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TEACHING THEORY AND THE ART OF NOT-KNOWING
NOTES ON PEDAGOGICAL COMMONALISM

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Two Modes of Teaching Theory

In his preface to August Aichhorn's education text *Wayward Youth*, Sigmund Freud famously repeated the bon mots 'that there are three impossible professions – educating, healing and governing' (quoted in Britzman, 2009: 128)¹. There are many sound reasons for naming education, which is deliberately restricted here to the realm of formally organized learning and teaching, as indeed an impossible activity. The main one states that every educator has to presume the existence of an individual learning capacity whose particularities or sheer idiosyncrasy only become gradually visible. Educating comes down to the careful – or the not so cautious – handling of human black boxes, which are foreseen with a certain communicative input out of the hope that it will induce, however minimal and in whatever way, a learning effect. The observed outputs, registered for example during classes or exams, will tell the teacher something about an individual's particular learning potential and its underlying structure. However, the schoolmaster or professor can only make informed guesses:

teaching is anything but an exact science. In the end, one deals with a non-transparency that is impossible to outdo. The self-enlightened teacher of course knows this: s/he knows that s/he actually doesn't know what s/he is really doing when transferring knowledge or instructing a skill. Notwithstanding the existence of didactics, teaching therefore remains a form of art, in the pre-modern sense of the word, that cannot be rationalized according to mere technical precepts. It is a craft, a *métier* whose very skilfulness rests on the paradoxical capacity to transform the not-knowing that the activity necessarily implies into a workable delusion of knowledge or expertise. With this simulacrum there will always correspond a particular mode of addressing the learner, an assumed identity that vastly co-structures the educational relationship.

One still widespread mode of teaching reduces the non-transparent black box called the pupil or student to a so-called trivial machine. Most technical devices are trivial machines characterized by fixed input-output relations. One for instance switches a knob, and the light goes on or the television starts working. On the contrary, in a non-trivial or so-called Turing machine, the output is determined by the particularity of the input and the machine's internal state(s). 'It is clear that the majority of our established educational efforts is directed toward the trivialization of our children', thus Heinz von Foerster, the founder of second-order cybernetics, already observed many years ago.

'Since our educational system is geared to generate predictable outcomes, its aim is to amputate the bothersome internal states which generate unpredictability and novelty. This is most clearly demonstrated by our method of examination in which only questions are asked for which the answers are known (or defined), and are to be memorized by the student. (...) Would it not be fascinating to think of an educational system that de-trivializes its students by teaching them to ask (...) questions for which the answers are unknown?' (Von Foerster, 1981: 209).

Von Foerster's suggestion has a special relevance for the teaching of theory in higher education. Existing university or college curricula routinely associate theory courses with rather grandiose-sounding learning objectives such as encouraging self-reflexivity or promoting a critical

stance. There exist, however, at least two general ways of teaching theory, which roughly correspond with the difference between trivializing and de-trivializing the addressed learner.

In the first version, the word ‘theory’ points to a well-defined and rather uncontested canonical body of knowledge that, whatever its more particular nature, is transmitted in a systematic fashion. Teaching theory then equals instruction, or the mediation of validated information. Several pedagogical methods can be deployed in light of this goal, varying from the traditional lecture format to more interactive forms of learning. These differences do of course matter, yet they mostly do not outdo the students’ overall positioning as trivial machines. The lecturer communicates parts and parcels of conceptual knowledge, makes the subject matter digestible through countless mundane illustrations, and expects the learners to give the right answers at the end of the educational ride. If the correct answers are indeed produced, the learning process was assumingly a (trivial) success. This is the dominant mode or organizing theory of classes for first or second year students at universities that can also be found in colleges. Such classes just confirm most students’ habits, acquired in primary school and usually greatly reinforced in secondary school, to behave instrumentally during lectures and to cram feverishly for examinations (after which many a student just forgets the examined subject matter).

