

Better Questions

On the University

This text arose from a silence we perceive to be coming from two different but related places. On the one hand, it's clear that we need to reinvigorate critical and egalitarian thinking on the university. On the other hand, the sources where we might expect to find such a reinvigoration, the dominant modes of critique, too often appear to block the imagination.

From these frustrations we decided to begin experimenting with new (for us) ways of thinking and engaging politically. The following text is an initial step in this experiment and very much a work in process. Written collaboratively, it combines styles and terminologies, inspirations and examples, from diverse settings.

We begin with an analysis of the university today and the political potentials therein, and finish with a discussion of Hedge Schools, by way of a kind of inspiration for autonomous education today.

Hostility towards the academia

The present time is characterized by a sense of generalized hostility towards the idea of the university. Consensus rotates around a conception of the university which emphasizes its *corporate* nature, its presence as something constant and entire.

In 'common sense' public discourse the university has suffered a dramatic decline: it is all too common to hear complaints about the excessive costs of maintaining useless departments and disciplines, about its failure in providing skills that might be decisive in the labour market, about the laziness of academic staff, the apathy of students and so on.

The 'decision- makers' also discount the university as a disproportionate body which needs to be drastically shrunk - or at least submitted to as much bureaucratic control as possible. They justify this tendency with the idea that the university has to get in line with the changing economic climate. Paradoxically, destruction is placed alongside the promise of a bold future: innovation, entrepreneurialism, knowledge transfer, international profile in a global marketplace. They say that we must look to the market to save our university.

But what is there at stake behind these mounting claims?

How does all this relate with the actual 'imperceptibility' of students as political subjects?

Critiquing the university

When it comes to thinking critically about the university there are two familiar approaches. On the one hand, the social democratic or trade union style approach which proposes to defend the university against cut backs, to defend a public service against the encroachment of the private. It presents a 'doomsday' choice between the state and the market. Within this approach, since critique is focused on the market/neo-liberalism, the university itself, as a specific field of power relations, is simply not analysed at all. Indeed any critical analysis of the university is seen as 'weakening the movement'.

On the other hand, a more 'radical' critique dismisses both the market and the state (and hence the university) as corrupt. The university is simply a state sponsored mechanism for the maintenance of class relations. In a curious twist of fate, this argument has recently been taken up and twisted by neo-liberal populists (such as Ferdinand von Prondzynski, president of Dublin City University) who argue that it is in fact the middle classes who benefit from free third level education and hence the reintroduction of university fees would be more egalitarian! Anyway, since the university can be dismissed

in advance, the radical approach also manages to dodge the challenge of doing any analysis of the University. As Hardt and Negri say in another context, 'no need for new concepts, what a relief!'....

Asking better questions about the university requires, first, looking at the university in its present form, and the histories from which it has emerged. We find there a more complex thing than bricks and bureaucracy. Not a monolithic institution, a shell, but a living, shifting landscape, growing and contracting, made of many parts and relations. A different way of looking allows us to map different visions of the university.

Accepting the university as a necessarily unfinished project, as open to different directions, requires not only a better analysis but the potential for positive critique and transformative action.

Cartography and the apparatus

A third approach seems much more suited to the task of analysing and intervening in a concrete situation. One name/metaphor which could be given to this approach is cartography: the mapping of a concrete field of power relations or apparatus to make visible the openings and closings, the mechanisms of domination and hierarchy, but also to make visible the 'underground' of the university, the invisible networks and possibilities which pass through all of us as we drift through the apparatus...

The concept of the apparatus, as developed by Foucault and especially Deleuze, allows us to approach the university productively. To conceptualise the university as an apparatus is to visualise it as a kind of coordination of a variety of partially autonomous components or machines more or less organised according to a particular logic or project. 'Machine' here does not refer to a technological device, but to a combination of elements (human and non-human) which respond to a particular need or desire. For example we can understand the class room as a machine, comprised of students, teachers, knowledge, forms of communication, a particular organisation of bodies, space and time etc. Each machine is sustained by certain ritualised practices and discourses.

The university is full of these everyday machines which are then more or less coordinated by the university-apparatus. For example if we think of an examination as a machine it is obviously linked to the classroom machine, drawing on the knowledge transmitted in the classroom and subjecting it to a particular form of supervision and evaluation. The key to the dynamism of the apparatus and the machine as generic concepts is that while each machine is oriented around a function and coordinated by the apparatus, this process is never complete or total, in the sense that there are always potentials, energies, moments and desires which escape the logic of a given machine or apparatus. At each and every

point there is a kind of a loose connection between the various machine-components and the apparatus which makes change possible, otherwise the university would have no history. We will return to this question below, for now let's focus briefly on some of the most significant machines operating within the university-apparatus.

