

Experimentum Scholae: The World Once More ... But Not (Yet) Finished

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Abstract Inspired by Hannah Arendt, this contribution offers an exercise of thought as an attempt to distil anew the original spirit of what education means. It tries to articulate the event or happening that the word names, the experiences in which this happening manifests itself and the (material) forms that constitute it or make it find/take (its) place. Starting from the meaning of *scholè* as ‘free time’ or ‘undetermined and unfinished time’ it further explores *scholè* as the time of attention which is the time of the regard for the world, of being present to it (or being in its presence), attending it, a time of delivery to the experience of the world, of exposure and effacing social subjectivities and orientations, a time filled with encounters. Education, then, relates to forms of profanation, suspension and attention and can be articulated as the art (the doing) and technology that makes *scholè* happen.

Keywords Education · Experimentum scholae · Free time · Suspension · Profanation · Attention · World

σχολή (Greek: *scholè*): free time, rest, delay, study, discussion, lecture, school, school building

At the end of her essay “What is Authority?” Hannah Arendt states that we are “confronted anew, without the religious trust in a sacred beginning and without the protection of traditional and therefore self-evident standards of behavior, by the elementary problems of human living together” (Arendt 1968a, p. 141). To take up this confrontation means to ask and investigate how to make sense again of such words as ‘freedom’ or ‘authority’, how to conceive of ‘education’, ‘culture’, etc. These are the “exercises of thought” that she

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proposes in *Between Past and Future* starting from an acknowledgment that, in the strong sense, the meaning of these words has “evaporated”, leaving behind “empty shells”. The challenge they present is “to distil from them anew their original spirit” (Arendt 1968b, p. 15). Distilling the original spirit is neither to perform a historical reconstruction or genealogy, nor to engage in essentialist analysis in order to define a (suprahistorical) essence. It rather consists of attempts to relate these words to the experiences and materialities connected to the inventions or events that they name and to our actual experiences. These exercises do not contain prescriptions on what to think or which truths to hold, they “do not attempt to design some sort of utopian future” (ibid. 14) or to provide definite solutions. The exercises of thought are to a large extent “experiments”, attempts to clarify some issues and to “gain some assurance in confronting specific questions.” Their literary form is that of the essay and the work that of an experimenter (ibid. 15). Let us, in this vein and with reference to a situation in which education seems to be conflated with facilitating (individual) learning processes and schools are being transforming from public institutions into privatized learning environments, risk such an exercise of thought as an attempt to distil anew the original spirit of what education means. This attempt is neither to define or clarify a concept, nor to project an idea, to purely describe a phenomenon, or to recall or explain (historical or empirical) facts. But it is trying to articulate the event or happening that the word names, the experiences in which this happening manifests itself and the (material) forms that constitute it or make it find/take (its) *place*.

In many languages the notion of ‘school’ (escuela, école, scuola, skola, Schule, etc.) derives from the Greek *scholè* (σχολή) which means first of all ‘free time’, but also: rest, delay, study, discussion, lecture, school building. All of these meanings are important and strongly related to each other and all of them would deserve a substantial elaboration, but let us take it, to begin with, in the sense of ‘free time’. Free time is neither leisure time, nor the time of learning, development or growth, but the time of study, thought and exercise. We could call it also the time of the gap between what is possible and what is actual, or between past and future to use the words of Arendt. From this, we can take a straightforward and preliminary articulation: Education is about *making* free or public time *happen*, to have the gap finding/taking (its) *place*. Or in other terms: it is about making ‘school’ in the sense of *scholè*. In this line, we can also state that the educator—e.g. the teacher as not only teaching but educating—is the one who leads to the school/scholè (which was the Greek meaning of the *paedagogus*—παιδαγωγός) and/or contributes to its happening: the architect of *scholè*, i.e. the one who un-finishes, who undoes the appropriation and destination of time. An educator (e.g. the teacher as educator) acts not only upon the opinion of equality of intelligence (as Jacques Rancière implies), which suspends the positions that are assigned in an unequal social, institutional order (which Rancière calls the police order), but she acts upon the opinion of time: there is free time and we have free time, that is, it is always possible to suspend defined or destined time. The psychologist, the therapist, the pastor, the facilitator of learning assume no free time. Their time is destined or has a predefined sense or aim: the time of development or growth, the time of learning something, the time of salvation or progress, the time of optimisation and mobilisation, the time of reform and innovation, of investment and production (e.g. of learning outcomes). *Scholè*, however, is the time without destination and without aim or end.