In the alternative approach, the notion of theory still involves bits and pieces of codified knowledge and the quasi-sacrosanct texts of, for instance, Max Weber, Niklas Luhmann and Michel Foucault in a social theory class, (or in an art theory class: of Immanuel Kant, Theodor W. Adorno and Jacques Rancière). Yet *doing theory* differs from just learning or instructing. For the accent now decisively shifts to the living encounter between theoretical concepts or insights and the students’ co-thinking. Theory thus changes from a firm body of knowledge into a verb, an open dialogical practice that again and again faces its own contingencies. This ‘thinking aloud together’, with or against particular ideas, initially aims at a heightened awareness of, e.g., the socially constructed and intrinsically complex nature of phenomena such as the exercise of power or art’s current modes of being. Yet when the teaching really goes in the direction of

‘doing theory’, a collective situation emerges in which something genuine may happen because the public thinking of both teacher and students leaves behind canonical problems and validated answers, willingly becomes uncertain, and deliberately takes the risk of ending up in a zone where ‘the will to know’ (Foucault, 2011) reaches an internal limit and the experience of not-knowing is openly affirmed. A theory class may thus open up a *common space* for possible reflection that never closes off the sense for ‘the possible’: no definitive Truth can stop the public process of inquisitive questioning.

Overall, ‘doing theory’ aims at the creation of an *intellectual common* that involves both a peculiar experience of commonality or togetherness and a specific social productivity that invites all participants to think in an unbounded mode, so going beyond cultural clichés or personal inhibitions. In her much debated book essay *Not For Profit*, Martha Nussbaum defends this activity out of a profound concern for an informed citizenship and a lively democracy. However, the practice that I will name further on as *pedagogical commonalism* may also be connected to a political stance that greatly values the (re)production of ‘social commons’ as such, not least within the context of an ever pervasive neoliberal regime that individualizes everything and everybody. Hence the general line of argument unfolded in this essay, which is primarily informed by my personal experiences in teaching social and cultural theory both at an average West European university (read: a social sciences faculty), and a rather extraordinary art school (read: the Brussels based international dance school P.A.R.T.S) (see also Laermans, 2012). I start with a brief phenomenological sketch of the main features of the practice of ‘doing theory’, particularly from the student’s point of view. Then this practice’s intrinsic political dimension is highlighted through the notions of ‘heteropia’, ‘public’, and ‘intellectual common’. The scene is thus set for the concept of pedagogical commonalism and a discussion of the prominent role of not-knowing when ‘doing theory’ against the background of the neoliberal regime of governmentality. In the concluding coda, the idea of pedagogical commonalism is briefly put into a broader perspective via Jacques Rancière’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s recent political pleas in defence of ‘the common’, or every social space or practice that is primarily structured by the principles of social equality and societal self-organization.

The Practice of ‘Doing Theory’

‘Doing theory’ differs from the institutionalized desire to transmit verified knowledge whose personal assimilation can be trivially tested. It therefore does not matter that much that the presentation of a theoretical framework is highly selective, that it overall remains under-contextualized, and is incessantly destabilized, detoured, or de-emphasised by seemingly inappropriate student questions or derivative remarks. What is decisive, at least in the first instance, is the publicly shared attempt to think through the assumptions of a familiar problem, to reframe the terms of an evident question, or to put into perspective an experience that at first sight turns language into a meaningless void. Definable results become rather unimportant: it does not matter much if at the end only half of the reading material has effectively been discussed. Nevertheless, both the collective process and individual practice of reflection implied by ‘doing theory’ are well-informed, even formatted, by books as well as, for instance, works of art. Yet the invoked bits and pieces of objectified intellectual culture do not act mainly as information units validated by an academic discipline, let alone as official topics for the examination that concludes the taught course. They are primarily valued as complex resources whose unravelling always contains the promise of both knowing and not-knowing. ‘Doing theory’ is – to borrow Roland Barthes’ (1982) famous distinction – taking the ‘studium’ (the Canon, Theory, Art, History...) seriously in the hope that it will be momentarily punctuated by a thought movement whose unpredictable particularity remains external to its very condition of possibility. This practice indeed asks for the ability to give in to an uncontrollable *receptivity of thought* that profoundly questions everything that seems normal, obvious, or natural, whether the topic is communication and social systems (sociology), the notion of the subject (philosophy), or the political dimension of baroque dance (art history). How does this actually work?

