Education at the Crossroads: Looking Back; Looking Forward (Part 1): Democracy, Autonomy, Capitalism and Ecology

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Abstract

Setting out from the etymological meaning of the concept 'education', this paper is an attempt to conceptualise the contemporary educational terrain in so far as it is inescapably situated within the broader cultural landscape of 21st-century globalised society. The priority granted to technical rationality in modern and postmodern societies is noted, and the related 'disciplinary' character of modernity is explored via Foucault. This is elaborated on through the work of Hardt and Negri on Empire, or the new form of sovereign power in the world, in which the 'multitude' is called upon to rescue democracy from its current crisis. Returning to Foucault, the preconditions of autonomy in a world where we are reduced to 'docile bodies' are outlined, and the urgent need for recovering such autonomy in the current global situation of deteriorating ecosystems is examined in relation to the dominant economic system of neoliberal capitalism.

> If humans are born humans, as cats are born cats…it would not be…I don't even say desirable, which is another question, but simply possible, to educate them (Lyotard: *The Inhuman* 1991:3).

Keywords: autonomy, disciplinary society, Empire, neoliberal capitalism, democracy

Most educationalists probably know that the etymological meaning of the verb, 'to educate', is 'to lead out of'. Lead out of what? Presumably, out of a state of ignorance, and presumably by those who are not ignorant. Whether

the latter assumption is still justifiable (if it ever was), is debatable, but what can be stated with certainty, in light of much of recent intellectual work on the condition of so-called postmodern, globalised society, is this: The world – that is, the more or less known relations between human societies, on the one hand, and between these and the planetary biosphere known as 'nature', on the other – has never been more complex, and moreover, been more complexly understood by social and natural scientists than at the present time. Hence, it appears that educationalists might be forgiven if they do not possess the kind of advanced knowledge that such scientists have. However, lest we too easily jump to the conclusion that especially the natural sciences should inform education (and unwittingly replicate the famous 19th-century debate between Matthew Arnold and T.H. Huxley on this topic), I believe we should take note of an important observation, in this regard, by Václav Havel (1996):

> the relationship to the world that modern science fostered and shaped now appears to have exhausted its potential. It is increasingly clear that, strangely, the relationship is missing something. It fails to connect with the most intrinsic nature of reality, and with natural human experience. It is now more of a source of disintegration and doubt than a source of integration and meaning. It produces what amounts to a state of schizophrenia: Man as an observer is becoming completely alienated from himself as a being. Classical modern science described only the surface of things, a single dimension of reality. And the more dogmatically science treated it as the only dimension, as the very essence of reality, the more misleading it became. Today…we may know immeasurably more about the universe than our ancestors did, and yet, it increasingly seems they knew something more essential about it than we do, something that escapes us. The same thing is true of nature and of ourselves ….
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> And thus today we find ourselves in a paradoxical situation. We enjoy all the achievements of modern civilization that have made our physical existence on this earth easier in so many important ways. Yet we do not know exactly what to do with ourselves, where to turn. The world of our experiences seems chaotic, disconnected, confusing …. Experts can explain anything in the objective world to us, yet we understand our own lives less and less. In short, we live in

> the postmodern world, where everything is possible and almost nothing is certain.

Taking Havel at his word – and I, for one, believe that we have every reason to – one might ask what it is that the present generation of humans populating the planet has lost, or forgotten, or perhaps unwittingly 'murdered', of our legacy from the past. I use this metaphor to allude to the encounter between the mythical Oedipus and his father, King Laius of Thebes, at a (triple) crossroads, which ended in Oedipus's unwitting murder of his father – an act that led further to his unwitting marriage to his mother, Queen Jocasta, and her eventual death by suicide, all of which tragic series of events was held together by what one might call the 'causality of ignorance' on Oedipus's part. Is it not perhaps the case that educators worldwide today, stand at a crossroads where they run the risk of unwittingly 'murdering' what is most valuable in their cultural heritage, and which, in a manner of speaking, 'fathered' or 'mothered' them? What would be a candidate for such parentage? I shall return to this question.