The Distribution Machines: CAO-Leaving Cert-university

The leaving cert, as we know, gives a number (points) to all those who undertake it. This number represents 14 years of formal education. It claims to represent how intelligent and hard working each individual is. Each summer, on the basis of these numbers, a massive distribution of bodies is undertaken. A whole generation divided up between various educational institutions: the 125s go to PLCs, the 200 and something's to technical institutes, the 300s here the 400s there etc. etc. The rationale is that the 'stupid', the 'mediocre' and the 'intelligent' must be separated. Some have to be prepared for menial tasks, others are destined to become great men. Why? The university couldn't function, we're told, if there was such a diversity of 'abilities' and 'needs'. The stupid would do better in an institution organised more around their 'needs' while the great would not be able to fulfil their 'potential' except in an elite institution. In other words, university institutions, according to the currently dominant logic, cannot deal with equality, they need to organise differences hierarchically, they can only function by operating an *inequalitisation* of people. They are institutions designed on the basis of a hierarchical categorisation with the aim of producing a hierarchical categorisation. This need to hierarchically organise, it seems to us, is the failing of the institution, not of the student. The Leaving Cert-CAO machine's function is to operate a hierarchical distribution of bodies according to the logic of an inegalitarian apparatus.

The Instruction Machines: Examinations

The university is paradigmatically a site of education. But the term 'instruction' captures something of the commanding and authoritative approach often at work within the apparatus, where teaching is reduced to the transmission of knowledge to be reproduced later. The student has absolutely no role in deciding the contents, the form or the objective of their activity. The student has no say in what counts as knowledge, in the politics of knowledge or in the process of the generation of knowledge. You will have a series of exams; you have x amount of time to complete them; you have exam number x and seat number x; you will be given a number at the end of each examination: 1, 2.1, 2.2, 3. 4. At the end these numbers are added together and divided and you get one number: 2.2. All of this depends on the basic machine of the lecture, a situation organised around the transmission of knowledge but dependent upon the passivity of the student. This

involves a particular spatial distribution (with the lecturer usually on a stage and students sitting in uniform rows) and a mass component which drastically mitigates against the possibility of real engagement. The invention of power point has intensified the passivity of the situation by presenting information in an already broken-down form such that even the most basic 'activity' of taking notes is no longer necessary.

The examination machine, as it is currently operated, resembles the story of 'Red Peter'. In this story scientists attempt to evaluate the intelligence of an ape, 'Red Peter', by manipulating him with the promise of food: they place bananas in the top corner of his cage and put a wooden box in the opposite corner. They expect the ape to move the box to get the bananas, and prove his capacity for basic problem solving. According to the scientist's logic if the ape is intelligent he will figure out the rules of the game and execute the tasks set out by the scientist. The ape, however, correctly perceives the meaningless and cruel nature of the experiment and refuses to participate. The monkey's refusal to play the game is interpreted as a lack of intelligence; the scientists thus 'prove' that the monkey is stupid. The examination machine, likewise, can only measure intelligence by observing the capacity of the student to conform to the rules of the game and to execute successfully the tasks demanded of her/him. Inherent to the logic of the examination machine is the translation of non-conformity, or resistance, as failure and lack of ability.

The Knowledge Machines: Standards

The tendency of university departments, where research takes place, is to reduce the independence of the researcher by incorporating him/her into new types of research machines. In humanities departments a number of elements can be highlighted:

- **Specific funding:** research funding within universities is increasingly project specific, researchers must tailor their projects to the funding priorities of external organisations, such as the European Union, facilitating the orientation of knowledge around specific macro-economic or political objectives (e.g. social cohesion, integration of migrants, attraction of skilled labour, reduction of school leavers, reduction of teen pregnancy etc.).
- **Rating research:** publications are now valued; a number which is given to particular journals. The value of each journal is designated by private institutions which base their evaluation on 'objective factors'. These factors benefit non-critical knowledge and certain methodologies, usually the most quantitative ones. The agencies are the intellectual equivalent of the international credit ratings agencies causing havoc on the markets. Funding within university is increasingly linked to the amount of research points scored by staff, so that 'unproductive' departments can be choked to death by withholding funding, and departments which play the game can be enhanced. Post-graduate research is also being

subjected to a similar logic, where funding for PhDs is made available within specific research projects with specific objectives.

The Depoliticisation Machines: Student Life

As you walk through the gates of the university on fresher's week you're confronted with an image of what awaits you in your student life, an image which has become the standard stereotype of the student. This is the image of the alcohol loving, sex-seeking free-wheeler. The story about yourself with which you're presented goes like this: you've just come out of a repressive and authoritarian institution (secondary school) now welcome to freedom. Freedom, however, turns out to be cocktail of drinks promotions, sex, and more drinks promotions. As the Trinity Student's Union website tells us: 'Alcohol and student life are about as inseparable as salt and chips or 9 o'clock lectures and non-satisfactory attendance'. The reference to non-attendance brings us to the other key component of the contemporary image of the student: students are not interested in learning.

