

RETHINKING EDUCATION AND THE POLITICAL: CHALLENGING NEO-CONSERVATIVE DISCOURSES ON NEUTRALITY

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Abstract: Neo-conservative movements increasingly claim to restore the neutrality of education to politics through an ultra-politicisation that masks its ideological agendas in a language of apolitical moralism and a militarisation of schools that censors politically engaged curricula and teachers. Focusing on Brazil's *Escola Sem Partido* (School Without a Party) movement, which opposes politically engaged education such as Freirean pedagogy, this article reveals how such movements politicise education under the guise of neutrality. It describes how this movement distinguishes between what is political and what is not through a self-referential violent act, where political antagonisms are labeled with moralist terms between good and evil. This framing delegitimises critical and democratic pedagogies, presenting them as ideological threats rather than educational approaches, and redefines the role of education in ways that prioritise conformity and control over critical engagement and pluralism.

This article argues that these claims of neutrality inadvertently coincide with the dominant trend of educational theory, which defends education as autotelic. This contribution challenges both the neo-conservative claims of educational neutrality and the divide that several educational theories mark between education and politics. Drawing on the concept of antagonism, it argues that education is always inherently political, not as a pathology to be avoided but as a constitutive feature of its practice. Education should neither be entirely absorbed by politics nor freed from it but must embrace a democratic vision of the political as defined by antagonism. According to this theoretical vision, the article gives policy recommendations for resisting right-wing populism's use of 'neutrality' in education.

Key words: Neutrality of Education; Ultra-politics; Political Antagonism.

Introduction

Educational research has long critiqued the instrumentality of education, particularly in the context of neoliberal policies in education (Carusi, 2021; Kristiansen, 2015; Säfström, 2022). Many educational policies are viewed as post-political as they follow economic rationality, masking their underlying ideologies (Knutsson and Lindberg, 2020; Sund and Öhman, 2018). However, after over three decades of dominance, neoliberalism has started to metamorphose into terms that defy some of its founding principles, such as globalisation or free trade, creating a chaotic void increasingly filled by populist hegemonies. This challenges the traditional debates on education's instrumentality, which are no longer confined to the hidden politics of life-long learning, skilling, or human capital. Instead, the debates on the instrumentality of education emerge in new issues that the conservative backlash articulates in an advocacy for removing topics such as sex education, multiculturalism, and climate change education with the excuse of restoring educational neutrality from political influence (Atif, 2024).

In this context, neo-conservative movements, while claiming to depoliticise education by restoring its neutrality, paradoxically intensify its politicisation in what is called ultra-politics (Žižek, 1999a: 193). This means that under the guise of neutrality, there is a combination of looking at political rivals as accused of using education to advance political agendas, such as leftist ideologies or progressive values. Simultaneously, neoconservatives, to embed their ideological control, propose violent and corrective measures like snitch lines to report perceived 'ideological' biases of teachers. This contradiction - suppressing politics through exaggerated politicisation - is an example of the joint strategy of ultra-politics where education is claimed to be depoliticised by adopting a moralising discourse between evil 'instrumental agendas' and good 'neutral education'.

This article focuses on such a case: Brazil's *Escola Sem Partido* movement (ESP). The article shows that the ESP movement's claims of educational neutrality aim to de-politicise education while re-aligning it with a conservative agenda.

Case study: School Without a Party (ESP)

The *Escola Sem Partido* (ESP, ‘School Without a Party’) movement in Brazil is a conservative initiative that seeks to reshape the role of education by opposing what it perceives as ideological indoctrination in schools, particularly from progressive and left-leaning perspectives. It also defines itself as a nonpartisan and anti-ideological movement that seeks to stamp out party politics from Brazilian classrooms. ESP was founded in 2004 by Miguel Nagib, a Brazilian attorney, who launched a website allowing parents to report teachers and professors for allegedly indoctrinating their children with political views. The movement gained visibility over the years, particularly during Brazil’s political polarisation in the 2010s, and became a major force with the election of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro in 2018. ESP is heavily backed by far-right politicians, particularly those promoting an ultra-liberal economic ideology and religious fundamentalism linked to neo-Pentecostal evangelicals and the Brazilian Catholic Charismatic Renewal. The movement has positioned itself as nonpartisan and anti-ideological, though in practice, it primarily targets progressive and leftist perspectives in education.

