

# Re-politicizing the scholastic: school and schoolchildren between politicization and de-politicization

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## ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the question ‘what is school?’, and argues that the answer to this question has an essential political dimension. I focus on two very different attempts to characterize school – Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society* and Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons’s *In Defence of the School* – and demonstrate that both texts miss the political potential which is inherent in school. The two texts are analyzed along two relational axes: relations between school and society, and relations between children and political subjects. Illich rejects children’s de-politicization while accepting the assumption that school operates according to a similar logic as society in general. Masschelein and Simons, on the other hand, advocate a separation between school and society, but also accept the separation of children from politics. I aim to integrate Illich’s analytical categories into Masschelein and Simons’ discussion, in order to mark important directions for political struggles both over and within school.

## KEYWORDS

School; deschooling; education; children; political subjectivity

## 1. Introduction

School stands today, perhaps more than ever before, at the heart of a heated discussion. This discussion, both in the public sphere and in academia, tends to be dichotomized into two extreme poles. The first pole is articulated in a recent poem by Israeli poet Eli Eliahu (my translation):

These were the rules. We had to entrust our children  
In other people’s hands. Total strangers.  
They were held there for half the day.  
They were not allowed to talk for hours on end,  
Or laugh, for that matter. These were the rules.  
Everybody sent their children.  
It was the sane thing to do.  
Nobody wanted to be considered insane.  
It is too easy to pass judgement on us now,  
From the distance of time and place.

We did not know then what you all know today (*Haaretz*, September 17, 2015).

As a counter example, also from an imagined future perspective, I turn to one of my favorite writers back when I was a schoolchild, Isaac Asimov. Here is a shortened version of his 1951 story 'The Fun They Had' (1990):

Margie even wrote about it that night in her diary. On the page headed May 17, 2157, she wrote, 'Today, Tommy found a real book!' 'What's it about?' 'School.' Margie was scornful. Margie always hated school. The mechanical teacher had been giving her test after test in geography and she had been doing worse and worse. Tommy looked at her with very superior eyes. 'It's not our kind of school, stupid. This is the old kind of school that they had hundreds and hundreds of years ago ... They had a special building and all the kids went there ... They weren't even half-finished when Margie's mother called, 'Margie! School!' Margie went into the schoolroom. It was right next to her bedroom, and the mechanical teacher was on and waiting for her. She was thinking about the old schools. All the kids from the whole neighborhood came, laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in the schoolroom, going home together at the end of the day. And the teachers were people ... Margie was thinking about how the kids must have loved it in the old days. She was thinking about the fun they had.

The mechanical teacher described by Asimov is of course far from being science fiction today, and the technological substitutes for school are central to the debate between those who think school is a kind of prison and those who think it is fun. But alongside its psychological and pedagogical questions, the debate also has a significant political dimension: school is presented by its critics as a site of discipline, coercion, and conformism, while its supporters see in it the primary (even the only) place we can count on to cure the ills of present society.

However, I believe the existing discussion of school remains in large part confused and superficial, since it almost always avoids the direct question: what is school? Of great value in this context is Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons' *In Defence of the School* (2013). This book deals with attacks on the school and offers 'a morphological understanding of the school' (see also Masschelein and Simons 2015, 85), namely attempts to characterize school's essence by answering the question, 'What is the scholastic?' And yet, although Masschelein and Simons are inspired by Hannah Arendt and stress the school's political role, they miss an important aspect of its political potential, which is the political activity that takes place or is initiated within school.

To learn more about this potential I also turn to the other pole of the debate, to Ivan Illich's *Deschooling Society* (1970). I examine Illich's and Masschelein and Simons' analysis of the school along two relational axes: relations between school and society, and relations between children and political subjects. I start with a brief presentation of how the lion's share of educational discussion views the school and society's operational logic as coterminous, while assuming a dichotomy between children and politics. In Section 3 I discuss the phenomenology of the school offered by Illich, and show that he rejects children's de-politicization while accepting the assumption that school operates according to a similar logic as society in general. Next I turn to Masschelein and Simons, whose characterization of the scholastic rests on the suspension of school's time and space, namely on a separation between school and society, but also on acceptance of the separation of children from politics. I argue that both distinctions are problematic, as they implicitly acknowledge the necessary existence within school of the very thing they want to detach from it, namely the political. Finally, in the last section I integrate Illich's analytical categories into Masschelein and Simons' discussion, in order to re-politicize the scholastic and mark an important direction for political struggles both over and within school.

