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DIÁLOGO EDUCACIONAL

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Desire, fantasy and curriculum: from signifiXations to concertinity

Desejo, fantasia e currículo: das signifiXações à concertinidade

Desejo, fantasía y currículo: de las signifiXaciones a la concertinidad

Diogo Barros Bogéa ^[a] 

Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), Faculdade de Educação, Departamento de Estudos da Subjetividade e da Formação Humana

Marcio Francisco Teixeira de Oliveira ^[b] 

Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil

Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), Faculdade de Educação, Departamento de Estudos da Subjetividade e da Formação Humana

How to cite: BOGÉA, D.; OLIVEIRA, M.F.T. Desejo, fantasia e currículo: das signifiXações à concertinidade. *Revista Diálogo Educacional*, Curitiba, PUCPRESS, v. 26, n. 88, p. 569-584, jan./mar. 2026. <https://doi.org/10.7213/1981-416X.26.088.AO03EN>

Abstract

This paper engages with the philosophy of Spinoza and elements of psychoanalytic theory to discuss the fantasies of determination regarding desire and curriculum. Adopting a post-critical, post-structuralist reading, it acknowledges the power of discourses on contemporary curricular policies, shaped both by neoliberal rationality and by critical approaches aimed at confronting it. On the one hand, neoliberalism establishes ideals of efficiency and success; on the other, the critical perspective promotes ideals such as equality and the common good. Although these perspectives appear oppositional, they ultimately converge in the desire to fix ideals, offering beatific promises of completeness and horrific threats of failure. By relying on the modern conception of individuals as rational and fully autonomous beings capable of choosing and adapting to pre-established ends, both perspectives fall into what this paper calls the fantasy of signifiXation. In response, the paper

^[a] Doutor em Filosofia, e-mail: diogobogea@hotmail.com

^[b] Doutor em Filosofia, e-mail: marcio.oliveira@uerj.br

introduces Spinoza's relational ontology, where desire is understood as dynamic and shaped by the concertinity of circumstances. Emphasizing this relational multiplicity, the paper argues that education cannot be predetermined, as its processes are marked by continuous negotiation. The concepts of concertinity, negotiation, and commerce are thus mobilized to challenge the fantasies of desire determination found both in normative critical approaches and in market-driven ideals of control.

Keywords: Curriculum. Desire. SignifiXation. Concertinity.

Resumo

Fazendo composição com a filosofia de Espinosa e com elementos da teoria psicanalítica, o presente artigo discute as fantasias de determinação do desejo e do currículo. Em uma leitura pós-crítica de inspiração pós-estruturalista, admite-se a força dos discursos sobre as políticas curriculares contemporâneas, marcadas tanto pela racionalidade neoliberal quanto pelas abordagens críticas que pretendem enfrentá-la. Por um lado, o neoliberalismo estabelece ideais de eficiência e de sucesso; por outro, vê-se na perspectiva crítica a instituição de outros ideais, como os de igualdade e de bem comum. Tais perspectivas, apesar de indicarem franca oposição, acabam por convergir no desejo de fixação de ideais, com promessas beatíficas de completude e horríficas de ameaça. Por admitirem a concepção moderna de que os sujeitos são seres racionais e plenamente autônomos, capazes de escolher e de se adequar a fins previamente estabelecidos, argumenta-se que tais perspectivas incorrem na fantasia de signifiXação de ideais a serem desejados. Face a essa fantasia, o trabalho articula concepções da ontologia relacional espinosista, segundo a qual o desejo é entendido como dinâmico e marcado pela concertinidade das circunstâncias experimentadas. Ao acentuar o múltiplo concerto de indivíduos em relação, pretende-se argumentar que a educação não pode ser pré-determinada, pois seus processos não estão isentos de uma negociação de forças. Assim, as noções de concertinidade, negociação e comércio buscam tensionar as fantasias de determinação do desejo presentes tanto na normatividade crítica quanto nos ideais de controle mercadológicos.

Palavras-chave: Currículo. Desejo. signifiXação. Concertinidade.

Resumen

Este artículo dialoga con la filosofía de Spinoza y con elementos de la teoría psicoanalítica para discutir las fantasías de determinación del deseo y del currículo. Desde una lectura poscrítica de inspiración posestructuralista, se reconoce la fuerza de los discursos que atraviesan las políticas curriculares contemporáneas, marcadas tanto por la racionalidad neoliberal como por enfoques críticos que pretenden confrontarla. Mientras el neoliberalismo promueve ideales de eficiencia y éxito, la perspectiva crítica postula ideales como la igualdad y el bien común. Aunque opuestas, ambas terminan convergiendo en el deseo de fijar ideales, con promesas beatíficas de plenitud y amenazas horribles de fracaso. Se argumenta que estas perspectivas comparten una fantasía de signifiXación basada en una concepción moderna del sujeto como autónomo y racional. Frente a esta fantasía, el texto propone la ontología relacional espinosista, en la cual el deseo es dinámico y se configura por la concertinidad. Al acentuar esta multiplicidad de relaciones, se sostiene que la educación no puede ser predeterminada, ya que implica una constante negociación de potencias. Así, las nociones de concertinidad, negociación y comercio se utilizan para tensionar las fantasías de determinación del deseo presentes tanto en la normatividade crítica como en los ideales de control del mercado.

Palabras clave: Currículo. Deseo. SignifiXación. Concertinidad.

1. Initial considerations

One would have to be immersed in an extraordinarily powerful degree of denial not to notice the pervasiveness of neoliberal ideals across every sphere of human life. Perhaps not even their illustrious architects, gathered at the Lippmann Colloquium in 1938 and in the Mont Pèlerin Society in 1946, could have foreseen the success their socioeconomic projects would achieve around the world. Perhaps, too, the first among their most incisive critics, Michel Foucault, could not have anticipated just how accurate his descriptions of the neoliberal drive toward totalization would prove to be. As Wendy Brown reminds us, at a time when Foucault's words have already been duly materialized all around us:

Foucault emphasized neoliberalism's significance as a novel political rationality, the reach and implications of which go well beyond economic policy and the empowerment of capital.²⁴ Rather, in this rationality, market principles become governing principles applied by and to the state, but also circulating through institutions and entities across society— schools, workplaces, clinics, etc. These principles become saturating reality principles governing every sphere of existence and reorienting homo oeconomicus itself, transforming it from a subject of exchange and the satisfaction of needs (classical liberalism) to a subject of competition and human capital enhancement (neoliberalism).¹ (Brown, 2019, p. 31).

