

BOOK REVIEW

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**School or barbarism:
a second warning**

Liria, Carlos F., Fernández, Olga G.,
Ferrández, Enrique G. *Escuela o barbarie:
entre el neoliberalismo salvaje y el delirio
de la izquierda (Nueva edición actualizada y
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1. Introduction

The book by Carlos Fernández Liria, Olga García Fernández and Enrique Galindo Ferrández has, as its very title¹ indicates, two main objectives: first, to expose the conditions of the current educational landscape that make public education, on the one hand, a continuous and progressive institutional project of failure and, on the other hand, a cog in the system of exploitation and precarity of capitalism; and second, to point out to political left movements the various ways in which their educational policies have, in fact, betrayed their values and ideological origins by seeking some kind of compromise with the principles of the market.

Throughout the book, the three authors write in a strong and unambiguous tone, attacking neoliberal thought–turbocapitalism–and the corresponding commodification, exploitation, and oppression of various dimensions of the life of the working class related to education, without sparing criticism of its active participants, such as non-governmental organisations that pressure for changes that predominantly serve capital and supranational blocks that implement them, but also other agents who, seemingly opposed to *capitalist savagery*, end up participating in the process the authors describe as the destruction of public education.

2. The three sections of the book: the origin of public education, current diagnosis and call for resistance

The book can be roughly divided into three sections: an analysis of the origin–historical and ideological–of public education as a republican project (chapters 1 and 2); a detailed diagnosis of the conditions that led to the current–and momentum–of dismantling education in liberal societies (chapters 3 to 7); and a proposal for action and reflection to try to stop or, at least, slow down this movement of invasion and colonisation by the market, without abandoning the dream of returning education to its mission and *raison d’être* (chapters 8 to 10 and the final section titled “Conclusiones inacabadas: la inercia

¹ In English: “School or barbarism: between savage neoliberalism and the delirium of the left”

hacia la desaparición de la escuela”, which means “unfinished conclusions: the inertia towards the disappearance of public education”².

However, with the division proposed here, the intention is not to lead the reader to think that the book consists of a simple linear narrative or a technical brochure for diagnosing the educational machine; on the contrary, the authors make, across all chapters, a huge and necessary effort to expose the complex network of connections between politics, society, education, and the market. What follows will present the main nodes of this network.

2.1. The Enlightenment dream and the origin of public education

The first two chapters present the Enlightenment dream of a society where freedom of thought and fundamental rights are guaranteed, and where humanity achieves progress. For individuals to reach this freedom of thought, the Kantian majority (*Mündigkeit*), it was essential that there be an appropriate, public, universal education separated from the particular interests of society (such as the church, business, and politics), whose function was to transmit the knowledge produced and accumulated by humanity up to that point: only by providing individuals with the (scientific) contents acquired by previous generations could they then think for themselves and, consequently, become free. For this reason, the authors claim, in opposition to the analysis Althusser makes about the role of public education as an *ideological state apparatus*, that public education is, in fact, the only antidote against ideological control, since in it there is no transmission of ideologies, but a transmission of contents regardless of ideology, i.e., the contents are the focus of the educational experience, and the values of the individuals are accessory, something to learn how to live with. It is precisely because the values of the members of the school community are outside the control of the government and school administrative bodies that it is impossible to effectively use public education as an ideological apparatus of the state.

However, since these functions of public education would create conditions for individuals to achieve rational and political emancipation, and consequently threaten the bourgeoisie and the liberal model they put in motion, the Enlightenment school project had to be contained, slowed down, and defeated. Since the French Revolution—which the authors present as the defeat of the Enlightenment dream at the hands of the bourgeoisie class, mistakenly considered by Marxists to be its protagonist—public education has been the target of numerous attacks in order to allow the market logic to prevail and not be contested by a humanity that could, collectively, be rationally emancipated.

2.2. Current diagnosis: the colonisation of education by the market

The following five chapters map the strategic attacks the market has launched and continues to launch on education, from preschool to higher education. For this purpose, the authors present the contours of the global commodification of education, which occurs in three fronts: adapting training to market needs, educating individuals about their role as conscious consumers,