## 2. One continuum – one dichotomy

The prevailing assumption in critical educational discourse is that the school's logic of operation and that of society at large belong to the same continuum. That is to say, school does not have its own unique logic of operation; it is a reproduction or rather a distillation of external mechanisms of domination – ideological, religious, and of course economic – so that understanding these mechanisms is both necessary and sufficient to understand school.

An important articulation of this assumption is found in Louis Althusser. School, according to Althusser, is an Ideological State Apparatus responsible for reproducing the workers as subjects of the existing socioeconomic order, taking 'children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most "vulnerable" ... it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of "know-how" wrapped in the ruling ideology ... or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state' (2001, 104–105). That is to say, school reproduces social relations by constituting the social relations of domination within school itself; relations of production – particularly class relations – are the key for understanding how the school operates on both the level of contents taught and that of teacher–student relations.

The continuum assumption is so dominant that it remains intact even when causality is assumed to be in the opposite direction. Michel Foucault's analysis (1995) shows how the mechanisms of discipline and surveillance that operate in school (as well as in prison, the factory and other sites) become in modernity the apparatuses of domination that are characteristic of the entire society – that is to say, society and the mechanisms through which it shapes and controls subjects can be understood by looking at the school. A parallel claim, even more focused on the school, can be found in Jacques Rancière's *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991). According to Rancière, 'the principle of explanation' which characterizes school forms the foundation of the political order itself: it operates whenever someone assumes somebody else can explain why things are the way they are, whenever someone commands and someone else obeys – although the mere ability to understand these explanations and commands testifies to the equality between all humans which underlies the inequality between citizens (Rancière 2004). Rancière's view, to be sure, is much different from Foucault's, as well as Althusser's, but they all share the assumption of a continuum between school and society: they all view school as a microcosm of society, a site whose walls are a nutshell in which the logic of society is concentrated.

While relations between school and society are deemed coterminous, those between the young individuals who attend school and the political sphere are considered dichotomous. Modern thought assumes that children are not political subjects, and that the political public should be reserved for adults (Givoni 2012). Kant's celebrated formulation of the public sphere in 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"' (1991) paradigmatically ties enlightenment to maturity, and excludes those characterized as children – whether due to age or laziness or cowardice – from the civic life of public discourse. Political philosophy after Kant stresses the importance of reason, sound judgment, and responsibility, traits considered lacking in children. Politics, in short, is no child's play. This dichotomy, of course, is related to the continuum: people can take active part in politics only after going through an extension of that politics without being political subjects.

### 3. Deschooling and the challenge to the separation of children from politics

A rare and interesting challenge to the separation of children from politics in a discussion of school can be found in Illich. Illich is by no means the first to offer a radical critique of modern institutes of education (e.g. Reimer 1971; Rousseau 1979), but his thought raises renewed interest in the twenty-first century, particularly with the advancement of technology and the internet (Hart 2001; Whittington and McLean 2001), and is part of growing voices calling for some sort of deschooling (Hern 2008). And yet these voices tend to focus on pedagogy, while Illich's critique of school as well as the alternatives he proposes is political no less than pedagogical.

Illich's refusal to embrace the view of children as apolitical is evident in his discussion of the 'phenomenology of the school', namely in his attempt to define the school and articulate the unique connection between school and education. His phenomenology is based on a tripartite definition: age, teachers, and students, and full-time attendance. Although the re-politicization of students is not explicit in this discussion, it can be extracted from each of its components and shed light on what makes Illich's ideas so compelling.