This image of student life, gleefully propagated by college societies, the students union, student publications, but also the likes of Joe Duffy, is a copy-paste job from the image of the student conjured up in the U.S. during the 80s and 90s. College societies trip over themselves to import U.S. College stunts (e.g. iron stomach contests, or a stunt pulled last year in which students could avail of a free lap dance if they opened an account with Ulster bank...) while the debating societies invite fascists or porn stars. Is it a coincidence that this utterly depoliticised vision of a nihilistic, infantilised, pleasure seeking student arose directly after students around the world (Chicago, Belfast, Paris, Prague...) emerged as the protagonists of global revolt? Likewise, in the 70s and 80s Hollywood producers and TV big wigs set out to deliberately saturate our screens with images of black men as drug dealers and pimps as a response to the politicisation of black ghettos....

Perhaps the most significant element of depoliticisation is the students-union machine. The Students' Unions monopolise politics within the universities leading to a general disgust with politics among students. The election campaigns for the unions are parodies of general elections; the candidates present the most depoliticised, technocratic image of politics possible. This administrative vision of politics reduces politics to a series of petty goals (open the library for 5 min longer etc). When they're finished trivialising politics through these petty demands, they organise (again U.S. style) discounts for students with 'leading brands' like Topman and Burger King.

It is crucial, finally, to emphasise that the Students' Union and the college societies are not external elements, as they may have been in a previous period, *but constitutive components of the university-apparatus today.*

Lines of Flight

Within and around each of these machines alternative possibilities will always exist. These may not always be easy to see, leading to the general melancholy tangible, for example, amongst lecturers who care about teaching. To take one example, a lecturer might instruct a student to read Marx and to find in Marx an economic reductionist whose ideas were only relevant in the 19th century. On reading Marx however, the student may find a different Marx; what the student will find there can never be fully determined in advance. This is because at the most basic level the meaning of words is fundamentally open and unstable, and the act of reading is always an interpretation that depends upon a certain freedom or agency. This is akin to what Ranciere calls *literarity* (the democratic regime of the 'orphan letter'). The university-apparatus, while characterised by the machines described above, among many others, also depends on putting into circulation a mass of books, millions of words, creating mass access to knowledge. The vertiginous circulation of words opens up infinite possibilities for intellectual creativity and the free generation of knowledge. The classroom machine, to take another example, can easily be reorganized. Its components (the physical space, the coming-together of people for the purpose of learning etc) can be reassembled according to a different logic and put to work for different ends. In 1968, to take a final example, the students of Copenhagen University barricaded the non-radical lecturers into their own offices by nailing planks of wood across their doors. Offices were turned into cells. The machine can be turned against the apparatus. But how can this be imagined today?

Students and the university

If we consider the university as a apparatus, as a multilinear ensemble composed by subjects, discourses, powers and knowledges, openings and closures of different nature, we can observe that at the moment, the elements that are under attack in this complex map, are the lines of flight.

Indeed consensus rotates around a conception of the university which emphasizes (or reduces it to) its corporate/objective nature. We can detect 3 main expressions of this idea in the present discourse. Liberals and neo-liberals associate the university with the market: the academia has to be a virtuous agent of economic development, they say, otherwise it is socially useless, especially given the present economic conjuncture. Social democrats, instead, try (as much as they can in times of crisis) to subtract the academia from the market arguing that it has to be functional to the public good, therefore it needs to be managed by the state. No mention, of course, of the fact that at the moment the idea

of 'public good' happens to coincide with that of the market[1] In relation to the 'radical left, their approach is to put the university and the factory on the same plane: there is no real difference - they nostalgically conclude - between the ways these two institutions are organized, including their mechanisms of production and reproduction[2]

There is little doubt that the academic world is influenced by structural constraints and forces that tie students into a net of objectifying relations. Labour, profit, domination, hierarchical rituals, individualist competition are all elements that, to variable degrees, operate in the academia.

But is the student an economic figure? Is she a product? Is he just a bureaucratic piece of paper? Should we define him from the point of view of what he produces, or of how smoothly she can be assigned a position in the labour market? In totally identifying the student with these specific lines of the academic apparatus something important gets lost. So we must ask: what about students?

The emphasis on the external elements hinders the fact that, first of all, students are those who *study*. Although for the time being this does not seem to be the principal concern of academic managers, students engage in this very special activity, which in itself is always unfinished, free and which is not characterized by a quantifiable relation between the time spent doing it and its eventual outcomes. Study always exceeds accumulation of information, skills development, knowledge production and exam performance.