Imagine we are in a theory class at an art academy, discussing the possible relationships between the medium of language and the practice of communication. A student formulates a remark that seemingly goes astray: ‘The problem with language is that you never master it well enough in order to communicate fluently your thoughts or feelings’. Suddenly

there is no longer a Fact but a Problem: an idea or category that was experienced as a matter-of-course (‘language is an instrument of communication’) changes into a contingent notion that is open to discussion and no longer excludes alternative ways of thinking. Different sorts of statements follow, all exploring or probing the idea of a communication medium’s autonomy. Pros and cons are sometimes intensely debated, without this resulting in a clear conclusion by the end of the class. That is how it often goes when ‘doing theory’: no unshakable Truths are added to the students’ knowledge. Rather, every new statement continually hints at the maxim – which is sometimes openly professed by the teacher – that ‘everything that is can also exist or be conceived otherwise’. The intertwined capacities to discern virtual realities in existing ones and to realize previously unobserved potentialities of thought or representation are both fêted and put to work in a self-critical way. New conceptual possibilities are therefore collectively tried out without making strong claims to truth. The disciplinary ‘will to know’ underlying academism is exchanged for the kind of experimental prudence that finds its most succinct expression in the word ‘*maybe*’. Hence the frequency, when ‘doing theory’, of statements like ‘maybe contemporary art is nothing but a failing name for an impossible object’. The ‘maybe’ indicates a possibility that should not be fenced off against other virtual thoughts but, on the contrary, contains the appeal to open up – in Deleuzian parlance – other ‘flight lines’ that ‘deterritorialize’ thought (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987).

‘Doing theory’ is for sure not a free-floating activity but is firmly framed by what Jacques Rancière (1991) calls in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, inspired by the writings and educational practice of Jacques Jacotot, ‘the order of explanation’, and the inequality in intelligence it simultaneously presupposes and actively produces. Teaching, in the dominant sense, indeed installs inequality in the name of an ever-renewed promise of equality. The teacher or lecturer is then a genuine master who already understands the subject matter and painstakingly explains it to the pupil or student. The fundamental axiom underlying the traditional pedagogical regime precisely states that the learner cannot comprehend without the explaining activity of the master. This assumption vastly legitimizes the teacher’s authoritative position, yet the corresponding relational inequality comes with the outlook of a future equality. For once the stu-

dent has actively learned and genuinely understood, s/he will become the master's principal equal. Nevertheless, education usually continually defers this promised moment of intellectual equality. There is still always something more or different to be learned – to be expounded and comprehended, or to be mastered by the student under the guidance of a master.

It is possible, however, within the institutional confines of organized education, to further the actual chances of a more equal participation, of a thinking and communicating together – and also, a togetherness in thought and communication – that instantiates, in the words of Rancière (2010: 168), 'the communism of intelligence', or 'the intelligence that does not fit any specific position in a social order but belongs to anybody as the intelligence of anybody'. The prime expression of this 'general intellect' (Karl Marx) is, of course, human beings' capacity to speak or communicate, the factual ability to be an intelligible language user.² 'Doing theory', or some such comparable educational practice, bets on this generic potential through the ever-repeated invitation to change the unequal terms of the educational game. Concepts are explained, arguments of a canonized author are scrutinized, yet in the overtly questioning and dialogical way this is done may be heard the insistent appeal to redefine the stakes and the actual positions held by the teacher and the students. At stake is a practice that tries to take education's promise of equality serious: 'doing theory' constantly *hopes* that the unavoidable moments of reproducing the pedagogical 'studium' will only form a passingly difficult step on its path towards its momentary 'punctuation' – to its temporary collective challenging, subversion, implosion.

Activating Potentialities

Some quite pedagogical situations imply a minimal self-challenge. The general invitation to think along and to understand the taught subject-matters accompanies the individual challenge of being able, or not, to personally bring in the presumed comprehension. At stake is a *potential* that every student gradually uncovers and refines, yet which every new course

or insight also re-addresses, re-articulates, and re-frames. The student is therefore confronted again and again with the question of whether or not s/he has the individual capacity to understand 'now, here' in an appropriate way. Learning thus unavoidably includes the simultaneously hurtful yet instructive experience of failure, of falling through or not-understanding. To learn, momentarily or structurally, that one is not able to grasp something is indeed part and parcel of every genuine learning process. However, most experts and many teachers either reduce the pedagogical challenge of personal understanding to a continual self-test, which examinations officialise with binding consequences – this is the old pedagogical regime; or they just cross it out in the name of transmitting in a neutral and efficient mode validated knowledge and codified skills that develop presumed *competences* – this is the new credo of the neoliberal regime.