#### 3.1. Age

First, Illich observes, it is essential for the school to group and divide people according to *age*: even before the age-determined assignment into classes – done as though the most important criterion is the students' manufacturing date – the school decides in advance individuals of which ages belong and do not belong to it. It assumes that adults and babies do not belong, while children belong *primarily* in school (Illich 1970, 13). The important point is that school does not treat age as a mere criterion for admission which loses relevance inside school walls: it expects those who enter it to behave as children, namely it *constructs* them as children, thereby producing infantilism. Childhood often causes feelings of suffering and helplessness, but even when it is not experienced as subjectively problematic, it is nevertheless *politically* problematic: on the one hand it protects children and grants them exemptions and privileges, and on the other hand it does not allow them to take equal part in the adult world (14). Removing the artificial barrier raised by childhood implies, therefore, treating young people as human beings capable of taking responsibility for their studies and choices, namely viewing them as political subjects for all intents and purposes.

#### 3.2. Teachers and students

According to the second element of Illich's phenomenology, schoolchildren are necessarily positioned as *students*, in contradistinction to *teachers*. The profession of teaching rests on the assumption that in order to teach a person he or she must be 'schooled', made into a student, namely looked at in an evaluative, classificatory, normalizing gaze. Teachers and students are therefore constructed as a structural opposition: while the former are active, knowledgeable, and reasonable, the latter are passive, ignorant, and capricious. But according to Illich learning necessarily involves active experience: it begins with spontaneous encounters and continues only if the learner becomes actively involved (14). To be sure, such learning is not a vision or a project to be fulfilled, but rather an everyday reality: people always learn, and learners of all ages are always already active agents who make all kinds of

reasoned choices and judgments. This means that by demanding a monopoly over all legitimate learning, the school not only sabotages learning – for it devalues the learning that takes place everywhere all the time – it also absurdly requires students to renounce their subjective agency in order to learn.

### 3.3. Full-time attendance

'School, by its very nature, tends to make a total claim on the time and energies of its participants', writes Illich (15). It imprisons children for years and denies them any reasonable amount of freedom. The obligation to attend is merely the basis which makes it possible to enter the children into a world of various other duties and obligations. The teacher's extensive authorities, which invade into students' personal lives, are legitimized by the assumption that students are not the subjects of school but are rather subjected to it. It does not really matter what is being taught and what is the quality of teaching, since the material is always accompanied by a 'hidden curriculum' (16), whose essence is the demand to obey. Instead of mandatory education, therefore, Illich suggests eliminating 'the disenfranchisement of the young' (37) by establishing voluntary, 'convivial' learning centers (24–28; Illich 1975), so that learners are able to choose what and when to learn, and decide how to combine their studies with their personal and civic lives.

Although Illich's views still resonate widely, they have also drawn much criticism, not only from conservatives who want to preserve and reinforce the traditional disciplinary institutions. Critics have argued that deschooling amounts to privatization of education (Callan 1983; Gintis 1972; Wexler, Whitson, and Moskowitz 1981), that the free networks Illich describes amount to abandoning education to the so-called 'free market', which is in fact all but free: it allows the wealthy to pursue their interests and shape the educational field while ignoring wide social considerations, thereby widening socioeconomic gaps and damaging the weaker social strata. Furthermore, it is argued that deschooling leads to de-politicization of education, for it does not take into due consideration concrete political questions of organizational change or issues regarding the management of the 'convivial institutions', and by disconnecting education from the state abandons it to the private market (Pitt 1980, 284).

These criticisms have more than a grain of truth to them, but they nevertheless miss the essential point of our discussion, namely Illich's demand for *re*-politicization of the young as part of rethinking the relations between education and politics. As Lewis (2012) points out, the Illichean vision of disestablishing schools is not equivalent to privatization, for it rejects the essential dualism between public and private: it locates education in the sphere of *the common*, which escapes both private appropriation and public central control (Hardt and Negri 2011). The common, rather, is shared by the irreducible plurality of subjects, *the multitude*, and run by them: it belongs to the community because it is part of the community just as much as the community is a part of it. Education in common is education without sharp distinction between teachers and learners, one in which all take active part. Such education is therefore far from de-politicization, for it allows learning to be part of a new kind of politics of broad participation in community life.

