
COMMON EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS

**GAUGING POTENTIALS FOR DEMOCRATIC TRANSFORMATION. A CASE
STUDY FROM GREECE**

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how educational commons, in which teaching and learning are shaped by the entire educational community on terms of equal freedom, contribute to democratic empowerment and renewal. Intervening in the critical debate over public formal education and the scope it allows for radical democratization, discussion draws on a case study conducted in the self-organized school *Solidarity School Mesopotamia* in Moschato, Athens, Greece.

The *Solidarity School* is an informal tutoring or supplementary tuition school which is attached to the formal high school curriculum. One of its main objectives is to support students for the courses they attend in public schools and to prepare them for public school and university entrance exams. This attachment foists constraints on education, however, the commons-based organization and the alter-political nature of the school put a crucial twist on educational practice. This generates considerable transformative effects which are reflected markedly in the ambience of teaching and learning.

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The *School* promotes socio-economic and political equality not only by providing free tuition to students whose families may not be able to afford private supplementary teaching and might not be able thus to enter university or to learn foreign languages. The *School* nourishes also a culture of equal freedom, solidarity and civic engagement which refashions the hegemonic habitus of consumerist individualism, passivity and submission to socio-political hierarchies.

The article argues thus that there is room for educational commons and democratic transformation even in structures which remain tailored to formal schooling but refigure educational hierarchies and modes of governance, infusing education with an alternative democratic ethos of solidarity, equal freedom and grassroots self-organization.

Keywords: common education, democratic empowerment, equality, solidarity school

Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st century, several attempts to counter socio-political exclusion, the hollowing out of democracy and environmental degradation explore diverse patterns of commoning, that is, collaborative ways of living which enact democratic ideals (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, Bauwens et al. 2019). For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, among others, the ‘common’ refers to nature and products of social labour, such as codes, networks and information, when these are organized as shared resources ‘through the direct participation of citizens’ (Hardt & Negri 2012: 69-80). Posing a historical alternative to neoliberalism and state socialism, the common should guide the reconstruction of social goods and relations across a variety of fields (Hardt & Negri 2012: 71).

Education assumes particular significance in this regard, as it can provide a catalyst for new social construction and subjective change. Indeed, there is now growing research in schools of ‘educational commons’ in which teaching and learning are shaped by the educational community on terms of equal freedom and participation (Burton 2022, Pechtelidis 2020, Locatelli 2019, Means et al. 2017, De Lissovoy 2011). From a critical perspective, educational commons advance struggles against inequalities and exclusions, confronting neoliberal logics which enforce two patterns of enclosure on education: they reduce education to a private commodity and a source of profit; at the same time, they turn education into a means of manufacturing docile, indebted and ‘entrepreneurial’ subjects that pursue ‘lifelong learning’ and the accumulation of credentials (Means et al. 2017: 3, 5; see also Lazzarato 2011: 41-43).

In probing the potentials of contemporary initiatives to *common* education, the controversy over public formal education and the scope it allows for radical democratization has regained salience in recent years (Pechtelidis 2020:106-110). To illustrate, Tyson E. Lewis has located the ‘educational commonwealth’ in an ‘exopedagogy’ undertaken by ‘pirates’ and migrants. This approach is aligned with Ivan Illich’s ‘deschooling’ which dismissed the modern institution of public schools as hopeless for transformative action (Lewis 2012). Taking up commons and education anew, Means, Ford and Slater (2017) objected that

a central problem with exopedagogy, and with left analysis and politics based on horizontalism more broadly, is that it tends to view all forms of institutional structure and authority as necessarily oppressive and not as sites that can be harnessed and reconceived for achieving broadly progressive and emancipatory aims (Means et al. 2017:12).

In response, Collet-Sabé and Ball (2022) seek to corroborate the thesis that the modern public school is totally unfit for commoning education:

...schools are intolerable institutions...and cannot be reclaimed if ‘real’ change to the ‘deep logic’ of contemporary education is to be achieved (Collet-Sabe and Ball 2022: 9-10).