As Michel Foucault (2008) already pointed out in the visionary analysis he delivered at the end of the 1970s in his Collège de France lectures on 'the birth of biopolitics', two basic trends stand out within the neoliberal regime of governmentality (compare Laermans, 2009). On the one hand, funding bodies explicitly regard and regulate the realm of higher education as a market of particular services or products in which organizations compete and cater for potential customers. For the buyer-student, the goods on offer should be both mutually comparable and easily combinable into packages that suit one's personal interest. Hence the urge for flexible curricula that present a vast array of choices, the demand for transparent examination rules and, not least, the requirement of well-defined courses or 'training units'. Formal education thus changes into one of the constituent elements of the broader disposition that Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne (2012) aptly name 'the catering regime'. On the other hand, the potential learner is not only consistently addressed as a consumer looking for maximal customer satisfaction in the educational market. Within the neoliberal regime, that very same student is also positioned as an active self-developer who wants to improve personal competencies in view of his or her employability. Gone are therefore the days that the average student in the humanities or the arts was viewed as an intellectually curious individual who was keen to give shape to a usually vague but personally fuelled interest in a particular topic, discipline, or

practice. According to the now dominant approach, the learner is first and foremost a ‘self-capitalist’: they possess a human capital, or a series of competences in need of development in view of a possible professional position. Studying equals buying educational goods, yet the choice and acquisition of these commodities equals a durable investment in oneself. In the end, the student is presumed to act as a ‘Me, Inc.’, as individual entrepreneurs who make rational, future-oriented decisions in the educational market with regard to the possible market value of their personal competences (compare Masschelein and Simons, 2003).

Describing the faculty to understand abstract concepts or arguments either as a general, even generic human potential or as an individual competence waiting to be enhanced, produces a serious difference. A human potential is a non-measurable, virtual capacity that is momentarily realized – or not; on the contrary, an individual competence is a delineable, even quantifiable faculty that needs to be developed, trained and shaped by means of general instruction and learning procedures. Whereas the first is given by nature, the second actually is a cultural construct, devised and calibrated by educationalists. Evidently, education and, more generally, culture co-structure human beings’ generic potentials to think or to communicate, to act or to understand (compare Virno, 2004). However, a *structured* potential is still a structured *potential*, or a virtual capacity that – as the saying goes – both constrains and enables in a non-transparent and, precisely therefore, unknowable way. In marked contradiction, a competence only exists through its performative expert definition and is therefore intrinsically coupled to specific learning goals, formalized instruction methods, and so on. Admittedly, this black and white distinction does not hold for several pedagogical situations. Thus to teach a dancer the art of the pirouette is at first sight only a matter of instructing a well-defined competence. Yet even in this seemingly evident case, it makes a crucial difference if the teaching relation is framed and experienced in terms of the gradual structuring of a general potential to dance or, much more minimally, as only the transmission of a technical competence. Students quickly grasp this and cogently differentiate between an ‘inspiring’ or ‘challenging’ ballet teacher and someone who is just a technically savvy instructor.

‘Doing theory’ – and again, the same goes for comparable pedagogical practices – also reaches out to education’s most intimate challenge, the one that links the potential to think individually and to personally understand with the capacity for self-transformation. Thus a student may find out that s/he is actually becoming vastly interested in issues s/he was not engaged with previously. S/he subsequently starts to take them up in a more personal way: private experiences are reconsidered, individual views become open to revision, discussed concepts or abstract ideas are thought through. What is awakened through this anything-but-smooth process is the potential not just to understand the various topics that are collectively tackled during a class but to appropriate them in such a way that one’s self or subjectivity is transformed, thus allowing one *to respond individually*. The student finds a new voice – and voices it. The resulting interactivity has nothing to do with the official pedagogical credo, already repeated for years by well-intentioned educationalists, to make students more active or participatory during a class or lecture. This kind of pseudo-activity can be simulated, which is what usually happens when a teacher explicitly invites a discussion of this theme or that topic. Finding and giving vent to a new voice is of a different nature. One teaches, and one elicits uncontrollable effects that are indirectly indicated by a personal question, an individual remark or, on the contrary, a conspicuous muteness. A gesture is produced, one that responds to the just-said in a sometimes affirmative, often hesitating way. A frequent mode of expression goes like this: ‘But if we assume that A is the case, then does it not follow from this that...’ – and the presented consequence implicitly points to a personal conviction that is in the mode of a remaking. A new thought is activated, and with it comes the capacity to deconstruct an, up till then, firmly held belief. This potential for self-transformation should not be addressed in a direct way. On the contrary, perhaps nothing debases the tradition of critical thinking more these days than the many official curricula promising an instruction in critical thinking. They indeed swap a potential for a competence.