School/scholè, then, is not to be conflated with the institution and, thus, can happen also outside it. In fact the school as institution could be regarded in many respects as a way to

appropriate the school/scholè, to destine it. More generally we could read the history of the school as system/institution/organisation (and probably also the history of the philosophy of education that supported it) maybe to a rather large extent as a history of appropriation or taming of 'free time'.

Of course, one could say in a certain way that study, exercise or thought are the ends of scholè. But what we mean is that what appears, happens or is done within scholè is not determined by a defined result, outcome or product. In this sense it is time which is freed from a defined end and therefore from the usual economy of time. The *Oxford Dictionary of English* traces the original sense of 'destination' and 'to destine' back to the Latin *destinare*: 'the action of intending someone or something for a purpose or end'. Free time as un-destined time is time where the act of appropriating or intending for a purpose or end is delayed or suspended. It therefore is also the time of rest (of being inoperative or not taking the regular effect) but also the time which rests or remains when purpose or end is delayed.

Free time as the time of study, thought and exercise is time which is separated from productive life, it is time where labour or work as economic activities are put at a distance. It is time of knowledge/matter for the sake of knowledge/matter (related to study), of capability for the sake of capability (connected to exercising) and of the voice/touch of an event in excess of the subject and its projects (which is at stake in thought). A typical feature of this separateness, then, is *suspension*. Economic, social, cultural, religious or political appropriations are suspended, as are the forces of the past and the future and the tasks and roles connected to specific places in the social order. To suspend means not to destroy or ignore, but to '*temporally prevent from being in force or effect*'. Education as a *form* of suspension is not destroying or denying anything, e.g. the past or the institutions, but is disorientating the institutions, interrupting the past. The necessities and obligations of professions, the imperatives of knowledge, the demands of society, the burden of the family, the projects for the future; everything is there or can be there, but in a condition of floating (see also: Barthes 1984).

Suspension here could be regarded more generally as an event of de-familiarisation, de-socialisation, de-appropriation or de-privatization; it sets something free. The term 'free', however, not only has the negative meaning of suspension (free from), but also a positive meaning, that is, free to. Drawing upon the terminology of Agamben, we can introduce the term *profanation* to describe this kind of freedom. According to Agamben "[p]ure, profane, freed from sacred names is that thing that is being replaced in view of the common use by people" (Agamben 2005, p. 96). A condition of profane time is not a place of emptiness, therefore, but a condition in which things (practices, words) are disconnected from their regular use (in the family and in society) and hence it refers to a condition in which something of the world is open for common use. In that sense these things (practices, words) remain without end: means without an end, or un-finished.

The form of *suspension* and *profanation* is what makes scholè a public time; it is a time where words are not part (no longer, not yet) of a shared language, where things are not (no longer, not yet) a property and to be used according to familiar guidelines, where acts and movements are not (no longer, not yet) habits of a culture, where thinking is not (no longer, not yet) a system of thought. Things are 'put on the table', transforming them into common things, things that are at everyone's disposal for free use. What has been suspended is their 'economy', the reasons and objectives that define them during work or social, regular time. Things are thus disconnected from the established or sacred usages of the older generation in society but not yet appropriated by students or pupils as representatives of the new

generation. The profane school/scholè functions as a kind of common place where nothing is shared but everything can be shared.

Comenius conceived of (school-)education as presenting the *world once more*, but according to him this ‘once more’ means to re-present the confusing, overwhelming world in an orderly, destined, defined way. School matter, then, refers to an oriented world (oriented beyond the confusion). However, in line with our reading of scholè, this orientation implies the taming of scholè. We would rather say, that the presentation of the world once more, without orientation or destination, turns something into school matter. That is the basis for what could be called the conservative aspect of education. This is not to be understood in the political sense to maintain the status quo, since it is precisely about offering or presenting the world once more without trying to define how it should be continued or used, i.e. to offer it un-destined, to set it free. That is why Arendt writes: “Our hope always hangs on the new which every generation brings; but precisely because we can base our hope only on this, we destroy everything if we so try to control the new that we, the old, can dictate how it will look” (Arendt 1968c, p. 189). That education is conservative means that it conserves things (words, practices) as unfinished things, i.e. things not directly related to an end, means without end so that students or pupils can begin anew *with* these things, *with* the world. They can now get meaning again, or get a new meaning.