This chapter gauges the contribution of educational commons to democratic empowerment and renewal by intervening in this critical debate. A case study conducted in the informal school *Solidarity School Mesopotamia* in Moschato, Athens, Greece examines the extent to which logics of the commons in less-than-formal education can further democratic education and broader change. The *Solidarity School* lies on the border between formal and informal education. It is an informal tutoring or supplementary tuition school, which has been established by the grassroots citizens’ movement *Mesopotamia* in the municipality Moschato-Tavros in south Athens. However, it is attached to the formal high school curriculum. One of its main objectives is to support students for the courses they attend in public schools and to prepare them for public school and university entrance exams. This attachment foists constraints on education, vesting the school with a hybrid character: typically informal, but substantially geared to formal public education, transmitting the knowledge contained in public school textbooks rather than undertaking an open exploration of different social and scientific fields.

Yet, and this is the thrust of the argument put forward here, the commons-based organization and the alter-political nature of the school put a crucial twist on educational practice. From this case study it transpires that there is room for educational commons and democratic transformation even in structures which remain tailored to formal schooling but refigure educational hierarchies and modes of governance, infusing education with an alternative democratic ethos of solidarity and grassroots self-organization.

Democratic alter-politics and educational commons in *Mesopotamia*

The following discussion will illuminate educational commons and alter-political agency in the *Mesopotamia Solidarity School*. It will draw mainly on the fieldwork carried out by the author on the premises of the *Solidarity School* (21 visits and participation in 5 on-line assemblies), from September 2022 till March 2023. The author interviewed 16 members, held 2 focus group and carried out participant observation in 11 courses, 12 assemblies, 2 cultural events and 1 seminar.

‘Alter-politics’ is used here in the sense intended by the anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2015). It pertains to new modes of politics which have been pursued by grassroots movements and civic associations since the 1990s. Democratic ‘alter-politics’ departs both from top-down, centralized logics of political activity and from typical patterns of activism that are bent on protest and demands from the state, or they are locked up in insularity, or they step forward as a vanguard.

Democratic politics and contestation are refigured thus in ways that foster diversity, openness, assembly-based democracy, attention to process, horizontality, prefiguration, visionary pragmatism, work in everyday life to meet social needs, networking and action beyond closed identities (Hage 2015, Dixon 2014, Coles 2016).

What marks off contemporary democratic alter-politics is the conjunction of new social construction with opposition to capitalism, patriarchy and all forms of domination (Dixon 2014: 4-7, 73-4, 223-233). This is precisely the kind of politics practiced by *Mesopotamia*, which contests diverse forms of domination and exploitation, from racism to hetero-patriarchy, neoliberal enclosures and statist, top-down rule. Opposition is paired with a politics of proposition, configuring new social relations and assembly-based models of organization which are non-hierarchical and non-vanguardist (Dixon 2014: 85-87). The modes of resistance and positive creation prefigure thus the egalitarian democratic world this alter-politics envisions. In the case of *Mesopotamia*, the politics of prefiguration constructs a political, cultural and educational space which is governed by open general assemblies and an ethics of solidarity and inclusion.

Mesopotamia's alter-politics frames its educational commons. The *Solidarity School* consists of a voluntary community which engages in learning and teaching as a shared good. All parties involved -students, guardians and teachers- manage in common the educational process on terms of equality, freedom, openness, pluralism and solidarity. A quarterly general assembly of all community members oversees the workings of the school and makes essential decisions. The philosophy and the *modus operandi* of the school challenge both the profit-oriented logic of private tuition and the hierarchical governance of public education.