Indeed, such politics welcomes a new – or rather renewed – political subject, which Illich calls 'the Epimethean Man' (Illich 1970, 45): while Prometheus, 'the foresighter', is one of the founding myths of western civilization thanks to his rationality and ability to plan

in advance, his brother Epimetheus is denounced as an irresponsible fool, whose love for Pandora brought about disaster to humanity. But for Illich Epimetheus is an archetype of pure giving, true love and hope, oppositional to patriarchal order, or any other rigid order (Kahn 2010, 41). That is to say, the Epimethean Man, who has been ignored by the mainstream of enlightened thinking, is an active political subject who does not reject childhood but rather embraces it and praises its traditional characteristics – spontaneity, sentimentality, and friendship. A deschooled society, therefore, is one which acknowledges children as political subjects and that politics has childlike aspects.

The challenge posed by Illich to educational thinking, therefore, cannot be easily disregarded. As long as schools are thought of as places that must deny the political subjectivity of those who attend them, he will have a valid, important point against them and for alternative forms of education. But while Illich goes against the grain in rejecting the separation of politics and childhood, he seems to accept the assumption of a continuum between school and society. Indeed, he sometimes writes that school is ‘an enclave within which the rules of ordinary reality are suspended’ (Illich 1970, 15), and denounces not only the artificial differentiation of adults and children, but also that of places in which proper learning takes place and places in which it does not; but the brunt of his argument rests on recognizing a structural similarity between both sides of school walls: ‘Not only education but social reality itself has become schooled’, he writes (3). While defending the school against Illich’s criticism must take the political subjectivity of children into account, the call for deschooling loses much of its power if it does not reflect on what is unique to school.

#### 4. The scholastic as suspension and de-politicization

Masschelein and Simons reject the continuum of school and society. Rather than viewing school as an extension of the social order, they ask what the unique logic of the scholastic is, namely ‘what makes a school a school’ (2013, 30). Their answer owes a great deal to Arendt’s reflections on education, but as will be demonstrated it also suffers from a cardinal problem characteristic of Arendtian thought.

Like Arendt, the anchor for Masschelein and Simons’ discussion is the Greek *polis*, as the school they defend is not every educational institution in general, nor exactly the kind of institution we are familiar with today, but rather a specific historical invention. *Scholè*, they argue, means ‘free time’, but by that the Greeks did not mean time for rest and leisure, nor time in which the individual may choose to do whatever he desires. The school’s free time was time devoted to learning and practice for those who had no rightful claim to knowledge and skills according to their position in the political order of the city. Unlike the common upper class practice of studying with private tutors, school was meant to make knowledge and skills common for everybody: it freed a specific time and space from everyday city life, providing relief from instrumental pressures, economic differences, and political agendas, and dedicated them to studying in an institution where all students are equal:

The school provided *free time*, that is, non-productive time, to those who by their birth and their place in society (their ‘position’) had no rightful claim to it. Or, put differently still, what the school did was to establish a time and space that was in a sense detached from the time and space of both society (Greek: *polis*) and the household (Greek: *oikos*). It was also an egalitarian time and therefore the invention of the school can be described as the democratisation of *free time*. (27–28)

That is to say, free time is liberated from both society and the family, to enable a safe place for children to encounter the world (Masschelein and Simons 2010). According to Arendt, such an encounter lies at the heart of education; in 'The Crisis in Education', she writes that 'the function of the school is to teach children what the world is like' (Arendt 2006, 192). The role of the teacher, therefore, is to introduce the world to the children, and his authority stems neither from his ability to punish nor from knowledge as such, but rather from the responsibility he assumes when representing the world in an unbiased way, even when disagreeing with it: 'The teacher's qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for that world. Vis-à-vis the child it is as though he were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world' (186).