As a process of continuous self-improvement/transformation, study is what subtracts students[3] from any well defined classification. No doubt 3rd level institutions comfortably picture their students as education-consumers and pleasure seekers; however, because students study, their position involves a certain "natural" resistance to identification.

So, at the university everyone who studies should be considered as a researching subjectivity, to the extent that here knowledge and pedagogic organization are, by their nature, never definitely fixed, but open to infinite subjective interpretations, uses and articulations– independently from bureaucratic and economic circumstances. The principle that elevates the university to a 'universal' institution is an egalitarian one, and corresponds to what Ranciere[4] defines as the "generic human capacity to think".

Every actual form of hostility against the academia – as well as every uncritical exposure of it to its bureaucratic/corporate influences - corresponds at the end of the day to the suppression of this egalitarian essence and the subjective possibilities it might open.

Depoliticization

Given this scenario, it is important to make clear that the evolution of the university as an institution promoting equality of thought and knowledge was sustained by political conditions and pedagogic inventiveness, more than by forms of state-rationality. The present decline of those political/pedagogic conditions - which we relate to the decline of collective subjects capable of prescribing an egalitarian functioning to the state - is the origin of the destructive tendencies operating against the academia.

We call this phenomenon *depoliticisation*; and we consider it to be a problem which is not limited to the academic world and which exceeds national frontiers. Amongst the various individual/collective dimensions of the conjuncture that the concept of depoliticisation designates, the most striking one is certainly the failure of any new consistent form of political subjectivity to emerge, capable of constituting a strong alternative to declining representative forms of organisation such as parties and party-style formations, unions, parliaments and so on.

It is therefore not enough to demand the retreat of 'the cuts'; as it is illusory and misleading to hope in a progressive process of reform developed within and by the state apparatus itself.

As a principle of distribution of places and functions, the state has no intrinsic egalitarian - and, in general, political - predisposition. This is why throughout this phase of depoliticization (for the last 20/30 years) it has shown the tendency to wipe out or radically transform those egalitarian institutions (including universal health care, community organizations etc.) that politics had forced the state to provisionally accept, recognize and support in a previous historical period.

Today, a key political task corresponds to re-inventing and reorganizing an emancipatory politics capable of overturning the ongoing anti-egalitarian tendencies, otherwise the complete destruction/transformation of existing egalitarian institutions will be inevitable.

How can we start? – Lines of flight and egalitarian politics

Not being able to rely on any universal principle of political analysis and organization (e.g. class, class struggle and the party), militants' attitude needs to be vigilant and experimental. This is why we argue that today one can not be a militant without also being a researcher. Until a new egalitarian political agenda is re-established on a bigger scale it is fundamental to find in each situation some singular points (some unexplored

potentialities) on which to concentrate our effort and not be dispersive. Political organization at the university will be therefore different from other forms of intervention developed in other sectors. But also, unexplored potentialities detected in an Irish university will probably require a different treatment from those detected in a Greek one. However, each experimental intervention needs to share the aspiration of generating new embryonic consistencies – new collective strengths and continuities that don't let themselves be captured by hostile temporalities (the permanent states of emergency and related urgencies).

Generally speaking, in an academic world that heads towards bureaucratization and the commodification of knowledge, human capacities which cannot be counted in “marketable” terms remain empty or indiscernible. Therefore many students' potentialities become increasingly imperceptible. Although a certain type of joyful, pleasure seeking student identity is being socially produced and reproduced, the student as a free subject of knowledge and thought is being banned from the university - suffocated by the normalising educational machine.

Students, as those who study, as desiring subjectivities, have become the uncounted element of the academia; they constitute the void on which this system is based. It is from the possibilities this void might open up that we should start.

Although we recognize that the situation is shaped by capitalist forms of power and exploitation and that to a certain extent, at the moment, there is no outside to capitalism, we nevertheless think that a positive approach should always privilege a *political* view of the situation over an analytical one. In other words it should privilege the detection/enforcement of subjective potentialities over the analysis of objective conditions (of oppression, exploitation). These two instances need to be kept apart because there is no transitivity between them. As Badiou argues:

“...in approaching a singular point [political potentiality], one must always begin with its singularity. This does not mean that singularity is incompatible with a general analysis. However, it's not the general analysis that gives this singular point its political value, but rather the political deployment, experienced as a possibility, of its singularity”. (Badiou[5])

So, if we agree that at the university singularity – or line of flight - is located in ‘being a student’, i.e. in the exposition to knowledge, to what is still unknown (research), to open pedagogic dynamics and finally to freedom of thought, then we should also recognize that this potential is not determined by the action of capital, which, like a parasite just tries to make economic value out of it. How can we explore this potential in a way that goes beyond structural necessities and constraints and is open to unexpected subjective developments and political outcomes? This is the question to which *autonomous education* attempts to find an answer.