In this article, situated within the field of curriculum theory, we will draw on contemporary post-critical and post-foundational frameworks in order to propose alternatives—beyond those put forward by critical theories—for reading—and responding to—the neoliberal advances in curriculum policy. As our point of departure, we take Christian Laval's book *School Is Not an Enterprise: Neoliberalism's Attack on Public Education (A Escola não é uma empresa – o neoliberalismo em ataque ao ensino público)* (2019). In this work, which we might regard as a contribution to curriculum theory, Laval offers both a precise diagnosis of neoliberal influences on curriculum policy and a succinct—yet quite clear—outline of the properly “critical” “ways out” that are commonly proposed as strategies for confronting neoliberal domination.

In dialogue with Laval, we will combine Spinozist and psychoanalytic theoretical references to think through post-critical alternatives of post-structuralist inspiration, directed both at neoliberal rationality and at critical rationalism. Although Spinoza is a modern author, his commitment to a radically immanent ontology opens the way for dialogues with contemporary post-foundational thought. This is because the idea of a “foundation” with absolute pretensions typically presents itself as something truly external and superior to the processes and relations of the world, functioning as a final arbiter or criterion in epistemological, ethical, and political domains. This rapprochement between Spinoza and post-foundationalism—far from being new—was first highlighted by Deleuze (2002, 2017) and has since been widely explored, including within Philosophy of Education and Curriculum Theory. Recent examples of this movement include Barreto and Pelbart's “Education for power or the art of good meetings three or four ideas about Espinosa and education” (2023); Novikoff and Cavalcanti's “Thinking about power of affections in and for education” (2015); Borges and Lopes's “Why is affect important to politics?” (2021); and Carvalho, Zouain, and Cararo (2024), with “Spinoza and the paths of affection in teaching as multiple bodies in school daily life.” By wagering on radical immanence, Spinoza clears the path for elaborating another conception of subjectivity—one that is foreign to the very mainstream of modern thought—as we will seek to show throughout this article.

Psychoanalytic theory, in turn, seems to us to carry out one of the most forceful dismantlings of the modern ideal of subjectivity. In one of the most renowned works on the psychoanalytic notion of the “subject,” Bruce Fink (1998) states that Lacan's “subject” is neither “the ‘individual’ or the conscious subject of Anglo-American philosophy,” nor the “subject of the statement,” nor any “kind of underlying substance or substrate (hypokeimenon or subjectum)” (Fink, 1998, p. 59). If Descartes is considered the founder of the modern ideal of subjectivity, “Lacan turns Descartes upside down: the thinking ego is mere conscious rationalization (the ego's attempt to legitimize mistaken and involuntary utterances through after-the-fact explanations that fit its ideal self-image).” The “subject” presumed to exist as an effect

¹ BROWN, W. *In the ruins of neoliberalism: the rise of antidemocratic politics in the West*. Columbia University Press: New York, 2019, p. 19-20

of these processes “can only be categorized as false or as a fraud” (Fink, 1998, p. 65). It is a fundamentally divided subject: “between the ego and the unconscious, between conscious and unconscious, between an inevitably false sense of self and the automatic functioning of language (the signifying chain) in the unconscious” (Fink, 1998, p. 66–67).

It is worth recalling that—for precisely this reason—psychoanalytic theory has been widely used in articulation with post-structuralist-inspired educational thought. Beyond the works by Clarke (2018, 2020), with which we will engage later, further strong examples include Gustavo Oliveira and Anna Luiza Oliveira (2025), “High school reform as a vector for a new horizon for youth: neoconservative fantasies, projects of subjectivation and hegemonic tension”; Borges and Lopes (2015), “Teacher training: an impossible project”; and Borges and De Jesus (2020), “Making “rationality” tremble: disruptive notes about BNC-Formação.”

With regard to the methodological dimension of the present study, in agreement with the conceptions advanced by Gatti (2010, p. 53–57), Alves (1992, p. 55–56), and St. Pierre (2018), we understand our methodology as directly intertwined with the theoretical framework of our research. Accordingly, we adopt post-structuralist-inspired theoretical references. By calling into question the constitutive binarism of the sign in the relation between the materiality of the signifier and the identity of the signified, post-structuralist movements make room for thinking both the dynamic network of materials and affects and the dynamic network of signifiers that constitute processes of signification (Lopes, 2013, p. 12–13). Such dynamics apply to the very notion of “curriculum.” That is, curriculum will be neither a “signifier” referring to a real signified identical to itself, nor can it itself be a “signified” supposedly present and identical to itself. If we take seriously the destabilization introduced by post-structuralist thought, we must recognize that curriculum is always a discursive formation: a network of discourses which, rather than simply referring to some present identity, constructs its “object” in its own movement.

A discourse on curriculum [...] is not limited to representing a thing that would be “the curriculum,” which would exist prior to that discourse and would be there merely awaiting discovery and description. A discourse on curriculum, even when it claims only to describe it “as it really is,” effectively produces a particular notion of curriculum. The purported description is, in effect, a creation (Silva, 2016, p. 11–12).

Alice Casimiro Lopes and Elizabeth Macedo underscore the inescapable relation between discourse and power. After all, in the absence of a full identity, the various processes of identification that in fact occur are neither innocent nor merely accidental. Fixing identities around which one intends to “gather” a vast range of differences—as well as exclude so many others—is always already an act of power.