Masschelein and Simons articulate the various characteristics of the Greek school, of the unique time and place called 'the scholastic'. The most essential is the double movement of suspension and profanation: *suspension* means making the social order of production and consumption temporarily inoperative, while *profanation* means accessibility, making something public (Agamben 2007), namely turning knowledge and skills into a common good. Suspension and profanation, therefore, 'make it possible to *open up the world* at school', and hence 'it is indeed the world (and not individual learning needs or talents) that is being unlocked' (Masschelein and Simons 2013, 42; my italics). What happens in school is not focused on the teacher, or directly on the student. At the center of attention is something of the world, something that is being realized as it really is: school technologies – the board and chalk, table and chair, and the entire classroom's spatial arrangement – are designed to make it come to life and appear as part of the world in which everybody are engaged, interested – as something that is, in Arendtian terms, *inter-esse*, or in-between (ibid., 46; Arendt 1998, 182). Furthermore, orienting students toward the world as it is present in the subject matter implies suspending the self with the various limitations imposed by everyday concerns, ethnic origin, socioeconomic status, etc. Thus, when a new self is formed in school through an attentive experience of the world, it is born of an experience of sheer potentiality, of ability and possibility. Hence, 'scholastic space arises as the space par excellence in which equality for all is verified' (Masschelein and Simons 2013, 61).

School, therefore, has clear political significance: it creates an essentially *democratic* reality, which is also inherently *communist*, for it makes the world common in the deepest sense, common among equals (102; Masschelein 2011, 533). But no less important is that by bringing the world to speak to the students, the school enables them to experience the world as a new generation capable of new beginnings, as people who have the power to act upon and renew the world (Masschelein and Simons 2013, 84). As Arendt stresses, educational authority is necessary to maintain the gap between old and new, between the world that already exists and the new beginning every person brings to it (2006, 192, 193). This means that for school to fulfill its political role, it must itself be apolitical: suspension and profanation imply de-politicization of scholastic space, its disconnection from the civic arena. According to Masschelein and Simons, school must not be the continuation of politics by other means: politicizing it is part of the attempt to tame it, to subject it to an alien logic of operation, or simply an attempt to tell the young how exactly they should renew the world, which naturally compromises innovation (2013, 94, 95).

But the de-politicization of school also means de-politicization of students: Indeed, school enables young students to experience themselves as 'citizens of the world' (84), but the political



element of this 'citizenship' amounts to experiencing the world as common, and to an ability to learn and to do things in the world – not of *act* in the world and in relation to others in it. This is a clear echo of Arendt's claim that children must not be treated as political subjects: in light of her acquaintance with indoctrinatory education systems in totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century, which recognized no age limit, she claims that just as we must not educate adults to some political doctrine, politics must not be part of the education of children: 'Education can play no part in politics, because in politics we always have to deal with those who are already educated' (2006, 177). Politics, that is, is only for grownups, while children are 'not finished but in a state of becoming' (185), and hence need protection from the world, particularly from the light of the public realm which disturbs their tranquil development in secure darkness. Education must therefore be conservative in a twofold sense: it should protect the world from the young, present it to them as it is so that they would be able to act in it in the future, and at the same time protect the young from the world and make it possible for each to grow as a unique person, a new beginning in the world. That is to say, separating children from the public realm and de-politicizing school are designed to enable politics by enabling children to become adults who can act in the world and renew it.

This characterization of school and its political significance is both original and appealing, but it has an important weakness, which is typical of the Arendtian framework. Arendt's thought is based on illuminating conceptual distinctions – such as that between labor, work, and action (1998, 7) – but I believe she is mistaken in confusing these with ontological distinctions, as when she takes the *animal laborans* and *homo faber* to be real beings who condition the active man but are distinct from him, as if it were not the same person who labors, works and acts. As a result of this ontological confusion, Arendt imagines the political realm as dissociated from the social, thereby missing the necessary influence of social relations of power on whoever speaks and acts, as well as on the ways all speech and action are perceived and resonate in public. Similarly, the two basic distinctions on which Masschelein and Simons' discussion rests – the traditional one, which separates children from politics, and the original one, which separates school from society – may be conceptually fruitful but are somewhat problematic when taken to be immediate representations of actual or possible reality.