The Heterotopian and Public Dimension of Teaching Theory

The above sketch of ‘doing theory’ tacitly involves a not-so-latent normative idealization. ‘Doing theory’ is indeed a difficult to realize ambition, a valuable practice that one can consistently aim for, yet whose very realization clearly exceeds a teacher’s individual will or desire. For instance, one starts off rather traditionally with the presentation of a handful of abstract concepts or the collective reading of a theoretical text, and suddenly, unplanned and therefore all the more improbable, there emerges a genuine togetherness, a *being-in-common* animated by the topic at hand, which was actually initiated by a student’s apparently unimportant remark. Within the framework of institutionalized educational practices, ‘doing theory’ is first and foremost an always given potential that, to paraphrase Michel de Certeau (1988), again and again *interrupts* established strategies of teaching and offers itself primarily in the form of a *kairos*, a right or opportune moment that must be tactically seized and reproduced. This ability co-defines the art of ‘doing theory’, which is partially founded on a fine-tuned capacity to hear an implicit non-said in what is explicitly said. One, be it a teacher or a student, discerns for instance in a simple question both a possibility to go off the beaten track and a still unarticulated desire for critical displacement, for entering an uncertain zone of thought. A nearly audible invitation is heard, one that tempts to collectively cross a threshold and to explore that strange zone in which the process of thinking may confront self-induced cracks and fault-lines, and which sometimes even creates a small earthquake.

‘Doing theory’ momentarily transforms the space of teaching – the classroom, the seminar room – into a *heterotopia*. Michel Foucault coined this neologism in contradistinction to the better known notion of utopia, which is an imaginary site that is by definition not anchored in a real space or territory and often acts as an incitement to transform the existing societal order. Heterotopias, Foucault (2012) writes, ‘are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which (...) all the other real sites that can be found within a culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted.’ In a heterotopia, we are exposed and displaced, ‘drawn out of ourselves’: it is a space ‘in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs’. Notwithstanding their di-

verse nature, the cemetery, the garden, or the theatre all exemplify this possibility to lose ground and to become another – to experience one’s self and capacities in a genuinely different mode, not the least the capacity for experiencing itself. Yet as Foucault himself indicates, a heterotopia is not just another space but creates as well a different time regime. Heterotopias are also *heterochronies* that suspend linear time and produce an always particular own-time within time. Thus the museum or the library are places that indefinitely accumulate time; in still other heterotopias, the individual experience of time is consistently pushed in the direction of the flowing or the ephemeral, the transitory, and the precarious. This is the time characterizing the festival, the fairground, or the vacation village: three spaces that sharpen the sense for the event-like quality of time and its promise of an at once instant and eternal happiness.

The time of ‘doing theory’ is ‘now, here’, yet without the institutionalized prospect of a delightful corporeal experience one could not have imagined. Something is interesting – ‘now, here’. Something must be understood – ‘now, here’. Something has to be said – ‘now, here’. Teaching and learning within an educational context are of course always imbued with a particular temporal urgency, even a sometimes physically felt pressure to be strongly engaged on the spot. A student doesn’t usually think ‘Oh, it’s no problem that I don’t understand since I can look up the subject matter again later on the internet.’ And only rarely will a teacher muse: ‘The mistakes I make now can be corrected during the next class, so it’s no problem that I momentarily go wrong.’ In all the not-so-rare moments that I, for better or worse, keep on associating with the practice of ‘doing theory’, the heightened experience of what happens ‘now, here’ is sharpened to the point that it co-defines the ongoing activity. It is not just a matter of psychic attention, let alone of being rhetorically animated or stimulated. At stake is, very simply, the kind of intense concentration expressing a personal commitment to the task at hand and, subsequently, the continual realization that every ‘now, here’ is a contingent building-block in a longer series of actions whose future is actively secured ‘now, here’ – or not. The now-time of ‘doing theory’ indeed anticipates the future out of the hope of expanding the created ‘time in time’, or the temporal fold that suspends everything that is considered to be of the utmost importance ‘outside there, in normal life’.