Yet, if we construe commons not merely as an alternative within neoliberal regimes but as innovative orientations which would profoundly reshape societies, the question raised about the *Solidarity School* is whether it helps to induce wider transformation (Means et al. 2017: 3, 5). Although, by its constitution, the *School* opposes enclosures along class, race, nation and gender lines, offering tuition as a common good open to all, learning is substantially defined by the public-school curriculum and state language exams. These are governed by neoliberal priorities and logics -the individual accumulation of qualifications, the training of flexible and competitive employees or 'entrepreneurs' for neoliberal markets. Under these conditions, to what extent could an in/formal structure such as the *Solidarity School* effectively cultivate an ethos of commoning and radical democratic subjectivity? A sceptic could counter that such educational commons contribute mainly to the free reproduction of labour for neoliberal societies.

Another democratic politics at the present. Fieldwork

To fathom the actual impact of the hybrid or liminal commons enacted by the *Mesopotamia Solidarity School* research needs to delve deeper in the everyday relations, the practices and the subjectivities configured in this social space. This was precisely the objective of the fieldwork carried out with the community of *Mesopotamia* -core members, teachers and students.

The findings illuminate and complicate the picture, without giving the lie to this initial account. The interviews and participant observation indicate that democratic alter-politics imbues the educational activities of the *Solidarity School*, reshapes social interaction in the classroom by generating an ambiance of horizontal democracy and solidarity, and leaves an imprint on both teachers and students. While attachment to formal schooling diminishes the scope for experiment and undercuts the drive for collective participation, the alter-political orientation of the community brings about considerable subjective and relational displacements.

Pechtelidis (2020: 70-84) argues that the structure of formal school education is 'triadic.' A disciplinary component of 'rigid' enclosure, enforcing hierarchies, bureaucracy, and authoritarian adultism, is combined with 'supple' neoliberal enclosures of competition and individualism, while a 'smooth' institution of democratic commons partly unsettles this hegemonic order. In the following, we will make that case that the *Solidarity School* embodies a 'smooth' institution not only by eroding rigid social divisions and hierarchies but also by triggering radical democratic transformation in subtle and discreet ways, which are non-doctrinaire and non-directive.

The ambiance of educational commons

In attending different courses at the *Solidarity School*, from mathematics for the 1st grade lyceum class (high school, 15-16 years old) to ancient Greek, 3d grade lyceum (high school, 17-18 years old) and English proficiency classes, one typically witnesses a blend of rigorous teaching with a laidback, sociable and informal atmosphere. Despite the age gap and the differentiation of roles, there is no sense of strict hierarchy, disciplinarity, severity or pressure. Students and teachers appear to collaborate on friendly terms in a convivial, at times humorous and joyful mood.

Teachers, parents and young students typically attest to the good vibes reverberating in the *Solidarity School*. In the quarterly general assembly of the *School*, held at a Saturday afternoon on 10 December 2022 at the Cultural Center of Moschato and attended by fifty to sixty members, Kostas takes the floor to state: 'my daughter....comes back home happy and smiley [from *Mesopotamia*]. From the public school, she comes back tired.' Anna, a newcomer teaching

mathematics and physics, adds: 'I am also impressed at how kids....treat *Mesopotamia* as a company of friends, with a lot of love.'

According to Thibaud (2004), the ambiance of a situation or a place is the feeling, the affective tonality which colours a situation or a place by conferring on them a certain characteristic appearance and sense. It is indistinguishably a sense of the self and the world; a diffuse, non-localisable and infra-conscious sense which imprints its mark on our deeds and everyday gestures (Thibaud 2004: 146).

We make atmospheres by establishing the conditions which make possible the appearance of an atmosphere or phenomenon (Böhme 2013: 2,3). Ambiances or atmospheres communicate then a particular feeling to participating subjects. 'A solemn atmosphere has the tendency to make my mood serious, a cold atmosphere causes me to shudder' (Böhme 2013: 2).