Modernity and Panoptical 'Discipline'

It is worth taking one's cue from Karsten Harries about our most immediate cultural progenitors. In his monumental study, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (1997), which is just as much a study of the costs as well as gains regarding the transition from modernity to postmodernity, as it is of the present condition of architecture, he makes it very clear that modernity is inseparable from the centrality of reason and technology (1997: 7):

> … modernism and postmodernism would seem to be much more than just important aesthetic events. At issue is 'the legitimacy of the modern age' [Blumenberg]. Both movements are born of concern with the shape of the modern world, as postmodernism represents a phenomenon of modernity's bad conscience, of its self-doubt. Such self-doubt has long centered on the hegemony that we have allowed scientific rationality and technological thinking – over our lives, our thinking, and our practices ….

Needless to stress, these 'practices' include education, which is just as much

subject to the prioritisation of scientific and technical rationality as other practices, burdened as it is by amnesia regarding the fact that the natural sciences and technology cannot, by themselves, give any guidance on the axiological manner in which human beings should orient themselves in the world. The natural sciences describe the natural world as it is in scientific (often mathematical) terms, and not as it ought to be – something that is axiologically and culturally embedded in all languages, and need not be sought in ideologies[1]. But if modernity cannot be separated from what one might, following the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School, call technical rationality[2], it is equally bound up, according to Michel Foucault (1995), with a certain 'disciplinary' approach, institutionalised in the modern punitive practice of imprisonment. For Foucault, the latter, in turn, is paradigmatic of a pervasive tendency in modern society, which he characterises as 'carceral' and as being subject to 'panopticism'. The latter term alludes to the ideal prison, described by Jeremy Bentham in the 19th century, where prisoners would monitor their own behaviour in their cells because of their constant visibility to warders in a central tower. Similarly, for Foucault, the three pervasive mechanisms of 'hierarchical observation', 'normalising judgement', and 'the examination' have a 'normalising' effect in contemporary societies, in the process turning individuals into what he calls 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1995: 170-194). In a nutshell, this means that individuals today lack what is known in philosophy as 'autonomy', or the ability to 'give oneself the law' (Olivier 2010).

Does this sound familiar? It should, for today such infantilising practices have developed much further than at the time of which Foucault

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[1] In the work of Lacan, among others, there is a clear indication that language, or the symbolic register, is a repository of universalistic values which, with minor cultural variations, apply to all cultures – for example the incest taboo. See in this regard Olivier 2005a. While Lacan as poststructuralist psychoanalytic theorist leans on Freud and on Lévi-Strauss regarding his conception of language as repository of (unconscious) cultural values, even a modernist Hegelian such as Jürgen Habermas (1971: 196-310) points to the fact that cultural values are inseparably conjoined with both the historical-hermeneutic *and* the critical social sciences.

[2] For a sophisticated formulation of this concept, specifically as a 'technical guiding interest' driving the natural sciences, see Habermas (1971: 196-310).

was writing. If the three panoptical mechanisms he identified are still very much with us – in the shape of 'line managers observing academics' 'performance' with hierarchical effect, and the latter having to 'observe' students' performance in the same way, combined with the 'normalising' effect of all kinds of tests and measurements, which come together in the 'examination' as the repository of measurements (that form the basis of exercising power over the individuals concerned) – others have been added to exacerbate the overall disciplining result[3]. What else is the whole system of 'Outcomes Based Education'[4], university audits, and the promotion of an ethos of 'compliance' worldwide, than a systematic reduction to anaesthetising conformity of what might (perhaps) otherwise have been an educational approach which would optimalise the creative potential of every child and student within the context of an ecologically responsive, humanistic set of values?

In this respect (specifically regarding the actualisation of creative potential on the part of individual students) one could point to Aristotle's notion of a fourfold causality – material, formal, efficient and final or teleological[5] – which articulated the essence of all development, including that which is peculiar to education, in a complex causal model. The 'final cause' or 'telos'– that which everything strives to actualise, be it a fully grown oak tree from an acorn, or a responsible, critically aware citizen from a student – is the mode of causality relevant to education, and for centuries educationalists and philosophers have understood this; to pretend that any educational system which emphasises 'outcomes' is anything original is a

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[3] It is impossible to go into all those current social and cultural practices that arguably constitute novel instances of 'infantilizing', 'normalizing' and 'disciplining' practices and discourses. Here I shall only mention those most relevant to educators. However, other practices, such as those clustered around social networking sites like Facebook, arguably participate in the reduction of individuals to 'docile bodies', albeit covered up by the accompanying 'fun' and 'cool' of such activities. See Olivier (2011) in this regard.