‘Now, here’ equals an acute, collectively shared concentration on a common topic. Something – an idea, an argument, an artwork, a difficult to understand part of a text – appears in isolation and is reflected upon for its own sake. The contingent topic thus becomes a matter of collective concern. There may still exist a definable connection with a broader context of knowledge, yet that relation is made loose in the moment of ‘now, here’. For the discussed topic, however mundane or trivial in ordinary life, is suddenly in and for itself *worthy* of attention. It is a *valuable thought object* inviting further reflection, even if – or precisely because – one has never given it a thought before. The valuation is momentarily shared and transforms the teaching situation within a public gathering (compare Simons and Masschelein, 2012). Or rather, an active public sees the light, in the sense John Dewey (1983) uses this expression in *The Public and its Problems*. The notions of public and problem both imply each other; thus Dewey argues: a public is not a given but constitutes a contingent and temporary formation emerging in response to a problem. Within the political realm, the at once defining and defined problem is often synonymous with a small or big harm that is experienced as both unjust and remediable. This produces an engaged public that is willing to act in concert in view of the future solution of the collectively experienced problem. In a theory class, the problem has of course a different nature. It consists of a contingent topic addressing thought through the collectively shared concern the problem elicits, resulting in the momentary creation of a thinking public.

The public situation brought forth by the practice of ‘doing theory’ may be termed *an intellectual common*.³ Such a common consists of the topic at hand plus the collective attention it receives, which evidently involves numerous acts of both thinking and communication. This common only exists on the spot and actually does not just assemble the present individuals into a public. Rather, every participant’s capacity to think and to communicate is continuously singularized, transformed ‘now, here’ into an anonymous potential out of which emerge criss-crossing flight-lines of thought, or words looking for other words (that may never come). The unintentionally produced common thus comprises ever-changing singularities made up of wandering thoughts and communications inviting other communications. They are held together by the committed con-

centration upon the defining problem, which is itself sustained by an always difficult to articulate intellectual solidarity. ‘Doing theory’ therefore comes down to the continual reiteration of a threefold experiment in thinking, speaking, and concentration. It always looks different, and it is often difficult – but it also offers peculiar intellectual and sensory pleasures.

Pedagogical Commonalism

The active (re)making of an intellectual common within an educational context through the introduction of a common issue that may potentially produce a common concentration, thinking, and speaking is the hallmark of every instance of *pedagogical commonalism* (the latter notion is indeed a neologism with broader ramifications; see also Laermans, 2011). Although its initial take-off may be attributed to a particular individual, be it a teacher or a student, the creation and sustainment of an intellectual common is a truly collective affair. With a nod to a traditional notion informing pedagogy: *Bildung* becomes a matter of co-building. A specific form of togetherness that is at once its very base and intensified outcome deeply marks the produced commonality, one that is of the mode of ‘being singular plural’ (Jean-Luc Nancy, 2000). The incessant singularizations of thought pluralize the participating individuals, and the voiced communications always mark the insurmountable gap between speaking and thinking, the social, and all those who are bodily present. Like every common, an intellectual common unites and divides, or rather: it creates a ‘being with’ or co-existence that at once confirms and outdoes the ‘being alone’ characterizing ‘the life of the mind’. Pedagogical commonalism therefore greatly differs from pedagogical communism.

It is debatable where the notion of communism should be restricted to the various historical forms of state socialism. In a more abstract sense, communism may be conceived as a mode of social organization that not only addresses a generic human subject with generic capacities in a specific social position (that of the worker, the student...) but that moreover assumes the existence of generic instruments to develop these potentials.