While the movement’s main objective is to eliminate perceived political bias in education, it also aims to: restrict discussion on gender and sexuality in the classroom; enforce a supposed political neutrality among teachers; remove critical perspectives on Brazilian history and society, particularly those addressing social inequalities, racism, and colonialism; and defend conservative family values as the foundation of education. Since its inception, multiple legislative proposals (*Projetos de Lei*) inspired by ESP have been introduced at municipal, state, and federal levels. One such bill was approved in Alagoas in 2016. These laws attempt to: prohibit teachers from expressing political or ideological opinions; ban discussions on gender identity and sexual orientation; and allow parents and students to monitor and report teachers suspected of engaging in ‘indoctrination’. ESP has been particularly strong in recent years, fuelled by Brazil’s deepening political divide. Under Bolsonaro’s presidency, it gained national attention and led to a broader conservative push against progressive education policies. Although most ESP-inspired bills have not been passed into law, the movement has influenced public debate and created a climate of fear and self-censorship among educators.

Resistance to *Escola Sem Partido* (ESP) has been widespread through legal challenges, grassroots activism, scholarly critique, and political opposition. The Brazilian courts have repeatedly ruled against many ESP-inspired laws, citing constitutional protections for academic freedom and freedom of expression. At the same time, teachers, students, and educational organisations have mobilised through protests, public petitions, and advocacy campaigns, highlighting the threats posed by ESP to democratic education. Scholars in Brazil and internationally have also critically engaged with the movement, arguing that it undermines the very principles of pluralism and open inquiry that education should uphold (da Silva, 2023; Giorgi et al., 2018; Knijnik, 2021). Moreover, although ESP found strong support during Bolsonaro's presidency, opposition politicians at various levels actively worked to counter its influence.

The ESP movement articulates a distinction between the political and the neutral, which has also been a centre of departure for many political philosophies in the last decades (Marchart, 2007). For instance, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2014) make the same distinction between the political and the social (neutral) to explain societal stability and contestation. The social refers to sedimented practices and norms that appear natural and fixed, representing a closure of meaning where stability prevails thanks to obscured power relations. In contrast, the political emerges in moments of antagonism and contestation that reveal the contingent and constructed nature of society and enable struggles over meaning and identity. While the social reflects the temporary stabilisation of hegemonic articulations, the political disrupts this order, exposes its fragility, and creates opportunities for re-articulation.

This theoretical strand stresses that political struggles maintain and transform the contingent foundation of all social arrangements in a circular relation where every political moment happens on contesting a social one, and vice versa; every social moment is a stabilisation of a political moment. However, for neo-conservative movements such as School without a Party, there is a gap between both as the political is seen as a 'dirty game' where their opponents engage against a natural traditional social order, where values such as family, religion, and cultural heritage are central, romanticised and unquestioned. Neo-

conservatives wish to naturalise the dominant social order. Being against politics is a strategic mask to maintain a certain *status quo ante*. To avoid such misleading discourses, Jason Glynos and David Howarth (2007) build on Ernesto Laclau and Mouffe's distinction between the social and the political to explore how discourses and practices, such as those by this movement present their articulations as socially neutral and then look at their political dimension and the fantasies that sustain them. This can be operationalised by asking the following questions:

1. **For the social logics:** *What* are the shared and sedimented assumptions about the relationship of education to politics that ESP presents?
2. **For the political logics:** *How* is the distinction between political education and a neutral one established in the discourse of ESP?
3. **For the fantasmatic logics:** *Why*, or through which ideological narratives does the movement sustain its vision of education as neutral or political?