The capacity to unify a discourse is itself an act of power, so that modern metanarratives must be seen as such, and not as expressions of reality. Similarly, pedagogical and curricular discourses can be understood as acts of power: the power to signify, to create meanings and hegemonize them. (...) Each of the curricular traditions is a discourse that has become hegemonic and that, in this sense, has constituted the object “curriculum,” lending the term a meaning. They build it; they create a meaning about the being of curriculum. They are an act of power insofar as this meaning comes to be shared and accepted (Lopes; Macedo, 2011, p. 40).

Starting from a post-structuralist theoretical lens (Lopes, 2013), we understand curriculum not as a document that transparently enunciates a fundamental truth or corresponds to it with greater or lesser exactitude. Curriculum documents express preconceptions, powers, disputes, and desires to assert purported projects of identity and grounding which—although presupposed as in force from the outset—are produced in the very discursive process.

As for the type of study and its technical procedures, our work combines exploratory research and bibliographic research (Barbosa; Costa, 2015, p. 32–33) on the topic, taking into account discussions found in academic articles, classic works, and more recent works as they are applied to questions in the field of curriculum theory.

2. Neoliberalism and Its Contemporary Influence on Education

One of the most extensive analyses of neoliberalism was undertaken by Christian Laval himself, in partnership with Pierre Dardot, in *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society* (2016). The book's central thesis is that neoliberalism is not merely an ideology or an economic doctrine, but rather "as the set of discourses, practices and apparatuses that determine a new mode of government of human beings in accordance with the universal principle of competition."² (Laval; Dardot, 2016, p. 17). Neoliberal rationality has as its "principal characteristic" "the generalization of competition as a behavioural norm and of the enterprise as a model of subjectivation."³ (p. 16). The contemporary enterprise, taken as a model of life and society (Laval; Dardot, 2016, p. 330), universalizes notions of productivity, efficiency, and performance, which come to regulate even dimensions of life to which such parameters might seem foreign: thus one can speak of optimizing leisure time, regulating rest schedules, algorithmically distributing potential partners on dating apps, and adhering to a carefully calculated, balanced, nutritious diet.

In *The School is not an enterprise (A Escola não é uma empresa)*, published a few years prior to *The New Way of the World*, Christian Laval maps the process of the neoliberalization of education—that is, the transformation, by neoliberal discourses, of the school into an enterprise, principals into managers, teachers into professionals, students into workers-in-training and entrepreneurial laborers, and families into consumer-clients. This is what Laval calls the commodification of education:

the school is approached with a professional purpose, to provide labor power suited to the needs of the economy. This more direct and more pressing intervention in pedagogy, in content, and in the validation of curricular structures and diplomas signifies pressure from the logic of the labor market upon the educational sphere (Laval, 2019, p. 129).

As Laval emphasizes, one of the key notions in the process of the neoliberalization of the school is that of "human capital": the "stock of economically valorized knowledge incorporated in individuals" (Laval, 2019, p. 51). In this way, curricular concern with the "knowledge" to be transmitted gradually shifts toward a central concern with the competencies to be acquired. Forms of knowledge come to count "only as tools or stocks of operational knowledge usable for solving problems, processing information, or implementing projects" (Laval, 2019, p. 81).

The work also maps the strong influence of international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in the development of transnational curriculum discourses. These organizations, closely tied to international financial capital, pressure educational systems in all the countries within their sphere of influence toward efficiency, performance, competitiveness, and professionalization. In so doing, they turn "'findings,' 'assessments,' and 'comparisons' into opportunities to produce a global discourse that draws its strength precisely from its planetary dimension" (Laval, 2019, p. 19). Presenting analyses that are supposedly cool and "evidence-based," with endless graphs and statistics, these international organizations present themselves as scientific institutions capable of diagnosing "gaps" and proposing solutions in order to spread worldwide what they take to be a "quality education." In pursuit of this noble objective, they will themselves finance—or else become spokespeople for demands for private financing of—curriculum policies and educational reforms.

The above-mentioned international organizations also play a crucial role in another aspect that Laval identifies as a key element of the neoliberalization of education: standardized and internationalized assessment policies. In the global context of neoliberalization, assessment becomes the necessary complement to the discourse that insists on the "freedom of choice" of the citizen-consumer. This citizen-consumer must be able to choose where to enroll their

² LAVAL, Christian; DARDOT, Pierre. *The new way of the world : on neoliberal society*. Verso: Brooklyn; London, 2013, p. 09

³ LAVAL, Christian; DARDOT, Pierre. *The new way of the world : on neoliberal society*. Verso: Brooklyn; London, 2013, p. 09

children—and these, in turn, must be able to “choose” educational pathways. The right of families to choose, associated with the proliferation of private educational institutions, would guarantee that education—now finally inserted into market dynamics, that is, operating according to the sacred laws of supply and demand—could at last raise its standards of quality. This discourse harks back to the policies of the Reagan administration, which “gave families more possibilities of choice in order to stimulate competition between schools, since this supposedly would raise the quality of education” (Laval, 2019, p. 111). To realize such an ideal, it “favored financing private schools, which would be entitled to receive the same kind of state aid as public schools” (Laval, 2019, p. 111). Thus, “the market and parents’ free choice became a kind of panacea capable of resolving the crisis of education almost as if by magic” (Laval, 2019, p. 118).

Now, a form of choice supposedly capable of warding off arbitrariness and aligning with the rationality of the market would require objective parameters. The demand to satisfy such objectivity would give rise to the purported need for global assessment policies, instituted as a necessary complement to families’ exercise of choice:

The standard discourse, inspired by the arguments of liberal economists, tends to idealize the market as a natural entity whose aim is automatically to allocate resources to their best use. If this idealization is already an illusion for classical markets in goods and factors of production, it is even more so in education. As we can observe, the theory rests on an alleged sovereignty of the consumer, who is urged to choose products in full freedom. But which products? What consumption? What is a school establishment that satisfies the consumer? What kind of information is necessary for choice? Does the isolated consumer, an atom among other atoms, know what they need? Can they foresee the long-term consequences of their choices? [...] Hence the implementation of the assessment system, the complement to families’ free choice: by publicizing the performance of schools, classes, and even teachers, it serves as an indicator of the performance of the “producers.” (Laval, 2019, p. 184).