[4] See in this regard my argument concerning the failure of OBE in South Africa (Olivier 2009).

[5] See in this regard Norman Melchert's (1991: 154-157) wonderful explication of Aristotle's doctrine of the four causes.

display of lamentable ignorance of the history of thought, apart from which the panoply of smothering administrative procedures in which much of it is usually embedded is enough to squash the spirit of most teachers and lecturers – in fact, it is overkill, and only benefits those in positions of authority who do not wish to see any innovative teaching, which might, after all, just succeed in cultivating a spirit of creative and critical thinking on the part of students. Not that one can ultimately merely hold individuals in positions of authority accountable for an education system that actively discourages innovative, critical thinking and practice. Such a system is a function of a worldwide system, where political governance and dominant economic practices dovetail into a veritable cratological straitjacket of 'compliance', aimed at constantly reinforcing the new world order of an alliance between dominant states and neoliberal capitalism (especially in its corporatist embodiment) so clearly uncovered in Hardt and Negri's trilogy, *Empire* (2001), *Multitude* (2005) and *Commonwealth* (2009), as well as in Manuel Castells's *The Rise of the Network Society* (2010).

'Empire' and the Educational Task of Recovering Democracy

According to Hardt and Negri's (2001) analysis of the present state of a globalised world, the emergence of 'Empire' can be tied to the 'irresistible and irreversible globalisation of economic and cultural exchanges' (2001: xi). Specifically, their use of the term refers to a new global order or a novel form of sovereignty. 'Empire', they go on to say, 'is the political subject that effectively regulates these global exchanges, the sovereign power that governs the world'. While they grant that, as many commentators have argued, the sovereignty of nation-states has declined – no contemporary nation-state is a sovereign authority any longer – this does not mean that sovereignty as such does not exist any longer. Hence the fundamental hypothesis of their book, namely, that sovereignty has assumed a new form, consisting of a series of national and trans-national structures which obey the same 'logic of rule'. This novel type of sovereignty is precisely what they call 'Empire'.

From this alone it should be apparent that what Negri and Hardt have in mind is nothing like the imperialisms established by modern European powers. These were essentially territory-bound in so far as nation-states exercised their central and centred rule over geographically expanded

domains. They point to the increasing inability of nation-states to regulate economic and cultural exchanges as one of the symptoms of the advent of 'Empire'. In contradistinction to modern imperialism, Empire has no centre of power in a territorial sense, nor does it have any geographical boundaries. Instead, it is 'a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers' (2001: xii). In contrast to the putative (but illusory) stable identities and fixed hierarchies of modern imperialism, Empire is characterised by hybrid identities and flexible hierarchies that operate hand in hand with multiple exchanges along rhizomatic global networks of power.

The advent of Empire signals a new stage in capitalist production, which goes beyond the industrial phase of production by means of factory labour, even if this still exists in reduced format. The actualisation of the world market is inseparable from it, but far from implying trade between discrete geographical territories, the spatial boundaries between First and Third World have become fluid, resulting in their continual intermingling. This has been made possible by, among other things, a transformation of the dominant processes of production. According to Negri and Hardt the postmodernised global economy prioritises labour of a cooperative, communicative and affective kind, and inclines increasingly towards so-called 'biopolitical production', or 'the production of social life itself, in which the economic, the political, and the cultural increasingly overlap and invest one another' (2001: xiii). As may be expected, such social reproduction tends towards, but (because of hybridisation) never actually attains, cultural, social, technological and political homogeneity.

What precisely it is that they have in mind becomes clearer in light of their insistence that, as a concept, Empire entails the absence of boundaries or limits. Moreover, it presents itself as an 'order' that would 'suspend history' (2001: xiv), by fixing a certain socioeconomic structuring for all time to come. It is not difficult to detect echoes here – in the character of Empire as analysed by Hardt and Negri – of Francis Fukuyama's triumphalist claims about the 'end of history' in the wake of the collapse of East-bloc socialism. Two additional conceptual characteristics of Empire are important: that the 'object of its rule is social life in its entirety', and that it is unfailingly devoted to universal peace, although, as they put it, it 'is continually bathed in blood' (2001: xv).

