated to parent-child paradigms" (p. 28)[20] and "[p]rivatization demeans the 'us' as an 'it' (big government, bureaucracy, 'them') and imagines that consumers and citizens are the same thing" (p. 150). Both movements (the subordination of any public practice to the parent-child paradigm and the cancellation of the public "us") are, to adopt the vocabulary introduced in the second section, the breaking of the interlacement-through-difference between $officium_o$ (= the institution of a life in common) and $officium_1$ (= the role of officials as those who contribute to shaping a public space); such a breaking, while claiming to dissolve the role of $officium_1$ in favour of an increase of the power of personal choice, finally evaporates also $officium_o$: indeed, what kind of institution of common life is possible when privatization obtains? In the vocabulary of Meirieu, it is the verticality of $officium_1$ that is necessary to avoid an unstructured horizontality.

At the same time, by disbanding $officium_1$ any space of mediation as a domain of reflectivity is not only made impossible but even seen as an attack on the immediacy of the satisfaction of one's own desires and on what is taken as "freedom," whereas,

> "[t]o be politically relevant, liberty in our era must be experienced as positive rather than negative, must be public rather than private. This means education for liberty must also be public rather than private. Citizens cannot be understood as mere consumers because individual desire is not the same thing as common ground and public goods are always something more than an aggregation of private wants" (Barber, 2007, p. 126).

[20] For how the parent-child relationship can – and, indeed, should – enter into a reflection on education as a common and public good and not be merely dismissed as a negative model, see the brilliant argument in Ramaekers and Hodgson's paper in this special issue.

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The logic of the consumerist ethos builds on the deletion of second-order desires in favour of the undisputed dominion of first-order desires (to stick to a distinction of Frankfurt (1971) akin to Biesta's (2017) opposition between desire and desirability). In contrast, the democratic ethos thrives on the education of people who cultivate (the ability for) second-order desires and on forms of relationships that make this possible. A caveat is appropriate: first-order desires, as they are frantically fueled by a consumerist ethos, are not simply a manifestation of $officium_o$ as the latter, *qua* a kind of *officium*, is geared to the institution of a life in common, whereas a consumerist ethos finally liquefies it. For this reason, the bankruptcy of the public (its corrosion into an "it" instead of an 'us' and the interwoven reduction of the officials to a "them" who are experienced as obstacles to the full enjoyment of one's desires) backfires on $officium_o$; in its turn, as aforementioned, a kind of $officium_1$, merely exercised in a way ultimately antithetical to $officium_o$ would decay to mere officialdom. In other words, the tripartite model of the office prevents us from creating a rift between the dimensions of the life in common and that of the formation of the public; it allows us to operate in the horizon of the aforementioned triangulation, as has been re-interpreted in the Deweyan key, and thus to preserve the value of some intuitions of the advocates of the commons, without ceding to their excesses.

The portrayed social constellation has calamitous consequences for teaching as a profession. In the age of GERM (Global Educational Reform Movement) the "choice" (a typical mantra of consumerist capitalism) is one of the main features modelling educational practices (Sahlberg, 2016, pp. 133-134) and, moreover, it is sustained by the emphasis on accountability ruled by an "odd combination of marketized individualism and central control" (Biesta, 2010, p. 56), that is, in the vocabulary of this paper, of infantilized individualism and officialdom, in which both $officium_1$ and, finally, $officium_o$ disappear. Teachers risk losing (or have they already lost?) their role as public officials in the strong meaning of $officium_1$. To harp on Santoro's (2018) categories, this may result in a degradation of the profession both in terms of the "harm caused to the students" (by being compelled to accept the practices dictated by GERM) and of the sense of "unfaithfulness to the integrity of teaching." The final upshot of this process could be what Santoro calls "demoralization," insightfully distinguishing it from burn-out (as a psychological notion).

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I want to appropriate (possibly with a grain of idiosyncratic interpretation) Santoro's argument by stating that the teachers' demoralization is the consequence of the lost access to what Albert Hirschman (2002) defines as "public happiness," which accompanies any public action:

> One of the major attractions of public action is the exact opposite of the most fundamental characteristic of private pleasures under modem conditions: while the pursuit of the latter through the production of income (work) is clearly marked off from the eventual enjoyment of these pleasures, there is no such clear distinction at all between the pursuit of the public happiness and the attainment of it. (...) striving for the public happiness (in some concrete respect) and attaining it cannot be neatly separated. Indeed, the very act of going after the public happiness is often the next best thing to actually having that happiness (and sometimes not even the next best thing, but much the best thing of the whole process (...)). Public-oriented action belongs, in this as in other respects, to a group of human activities that includes the search for community, beauty, knowledge, and salvation. All these activities "carry their own reward," as goes the somewhat trite phrase. (p. 950)

In the reading here offered, Hirschman thereby explains what would appear to be sheer folly in the utilitarian logic typical of the social sciences, namely the commitment to public action and, in the present context, to teaching as public action (to the extent that it remains of such a kind), despite the fact that many 'practical' reasons could suggest undertaking other careers.

Remarkably, Hirschman illustrates his point by quoting a thought of Blaise Pascal about the search for God and this leads me to my final point: as operating in the horizon of the public in the time of its decline (Marquand, 2004; see also Biesta, 2012) is comparable with the act of believing in God in the epoch of His hiddenness (Goldmann, 2013), the logic presiding over Pascal's wager (Oliverio, 2002) can be read into the structure of the (contemporary) commitment of teachers to the public. Indeed, as Franco Cassano (2004, p. 59) has wonderfully put it, "wagering means wagering that God [or the public: *addition of the present author*] is not dead but only hidden and that as of now the only

way of representing it is that of proving, through one's own behaviour, that the finite [or the private: *addition of the present author*] may not be everything."

From this perspective, this wager is intrinsic to what Santoro (2018, p. 34 ff.) calls the teacher's "moral center." Without being allowed to investigate here the technicalities of Pascal's reasoning, it is important to specify that, if we stick to his views, wagering (on the public) – seemingly against all odds – is not a game of chance but it is a decision taken by marshalling the mathematical explanations elaborated by the French philosopher to demonstrate the reasonableness of 'working for the uncertain' (see Oliverio, 2002, esp. pp. 337 ff.). Hence, however risky, the folly of education as a public good is reasonable; it appeals to teachers as officials (in the sense of *officium*$_1$), if we do not want that the call for a dis-enclosed education (possibly sensible in other respects) winds up colluding with the pressures of the infantilizing ethos of consumerist capitalism.

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