Large-scale assessment systems with internationalized standards pressure educational establishments to standardize their own evaluative processes around objectively measurable content. The results determine the extent to which a school lags behind expected quality targets. Failure in assessments reaffirms a chain of accountability that runs from the Departments/Secretariats of Education to students, passing through principals, coordinators, and—above all—teachers.

This vast movement of international evaluation and comparison is inseparable from the growing subordination of the school to economic imperatives. It is driven by the “obligation to deliver results” to which the school is supposedly subject, like any organization that produces services. From this perspective, it forms part of “competitiveness-focused” reforms that aim to establish and raise school standards and, to that end, must standardize methods and teaching content. This movement in favor of standardized assessment is most visible in countries that have traditionally been more decentralized. All universities, all departments are considered accountable, that is, charged with and held responsible for the resources they receive. Today some specialists and administrators consider assessment the key moment of the educational enterprise. Evaluation would be a guarantee of efficiency, of the convergence of expectations and results, of democratization. Because it is evident to all, evaluation creates consensus between educational supply and demand. This results-based management presupposes agreement that evaluative dispositifs are neutral techniques for monitoring the attainment of objectives—which, in turn, must also be matters of consensus. (Laval, 2019, p. 211).

However, if the aim of educational processes is to perform well on standardized assessments with objectively calculable data—where “the results, presented in the form of data, are fetishized” and “appear as a criterion of school quality and as a measure of the population’s cultural level” (Laval, 2019, p. 210)—then assessment comes to shape curriculum policies themselves as well as school dynamics. Thus, paradoxically—or perhaps not—assessment, which was supposed to guarantee the diversification of educational establishments to be “freely chosen” by families, becomes a factor of centralization and standardization:

In many countries there is increasing centralization and increasingly extensive regulation—perhaps not in administration, financing, or hiring staff, but at the strategic core of the school, in the pedagogical field itself. Pedagogical guidelines elaborated “from above” have been expanding, and there are cases in which, in the name of economic and social efficiency, the definition of curricular guidelines, the choice of methods, and the order in which subjects are presented are taken out of teachers’ hands, or even out of the hands of educational supervisors. (Laval, 2019, p. 185–186).

The proposals Laval offers as alternatives to this global neoliberal domination are enumerated in the book’s conclusion: “Freedom of thought and research, and the rigor of knowledge, must be protected from the ascendancy of management. Equality must once again become the guiding principle; education must be recognized as a right for all.” According to the author, it is of “extreme urgency” that education “be reconceived in social representations and political programs as a public good, a common good.” Hence, “we need a policy aimed at greater equality in concrete teaching conditions for all students—not only equality of conditions, but equality of fundamental intellectual aims” (Laval, 2019, p. 307). Finally, the author reminds us that “the axis” of education is “the transmission of knowledge” (Laval, 2019, p. 307). But without forgetting that “Education lies at the center of the logic of gift and counter-gift between generations. Knowledge, yes—but also norms and values” (p. 307). This logic, the author says, “is the foundation of the institution and gives it anthropological grounding.” Thus, the “greatest danger,” he reminds us, “alongside inequality, is the mutilation of life by a reductive conception of culture and education, conceived as training with professional objectives” (Laval, 2019, p. 307).

It is clear that the neoliberal strand, as described by Laval, seeks to fix a single meaning for education, curriculum, and life. What concerns us, however, is the sense that the properly “critical” alternatives proposed by the author may not entirely escape the temptation to establish fixed meanings for educational processes as well. It is by no means our intention to fabricate a false symmetry between a neoliberal educational project and the many projects inspired by critical thought. Since the mid-twentieth century, diverse critical projects have produced important challenges to conservative and neoliberal traditions—which, incidentally, often go hand in hand—and have enabled multiple movements of resistance and creation across a wide range of contexts and scales, with widely varying impacts on the lives of those involved in educational processes.

Our concern, as we have said, is to notice that even critical currents, with their multiple possibilities, very often still presuppose the same modern ideal of subjectivity that underwrites the dreams of the individual entrepreneur-subject: the subject who is essentially rational, conscious, individual, centered. That is, the subject who is supposedly “free” to choose, to build one’s own life as an individual enterprise, or to claim an “equality” of “rights” “for all,” or “emancipation” and “freedom.” It is the same modern subject presumed to be free to pursue individual aims, and which in turn presupposes a “common-unity” of rational subjects for whom the “common good” can truly appear as an ideal to be pursued, imagined, and constructed. As Elizabeth Macedo and Janet Miller put it, “we have been faced with reiterations of the idea of the rational, autonomous, and individual subject, when we project the subject of education as an entrepreneur or as a critical and reflective citizen” (Macedo; Miller, 2022, p. 10). Not least because both projects, in fact, conceive the “axis” of education as the transmission of knowledge, norms, and values of a certain kind.

Our reservation is not directed against ideals—ideals which, moreover, we do not deny can be politically mobilizing and productive—such as equality, emancipation, freedom, or community. Our questioning targets the ideal of subjectivity that seems to be presupposed by these ideals. For an ideal of subjectivity ends up presuming and/or instituting a standard of subjectivity and, therefore, of humanity—one that ultimately leaves out, or more or less actively excludes, the many differences, diversities, and singularities that move through the world. It is in the name of an openness to experience—neither entirely controllable nor entirely predictable—an openness to engaging with the many differences, diversities, and singularities that make up educational processes (and the world and life) that we propose to place under suspicion the ideals of subjectivity that seem to sustain both neoliberal ideals and critical projects.

We will therefore turn next to elements of Spinozist theory and psychoanalytic theory in order, by calling this modern model of subjectivity into question, to think through post-critical alternatives for curriculum thought in the face of planetary neoliberal domination.