Although it may sound paradoxical, pedagogical communism is nowadays massively reproduced by the reigning neoliberal regime and its vast re-articulation of potentials into competences, its standardizing didactics aiming at entertaining students, and its homogenizing learning objectives. About nearly a century ago, Max Weber (2010) already warned that state socialism would only intensify modernity's overall tendency to promote a restrictive goal rationality in all life spheres and to widen the radius of action of an evermore regulating, freedom-averse bureaucracy. Neoliberal governmentality is today the prime medium of the communist belief, in the just introduced broader meaning, that we can become equal subjects through the consequent implementation of equal management procedures in whatever realm. They imperatively position us as a firm, as an entrepreneur or 'Me Inc' that rationally administers a series of personal capitals or competences in view of their optimization, and this also exists within the context of formal education. Pedagogical neoliberalism, moreover, displays a marked *heterofobia*. Spaces or practices that do not fit the more-than-once neatly defined norms of competence empowerment or instrumental teaching are usually regarded with a profound suspicion. They are at best tolerated at the fringes of the educational system, but more often they are brought into line through the expensive monitoring apparatus that nowadays differentiates without much fuss between normal and abnormal, legitimate and illegitimate situations.

Pedagogical commonalism is quite a different story, one that keeps on practicing Enlightenment's call for emancipation in a culture of contentment once baptized postmodern. Each creation of an intellectual common indeed comes with the urgent invitation to singularize 'the general intellect' (Marx, indeed), or to actualize the generic human potentials to think, to experience, and to communicate. Pedagogical commonalism does not aim at an homogeneous and measurable equality but bets on the always unpredictable richness brought about by an untameable play of differences, a heterogeneity of voices, a sociality that is simultaneously assembled and fractured through the common focus on a worthy issue. The teacher who underwrites the ideal of commonality therefore welcomes the plurality of singularizations that can neither be willed or aimed at nor controlled or managed. The constitutive paradox of every commonalist pedagogy is indeed *to intend the non-intended*.

Within an intellectual common, thought is tested to its uttermost limit, up to the point where 'the will to know' does not produce a new insight, let alone a new truth, but rather results in a profound experience of *not-knowing*. Like every general human capacity, knowing actually includes its negation, so its not-knowing. The full affirmation of this potential therefore implies moments of impotentiality, or the realization of the ability to know through its un-realization. An important ethical lesson is implied, as Giorgio Agamben (1999: 183) rightly stresses: 'To be free is not simply to have the power to do this or that thing, nor is it simply to have the power to refuse to do this or that thing. To be free is (...) *to be capable of one's own impotentiality*, to be in relation to one's own privation.' 'Doing theory' and comparable instances of pedagogical commonalism may instil a relatively durable sensitivity for that peculiar borderline experience in which not-knowing appears to be a genuine form of knowledge, particularly when one is – perhaps desperately and on the verge of panic – looking for a plausible answer or arguable solution. This receptiveness implies a notion of criticality that goes beyond the established ideas of critique, as Irit Rogoff has rightly pointed out. Whereas critical analysis tends to indulge in 'illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames', criticality is 'operating from an uncertain ground': it affirms the moment of not-knowing in the process of knowing (Rogoff, 2006: 119). One looks for instance for a different perspective or idea, and one ends up nowhere, in a sheer void where none of the spontaneously emerging thoughts fit the theme at hand. To be emancipated is not just being able to endure and stand this criticality: the emancipated individual also trusts it as a possible new beginning.

Trust is actually the cornerstone of each instance of pedagogical commonalism. The teacher has a trust in every student's ability to respond to the issued invitation to become part of the eventually generated common; and the students trust the teacher that the proposed thought object is indeed a worthy one, and that s/he will be instrumental in the sustenance of the created intellectual togetherness. For the teacher is – to paraphrase Jacques Lacan's (1967) famous characterization of both the psychoanalyst and unconsciousness – 'the subject supposed to know', and this also is in the always surprising moments that 'the will to know' observably runs against its very limits. The mutual trust must be given, time

and again: within a class, trust is a highly precarious social medium that cannot be asked for, only reproduced implicitly (compare Luhman, 1982). Some students fall through – and the teacher keeps on trusting their capacities; or the teacher fails – and s/he goes on with the presupposed trust that the students still trust her or him. No common without trust or, in the Spinozist vocabulary employed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2009), without ‘love’.