The feeling of reciprocity, the lack of rigid hierarchies and disciplines, the friendly, jokey or even cheerful intercourse between teachers and students, the concern with meaningful learning which infuses courses at the *Solidarity School* is thus an effect of conditions prevailing in the broader space of *Mesopotamia*: solidarity, acting together for the common good, collective decision-making in open assemblies, the absence of bosses and directors, citizens' political activism in defence of democracy.

The two focus groups the author held with eight students in a class of Proficiency in English and a third-year lyceum class (final high-school class) shed more light on this effect. The first conversation took place on 10 February 2023 (students A-D) and the second on 4 March 2023 (students E-H). Seven of the students were underage, and one was nineteen years old.

Digging into relationships and their 'sense' of the space, students highlighted democracy, freedom, feeling at ease, intimacy, collaboration and understanding.

Student A: It is more democratic here, we don't have the hierarchy that exists at school, the head of the school, professors at a higher position... With teachers, because at school we get grades, the head, if you say something that is not correct/proper...you should be careful. Here the style is looser...

Student B: It is more relaxed and freer.

Student C: They use other methods of teaching.

Student E: There is a more pleasant ambience, and this makes the class better. While we keep face, intimacy makes the class more efficient. Without breaking everything apart.

Student H: Teamwork prevails, there is a dialogue between teacher and students, whereas often at school this is not the case.

According to Sotiris (interview, 15 November 2022), *Mesopotamia* and the *School* are bent on shifting dominant attitudes towards grassroots mobilization, solidarity and participatory democracyⁱ. Such a transformation is a cardinal aspect of counter-hegemonic politics. In this case, it is fostered through their multiple socio-political and cultural interventions, both inside their own space and outside, in the public sphere, and through the distinct processes they follow in their assemblies and their collective actions, crafting the ambiance which cultivates a radical democratic ethos. The *School* itself is pivotal to *Mesopotamia*'s counter-hegemonic agency aiming for profound social change.

Commoning in and out of this world

The 'formal' dimension of education at the *Solidarity School* forces constraints on the kind of educational commons it realizes. Sotiris, a core member of the *School* and *Mesopotamia*, submits that, at the *School*, the educational process itself contributes little to social and subjective reform. In the many courses which prepare students for public school and university entrance exams, teachers are under pressure to cover the syllabus. 'Covering the syllabus levels us down' (interview, 15 November 2022). Sotiris suggests that the same pressure may account for the scant participation of young students in the assemblies, mainly the quarterly general assembly of the *School*.

The levelling effect of the formal curriculum was a commonplace remark in the interviews with teachers, and it crops up immediately in a casual observation of courses. Hence, teachers voice doubts over whether young students are conscious of the 'difference' of *Mesopotamia* as an alternative socio-political space, or they just look on the *School* as an institution of supplementary tuition which is free of charge (Nikos, interview, 24 October 2022; Adriana, interview, 5 December 2022, Dinos, interview, 3 September 2022).

The educational commons staged by the *Solidarity School* remains thus at a remove from a full-fledged mode of commoning in which the entire community of learners, teachers and guardians would freely co-construct the learning subjects and practices by co-managing the school on a basis of equality. In the *School*, education turns into a common good freely produced and shared among a community for the benefit of all. But the broader contents and objectives of schooling are predefined insofar as they conform to the formal curriculum, while the actual participation of young students and many teachers in the co-management of the school is low. The 'predefined framework' may account for the weak motivation for political participation in a context where there is an overall satisfaction with the quality of supplementary tuition.

Yet, this very limitation aims at reversing inequalities and exclusions in society as it is. By providing free and high-quality supplementary tuition for the public high

school, for university entrance exams and foreign language certificates, the *School* effectively assists students from lower income classes and diverse national-cultural backgrounds in overcoming class barriers and gaining access to higher education, scientific learning, professional skills and formal qualifications. Hence, the *Solidarity School* is committed to extending solidarity and fuelling collective empowerment *in this world*. But, in the vein of democratic alter-politics (Dixon, 2014, p.8), the *School* is in this world without being *of* this world, nurturing radical democratic values and visions of commoning *beyond* it.