The main materials for this analysis are three key legislative proposals - Law Projects n° 867/2015, Senate Law Project n° 193/2016, and n° 246/2019 - often collectively referred to as the *Escola Sem Partido* law projects. In Brazil, a *projeto de lei*, or 'law project', is a proposed bill that must pass through debate and approval in Congress before becoming law. These specific bills, introduced at different times in the Brazilian National Congress, aimed to implement the principles of the *Escola Sem Partido* movement by restricting teachers from expressing political, ideological, or religious views in the classroom and limiting discussions on topics such as gender and sexuality. While none of these bills were passed at the national level, they have significantly influenced educational debates, leading to similar proposals at state and municipal levels. These legislative texts serve as the primary empirical materials for this study, providing insight into how the movement has attempted to shape Brazilian education policy. The study employs a retroductive approach, moving between an empirical review of the law project texts and a theoretical analysis based on the works of Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, Carl Schmitt, and Slavoj Žižek on the concept of the political. The article builds an alternative approach to the relationship of education to the political after understanding the internal logics that sustain this discourse of ESP. This broadens the discussion to show that even within

educational theory, the question of education's autotelic nature or instrumentality poses theoretical impasses.

The social logic: education is not political

The discourse of the ESP movement relies on a distinction between what is deemed political (the existing education in Brazil) and what is not (the education it advocates). This dichotomy reflects a broader distaste for politics, which Schmitt (2008: 20) notes as characteristic of the political in regard to other fields. Schmitt argues that 'the word (the political) is most frequently used negatively, in contrast to various other ideas, for example in such antitheses as politics and economy, politics and morality, and politics and law' (Ibid.). Within the ESP discourse, one might add education to this list, as the movement portrays any connection between education and politics as corrupting education's intrinsic purity and value. Instead, education is often idealised as neutral, apolitical, or purely moral, while politics is seen as contentious, ideological, or corrupt. This distinction is the core on which the movement builds itself and can be sensed in almost all the iterations of its projects of law. As we can read in the Senate Law Project n^o 193/2016, and n^o 246/2019:

“Faced with this reality – known by everyone’s direct experience those who have gone through the education system in the last 20 or 30 years ... We believe that it is necessary and urgent to adopt effective measures to prevent the practice of political and ideological indoctrination in schools, and the usurpation of the right of parents to have their children receive moral education that is in accordance with their own convictions” (Brasil, 2016).

“5) The freedom to teach, obviously, does not grant the teacher the right to take advantage of his position and the captive audience of students to promote his own interests, opinions, conceptions or ideological, religious, moral, political and partisan preferences; nor the right to favor, harm or constrain students due to their political, ideological, moral or religious convictions; nor the right to make political-partisan propaganda in the classroom and incite his students to participate in demonstrations, public acts and marches; nor the right to manipulate the content of his

discipline, with the objective of obtaining the adhesion of students to a certain political or ideological current; nor, finally, the right to tell other people's children what is right and wrong in matters of religion and morality" (Brasil, 2019).

The ESP movement was founded against a state of Brazilian education which sees it as being manipulated by an ideological indoctrination summed up under the name of Brazil's main education philosopher, Paulo Freire. Freire views education as a means of achieving social justice and liberation. For him, education should not simply aim to transmit knowledge, as in a 'banking model', but should enable students to transform their world and overcome oppression (Freire, 2000). The ESP movement claims that Freire's emphasis on critical consciousness and social justice is not neutral but could lead to the teaching of Marxist or leftist ideas, which they see as problematic for the neutrality of education towards the different political opponents in Brazil.

The way Paulo Freire's teachings are often presented by the ESP suggests that he was opposed to the Catholic faith, but in reality, he maintained a strong connection to his Christian beliefs. In the 1960s, Freire became involved in 'liberation theology', a movement within the Catholic Church that focused on social justice and urged the church to take a more active role in fighting poverty and oppression (McLaren, 2022). However, this interpretation of Catholicism was viewed by some as heretical. In a telling account, Miguel Nagib, the founder of the ESP movement, once expressed his frustration with a history professor of his daughters who compared the revolutionary Ché Guevara - whom he sees as a symbol of ideological fallacy - to Saint Francis of Assisi, a revered religious figure (Bedinelli, 2016). To avoid such a presumed misconception, Nagib thinks parents should stand against 'ideological indoctrination' in schools by clearly demarcating the boundaries of education and politics. The ESP movement looks at Paulo Freire's teachings as unconstitutional because of their partisan dimension. As Miguel Nagib states:

“What we defend is that some of Paulo Freire's teachings clash with the Constitution. Our criticism is of a legal nature because the use of the classroom for the purpose of transforming society, as he defended it,

depending on how it is applied, violates the freedom of students and the political and ideological neutrality of the State” (Souza, 2017).