In the face of a Leviathan such as the one sketched (in the merest out-

line) here, what possible hope for liberation could Negri and Hardt hold out to those among the human race who would always resist forces of domination, whatever form they may assume, even if they masquerade as an omnipresent economic system capable of satisfying al human needs? This question becomes all the more important when one realises, as you read on, that their discourse is fundamentally informed, not only by Marx and the collaborative efforts of Deleuze and Guattari (especially their *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaux*), but also by Foucault's discourse-analytical claim that, where (hegemonic) discourse functions, the possibility for counter-discourse is created. But how to resist something that appears to have become 'total', encompassing, down to the lowest registers of the social order? Do not despair, argue Negri and Hardt in true Foucaultian fashion, for although Empire possesses prodigious capacities for 'oppression and destruction' (2001: xv), the very polymorphous, variegated processes of globalisation which characterise Empire create novel opportunities for liberation.

The political challenge facing the champions of liberation is to reorganise and redirect these processes, instead of resisting them. The multitude – their term for Marx's proletariat – on which Empire depends for its functioning, is also able to create a counter-Empire as a political alternative, with rhizomatic global networks and flows similar to those which constitute and sustain Empire. Foucault in Hardt and Negri again: the struggles against Empire will not come from outside, but have already begun to appear within the domain of Empire itself. It is up to the multitudes to 'invent' new democratic forms through the struggles that are already enacting themselves – along this road, Hardt and Negri believe, the world will one day move 'beyond Empire'. Interestingly, although their genealogical reconstruction of Empire is, for contingent historical reasons, largely Eurocentric, neither its present functioning nor the forces that oppose Empire are restricted to Europe, America or any other region. The latter, they point out (2001: xvi), 'prefigure an alternative global society [and] are themselves not limited to any geographical region'.

The power of the postmodern multitude (elaborated in *Multitude*: 2005) consists, for Negri and Hardt, in the final analysis, in the capacity of and exigency for posing once again, like St Francis of Assisi, the joy of being, of biopower, of productive bodies and cooperative intellectual effort, against the misery of the power of Empire. This enables a kind of revolution that no Empire, no corporate, multinational power can ultimately control. But

make no mistake – for them, too, humanity is at a crossroads where one either has to act 'in common with' the 'multitude', or promote the interests of the new sovereign power of Empire, albeit without any illusions of this power being 'democratic'. In fact, their elaboration, in *Multitude* (2005: 272-273), on what they see as the 'crisis in representation' worldwide, is simultaneously an indication of the deep crisis of democracy (even in those countries that smugly regard themselves as bastions of democracy). The worldwide protests (that they identify) against the global political and economic system can therefore be understood as a sign that 'democracy cannot be made or imposed from above' (2005: 237). They list three principal elements which recur constantly across the board in all the global demands in question as preconditions for democracy, namely (2005: 269-270): 'the critique of existing forms of representation, the protest against poverty, and the opposition to war'. Regarding the 'crisis' of representation, does it not sound sickeningly familiar to South Africans where they write (Hardt & Negri 2005: 270).

> The false and distorted representation of local and national electoral systems has long been a subject of complaint. Voting seems often to be nothing more than the obligation to choose an unwanted candidate, the lesser of two evils, to misrepresent us for two or four or six years. Low levels of voter turnout certainly undermine the representative claim of elections: those who do not vote serve as a silent protest against the system.

But how to revitalise democracy, or what they see as governance that 'arise[s] *from below*', as 'the rule of everyone by everyone' (Hardt & Negri 2005: 237): governance with the participation of the people (who would thus be both the 'rulers' and the 'ruled')?

Recovering Autonomy

My first suggestion in this regard returns to Foucault, but this time not in the shape of a diagnosis of the problem of being reduced to 'docile bodies', but rather embodied in an affirmative elaboration on the conditions for a retrieval of individual autonomy – which, according to Foucault, is sadly lacking in extant, infantilised, society. In the third volume of his history of sexuality,

namely, *The Care of the Self* (1988), Foucault focuses on the eponymous practice in the Hellenistic age, which he regards as the 'golden age' (1988: 45) of the cultivation of such an 'ethic of self-mastery' on the part of individuals. The upshot of this study is that individuals during this time – and no doubt partly under pressure of the uncertainties of living in the far-flung Roman Empire (Foucault 1988: 41) – evidently experienced the exigency of developing a sense of autonomy that one can only envy in our age of manipulation of 'consumers' by and through the all-pervasive media.