and the progressive privatisation of education. In practice, when talking about adapting curricula to the opportunities of the labor market, the result is a content emptying; when talking about forming citizens who are conscious consumers, the result is a set of behaviors, allied with *greenwashing* tactics, that allow large economic groups to control—through the media—public opinion regarding what is (morally) *good* or *bad* to consume; and, when talking about opening space for private competition in education, often referencing the low quality of public education, or when defending initiatives like the right to choose the type of education for one’s children, not only does it undermine the credibility of public education—an institution that, despite all budget cuts, methodological impositions, and other threats, has successfully made a huge effort to preserve scientific progress in the collective human ideology—but it also destroys the republican, democratic, anti-tyrannical root of public education. When, moreover, talking about *democratising education*, in the sense of reconciling the democratisation of public education (which means placing the necessary conditions for its rational constitution in a state of law within everyone’s reach, i.e., the conditions for creating, maintaining, and participating in the public sphere) with economic rationality (which means the set of principles governing the functioning, discourse, and action of private interests), both democratisation and education are perverted so that the expression *democratising education* means placing the necessary conditions for the satisfaction of private sector needs—and nothing more. In other words, what gets democratised is, above all, ignorance; otherwise, education serves mainly to transmit technical-labor knowledge that allows the dominant class to perpetuate its social control.

But for this selective transmission to be implemented without generating opposition, it needs a justification based—at least apparently—on the objectivity of science. To this theme, the authors dedicate the fourth and fifth chapters, exposing multiple pseudo-scientific strategies serving the dismantlement of education: the attack on said traditional teaching, described as mechanical, rigid, and unappealing to students, which is actually one way of focusing education on content—contrary to student-centered teaching, which claims to adapt to student needs but whose only way to do so is by lowering standards of expectation; the conception of schooling as a total (and totalitarian) process accompanying various dimensions of the individual—not only scientific and cognitive, but also psycho-emotional and moral—transforming it ultimately into an efficient future worker with the necessary coping mechanisms to stay operational, but not with the intellectual tools needed to criticise and modify the political and ideological conditions that produce the material conditions forcing that coping; the continuous (artificial) infantilisation of individuals, corresponding to a *docilisation*—no longer of the bodies, but—of the minds of the 21st-century workers; the rising precarity—through salary cuts and freezes under the guise of economic crises, excessive bureaucracy under the guise of digitalisation, etc.—and the persecution of teachers through the defamation of the teaching profession in the media, portraying it as inherently lazy, incapable of adapting to changes, and too comfortable in a place of social impunity; and an entire set of ideological techniques transforming (the environments of) schools into (environments of) companies, as well as transforming the individual into a self-project in constant reinvention, shaping them from

² Ibid.

compulsory education to a logic of exploitation and subjection to the whims and demands of the market.

Given this, more or less hidden, market influence on how education processes occur, it is clear that this is not a localised phenomenon but a generalised one—many considerations can be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to areas like health and justice, essential for the development of a state of law. It is then not surprising that universities have not remained untouched by the turbocapitalist whirlwind that turns everything into capital to be exploited (including, and especially, the so-called *human capital*). Chapters six and seven show how European policies regarding higher education sought to adapt universities to the labor market. To guarantee funding, status, and relevance, universities focused on what could bring a greater return—as if, once again, the acquisition of knowledge were something strange and uncomfortable that had to be negotiated, diluted, or made pleasant—to students: the employability of their courses. The great problem here is that the employability of a course is much more dependent on the aforementioned market whims than on the objective scientific knowledge transmitted within it. Thus, many decisions made by universities (and in their name), by both right-wing and left-wing individuals, constituted steps toward sacrificing the objectivity of scientific knowledge at the altar of the market. Among other measures, they sought to: promote in students the capacity to adapt to new situations, instead of the humility and patience inherent in a genuine scientific attitude; shift from a system of public competitions (open to anyone) to a closed-door evaluation system by *expert panels*, effectively privatising the evaluation of professors and research centers; homogenise and shorten curricula to an international standard, without, in the end, guaranteeing the time for maturation and consolidation of the necessary scientific perspective for a deep contribution to human knowledge (see that courses like Law or Medicine keep resisting the reduction to the usual three plus two, precisely due to their scientific rigor).

Faced with this desolating diagnosis, according to which neoliberalism has metastasized into virtually all sectors of education, the authors acknowledge major defeats, blaming right-wing policies for obvious reasons, but also—and perhaps more sharply—left-wing policies that, between trying to keep faithful to their ideological origins and promising to defend public interests against private greed, not only failed to defend public education but actively participated in its fragmentation. However, the authors do mention: there are those who fight, who resist the turbocapitalist incursions, despite all difficulties. Therefore, it is—at least for now—not time to give up and resign. It is, as in all times of oppression and repression, time to fight for what has been lost.

2.3. Call for resistance: notes for a *less worse* future

What path should education take so that the future is not what the book's authors have warned us about for the second time? In the last three chapters, the authors discuss principles of action—and a few specific measures—that will allow us to reverse the present educational situation. In particular, the authors reflect on the role of knowledge in education, in the organisation of society and in the formation of that rationality which, returning to Kant, constitutes the passage to majority for individuals.