The movement critiques educators inspired by Freirean pedagogy for rejecting a presumed neutrality in education and engages in this debate as if neutrality would be a shame for Paulo Freire. Instead, Freirean educators argue that all education carries ideological influence, as Richard Shaull writes in his introduction to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

“There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom’, the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world” (Freire, 2005: 34).

The answer to such neo-conservative discourses claiming education’s neutrality is usually done in other contexts through normative or evidence-based answers. For instance, Bialystok (2018) argues, using the recent controversy over the sex education curriculum in Ontario, Canada, that being overly respectful of the parental choice that refuses the enrolment of their kids in sex education risks reproducing the illiberal paradigms that the curriculum is intended to erode and thus subverts its own liberal intentions. Similarly, Overwien (2019), in the context of the Neutral Schools movement led by the German right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland, emphasises that education in schools cannot and should not be politically neutral. Instead, it needs to address critical societal issues such as populism, racism, and discrimination in educational settings. Neutrality in this context would undermine the democratic and human rights-focused values that schools are meant to promote. Instead, educators should foster critical engagement, equip students with knowledge and competencies for democratic participation, and confront anti-democratic tendencies explicitly and thoughtfully.

Even an answer grounded in Chantal Mouffe’s theoretical contributions, as outlined in the introduction, would assert that the political is inherently

irreducible. This suggests that claiming to be apolitical is, in itself, a political strategy. Hence, even the call for neutrality in education through pluralism without antagonism is itself a political strategy (Mouffe, 2011). However, this explanation has theoretical limitations. Neo-conservative movements like the ESP do not promote pure universalism with an uncontested view of the world, which would be in this case, a conservative, neutral education. Instead, their strategy is one of violent particularism. For example, the universal right of parents to choose is framed as enabling different particularities. However, once the right of the parents represented by the movement is open, the same right is closed by an act of violent exclusion. ESP shuts out other particularisms (such as other parents' choices that are pro-critical pedagogies) by creating a sharp divide: one side is deemed political and corrupt, while the other is portrayed as natural and legitimate. In the next section, I argue that this approach is known as ultra-politicisation, and it represents the political logic of this movement.

The political logic: a violent decisionism

The political logic of ESP lies in combining depoliticisation with ultra-politicisation. Despite their claims to be against politicisation, the ESP movement selectively combines depoliticisation (of critical visions) and ultra-politicisation (of conservative visions). This paradox aligns with Schmitt's notion that all politics is ultimately about defining the enemy (Schmitt, 2008). For ESP, the enemy is an imagined collective of various enemies and ideological manipulators - leftists, queer activists, or progressive educators - who supposedly corrupt education. Yet, this pretension to neutrality is political in itself. In the ESP, the paradox of neutrality lies in their decision to eliminate Freirean pedagogy or decolonial curricula, which is not a withdrawal from politics but a radical assertion of control over the inherent political content of education. Hence, by excluding an education that promotes democratic participation, liberatory intent, and gender equity in particular, the movement strives to naturalise the sovereignty of coloniality, gender hierarchy, and Catholicism.

Carl Schmitt's concepts of sovereignty and decisionism can help us understand the political strategy of the ESP movement. For Schmitt, sovereignty is defined by the ability to decide on the exception - what lies inside and outside the norm. The ESP performs this sovereign act by drawing the boundary between

‘neutral’ and ‘political’. The ESP seems to understand, in the guise of neo-conservative movements, that it is impossible to pass from a pure single normative order and ideal of school to the actuality of life where we have endless contingent particularities without this act of *self* imposition. As Žižek (1999b) explains, this basic decision on what is political and what is not hinges on an abyssal act of violence. Violent in the sense that it articulates a vision of education as neutral from all politics but then inscribes this same decision through a political act. In a sense, it grounds itself in itself (in its *own* decision), and everything it does is self-referential to this act itself. This is, for instance, what we see in article number 6 of the Senate Law Project n° 246/2019:

“Art. 6 Private schools that follow specific religious and ideological orientations may broadcast and promote religious, moral and ideological content contractually authorized by the parents or guardians of students, and the students’ right to education, freedom to learn and pluralism of ideas must be respected with regard to other content” (Brazil, 2019).