3. The Dynamics of Desire

In the third part of the *Ethics*, devoted to the discussion of human affectivity, Spinoza introduces *conatus* as something common to all things: each thing strives, insofar as it lies within itself—that is, to the extent that it is not subjected to the force of another thing—to persevere in its being (Spinoza, 2008, p. 173). And what constitutes human *conatus* is desire, will, or appetite to realize whatever satisfies this principle common to all finite things (Spinoza, 2008, p. 177). But let us not be mistaken: *conatus* as a common principle does not fix the same desire for everyone.

This notion of a desire with no object defined *a priori* aligns well with the psychoanalytic notion of drive. In *Drives and Their Vicissitudes*, Freud (2014) defines the drive as an internal stimulus—and therefore inescapable—one that impacts the psyche with a constant force; that is, in the face of a repressive barrier it will continue to insist and press forward; whose sole aim is satisfaction—without any moral parameter that might predetermine the meaning of that satisfaction; and whose objects (the means of satisfaction) are infinitely variable.

Around this description, Lacan will think the dynamics of desire as a movement of pursuit of object *a*, the first, true, real object of the drive's movement. This object *a*, however—and this is an unavoidable principle of Lacanian psychoanalysis—is fundamentally lost. The real object of desire is lacking. Or, as Lacan will say, around this fundamental, real lack, the movement of desire insists and persists, fabricating symbolically constructed fantasies that claim to be able to fill this unfillable lack (Jorge, 2011, p. 97).

By identifying *conatus* with the exercise of desire, Spinoza rejects the notion of an absolute freedom of choice. There is no rational anteriority or pre-established morality capable of guiding the will, but rather a dynamic of conserving/expanding power and resisting powerlessness, constituted at the same time as each individual affects and is affected. It is this desire for the preservation or expansion of power, as well as the desire to oppose whatever is the cause of powerlessness, that determines the will.

Psychoanalysis can add an interesting element to this dynamic. Whereas for Spinoza what is at stake in *conatus* is a desire for an increase in power and an opposition to powerlessness, psychoanalytic theory introduces into this dynamic fantasy—that strange mechanism capable of projecting scenes of omnipotence and engendering delirious escapes from powerlessness. This is the role of fantasy in what Glynos and Howarth call fantasmatic logics:

Whether in the context of social practices or political practices, fantasy operates so as to conceal or “block” the radical contingency of social relations. This is done through a fantasmatic logic or narrative that promises a plenitude-to-come once an implicit or named obstacle is overcome—the beatific dimension of fantasy—or that foresees disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable, which can be termed the horrific dimension of fantasy. For example, images of omnipotence or total control might represent the beatific dimension, while images of impotence or victimization might represent the horrific dimension of fantasmatic attempts to achieve or maintain closure. (Glynos; Howarth, 2018, p. 64)

From the standpoint of immanence, there is no *conatus* that is *a priori* stronger or nobler than another. Each one's strength will vary as encounters unfold, depending on the nexus of causes or relations. In fact, “risk is the permanent structure of the existent or of the finite mode. To act consists in putting one's own life at risk; and we cannot not act, because our being is action” (Bove, 2023, p. 29). Thus, the degree of power each being has will depend on a negotiation of forces, on a conative commerce among things—hence the radical circumstantiality of social relations that a logic of fantasy never ceases trying to overcome. From this perspective, there are no entirely pre-determined relational models that can truly guarantee a “more powerful” life. There is no way to define the capacity for action prior to the concreteness of relations.

However, it is also because of the exercise of *conatus* that, as Spinoza says, “each person desires that others live according to the inclination that is proper to them” (Spinoza, 2008, p. 373). Or, in psychoanalytic terms, fantasmatic logics will never cease presenting models structured around fantasies of omnipotence—models supposedly applicable to all as universally valid.

In this sense, both the neoliberal model and the sociological model of “equality” and the “common good” mobilize the beatific and horrific sides of fantasmatic logics. The neoliberal model offers the beatific fantasy of full efficiency, full performance, the pure objectivity of assessments, and total control over uncontrollable human processes—such as educational processes—while keeping on the horizon the mirage of ideals of “success” and “happiness.” For this, it must defeat those diabolical, horrific “others” that never cease to prevent the neoliberal fantasy from being completed: state inefficiency, authoritarianism, and corruption; the indolence and unpreparedness of teachers and students; and the insistent specter of “leftism,” which can assume the most varied guises. On the other hand, critical sociological theory makes the market itself into the diabolical enemy that incessantly encourages division and competition, preventing the beatific ideal of the “common”—around which “all of us” should mobilize—from finally being totalized. As Alice Casimiro Lopes, Verônica Borges, and Geniana Santos aptly note:

We identify that these logics are present both in what are understood as neoliberal projects and in a re-presentation of classical liberalism that envisions freedom, autonomy, regulation by the market, and the shrinking of the state. But we also find the horrific and beatific logics in the legacy of sociological perspectives in education, which shift and attribute to emancipation—or to its lack—the mode capable of reconfiguring society. In this model, there is a progressivist idea of society underway. This is a logic that projects what society ought to be from a previously given model of subject and society. [...] Both logics, here identified as market-based or sociological, are bound by structuralities capable of establishing in advance the trajectory to be followed, anticipating curricular decisions as well as assessment decisions on the basis of foundations and identity processes that aim to define the other—the teacher, the student—insofar as they define the other’s knowledge, the other’s curriculum (Lopes; Borges; Santos, 2019, p. 247).

Both Spinoza and psychoanalysis foreground an experience of subjectivity very different from the modern ideal. What is at stake is not a rational, conscious command center, but an existence moved by desires, affects, and fantasies. This greatly complicates neoliberal ideals: traversed by fantasy, the dynamics of desire do not allow themselves to be regulated by any absolute parameter of efficiency and productivity. Since there is no single, identical object of desire naturally and *a priori* established for “everyone,” the very idea of a single standard capable of determining what counts as “success,” what counts as “happiness,” and consequently what counts as “efficiency” and “good performance,” appears as a fantasy of omnipotence. By thinking human existence as co-moved by desires, affects, and fantasies, both Spinoza and psychoanalysis deny any supposition of “free will” and render untenable neoliberal claims about the consumer’s “freedom of choice” as a “sovereign” agent. And by also thinking existence as constructed in relation with many other affective, conative, and desiring bodies, Spinozism and psychoanalysis challenge the image of an individual subject who appropriates a “stock” of knowledge and competencies.