Scientific and objective knowledge must return to the center of educational activity. For this to happen, the so-called educational sciences must aspire to the same scientific rigor as other disciplines, and their professionals (those seriously committed to defending public education) must be involved in the process of reevaluating the role of pedagogy in creating educational strategies. Public education must be protected from socioeconomic realities, so that teaching does not replicate and perpetuate its biases, nor be *democratised* by the market. It is necessary, in order to break the trend of mercantilisation in education, to give philosophy a prominent place; philosophy is the discipline that questions knowledge itself, and in doing so, proposes to be interested in what things *are*, rather than what they *allow*. This inaugurates or deepens an appreciation for truth, beauty, justice, among others, but also—not surprisingly—for knowledge.

In Chapter 10, the authors present a minimal proposal—much more modest than what they would ideally like to propose, but the bare minimum to halt the suicidal trajectory of education—which they describe as *the return of what was taken away*: reflecting on the various attacks identified throughout the book, this proposal does not defend more than the reversal of those very measures that implemented the attacks. Thus, the authors advocate for the urgent need to: suffocate subsidised education, restricting it economically and legally, forcing it to hire teachers who passed the public education admission process but didn't get a position, etc.; combat the widespread notion that schools should be able to solve all societal problems (for example, it's crucial to clarify that making young people *more employable* does not solve the structural unemployment problem); defend the principle of specialisation, according to which teachers must be specialists in what they teach, and should teach exactly what they are specialists in—instead of producing specialists in teaching who, by chance, also have training in a subject; strengthen orientation offices, whose work makes it possible to address the complexity of the public school environment; stop romanticising the Finnish model, whose positive results did not prevent it from being replaced by competence-based education. The authors also note that, like other previously presented proposals, some of these measures could be implemented at zero cost, so potential criticisms regarding their economic viability are ineffective.

The final section, “Conclusiones inacabadas: la inercia hacia la desaparición de la escuela” (“unfinished conclusions: the inertia towards the disappearance of public education”), contains considerations and outpourings from the authors about the relationships between politics, economy, philosophy, and education. In their defense of public education, they reference Socrates' speech before the court that condemned him to death. The Greek philosopher questioned his audience whether it was worthwhile to defend life at the cost of losing what makes life worthwhile; for the authors, the question is whether it is worthwhile to try to defend an evolution of public education at the cost of what makes it public and republican. And as a public and republican institution, education must be conservative precisely so that it does not lose its capacity to educate individuals. And for these individuals to be able to understand the world they live in, it is necessary that they have access to scientific and historical knowledge produced by previous generations and preserved by educational institutions.

The warning repeats: to effectively defend the public school, it is necessary for the left—tendentally oriented towards progress and

change—to reflect on what, truly, is worth conserving: because, amidst so many defeats and amputations suffered by the Enlightenment dream, there is still much to conserve.

3. Conclusion

The authors of this book do not want to waste time or energy trying to tip toe around the issue, nor compromise their position by placing themselves halfway between those they consider responsible for the destruction of education and the betrayal of left-wing values. For these reasons, the tone of the text is accusatory, aggressive, and displays a rejection of any kind of false moderation.

The text seems to have the same reflections—or, at least, very similar—on the same themes at different moments, which, in some way, makes the chapter titles and subtitles less meaningful, and sometimes gives the feeling of a certain thematic repetition in the exploration the authors dedicate themselves to. Perhaps it is an undesired consequence of a text written by three hands, but this repetition, added to the openly and actively hostile tone—albeit justified—against the dominant neoliberalism, may lead the reader, at certain moments, to perceive a more affective than intellectual, more reactive than productive, disposition in the text. However, it might be precisely this tone that is necessary to (re)awaken those who dedicate themselves—and with *dedicate* I don't mean a romantic capitalist euphemism for working, but rather the attitude of those who place not only their technical skills but also their intellectual effort and emotional commitment at the service of public education—in forming the citizens of the future.

The reader of this book will certainly see the current state of education with a different set of eyes, and will understand further not only the justifications for the changes to public education but also the true nature of these changes. It will not be difficult for them, armed with nothing but a scientific spirit and access to publications on education from the last decades, to reflect on the promises repeatedly made around educational innovations, and compare them with the consistently disastrous results that followed. They will also acquire knowledge about the complacency – and even complicity – with which the left got involved in the destruction of public education, and from this knowledge (and never in the reverse sense), they will become more competent in defending the Enlightenment, democratic, and republican dream of an education system that forms truly free citizens ■