This is the main distinction between modern populism and old traditionalism: recognising that the dissolution of traditional values can no longer be reset. Therefore, the project does claim a re-foundation of an educational model that encompasses all the different ideologies in Brazilian society or that it will end up absorbing them.

Hence, decisionism becomes paradoxical, as the moment to decide what is political and what is not is a political act. According to this, the ESP frames Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy as inherently political and contrasts it with an ostensibly apolitical and neutral model of education that the movement claims existed in the past. The narrative erases the contingency of this ‘original’ model, presenting it as a return to a natural state of education, free from ideological contamination. Therefore, teachers are labeled cultists of Paulo Freire, and their approach is dismissed as a political surplus. According to ESP, students are harmed by being forced to remain in the classroom while teachers benefit from this condition. Teachers are portrayed as taking advantage of this circumstance, not to speak in a balanced way, but to promote their own preferences and violating the students’ freedom of conscience and belief.

What follows this is an authoritarian shift of schools where the movement encourages broader surveillance and control mechanisms, such as encouraging students to record classes and anonymously report teachers who promote ideologies. Articles number four and five of the law project nº 246/2019 detail some of these measures:

Art. 4 In the exercise of his/her duties, the teacher:

I - shall not take advantage of the captive audience of students to promote his/her own interests, opinions, conceptions or ideological, religious, moral, political and partisan preferences;

II - shall not favor, harm or constrain students due to their political, ideological, moral or religious convictions, or lack thereof;

III - shall not engage in political-partisan propaganda in the classroom nor incite his/her students to participate in demonstrations, public acts and marches;

IV - when dealing with political, sociocultural and economic issues, shall present to students, in a fair manner, the main versions, theories, opinions and competing perspectives regarding the subject;

V - shall respect the right of the students' parents to have their children receive the religious and moral education that is in accordance with their own convictions;

VI - will not allow the rights guaranteed in the previous items to be violated by the actions of students or third parties, within the classroom.

Art. 5 Basic education institutions shall post posters in classrooms and teachers' rooms with the content set out in the annex to this Law, measuring at least 420 millimeters wide by 594 millimeters high and using a font size compatible with the dimensions adopted (Brazil, 2019).

Art. 7 Students are guaranteed the right to record classes, in order to allow better absorption of the content taught and to enable the full exercise of the right of parents or guardians to be aware of the pedagogical process and to evaluate the quality of the services provided by Art (Ibid.).

Art. 11 The Public Power will have a communication channel for receiving complaints related to non-compliance with this Law, ensuring anonymity (Ibid.).

If the political is understood as ontological and unavoidable, how does it manifest or find expression within the discourse of ESP when that discourse actively negates it? Schmitt (2008: 26) argues that the political, unlike other spheres such as aesthetics, religion, or economics is 'independent, not in the sense of a distinct new domain, but in that it can neither be based on any one antithesis or any combination of other antitheses, nor can it be traced to these'. Similarly, Arditi (1995: 13) highlights that 'the advantage of this concept of the political is that it does not tie political phenomena to a particular institutional setting, and allows us to think the political as a mobile and ubiquitous field. Thus, the political's omnipresence raises the critical question: where does it surface or become displaced when it is ostensibly excluded? The answer lies in exploring the fantasmatic logic underpinning this displacement.

The fantasmatic logic: cuius religio, rius educatio

In movements such as ESP, while the political is rooted in distinctions between adversaries, these distinctions are reframed through a moral lens, often tied to religious values. The neutrality claimed by ESP becomes a fantasy, sustained by moralism that supplants political debate with moral imperatives. For example, critiques of Freirean pedagogy are framed not as political disagreements but as moral concerns which aim at protecting children and families. This moral discourse obscures the inherently political nature of education and introduces a conservative vision of society under the guise of neutrality. The fantasmatic dimension of the ESP project reveals its ideological operation. Rather than outright denying the political, ESP displaces political conflict onto moralising grounds. Morality becomes a substitute for political contestation, filling the void left by the denial of explicit political struggle. This dynamic is evident in the repeated invocation of morality alongside education in the ESP Law project n^o 246/2019, which includes provisions such as:

Art. 4: Teachers will not use their captive audience of students to promote personal opinions or ideological, religious, moral, or political preferences (Brasil, 2019).