First, the distinction between school and society, which rests on the double movement of suspension and profanation, is never fully achieved. Masschelein and Simons are aware of that, of course, and they posit this distinction as a goal, an endless project, but the very attempt to make this sharp distinction defeats itself and calls for a rethinking of the relations between school and politics. The problem is not only that power relations necessarily penetrate into school (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The problem is that the world itself is always already political, and therefore getting acquainted with it requires encountering it as such. Children would not be able to grow into active political subjects if they do not get to know the world and its cultural-historical tradition, including the various dimensions of exclusion and oppression which necessarily characterize it; they would not be able to renew the world as one less affected by racial, national, or gender relations of domination if they fail to understand the role played by these relations in previous generations.

The crucial point here, however, is not that students must be familiarized with the world's essentially political aspects – with which Masschelein and Simons will probably concur – nor that it is necessary to present them with specific political wrongs in need of correction – to which they may reply that the older generation must not determine the political goals of



the new in advance. The point is rather that every attempt to de-politicize the world implies a moment of decision, which has a political dimension. What is apolitical in history? Is the attempt to present such history, to separate the political from the apolitical, not in itself political? Is it possible to teach literature, language, and even science or computers as unproblematically detached from the political circumstances that made them possible? Every subject matter may appear to be apolitical only due to a political act.

In other words, the political cannot be separated from human life, since it is present in every attempt to make such separation, as well as any attempt to apply conceptual categories to reality. The political infiltrates school in the very effort to divorce it. This does not mean that 'everything is political', in a simple sense that would dilute the meaning of politics and empty it of real content; it means rather that everything in the world has political aspects, as everything in the world is necessarily entangled in some sort of power relations. The political aspects may be repressed and denied, temporarily suspended or put at the center of discussion, but they are never locked safely outside, not even at school.

This insight leads to a second point, for it also applies to the desire to separate children and political subjectivity. The de-politicization of children is also political, but this time the political act of separation is not done from outside only, as when a teacher decides how to treat his students or how to present an element from the world to them. Rather, it is done from within, for the children who are its objects take active part in the attempt to realize it: it is impossible to de-politicize them without them being actively involved in the process; and as this process is political, this means that children, just like any human being, are never fully apolitical or even pre-political. Children may resist attempts to de-politicize them, but they are always political subjects, even when they try not to be.

The political subjectivity of the children is not disconnected from their being students. Even the pedagogic moment of encountering the world in class cannot be completely apolitical, since the political subjectivity of schoolchildren cannot be bracketed out even when something of the world is put in the center. Schoolchildren never become abstract potentials, learners without properties. Each student encounters the subject matter, responds to it and interprets it differently, also according to his or her political identity and place in the multi-faceted relations of power. The encounter with the subject matter is not a pure acquaintance with the world 'as it is', but rather an interaction involving confrontation, conflict, and struggle.

Put differently, there is no single simple way of de-politicizing children. There is rather constant need to ask which of their characteristics are relevant to the encounter with the subject matter and which is not. Gender differences, for example, often disturb the scholastic activity and must be neutralized as much as possible, but at other times they are essential and without them the subject matter would remain distant and abstract; some poems, state laws, and historical events, to name just a few examples, simply cannot be engaged with from a gender-neutral perspective. Hence, decisions regarding politicization and de-politicization of students must be made each time anew, by the teachers but also by the students themselves.

This last point takes us back to the first, for the collapse of the dichotomy between children and politics sheds new light on the de-politicization of school, namely on the collapse of the distinction between school and society. We understand now that school is necessarily a political arena not only because of the world or the teachers, but rather because of the students. School may prefer the students to be politically active only after they graduate,

but they can decide to act and renew the world inside school itself – namely to make the worldly element which is the school the object of their action – or decide that the novelty they bring to the world is that already as children they want to change the world outside school.

## 5. Re-politicizing the scholastic

All this does not mean that we should return to the assumption of a continuum between school and society, and see the school as a microcosm of social logic. It also does not mean that there are no differences between younger and older people, or that these differences have no political significance. It does mean that both distinctions are always a matter of political negotiation, and hence must be objects of reflection and discussion which are not only pedagogic but also political. We must always ask when, why and how we want to de-politicize school or schoolchildren, and be attentive not only to the fact that de-politicization is always partial, but also to the fact that the concrete form of de-politicization should itself be an object of struggle.