For the same reasons, Spinozist ontology and psychoanalytic theory also complicate Laval’s critical proposals. “Equality,” “rights for all,” and the “common good” are taken as terms around which a community of rational beings could arrive at a consensus. However distinct and complex the strategies for reaching such a consensus may be, the assumption remains on the horizon that it is possible to build consensus around these terms. Yet notions such as “equality,” “rights,” “for all,” and “the common” tend to resist any possibility of semantic closure secured by mutual agreement. As symbolic constructions that supplement a real that is, irremediably, lacking, such significations have shifting meanings, continuously produced and displaced through endless disputes and conflicts. As Matthew Clarke notes, one of the psychic strategies for dealing with the anguish of an unfillable lack is to forge

a neutral notion of the common good, a desired or imagined future that represents the public interest or the public good. Yet notions of the ‘public good’ are inevitably fantasmatic, insofar as they simplify and gloss over the contestations and antagonisms that contour society. (Clarke, 2018, p. 05).

In *Teaching by Numbers*, Michael Taubman seeks to investigate what kinds of fantasies are mobilized by neoliberal discourses around standardized assessments that lay claim to an objectivity supposedly guaranteeing ideals of efficiency and success. His description, however, also applies to the ideals of critical theories. In one case as in the other, one appeals to teachers’ fantasies of omnipotence—which, psychoanalytically, are often inseparable from submission to the law of a “big Other”:

For teachers, fantasies, that if we just find the right practice or the right curriculum or the right way to educate teachers all students will learn, sustain the sense that our work is or at least could be meaningful. Such fantasies suggest that we will finally be recognized by what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (2006/1970) referred to as the big Other, that is society or God or some agency that we presuppose can guarantee our worth. These fantasies assume a coherent world, where answers lie with those presumed to know, where solutions and blame are clear but exist external to us. They defend against the lack within our selves and the fallibility of the big Other, against a sense of meaninglessness, against the possibility of our own freedom, and against the knowledge of our complicity in our own suffering (Taubman, 2009, p. 147).

In what follows, we will seek to show that Spinozist thought mobilizes a relational ontology in which both compositions and conflicts are constitutive of unavoidable negotiations. We will also aim to show, with the support of elements of psychoanalytic theory, that the major problem with both neoliberal and critical ideals lies in the desire to signifiX (Macedo, 2011) a definitive meaning for this relational and conflictual dynamic—whether by fixing a single finality for all conflicts, or by denying the conflictual character of existence in the name of a “common good” purportedly capable of gathering everyone around the same objectives.

4. Concertinality: Beyond signifiXations

Spinozist ontology expresses the properly *concertina-like* aspect of relations. The word *concertina* designates both the bellows-driven musical instrument and the piercing security device installed atop walls. This double meaning is useful for thinking through the commerce that every *conatus* establishes with its surroundings. *Concertinality* can be explained as follows: individuals articulate themselves by virtue of the convergence of desires they share. There is a concertina-like composition of desires and forces among singular beings in association, but there is also a natural incompatibility among those beings. After all, since each strives to realize its own power, there can be no complete compatibility among *conatuses*. Spinoza makes this clear when he states that “there is, in the nature of things, no singular thing such that there is not another more powerful and stronger than it. Given any thing whatsoever, there is another more powerful by which the former can be destroyed” (Spinoza, 2008, p. 269). In this sense, the most incompatible relations—marked by destructive, discordant, and violent encounters—are also part of concertinality. Concertinality shows that, to varying degrees, relations can be experienced both as harmonic, compositional, and creative forces, and as piercing, violent, and destructive forces.

Existence is, by nature, concertina-like. And this concertinality is fundamentally negotiated, for it results from an inescapable commerce that things have with one another. If the world was not created for the sake of ends, as Spinozist theory maintains, but is incessantly produced by an immanent force, individuals are not subjected to a finality or to a moralizing ideal. The circumstances experienced arise from a network of relations that is a continuous negotiation of forces among singular beings. This opens space for thinking education as a relational process of formation, in which the variation of the power to exist depends on the multiplicity of encounters, and not on the application of a transcendent model of “God” and “Man.”

In what follows, we will seek to situate the notions of commerce and negotiation as inherent to education and to life. We imagine this claim may strike some readers as strange. After all, the idea that “education is not a business” is a powerful political banner in denouncing the drive for profit that prevails in private primary, secondary, and higher education institutions. We do not ignore that drive, nor do we wish to defend it. What we aim to show, however, is that commerce and negotiation are relational operators before they are merely market markers. If they can be used in market terms, it is because they are, first and foremost, relational. What interests us is to underscore a dimension of commerce and negotiation that, far beyond capitalist markets, is intrinsic to the very relational–conative dynamics of existence. *Commercium* and negotiation are directly articulated with the concertina-like exercise of *conatus*:

The power of any thing whatsoever—that is, the striving by which, whether alone or together with others, it acts or strives to act, that is [...] the power or striving by which it strives to persevere in its being—is nothing other than its given, or actual, essence. (Spinoza, 2008, p. 175)

Because of *conatus*, a body’s power to affect results from its natural striving to preserve and expand its own power. Such an exercise of power coincides with its very power and results from natural contention rather than from any *a priori* privilege. According to Spinozism, the power of each thing has no defined duration, but arises from a play of forces. The degree of power that each being manages to exercise, whether singularly or in association with other *conatuses*, varies according to the relations of force it undergoes—more specifically, according to the capacity for negotiation, for commerce, that each thing is able to enact.