Introductory notes on autonomous education.

Autonomous education (AE) is, in a broad sense, a movement that is centred in the activity of study, and whose aim is to take this activity back to its own root, i.e. to desire – *studere* in Latin means “to desire”.

What is happening today is that this essential component of study is being repressed: on one hand students are ‘fed’ with huge amounts of knowledge to be used in exams and other ritual and hierarchical performances, and afterwards more or less forgotten. As Tariq Ali argued in his political declaration during the Middlesex Philosophy Department occupation, what we are dealing with today is the transformation of academic didactic into “Kentucky fried education: quick, fast, you swallow it, you badly digest it and then you excrete it”.

On the other hand, students’ faculty of choice and active intervention in the organization of their study is increasingly limited. This does not just have negative effects on our capacity to autonomously think and know; a negative consequence is also that in this context students are not used to seeing themselves as active ‘partakers’ of the academic experience. They do not see themselves as actually *being the university* (instead of just being *at* the university) and therefore capable of ‘impossible’ transformations of themselves and their own institutions.

Although this is evidently the symptom of a depoliticized existence that is not just limited to the academic world, we believe that an ‘impossible’ solution to the current impasse can only come from students themselves. Autonomous education assumes that there will be no paternal authority guiding people towards their own liberation – that the time of central parties and political vanguards thinking and acting on people’s behalf has come to an end.

Autonomous Education means to think that *we are the ones we have been waiting for*.

By introduction into the academia experimental forms of *collective autodidacticism*, AE is a means to go beyond the oscillation between “saving the university” and “destroying it” in order to replace it with new utopian institutions.

AE is neither a ‘defensive’ nor a ‘destructive’ type of activity, but rather a *subtractive* one, whose aim is to generate new pedagogic articulations of time and space *within* the university. On one hand AE obliterates the spatial dialectic of the inside and the outside by breaking the ‘policed’^[6] boundaries that increasingly separate campuses from the rest of society and the world. On the other hand it breaks with a temporal dimension of study which increasingly follows the rhythm of professionalization and ‘skills building’. The

participation of interested people who are not necessarily part of the institution; the production of documents that are not 'normalized' according to academic/bureaucratic criteria and that might circulate outside the hierarchical self-referential academic publishing circuit; the collective re-conversion of institutional spaces into the 'public spaces' they are supposed to be; the subtraction of study time from disciplinary forms of ritual performance and the valorisation of the collective components of this activity. These are just a few possible examples of AE's spatial/temporal re-articulation.

Because AE is a form of militant research which is always singular and developed in-situation we would like to emphasize the central role that forms of 'constituent imagination' might play in such processes of subjectivisation.

Imagination - we have seen it happen with May'68 - can suddenly transform passivity into its opposite, impossibility into possibility. People like Felix Guattari who witnessed the first university uprisings in Paris remember that

“something happened that would have been unimaginable only the day before; imagination was set free and was called upon to take power. Was it a brief madness? How does one explain this coming to live of long buried ideas? This is the point at which the notion of transitional phantasy comes into operation... Phantasies have to find their way back to reality... they have to authorize a mode of representation for what is essentially non-representable, something absolutely other, a newborn commitment made of barricades, fraternity, generosity, individual liberation, rejection of all hierarchy and constraint, collective exaltation, permanent poetry, daydreaming”.

Autonomous education is the recuperation of politics as 'the art of the impossible'. It is anchored in the belief that a completely different pedagogy is possible: one that reconstructs the bridges between imagination and practicalities of daily existence, between the individual and the collective, between rational and nonsensical, between people's infinite differences and the equality of their intelligences.

Today it is quiet clear that in periods of depoliticization and generalized passivity, politics needs to be reinvented nearly from scratch; each of its sequences (no matter the scale) is something unique and unrepeatable, like the subjective experiences which characterize it.

Autonomous education is our starting point: desiring generic subjectivities, organizing their own 'impossible' pedagogy in their own new independent spaces, claiming for an 'impossible' academic recognition of their activity, believing that after the spread of such an incredible experience, university will not be the same anymore.

Inspirations....

Hedge Schools

*I Still crouching 'neath the sheltering hedge,
Or stretched on mountain fern,
The teacher and his pupils met feloniously to learn.*

Saving the Irish

Many of those be the most barbaric and loathy conditions of any people (I think) under heaven... They do use all the beastly behaviour that may be, they oppress all men, they spoil as well the subject, as the enemy; they steal, they are cruel and bloody, full of revenge, and delighting in deadly execution, licentious, swearers and blasphemers, common ravishers of women, and murderers of children.