Challenging the hegemonic culture and the inequalities of neoliberal capitalism, *Mesopotamia* and the *School* cultivate solidarity, reciprocity, conviviality, equality across class, race, nation and gender lines, the levelling of rigid hierarchies, care for others and the world at large. Young students feel freer in the classroom itself, in their intercourse with each other and their teachers. The atmosphere of companionship, solidarity and conviviality bolsters youth from strained family backgrounds, who find at the *School* a safe space in which they feel at ease and mutually supported (Athina, 11 February 2023, Dinos, 3 September 2022).

Moreover, young students enjoy real opportunities for participation in decision-making, mainly in the quarterly general assembly of the school, which are typically scant or absent in most public and private schools alike. Finally, teachers endeavour to transform teaching into a participatory process even when the subject matter is predetermined by the public-school curriculum (Dinos, 3 September 2022). Kostis' essay-writing class for the 3d grade of lyceum (final year of high school) illuminates this. He proposes different topics of discussion to the students who pick out one or two. They engage then in a free, open and collective discussion before putting their thoughts on a paper (observation on-site, 5 December 2022).

The extra-curricular courses offered at the *Solidarity School* make ampler room for a participatory co-construction of learning and teaching, which commons the educational practice itself. Teachers seize on this opportunity, and *Mesopotamia* members insist on the importance of teaching free courses outside the public-school syllabus (as they did in the general assembly of the *School* on 10 December 2022). Akis, a young teacher of freehand drawing at the *School*, explains how this free commoning can unfold in the classroom:

I try to build a relationship with students, so that we don't have this kind of thing -I am the teacher, you are the students. They are at liberty to voice their views, art does not need pressure, it needs a serenity of the soul. We proceed as a team. I also learn through the students... we construct a story with social content (interview, 18 March 2023).

Significantly, the good of educational commons -learning and teaching- is upheld and enhanced insofar as it is valued for its intrinsic worth. Teachers and students alike foreground the deep and ongoing concern with proper learning and

understanding in the different courses. Knowledge is valued in itself rather than being instrumentalized in terms of passing exams. Students' responses in the focus groups (see below) speak volumes on this score. Care for education in itself is also reflected in the fact that students do not get any marks for their performance. Instead, teachers discuss regularly with guardians about the progress of young students (Fontas, interview, 9 February 2023).

2.6. Smooth commons and transformation

Last, but not least, the transformative effect of free democratic education is also marked at the *Solidarity School*, despite the burdens of formal schooling. Solidarity, reciprocity, equal freedom beyond fixed hierarchies, learning as a good-in-itself are instilled in young students through the atmosphere of the space, their awareness of its difference, and the interventions of teachers in the 'fractures' of the courses, sensitizing students to issues of racism, exclusion, gender inequality, new enclosures, environmental degradation and the crisis of democracy.

Sotiris fleshes out the political effect of the ambience, which is hard to quantify.

Q: How do you promote solidarity here?

Sotiris: Through the multiple interventions...The processes contribute: assemblies, actions, the rallies outside.

Q: Does the educational process contribute, as well?

Sotiris: To a small extent....I teach courses for students to sit exams. I give hints, but I need to cover the syllabus. In other, looser courses, such as drawing, there is discussion (interview, 15 November 2022).

'I give hints...' Political education in the classroom is light and 'interstitial,' avoiding catechism of any sort. Teachers use 'fractures' in the curriculum, by commenting for instance on the texts of ancient Greek literature, to raise consciousness about inequalities and exclusions. Fontas stresses also the fact that they never put pressure on young students to participate in the socio-political activities of the space. 'We have never tampered with the free will of any individual. The framework, not myself, the framework is like that' (Fontas, interview, 9 February 2023).