Coda

Pedagogical commonalism is not just an educational affair but only one particular instance of the more encompassing practice, encountered today in many societal spheres, of the temporal creation of a common through an active collaboration or productive togetherness (Hardt and Negri, 2009). Moreover, with the perspective of commonalism corresponds both a specific way of understanding or analyzing contemporary social relationships and a political stance that wants to further the possibility ‘to act in common’ (Laermans, 2011). Two already mentioned French thinkers who partly inspired my previous considerations concisely state the principal stakes of commonalism as ‘a politics yet to come’ in their respective contributions to the essay collection *The Idea of Communism*. Thus Jacques Rancière (2010: 176) writes toward the end of his article ‘Communists Without Communism?’: ‘The only communist legacy that is worth examining is the multiplicity of forms of experimentation of the capacity of anybody, yesterday and today. The only possible form of communist intelligence is the collective intelligence constructed in those experimentations. (...) The future of emancipation can only mean the autonomous growth of the space of the common created by the free association of men and women implementing the egalitarian principle.’ Pedagogical commonalism clearly belongs to the tradition of experimentation Rancière is referring to. It for sure forms a minor, and overall somewhat fractured, undercurrent because it generally operates within the confining limits of the traditional or, more recently, the neoliberal pedagogical regime. It may remain an open question here which regime mostly endangers the chances of commonalism. Whatever the answer,

what is involved here is a subtle tactics and ‘wisdom’ to grasp the opportune moment, to stretch it through an uncontrollable dialogue, and to further the emerging or produced common through the discreet affirmation of one’s position as a teacher – as ‘the subject supposed to know’ who actually does not know what s/he is doing and therefore cherishes the produced moments of not-knowing, (or in Heinz Von Foerster’s words, quoted in the introductory paragraph: of the public formulation of momentarily unanswerable questions).

The proverbial political essence of each form of commonalism is touched upon almost in passing in Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay ‘Communism, the Word’. As in several of his other works, Nancy succinctly unfolds in this short text the idea that being is ‘being with’ or *Mitsein*. ‘To be is to be *cum*’, Nancy states in a sentence that takes up the Latin preposition *cum* ‘as the universal preposition, the presupposition of any existence’. Although the credo-like sentence explicitly points to a new ontology that goes ‘beyond Heidegger’ with a marked Heideggerian inspiration, it also implies a profound political question. For ‘how can we think about society, government, law, not with the aim of achieving the *cum*, the *common*, but only in the hope of letting it come and taking its own chance, its own possibility of making sense?’ (Nancy, 2010: 150). This question is not only a political one in the strict sense: the raised stakes and possible answers clearly exceed the realm of organized politics. Nancy actually envisages the political dimension of every social activity, as also of teaching. One teaches out of the hope of still another intellectual common yet to come – or one does not. One sticks in the classroom to an ethos of emancipation ‘against all available evidence’ – or one does not. One thinks and speaks in a particular mode because one assumes the existence of a shared, collective intelligence – or one does not. One knows that an irremediable not-knowing informs one’s very activity and knowing – or one does not. There exists no intermediary position: as a political stance and ethical commitment, (pedagogical) commonalism does not offer much room for negotiation...

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¹ A first version of this essay was presented at the symposium 'Theory and Art of Teaching Art and Theory', organized by the expert centre Arts in Society, Groningen, 19 February 2012. I have addressed the topic of teaching theory also in Laermans (2012); small parts of this article are presented verbatim in the present essay.

² Karl Marx uses the notion of the 'general intellect' in a rather particular meaning in the so-called 'Fragment on Machines' of his *Grundrisse*, or the seven notebooks on capital and money in which can be found the first outlines of his more systematic critique of political economy in *Capital*. The expression has gained some notoriety within Italian autonomous Marxism as exemplified by the recent writings of, amongst others, Christian Marazzi, Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri and Paolo Virno. In his influential *A Grammar of the Multitude*, the latter author observes that what matters most in Marx's loose use of the concept of 'general intellect' 'is the exterior, collective, social character which belongs to intellectual activity when this activity becomes (...) the true mainspring of the production of wealth' (Virno, 2004: 38).

³ The notion of the common is a central concept in the writings of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, particularly in their analysis of so-called immaterial labour (see esp. Hardt and Negri, and 2009). Their basic idea links up with Marx's notion of the 'general intellect' (see note 2) and states that within the contemporary post-Fordist economy, which bets on innovation and niche markets, the creation of surplus value involves various forms of collaboration within productive social networks. The concept of the common designates the generic capacities to think, communicate, imagine, experience,... put to work within immaterial labour, the actual forms of cooperation it necessitates, and the collectively created product (compare Laermans, 2011).

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