Scholè is not simply a time of passage (*from past to future*), project-time or initiation-time. It is the time of attention which is the time of the regard for the world, of being present to it (or being in its presence), attending it, a time of delivery to the experience of the world, of exposure and effacing social subjectivities and orientations, a time filled with encounters.

Michel Serres points our attention to the swimmer in the middle of a very large stream: “all security has vanished: there he abandons all reference points... The real passage occurs in the middle. Whatever direction determined by the swim, the ground lies dozens or hundreds of yards below the belly or miles behind and ahead. The voyager is alone. One must cross in order to know solitude, which is signaled by the disappearance of all reference points.” (Serres 1997, p. 5). Taking this swimmer who traverses the stream it could look like the swimmer simply goes from one land to another (from the land of ignorance to that of knowledge for example), as if the medium would be simply a point without dimension (as when we jump). Of course, he ‘arrives’ in a second world, but more importantly, the swimmer did not only change river banks, but has known the trait that binds them and that is in fact a ‘place’ that integrates all directions, a ‘milieu’ that has no orientation itself, or, the other way round, opens to all directions and orientations. And we could add: human beings have no natural habitat, no proper place/milieu, no natural destination, which is the same as saying that they can experience scholè, and have to be educated (an animal that goes to school).

Profanation, suspension and attention are ways to communize and disclose world, and place students time and again in a position to begin (*with* the words, things): they offer the experience of being able, of potentiality in front of a thing in common. The words to ‘communize’ and ‘communization’ exist in English, but are seldomly used. They have their origin in communist theory where they refer to the process of abolishing ownership of the means of production and therefore resonate to the de-appropriation which we want to emphasize here, however in a somewhat different way. Communization is first of all—and perhaps only—an educational term, not a political one. As education presents the world

once more, unfinished, it turns the world into a common thing, and puts students as equals in the position to begin. This is, if one would like, the political dimension of scholé. It needs no political doctrine and guidance—communist or not—to become political. The time and space of scholé has an end in itself or, which comes to the same, is a pure means, a medium.

Scholè can have different other names: the ‘gap between past and future’ (Arendt), a ‘bubble in time’ (Pennac), a ‘refugium’ (Horkheimer), an ‘asylum’ (Deligny), a ‘suspended garden’ (Barthes). In all these cases it is a time/space where something can be and can become present and where we are in its presence (attentive and attending it, not only knowing but also concerned), so that it can touch us, and we can be in its company and can begin (to live) with it.

Where this something can start to signify, become a ‘res’ or ‘thing’ in the sense of Heidegger: referring to the old German word ‘Ding’ a thing is an affair, it is what assembles a world (Heidegger 1951). A thing is not an object of knowledge, but something that starts to (be of) interest, something that becomes part of our world, in the double sense of being part of it (and thus at once adding to it and further dividing it) and being of concern. The experience that is involved is the experience: ‘it becomes interesting’, which is at once an experience of de-appropriation and commonality. ‘It’ being, as Serres indicates, the third that repositions the first and the second person.

Education is not in the first place about the coming into presence of someone (a unique person), but of some thing as part of a common world. Some thing can communicate and become ‘real’ or realized (in the sense of being turned into ‘res’, into a ‘thing’). In other words, scholé is where the world ‘happens’ (once more), is given again so that it becomes real and subjects are exposed to it, i.e. de-centered and de-subjectivated. De-centring and de-subjectivation are not the aim of scholé, but the consequence of something becoming ‘real’ (again). It is formative and transformative: a world takes place, ‘things’ appear, but in their appearing also the individual is transformed and co-appears and an interest in the sense of *inter-esse* can develop. That is why scholé is not so much about learning or about identity or subjectivity. The issue is not to know or learn who I am or who you or we are; the issue is to care for the self as being a care for what inter-ests. It is about the common world and what that world has to ‘say’ to me or us, how it ‘interests’ me or us. Scholé is the time of *being exposed together*.