The concept of negotiation, read in a Spinozist key, helps us think the play of forces at work in existence. In the *Political Treatise*, Spinoza affirms that the peace of a city is not the mere absence of war, nor should it be confused with a posture of inertia (Spinoza, 2009, p. 44–45). The word *negotiation* has its origin in the Latin locution *nec otium*, whose roots express, respectively, the negation (*nec*) of leisure (*otium*). All finite things, in varying degrees of concertinality, negotiate—whether a cell or a city. For the essence of every finite thing is not *otium*, not the negation of conflict, but *conatus*, that is, the concertina-like striving to enjoy the power to act. To live, therefore, is to negotiate: to exercise a naturally concertina-like right of opposition and/or convergence in order to enjoy one’s own power.

Desire is certainly productivity, but this can only be understood, in its specific contents, according to the commerce [author’s emphasis] that the Body maintains with the external world. This shows how, within relations of force that are necessarily unfavorable, autonomy, as an absolute affirmation of cause, is a struggle; and that, from our birth onward, we are only in an extremely partial way the cause of what happens in us and of what we do (Bove, 2003, p. 28).

Spinoza affirms that it is “absolutely impossible that we should need nothing external to us to preserve our being, and that we should live in such a way as to have no exchange [our emphasis] with things outside us” (Spinoza, 2008, p. 287). In the Latin text, the author uses the word *commercium*. The origin of this word (*cum merx/mercis*) refers precisely to mercantile operations (Dixel, 2011, p. 401), but the philosopher’s work makes it clear that he is not referring to the buying and selling of products. In light of the concept of *conatus*, the use of “commerce” seems more apt⁴. If the word “exchange” often suggests a non-conflictual, horizontal, and symmetrically advantageous operation in which the parties involved give something and, in return, obtain what they desire, the word *commerce*, for its part, places greater weight on the process of negotiating forces which, rather than being characterized as a horizontal relation between parties, remains open to the risk of disadvantage, since the effort undertaken by the parties in commerce is no guarantee of success.

From the standpoint of Spinozist ontology, there can be neither horizontality nor control over the commerce undertaken. Commerce is inevitable. And what determines this commerce is an immanent concertinality, resulting from

⁴ Portuguese translations, such as those by Antônio Simões (Os Pensadores, 1973, p. 245) and by the *Grupo de Estudos Espinosanos* of the University of São Paulo (2015, p. 405), use the term *comércio*. In English, Edwin Curley (1996, p. 125) renders the term *commercium* as *dealings*. In French, Émile Saisset (1842, location 17758 of 28208) uses *commerce*.

a multiple concert of individuals in relation, since “the human body, in order to preserve itself, requires very many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated” (Spinoza, 2008, p. 105). Thus, one cannot dispense with a plurality of relations for existence itself. We are here within the scope of a “relational ontology” for which each existent “is constituted by dense operations, by conflicting discursive networks, and by historically situated sociocultural materialities and practices.” Thus, each existent is “simultaneously constituted and decentered by a series of processes and relationalities” (Macedo; Miller, 2018, p. 956).

From this perspective, the major problem with neoliberal ideals is not that they promote or encourage commerce and negotiation, but rather their attempt to signify a single meaning for commerce and negotiation—as if these were restricted to the capitalist market of production, consumption, and profit. Elizabeth Macedo uses this neologism coined by Arnaldo Antunes to refer to “a process which, in sum, seeks to restrict the possibilities of saying otherwise” (Macedo, 2011, p. 46). Yet, “since difference constitutes the system and cannot be eliminated, the dimension of social antagonism is ineradicable” (Macedo, 2011, p. 46).

Lopes, Borges, and Santos likewise, drawing on Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory, identify in neoliberal ideals the centrality accorded to a single aspect at the expense of so many others. There is a privileging of

economic aspects, whether in the name of invoking efficiency and efficacy and binomials such as teaching–assessing, or in the emphasis on pedagogical-educational aspects such as the different movements in favor of entrepreneurship, the information society, lifelong learning, or sustainability as determining factors in contemporaneity (Lopes, Borges, Santos, 2019, p. 249).

Through this process of signifiXation, “the political is obliterated from these discussions, along with the radically negotiated character that involves the political.” As the authors affirm, reductionist signifiXations “function as if they could push conflict out of the debate” (Lopes; Borges; Santos, 2019, p. 249).

The authors also understand negotiation in a sense far broader than that established by neoliberal ideals. Negotiation is a dynamic inseparable from the movement of life and from the endless processes of signification and disputes over the fixation, dissolution, or transformation of meanings.

We highlight an understanding of negotiation as something that exceeds the simplification of the notion of politics as an act situated in what is conventionally defined as the official—sometimes governmental—space of decision-making processes. From a discursive perspective, we understand that all spaces of life are political [...] and operate through different power relations with an openness to the conflictual negotiation of meanings (Lopes; Borges; Santos, 2019, p. 240).

Whereas neoliberal logic seeks to signify a single meaning for commerce and negotiation, sociological critique of neoliberalism seeks to signify a single meaning for the conflict inherent in life: the only legitimate conflict is the struggle against the neoliberal enemy, in order finally to structure society around the “common good” recognized by all.

Both poles, though antagonistic, operate through projections with the pretension of hegemonizing their political positions. What we emphasize from these analyses is that the decision is made outside the conflict, outside the event, and is being, in different ways, inserted into so-called rational logics (Lopes; Borges; Santos, 2019, p. 250).

Those elements of psychoanalytic theory we introduced in the previous section help us understand the desire for signifiXation and hegemonization. Around the Real that is lacking, fantasies are symbolically constructed that promise completeness, totalization, closure. It is quite common for such fantasies to attempt to stabilize a single meaning for conflict in order to impose a well-configured design on this endless, faceless struggle between the desire for the absolute enjoyment of completeness and the unfillable Real lack. In this way, such fantasies sustain, on a shifting horizon, the imaginary mirage of an absolute enjoyment supposedly attainable—whether represented as the “success”

and “happiness” of neoliberal ideals or as the harmony of a society finally gathered around its own “common good.” What these totalizing logics must disavow is that

Our societies are never harmonious ensembles. This is only the fantasy through which they attempt to constitute and reconstitute themselves. Experience shows that this fantasy can never be fully realised. No social fantasy can fill the lack around which society is always structured (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 74).