As a result, the *smooth* character of educational commons is heightened at the *Solidarity School* -'smooth' not only in the sense that it lowers barriers, combatting exclusions and diluting rigid disciplines. The deeper educational influence on subjectivity, inclining young people towards a radical democratic habitus, are also brought about in a smooth, inobtrusive manner, respectful of individual autonomy. This cultural shift is induced through the ambience of the *School*, the democratic and solidary relations between students, teachers and

parents/guardians, and the teachers' socio-political interventions in the 'fractures' noted by Sotiris and Fontas, and illuminated in the focus groups (see below).

The focus groups with the students (10 February 2023, students A-D, 4 March 2023, students E-H) spotlighted the political efficacy of such smooth and hybrid commons. The groups disclosed how their attendance at the *School* has left an imprint on them, even if they do not regularly take part in assemblies or other events at *Mesopotamia*.

Q: When you leave this space will it leave an imprint on you....?

Student A: I want to become a volunteer teacher, too.

Student F: For sure we will be nostalgic, we had a nice time, and a proper class ... We have developed certain moral values ... Respect...

Student D: Humanity.

Student H: Team spirit.

Student F: Collaboration, freedom of speech.

Student E: Critical thought.

Student G: Diligence, organization.

Student H: We expand our horizons...I mean that, many times, during courses we get further information that helps us, it is up-to-date and relevant for our career...

Student E: That will give us a more rounded picture of life out there.

Q: What about gender relations?

They start fighting jokingly. Student F (female name) chips in: '*Humour brings us together.*'

Conclusion

The *Solidarity School* embodies a liminal or hybrid mode of commoning education which contrasts with the logics of exopedagogy or deschooling. While the latter discard the modern public school as a disciplinary institution that is 'irredeemable' for real change, the liminal position of *Mesopotamia* is located both within and beyond formal public schooling.

The formal soul of the *School* restricts the room for free commoning through which all members of the educational community would collectively and openly form the contents and methods of learning. The 'informal' or grassroots militant soul operates through open assemblies, fomenting an ambiance of conviviality, solidarity, freedom and equality which gets diffused in the classrooms and triggers smooth subjective shifts. The offshoot is a distinct, *alter-political commoning*

within and beyond the present world which is, by the same token, an *agonistic commoning* internally, reflecting on its imperfections and striving to reduce them, and externally, militating against a status quo that enforces inequalities and exclusions.

The strategic logic informing *Mesopotamia's* commoning is a typical instance of the composite alter-political strategy advocated by radical political thought (Hardt & Negri 2017, De Angelis 2017, Dixon 2014) and adopted by contemporary social movements, from the Zapatistas to the 2011 'squares movements.' Covering social needs and empowering people in the present is wedded to the politics of opposition to neoliberal capitalism and to the visionary politics of creating, here and now, the institutions of a new world. It is the conjunction of commoning with this three-pronged strategy of visionary pragmatism which begets a distinctive figure of commoning within-and-beyond the present.

The type of commoning within-and-beyond enacted by the *Solidarity School* displays a dual concern with achieving a space of grassroots democratic solidarity and acting as a vehicle for change outside the space itself. In the move from inside to outside the space, we have highlighted the importance of the *ambience* - a widespread feel of solidarity, the democracy of any and all, the flattening of hierarchies, freedom, conviviality, humour- which is engendered by the community constructing the space but is transmitted outside the space by making an effective imprint on subjectivities. Through the *ambience*, subjective shifts are brought about in subtle, inobtrusive ways which are the outcome of personal exposure to the positive vibes of a space rather than of discipline or indoctrination.

Research in educational commons as a new perspective on emancipatory pedagogy has not yet delved into the logic(s) of agonistic commoning within-and-beyond, and the transformative potencies of the *ambiences* imbuing actually existing commons. The example of the *Solidarity School* in *Mesopotamia* sheds light on the significance of both, not only for future inquiries but also for democratic transformations in our times.

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ⁱ All references to interviewees are pseudonymized.