- Edmund Spenser, A View of the State of Ireland, 1596

Annihilating a people through war and famine, as the poet Spenser advised, was not the only way to make a people subject. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, after waves of open warfare, the English began their long pacification campaign against the Irish. What didn't change was a common sense vision of the Irish people, a way of prescribing their natural abilities and thus their potential.

To grasp this historical fact is to accept that the education question in Ireland was not primarily an economic or a religious question. It was a conflict over what a people were capable of, how their past was told and what their futures promised.

Accounts from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries testify to this. People crawling from hovels and sleeping with animals were not a people perceived to be capable of freedom. The penal laws which banned the education of Catholics can be interpreted through this logic, a logic that made sensible the belief that such prohibition was actually a step forward, a step on the road towards saving the Irish from being Irish.

Education

The balm of information for the wound of ignorance.

- Thomas Orde, Chief Secretary, 1792

As early as 1730 the English established a system of Charter Schools around Ireland. They wanted good subjects. What does this mean? It means subjects who see and hear and feel the same way, who value and understand the same things, who come from the same history and aspire to the same dreams. The fact that the Irish kicked and screamed was only evidence of their ignorance. As long as they kicked and screamed they made manifest their inability to communicate and to be reasonable: the power of a formula that required better instruction where ever there was disorder. And so pamphlets were circulated revealing that the Irish people who starved did so because they didn't yet know the latest methods of husbandry.

To the average traveller the scenes in Ireland spoke for themselves: bare hills, thatch cottages, smouldering fires, toothless children: "In a country where there is hardly any employment but tilling the ground, it (learning) can eventually be of no use except to such as are bred to trades". These were accounts from those who came to study the situation- the geographers, economists, prospectors. They reported to the Crown that the Irish were little more than hewers of wood and drawers of water, little more than animals. If this was the case what reason to promote thinking? What use had they for books or poetry?

At the end of the eighteenth century, the revolutionary decades, liberal philosophies of education began to filter into the reckoning of the English government. The child was perceived to be something more than a worker. Rousseau and Paine discoursed on the holistic development of heart and spirit. They were convinced that sound tutelage, careful exposure to the right kind of ideas and a healthy environment would encourage a moral, willing citizen. A conflict arose between those wary of upsetting the social order (the conservatives) and those who sought to strengthen the social order (liberals). Everyone believed in the 'ageless rule of regularity and order- a time and a place for everything, and everything in its proper time and place'.

Conservatives and liberals debated over techniques and aims of education, text books, class sizes, teacher training. They could do this because they were agreed on the general parameters; they had a consensus. As Richard Lovell Edgeworth said, reporting on the future of Irish education in 1806: "to inculcate democracy and a foolish hankering after undefined liberty is not necessary in Ireland."

No one questioned the common sense that fiction and dreams were dangerous for children. Instead children were taught Mrs. Marcet's fairy tale about an imaginary world of equality and freedom. Life in this utopia was depicted as so diabolical and disturbing that the characters plead for a return to the status quo, to the security of their earlier enslavements.

To appreciate the hedge schools we have to understand the depth and extent of this common sense partition of the Irish people, a common sense that reiterated the limits of their potential and sought above all "to make youth more useful without elevating them above the situation in life for which they may be designed."

Another Vision

It is not a question of pulling machinery asunder and piecing it together again; it is a question of breathing into a dead thing a living soul.

- P. H. Pearse

The hedge schools fostered a different common sense vision of Ireland. They operated on a different spectrum, a different understanding of where the Irish people came from and what they were capable of doing. This must be evident when we see priests leading their congregations to the hills and teachers taking their students to the fields and the ditches.

What was the vision?

It was a different history to begin with. A history animated by music, myth, poetry and song, an intimate geography and a connection to the land. From this history stems the possibility of a different way of looking into the future.

There is no question that in 18th century Ireland the native people lived on very little. No question either that they paid rents to landlords and tithes to a church that didn't share their faith. They had no rights to congregate, no rights to think. They were forced to bury their books in the ground leaching their language back into the soil.

Against a political will and a common sense that sought at every turn, in every sneering look, in every unheralded eviction, in every moment of brutality, to inform the people that they had what was suited to them, the force of another vision grew. The hedge schools held on to and kept common this vision through a belief that poetry and imagination were available to all.

Imagination

I did not read the classics as they are usually read by Learners. I read them as novels – I looked to the story – the narrative – not to the Grammatical or other difficulties.

- William Carleton, Irish novelist, educated in hedge school, 1830

At a time when fiction was frowned upon ('nothing but gilded lies') and education was universally considered to be utilitarian- for the making of a factory worker or the making of a good subject- the hedge schools fostered a form of education that was open and broad.