In order to rethink school as a space and time which are simultaneously political and suspended from politics, let us go back to the three elements of Illich's phenomenology: age, teachers, and students, and full-time attendance (to be discussed now in reverse order). Juxtaposing the political contents Illich associates with these elements with Masschelein and Simons' characterization of school will make it possible for us to apply insights from *Deschooling Society* to *In Defence of the School*, and offer a multidimensional understanding of school – one that takes into consideration its political dimensions and the political challenges that derive from them.

### 5.1. Full-time attendance

Being in school entails various duties and obligations, the chief among which, Illich rightly claims, is attendance, which makes it possible to apply all the others. Mandatory attendance summons into school individuals who most likely would never have met without it, groups them for a limited time in a limited space, and forces them to stay together under the same regime. This is precisely what the notion of suspension, of separating young people from society and family, is all about: it is never fully voluntary. But if we reject the attempt to de-politicize the students we can understand that the suspension of scholastic space-time in fact creates the very conditions for the appearance of political action according to Arendt, namely the simultaneous presence of a plurality of people (1998, 199). School is a form of gathering, as it always involves more than one student (Masschelein and Simons 2015, 91); hence in school the agora exists all the time, it only waits to be activated. The intensive communal interactions it imposes call for various forms of political engagement, sometimes directly against it (as when students protest against their school's regulations and policies)<sup>1</sup> and in other times despite it (as when students protest in school against state policy),<sup>2</sup> through connections and co-operations which would probably not have been formed if it weren't for the grouping together of different people.

However, the people grouped together in school are not always so much different from each other. Various mechanisms – among them processes of privatization and 'school choice' – are at work to make schools group together only individuals who are more or less the

same, at least in terms of their socioeconomic background, thereby neutralizing the school's radical political potential. The obligation required by the education system must therefore be turned back at it, to demand that schools break from existing social power relations and group together children from different backgrounds and social strata. Thus, like the community of learners in Illich's deschooled vision, the school community will also be able to become a common sphere which is neither private nor entirely public: it will avoid the homogeneity which results from private education which groups children according to ability to pay or other characteristics, as well as from reproducing the power relations prevailing in the public sphere outside school, to come close to that irreducible heterogeneous plurality which is the multitude. To achieve this, the question of who is obliged to go to school with whom must be an object of political struggle,<sup>3</sup> which is a struggle over the political potential of school itself.

## **5.2. Teachers and students**

The people grouped together at school play various roles and are all potential political subjects and members of the school's political community. We must not ignore this plurality of roles, and be attentive to the way the relations between them, as well as each role's conditions of belonging to the school community, may be the object of political activity within school.<sup>4</sup>

Yet, of special importance are the teachers and students. Illich emphasized that the professionalization of teachers, an essential aspect of which is the 'schooling' of children, is not only pedagogical but also political, for it is part of a mechanism of control and domination which concerns not only learning processes but also the learners. Masschelein and Simons, on the other hand, point to the teacher's inherent amateurism, which is expressed not in knowledge and skill but rather in genuine love for the subject matter and of course the students (2013, 67). But even this amateurism is in fact political: in rejecting the demand for total professionalism, in refusing to be assimilated into the disciplinary institution, the amateur teacher is acting politically. To be more precise, teachers are always oscillating between professionalism and amateurism, repeatedly choosing where to be along this dynamics.<sup>5</sup> They may also help students move in and out from the position of the 'schooled' student to that of the political subject. In other words, although the teachers are always part of the disciplinary school mechanism, they are unable to totally avoid political activity within school, but they may very well understand their role as curtailing such activity, or alternatively cooperating with or even encouraging it. Opting for the latter alternative requires the teachers to engage in active political struggle, both over their own political subjectivity as school-teachers and over their ability to give students the space required for political subjectivity.