Art. 15: A secular state cannot use the education system to promote values hostile to the morality of any religion (Ibid.).

Art. 16: Allowing the government to promote a particular morality through education undermines the religious beliefs of students (Ibid.).

ESP constructs a moralistic ‘us vs. them’ narrative, where ‘we’ represent traditional values and ‘they’ embody ideological corruption. The movement obscures its political agenda and projects an image of neutrality. The movement’s critique of Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy underscores this tension. Freire’s pedagogy is explicitly political which contrasts with the ESP’s claims of an apolitical and neutral educational model rooted in a mythical past. This narrative erases the contingency of this supposed ‘original’ model, framing it as a natural, balanced state of education free from ideological influence. Yet, such a framing denies the inherently political nature of education. As Carl Schmitt (2008) observed, in early modern nation-states, the political was initially confined to external relations during religious wars and, internally, to policing. Over time, however, politics permeated all aspects of life, including family and religion. The ESP Law project reflects a similar trajectory, seeking to depoliticise family and gender by framing them as neutral and relegating authority over these domains to the family. This is evident in articles of the Law Projects n^o 867/2015:

Art. 2^o The Public Power will not meddle in the process of sexual maturation of students nor allow dogmatism or proselytism in addressing gender issues.

V - (teachers) will respect the right of students’ parents to have their children receive religious and moral education that is in accordance with their own convictions (Brasil, 2015).

The project's attempt to depoliticise these spaces masks their political dimension. It does not remove politics but rather reconfigures it through a moral and privatised framework that effectively reinstates a form of policing in these spheres.

Schmitt noted that, historically, the political was synonymous with the sovereign, encapsulated in the phrase *Cujus regio, ejus religio* 'whose realm, his religion'. By redefining family, religion, gender, and education as apolitical, ESP reinstates control and authority over these spaces, disguising its actions as neutral while enforcing a return to hierarchical and militarised structures. In contrast, Laclau (1994) challenges the notion of a 'first originality', arguing that every origin is shaped by prior constructs. ESP disavows this, insisting that education can be stripped of politics and reduced to mere knowledge production and dissemination. By framing this reduction in moral terms, ESP perpetuates the illusion of an apolitical educational framework, failing to acknowledge the inescapable entanglement of education with the political. In a way, the fantasmatic logic of ESP becomes *Cujus religio, ejus educatio* 'whose religion, his education'.

What is to be done theoretically?

This debate on the neutrality of education, far from representing only pathological discourses, also represents an aporia within the educational theory regarding the instrumentality of education (Atif, 2021). If we examine the discourse of the ESP movement, we find some overlaps with broader educational theories with ambivalence in the reasons or consequences of their positions on education's instrumentality. For instance, while Biesta (2018) advocates for education's separation from politics and economy to prevent its reduction to mere learning, the ESP movement paradoxically uses the same anti-instrumentality argument to reduce education to learning. Similarly, post-critical pedagogy rejects any relationship between education and politics by claiming that education is predicated on love, while politics is rooted in hate (Hodgson et al., 2018). ESP adopts a comparable stance, critiquing critical pedagogy on the same grounds. On another level, Masschelein and Simons' (2013) suggestion that education should be independent of any instrumentality seems to unintentionally represent the same conservative approach that asks for a return to the roots of an elitist

cultural heritage as in the speeches of ESP or the controversial work of Bloom (2008). Furthermore, attempts have been made to argue for the autotelic nature of education by comparing it to the experience of art, entirely divorced from any calculation or instrumentality (Ruitenberg, 2022). However, such efforts run the difficulty of being complicit in perpetuating power structures in an aestheticization of a status quo (Vardoulakis, 2024).

These examples invite us to rethink the relationship between education and politics as more than a pathological discourse performed by populist movements and hence has to be dismissed. Instead, we must conceptualise education and politics in new terms that respond to the dilemmas of education's instrumentality and its distance from political actors, as educational theory itself seems difficult. This vision should be more than a simple approach that confirms the relation of education to politics and hence its full absorption by political projects (democratic or not); similarly, it should not negate any relation of education to politics.