Freedom in the literature, in the teaching, and also in the architecture meant no bureaucracy, no licenses, no certificates or exams; as fast as the weather changed the masters moved with their satchels, skirting over hills and mountains. They met at night when the workers came in from the fields, they met in clefts of rocks and under trees; free to come and go, to move as they wanted.

Students were taught maths, literacy, science, geography, astronomy... Latin, Greek, Irish, Hebrew... hurling, poetry, dancing, singing.... They were also taught what the parents wanted, and even what the children themselves wanted. A scene in Brian Friel's play *Translations* shows the hedge school master sitting in the midst of a chaotic scene as all around him the children perform different tasks: one reads alone, another plays with objects on the ground, another recites a song to a younger boy, one girl helps another to read. The freedom of the classroom, so reviled by the authorities, sprung from the understanding that people could direct themselves.

An extension of this faith was the importance of unplanned play in the classroom. With so many different groups taking part in the classes, of all different ages, a necessary independence meant that distinctions between work and play could not exist. Even the authority of the master was dispersed as older children helped younger children in their lessons. Despite the apparent disorder there were no quarrels or fights, no children desperate for the clock hand to reach the time of escape. There were pranks and jokes and frequent disruptions as passing folk dropped in to say a word or sing a song, but all this was part of the fabric of the children's day.

The hedge masters had few books and buildings to store their stories and songs. They moved with them and kept them alive through processes imperceptible to the authorities, who characterised the masters as chancers and opportunists. Successive education inquiries claimed that the ability of the masters was slight, that they only taught basic maths and literacy from cheap chapbooks because they were too poor to afford anything else. But after the priest the master was the most respected figure in the community.

Their lifelong commitment to teaching was understood as a vocation. With so many masters offering their services, travelling from place to place in search of pay and hospitality, a system of training and apprenticeship between the most learned and the inexperienced arose.

Of great dismay to the authorities was the preponderance of cheap chapbooks, or penny books, used in the schools. These were thought to be trashy romances and adventure stories unfit for a child's developing mind. Dreaming, they said, was inherently destabilising. To fill children's heads with make believe and nonsense made them anarchic or morally perverse.

The chapbooks most popular with the children were those stories about highwaymen and rapparees. The adventures of men such as James Freney and Redmond O'Hanlon who lived outside the law but in their own way showed how a different sort of justice could prevail. These outlaws were heroes for striking a blow against the establishment: they took money from the land agents and tax collectors and re-distributed it amongst the tenants.

Alongside these contemporary tales were the classic myths of Ovid and Homer, the ancient stories of the Fianna and Cuchulain. Accounts tell of those moments when the minds of children were thrown open, of how strongly and mysteriously they were affected by these strange, distant worlds.

The teaching of an uncensored history kept alive the possibility of a different sequence and so it was that of all subjects taught, history was considered the most treacherous by the English government. Wakefield, in his Account of Ireland, feared for the security of the state because of the books he had seen being taught in the schools, books which were impossible to read "without imbibing a spirit of disloyalty to the government, and hatred of the present royal family and the English connection." In the early nineteenth century the hedge master was increasingly spoken of as a 'disloyal subject' who kept alive 'the spirit of discontent'. Alongside histories of O'Neill and O'Donnell were histories of Rome, Troy and, most recently, the French Revolution. Teaching alternative histories was not simply a case of preserving a heritage but preserving the possibility of a different step into the future.

Equality

Amidst the unspeakable miseries the peasants enjoyed to a very exalted degree poetry and song.

- Charles Topham Bowden, A Tour through Ireland, 1791

Lord Palmerston, the Sligo landlord, wrote to a friend that he couldn't believe, or understand, how five or six of schools had sprung up on his land. Robert Peel, Home Secretary, was more dismissive when he wrote to his friend, the MP of Limerick, that he did not want to see "children educated like the inhabitants of that part of the country, to which the honorable member belongs, where the young peasants of Kerry run about in rags with a Cicero or a Virgil under their arms."

The utilitarians, the bearers of the governing vision, couldn't understand why parents with no income paid vagabond masters to study the classics: 'surely it's a waste of money', they said, 'surely they had better spend their money on tools for the field or shoes for their feet'. While some parents had faint hopes of sending their children to Louvaine, to train in the religious college, many simply wanted their children to learn how to read and write, to learn from men they respected.

After the end of the Gaelic aristocracy in 1601 many of the court poets and scribes remained in Ireland while their Lords fled to Europe. They carried with them a rich repertoire of stories, poems, songs and history. Beyond the classroom, on evenings by the fire, people used to gather and hear of fantasies and tragedies. In this way tunes and verses passed between the people and though most could not read and write they would sing the words as they worked or walked in the fields. It was this apparent dissonance, a dissonance of two visions, poverty of flesh and wealth of spirit, which stirred foreign travellers: 'the peasantry are uncommonly attached to their native melodies and some are exquisitely beautiful'.