## **5.3. Age**

Illich complains that school turns the young into infantile children, deprived of political subjectivity. While I believe this has been shown not to be necessarily true, it seems that the concept of age limit must be accepted as essential to the school, along with attendance and suspension: the obligatory suspension of people from their family and social surrounding is acceptable only because it is limited in time. However, the question of how long, and between which ages, children should be required to attend school remains open. This, of

course, is also a question which is not only psychological and pedagogical, but also political, and moreover, the object of political struggle. In this context it is especially important to remember that schoolchildren are political subjects, and that excluding them from taking part in struggles around school, including over the thresholds of getting in and out of it, undermines the scholastic and forms a clear case of what Masschelein and Simons call 'the taming of the school'.

Nevertheless, the collapse of the dichotomy between children and politics does not mean we should go back to treating children as small-sized adults to which the characteristics ascribed by modern thought to political subjects – reason, careful judgment, seriousness – should be applied unproblematically. In the renewing civic-political activity there is room also for playfulness, creative imagination, and passion. That is to say, just as we should struggle to bring politics back to childhood, we should also struggle to bring childhood back to politics. At school, even in its Greek-scholastic form, the playful element is not lost: when something of the world is suspended from its immediate or instrumental contexts and made into subject matter, it becomes a game piece and the students encountering it are invited to play. In this sense, 'school is indeed the *playground* of society' (Masschelein and Simons 2013, 40). In school, therefore, play and politics meet; the very encounter of people, of children, brings politics and play together. And we must recall that this encounter, this being-together, is a source of endless pleasure and fun: this is precisely what Margie was thinking in Asimov's story. The political potential of being-together does not conflict with this feeling, but rather rests on it.

It is also important to remember that not only school attempts to construct children as apolitical. Various social institutions take part in this, and central among these is the university: both in the knowledge it produces, and in the way the relations between school and university are constructed. We tend to think of university as a research institution producing knowledge, and of school as a teaching institution, in which preexisting knowledge is transmitted. Accordingly, we also tend to think of the university as a classical site of political activity and resistance (at least potentially), and of the school as a disciplinary site, in the service of existing powers. Following the dichotomies between school and society and between children and politics, the dichotomy between school and university must also be shaken up: we have to remember that knowledge is also produced at school, and especially that school too is a civic-political arena, despite – and sometimes because of – the young age of the individuals in it.

## Notes

1. In May 2015 Israeli high school students organized various protest activities against schools in which girls had to conform to a much more restrictive dress code than boys. The protest made headlines in national media, and provoked numerous discussions on subjects such as feminism, gender roles, and the role of discipline in education.
2. A famous example of students expressing political protest in schools despite strong objection of school authorities is the case of Mary Beth Tinker (13 years old at the time of events), Christopher Eckhardt (16) and about two dozen of their friends, who decided in 1965 to wear black armbands to their schools in protest of the Vietnam War. This case led to a 1969 decision by The United States Supreme Court that defined the constitutional rights of students in US public schools (<https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/393/503/>).
3. The most famous case of political struggle against school segregation is the 'Little Rock Nine': following a 1954 United States Supreme Court decision declaring segregated schools to be unconstitutional, nine African-American students enrolled in Little Rock Central High School in

1957. Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus deployed the Arkansas National Guard to block out the nine students, and President Eisenhower decided to send federal troops to enforce integration and protect the students. This historical episode is also discussed by Arendt (2005).

4. In January 2014 students of IASA High school in Jerusalem initiated a struggle for improving the working conditions of cleaning and maintenance staff at school. The students demanded that the workers will be employed directly by the school rather than by workers' agencies. The struggle was successful, and reproduced by students in several other schools throughout Israel.
5. The Israeli education system, which is constantly at the center of political debates, provides countless examples for teachers stepping out of the 'professional' position to take a political stand. A telling example is a petition signed by some 800 Israeli teachers (including the author) on February 2012, protesting an initiative by then Minister of Education Gideon Sa'ar, to bring high school students from all around the country to visit the Jewish settlement in Hebron – a highly controversial, radical settlement at the heart of a Palestinian city. In that letter the teachers not only expressed reservation from the program, but also declared they will refuse to take their students on this excursion even if required to do so. These teachers were accused by the Ministry of Education of being 'unprofessional' and of politicizing public education.

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