And educators, than, don’t re-present something, but through the way in which they deal with something (and thus communicate it)—their care or love for the world (their love for words, texts, things, practices), to refer once more to Arendt—they present some thing, they give some thing to see, to hear, and they let someone exist in the shadow of this thing. They give authority to some thing, bringing students or pupils in its neighbourhood so that it could become common or shared. The passionate teacher can make the matter speak, transform an object into a thing, that is a part of our world. Make that students come in touch and be touched, that is communicating and disclosing world.

Experimentum scholae: the experience of the happening, appearing and communizing of world.

But how to suspend time? How to disclose and communize world? This is not only to make the world known or to offer an immediate experience of a reality, but about the way in which a certain shaping or aesthetics obliges or incites us to take part in a sensory experience in which some thing is disclosed and communicated, such that the world divides and becomes shared, such that a purely detached relationship or dis-interested

attitude becomes difficult to maintain and we become attentive. It is about an aesthetical arranging and dealing with matter (implying architecture, design, gestures, words, disciplines, composition, limitations, protocols) that places students or pupils in the silence of the beginning and offers the experience of potentiality in front of something.

Starting from the articulation of the event and experience of scholè, we could start to think of education as the art (the doing) and technology that (help) make it happen, i.e. spatializes, materializes and temporalizes this scholè. Education as practice, than, entails the tracing of *spaces*, the arranging and addressing of *matter* and the editing of *time* that make scholè (study, exercise, thought) happen. Starting from this first articulation, we could then try to reconsider and reinvestigate the rich pedagogic(al) and didactic tradition of practices and exercises in order to articulate them in terms of *pedagogic forms of suspension, profanation and attention*: the class, the lecture, the seminar, the workshop, the educational dialogue. (Foucault's lectures of the eighties would offer a brilliant start for such 'philosophy of education', including a morphology, figurology, technology and gesturology of education.) These forms would include particular architectures, particular pedagogic disciplines (intellectual and material technologies of mind and body, gestures) and pedagogical figures (persona characterized by a particular ethos, i.e. an attitude, disposition or 'stance' e.g. the figure of the teacher, professor, student), that constitute the happening of 'free time'.

Various ways exist in which 'free time' is neutralized or immunized in current discourses and educational technologies testifying of what one could call, by analogy with Rancière, a deep hatred of school. The banalization of school, which happens in the identification of the time of the school with the (natural) time of growth, maturation or development, with the (productive) time of learning or of political projects, masks/disguises the separation between 'useful, productive, economic time' and 'free time'. The banalization of the discussion and argumentation about a matter that takes place by reducing it to an exchange of private opinions and a debate on individual preferences, standpoints and perspectives masks the fact that in the school the (common) world is put into play (and not individual stakes or needs). The banalization of the teacher that takes place by identifying her with the professional, masks the possibility that she is an amateur, a lover of world, that can 'make' (free) time.

Moreover it is important to emphasize especially that free time (as is every time) is technologically mediated and edited, and that one of its basic mediums was apparently for a very long time alphabetic writing (which Ong called the technologisation of the word). Indeed, as Parry, Havelock, Ong, Illich, Sanders, Rotman and others have showed alphabetic recording of speech is the condition for the beginning of a 'pedagogical space' that implies the very coming into existence of words and of the difference between thought and speech. "Only the alphabet has the power to create 'language' and 'words', for the word does not emerge before it is written down" (Illich and Sanders 1988, p. 7) "Only then does true subject matter come into being; only then can the wisdom of a previous generation be transmitted in that generation's words, to be commented upon in distinct and new words by the teacher" (Ibid. 168). Without this alphabetical technologisation of the wor(l)d no 'education' and 'school'. Therefore, one of the crucial challenges seem to be whether and how scholè (as disclosure and communization), is to be made or sustained in a time of information and communication technologies, in a time of digital technologisation of the wor(l)d, in a time which is no longer that of modernization, progress or development, but of globalization and the instant.

Uncommon, perhaps, but it is necessary to end with us, the two authors of this essay. We came to experience that it is impossible to talk, to think and write alone about these things. Another, maybe the only name for that experience is friendship. Friendship is not about intimacy or privacy. It is a worldly experience; for friends the world becomes something of a concern, something to think about, something that provokes experimentation and writing. Is a philosophy of education, as far as it faces the world, possible without friendship? Clearly, it has never been, institutionally, more strongly required to indicate and claim one's own contribution, or at least to indicate an order of names. That reduces the time and space for friendship, it constitutes its banalization. Perhaps free time makes friends.

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