We must reconceptualise the very notion of the political to adopt such a new approach. Rather than viewing politics as merely a collection of competing procedures, institutions, or policies, we should, following Laclau and Mouffe (2014), understand the political as ontologically inherent to every identity. It unfolds through a dual, interrelated dynamic of associative and dissociative operations - what they term antagonism - operating on two levels. First, internal antagonism which refers to the inherent negativity within any claim to neutrality or instrumentality in education, and recognises the radical contingency and incompleteness that underpins all educational and political projects. And, second, external antagonism that arises from conflicts between competing visions of education, reflecting the tensions between neutral and instrumental approaches and their differing interests and objectives.

The undemocratic tendencies of neo-conservative movements often manifest in reducing antagonism to the external competition between different instrumental projects while overlooking their internal antagonism, which is their inevitable incompleteness. By refusing to recognise the contingency of each instrumentality and how it ontologically fails to achieve its goals fully, the

democratic opposition of different instrumental projects of education becomes a war between absolute, unquestionable enemies - much like moral debates that divide things strictly into good and evil.

By contrast, accepting the political as external and internal to every project acknowledges the radical negativity ontological to all instrumentalities of education. It creates the conditions for continuous and diverse educational projects without imposing definitive closure through forms of neutrality. By recognising the internal negativity inside every educational project, we can have a productive force for evolving educational and political practices (Atif and Fitzpatrick, 2024). Ultimately, this understanding of antagonism emphasises that the legitimacy of any relation of education to political actors lies in its acknowledgment of the dual nature of antagonism. Education can affirm its democratic potential by acknowledging the inherent gaps in every attempt to define it and in the identities of the goals it seeks to shape as an instrument. Recognising this, education and politics are no longer seen as opposing forces, as ambivalently educational theory and neoconservative movements defend for different reasons, but as interconnected dimensions of a shared ontological reality, where the success of any project remains provisional (Szkudlarek, 2017).

Practical implications for resisting right-wing populism's use of 'neutrality' in education

First, we should challenge the myth of neutrality in public discourse by actively questioning and exposing how claims of educational neutrality often mask ideological agendas that serve conservative and neo-liberal interests. On the curriculum level, we should avoid presenting education as purely neutral or non-instrumental; instead, we should emphasise its role in fostering a critical inquiry into democratic engagement. Second, we can embrace open and plural educational spaces in policy advocacy by pushing for policies that recognise multiple perspectives rather than ones that enforce a single dominant narrative under the guise of neutrality. Pedagogical practice can encourage educators to address political questions in a way that highlights their complexity rather than reducing them to binary oppositions.

Furthermore, we can recognise the inevitable incompleteness of educational projects in teacher training by equipping educators with frameworks that accept education's evolving and contingent nature, resisting attempts to impose fixed, 'final' curricula. Institutional strategies should echo this by designing reflexive educational programmes, allowing room for ongoing revision and critique. We should shift the debate from 'good vs. evil' binary to democratic negotiation in classroom discussions by framing political and social issues as matters of ongoing debate rather than battles between absolute right and wrong. On a community engagement level, we can create forums where students, educators, and policymakers negotiate different perspectives without falling into antagonistic extremes. With the continuous rise of right-wing populism, it would also be essential to expose the political strategy behind right-wing populism in education. Media literacy is important in this matter to educate students on how political actors use the rhetoric of neutrality to delegitimise engaged, critical education. The policy can resist this trend when right-wing populists push for 'neutral' education policies by revealing how these policies enforce a conservative bias rather than true openness.

Finally, we should promote education as a site of democratic struggle to overcome the accusations of indoctrination by reframing debates. For instance, we should shift the narrative from 'education should be free from politics' to 'education is always political, so the question is *how* it engages with politics'. Similarly, institutional policies should advocate for educational institutions to explicitly recognise their role in fostering democratic values and pluralism rather than claiming false neutrality. By implementing these strategies, education can resist the right-wing populist tactic of using neutrality as a weapon against engaged, democratic learning while fostering a more open and evolving educational space.

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