Since each person has, as their Real essence, an unfillable lack around which there insists a desire for omnipotence with no Real object established *a priori*, every social attempt to universalize a meaning for life runs up against this impossibility. In Matthew Clarke’s words:

In broad terms, psychoanalytic theory can be understood as articulating a lack of ‘fit’ between the individual and the social, which means that the former can never be perfectly adapted to the latter, no matter how much government, education or therapy she or he is subjected to (...). This lack of fit reflects a deeper constitutive split between the universal and the particular, framed in terms of a tragic dialectical dance between ‘fantasy and traumatic failure’ (Daly, 1999: 233). For instance, all attempts to identify the (universal) notion of the subject with any particular historical or cultural subject fall short and come adrift in the face of the gap or void around which such particularities must wrap themselves (...). We might think of the Real as an ‘immanent blockage’ that prevents both the subject and society from ever being self-identical by implanting an insurmountable alien-ness. In this sense, despite our ongoing attempts to accommodate ourselves to reality, we remain perpetual misfits (Clarke, 2018a, p. 113).

One possible strategy for taking on this “Real” impossibility without losing sight of any ideal of political mobilization is to re-signify the “common” beyond the imaginary ideal of harmony, as an open discursive field in which multiple and diverse demands can, at once, expose their conflicts and build a common world that does not annul their differences. Such mobilization would not be organized around the imaginary ideal of filling the Real lack once and for all, but would instead result from assuming this lacking Real as a point of departure for shared symbolic constructions that are knowingly transient and precarious. This is, in a certain sense, what Clarke (2018a) and Stavrakakis (1999), for example, defend—though no longer around the signifier “common,” but around the signifier “democracy”:

democratic discourse is not (or should not be) based on the vision of a utopian harmonious society. It is based on the recognition of the impossibility and the catastrophic consequences of such a dream. What differentiates democracy from other political forms of society is the legitimisation of conflict and the refusal to eliminate it through the establishment of an authoritarian harmonious order. Within this framework the antagonistic diversity between different conceptions of the good is not seen as something negative that should be eliminated, but as something to be valued and celebrated (Stavrakakis, 1999, p. 111).

In this case, it is indeed worth asking whether it still makes sense to sustain the “common” as a mobilizing signifier/ideal. We therefore align ourselves with Frangella (2020) and Pereira and Saldanha (2020) when they problematize precisely the maintenance of a “common” ideal for “all” as the core of political and curricular projects. With Pereira and Saldanha, we understand that the idea of a “common future,” “better for all,” is “projected from a generic ‘all’” (Pereira; Saldanha, 2020, p. 02) that cannot account for truly existing human diversities and singularities. As Frangella (2020) stresses, such a procedure ends up taking “the many as One.”

The ontological shift we are proposing—from an ontology of atomistic subjects and objects to a relational ontology—also entails a shift in perspective when we address ethical, political, and educational questions. It is no longer a matter of adopting a privileged standpoint supposedly “outside” chaotic social relations from which “the intellectual” can diagnose and propose solutions for “society.” The ontological shift we propose leads us to assume that the task is not to propose a new, universalizable social blueprint, but rather to theorize concertina-like, in the midst of multiple concertinalities—in the double sense the term carries, as concert and conflict: conflictual concert, concertable conflictuality—that already occur and can—and must—continue to occur. In this sense, questioning universalizing ideals

that presuppose ideal standards of subjectivity does not strike us as an innocuous activity devoid of political efficacy. On the contrary: by questioning the great universalizing ideals and the ideal standards of subjectivity that sustain them, we make room for still more possibilities of concertinality to appear among the multiple, diverse, singular forms of human existence in the world.

5. Final Considerations

In this article, we have mobilized elements of Spinoza's thought and of psychoanalytic theory—from a post-critical perspective of post-structuralist inspiration—in order to call into question the one-dimensionality of neoliberal discourses that, in contemporary contexts, have invested heavily in fixing meanings for curriculum policies. We have sought to show, however, that critical discourses which typically position themselves against such neoliberal pretensions often relapse into a new kind of one-dimensionality, likewise fixing meanings for educational processes.

Both discursive strands operate on the basis of modern ideals of subjectivity: a centered, rational, conscious subject, responsible and capable and thus able to follow, point by point, a rational project toward a previously established supreme end. We have attempted to demonstrate that conflict—and, with it, an expanded notion of commerce and negotiation—is ineradicable from the very dynamics of existence. This is because we understand existence itself to be co-moved by desire and “essentially” relational.

In light of a relational ontology, the commerce that every individual maintains with others is something from which there is no escape. Such commerce presupposes a *concertinality*—that is, a negotiation that unfolds in different senses and degrees, both as a harmonious composition of forces and as dissonance. From this perspective, we understand educational processes not as a linear transformation, free of conflict, that could dispense with the negotiation of forces among all those involved, nor as a mere adjustment of everyone to pre-established models. More than that: ignoring the commercial aspect in this expanded sense—negotiation of one's very power—may precisely strengthen mercantile projects that seek to pre-determine what education ought to be.

Attempts to rigidly signifiX educational processes—whether neoliberal, critical, or any other—mobilize the fantasy of control over the uncontrollable. They stage and restage, as Elizabeth Macedo reminds us, attempts to capture the imponderable. And yet, “since the imponderable is not capturable [despite my foolish exercise of naming it], it keeps popping up here and there, reminding us of the insufficiency of the control that hegemonic discourse intends to constitute” (Macedo, 2014, p. 1550).

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Responsible Editor: Alboni Marisa Dudeque Pianovski Vieira

Recebido/Received: 03.07.2025 / 07.03.2025

Aprovado/Approved: 08.01.2026 / 01.08.2026