Despite their authority the masters were 'imbued with the same prejudices, influenced by the same feelings, subject to the same habits' as the people they lived amongst. This was in contrast to the Church which gradually moved in the opposite direction.

In the early eighteenth century the Church had sided with the hedge school masters in opposition to the crown; they had been itinerants too. But with the rise of agrarian violence and agitation the Church turned towards the state. They began to wear collars and black uniforms. They were banned from wakes, weddings and banquets. They didn't play hurling in the fields or get drunk on a summer's night.

The hedge school masters hosted the wakes, sang the songs, and, most importantly, empathised with the people: they suffered directly when the tithes were raised and the tenants evicted.

In 1758 the common lands of the people were taken away under the Enclosures Acts. What had been free land to graze livestock became ranches for cows bred and fed on Irish soil for export to England. Fields were fenced and walled; tenants were evicted without any notice. Not surprisingly it was the hedge school masters who orchestrated the secret societies, the Whiteboys.

The Whiteboys, so called for their white smocks, were the outcome of a form of education that fostered imagination and equality. In places where the Whiteboys circulated there were different laws for the people to follow, a separate system of justice. Men and women levelled the walls and ditches that divided their lands, just as they had read books and sung songs of levelling injustices.

It is not hard to imagine evening classes extending on into the night as frustrations and angers were voiced by a people suffering without an obvious choice. By the second half of the eighteenth century these secret societies were operating in conjunction with the schools. The authorities couldn't detect the leaders or the participants, those who sent threatening letters to landlords, who destroyed property, who joined in torch-lit parades through towns and signed their names 'captain moonlight' after nightly raids. The people and the leaders were indistinguishable; their networks were part and parcel of their daily lives.

From agrarian agitation it was known the hedge school masters became part of the more radical and revolutionary United Irishmen. Taking their leave from the French revolution (a long held knowledge and awareness of continental writers and thinkers) they succeeded in mounting an offensive in 1798. While the rebellion was defeated one area in which the rebels claimed victory was in the propaganda war. Using a vast distribution network of radical literature, pamphlets, handbills, newspapers and popular ballads a rapid politicisation of people had occurred. As Thomas Addis Emmet said, the United Irishmen sought to 'make every man a politician'. The scale of this expression machine would have been impossible without the previous decades of hedge school teaching that had made a population literate and imaginative.

National Education

Even the worst government that ever was, is both much better and much cheaper than no government at all.

- Fourth Book of Lessons, text book for national schools, 1847

Realising the role of the Hedge school masters in the upheaval of the 1790s (many were identified as such before being executed) the question of education became a priority for the state. Liberals, Conservatives and Catholic emancipators worked together against the seditious hedge schools. They had to break the force of the masters, the force that spun alternative histories and impossible utopias.

The first task of the commission was ‘to ban books calculated to incite to lawless and profligate adventure, to cherish superstition, or to lead to dissension and disloyalty’. After the establishment of the church-backed national education system in 1831 the state was able to print its own books and supply them free of charge to the new schools now being built all over the country. These schools were managed by church and state, filled with approved masters and set to a standard curriculum. The ‘lesson books’ cultivated ‘good values’: they taught the merit of hard work, the immorality of idleness, the value of being content with whatever God granted you. Most of all the unity between the two countries was emphasised: the common bond of language, geography, nationhood and even history. These same books were sent to Canada, Australia, Wales and India.

These institutional technologies- the rules, the training centres, the buildings, the funding- were the extension of the pacification machine. Over the course of the nineteenth century education was increasingly controlled by the Church.

Hedge schools became a thing of the past; their power, like quicksilver, spread elsewhere.

[1] States showed indeed no hesitation in nationalizing banks, when these were about to go bankrupt.

[2] This tendency is evident in some post-autonomist thinking on the university as the factory of immaterial capitalism. The strategy which flows from such an analysis involves translating the politics of the factory (demands for better wages/conditions) to the university and emphasizing the productive power of the ‘general intellect’

[3] Here the notion of student is intended in its broadest sense. Although today the university is a hard to access space, in many cases expensive and unaffordable for many people, we think that it should operate on an egalitarian basis, i.e. it should be opened up to every interested individual, independently from their social status/ qualifications/ skills.

[4] The Ignorant Schoolmaster

[5] Badiou, Alain, 2003. “Beyond formalization. An interview”. *Angelaki* 8,11, pp 108-132.

[6] The word ‘police’ is used here in Ranciere’s sense of maintaining boundaries through which power distributes spaces and functions

[p1]This is a repetition of the first section- maybe delete all of it?