But what is meant by 'autonomy', described earlier as 'giving oneself the law'?[6] Consider, first, that humanly speaking, 'autonomy' can never be complete or exhaustive – we are all inserted into the network of society through what Lacan calls the symbolic register[7], and that means that we are subject to language and to 'the law', let alone the fact that even comparatively autonomous or 'independent' individuals do have to depend on others for certain needs some of the time. Hence, the most one can strive for is what may be termed 'relative autonomy'. This is a poststructuralist, and not a postmodernist, conception of autonomy, which means that *both* one's dependence on others, and on other discourses, *as well as* one's ability to adopt a position *vis-á-vis* such others or the discourses that they represent,

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[6] See in this regard Olivier (2010), for an investigation of the implications of Foucault's work on 'the care of the self' for the question of (relative) autonomy.

[7] Needless to stress, without having a grasp of the structural complexity of human beings, no educator could really set out to 'educate' the young. Although one cannot expect teachers at primary and high schools, nor even university lecturers to be well versed in psychoanalytic theory, there are many more popular avenues along which one can learn that what Lacan (Lee 1990; Olivier 2005a) calls the registers of the imaginary, the symbolic and the 'real', together, comprise human subjectivity. In popular parlance one might say that a person has a 'sense of self' (imaginary), a sense of where and how he or she fits into society (symbolic, through language), and a sense of things that surpass herself or himself in such a way that one has no control over them (the unsymbolizable 'real') – this much may be learned through literature, myths and even folk wisdom. The point is that all of these aspects of being human have to be considered by educators for 'true' education to take place.

can be simultaneously affirmed. As Foucault puts it (1990: 84): 'There is no power without potential refusal or revolt'. Lyotard (1992: 15) formulates the same 'both/and' logic of poststructuralism in terms of the creation of artworks: 'The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*'.

Secondly, recall that the geographically extensive nature of the Roman imperial political domain, within which the practice of achieving relative autonomy through the 'care of the self' was situated, corresponds, *mutatis mutandis*, with the geographically even more extensive globalised space of the contemporary world, dubbed 'Empire' by Hardt and Negri (2001). Nevertheless, apart from a superficial emphasis, today, on 'personal fulfilment' of a popularly understood, fashion-aware kind (found in glossy magazines), which corresponds with the ancient interest in individuals' relations with themselves, and on 'lifestyle', there is hardly any sign, today, of a comparably strong interest in the attainment of personal autonomy and independence from political and other institutional agencies (for instance the media), as will become clearer later. Instead, the vast majority of contemporary subjects are almost exclusively heteronomous in the sense of obediently bending to state, corporate, religious and other ideological imperatives that they neither fully comprehend nor really embrace, but nevertheless yield to for lack of any self-directedness.

In stark contrast to the present state of affairs, Foucault draws attention to three interconnected things encountered in Hellenistic-Roman society: the 'absolute value attributed to the individual in his singularity', the 'positive valuation of private life', and, most importantly (1988: 42),

> the intensity of the relations to self, that is, of the forms in which one is called upon to take oneself as an object of knowledge and a field of action, so as to transform, correct, and purify oneself, and find salvation.

It is in this context that Foucault (1988: 43) alludes to the development of a 'cultivation of the self', which reached its apogee around this time in antiquety, and which was guided by the precept that one should 'take care of oneself'. To be sure, this was a very old idea in Greek culture – among the Spartans, and above all associated with Socrates's supposed practice to remind humans of the priority to be given to the condition of their selves (Foucault

1988: 44). Fact remains though, that this interest in 'cultivating the self' was resurrected by Hellenistic philosophy, in the guise of the 'art of existence'.

Lest anyone should think that the kind of self-mastery at stake here is an easy matter, it should be stressed that such 'cultivation of the self' in antiquity was aeons removed from the kind of preoccupation, if not obsession, with the self, encountered in popular media of today. Foremost among these are the narcissistic indulgences that occur non-stop on the social networking sites (with a demonstrable 'disciplinary' function in contemporary society; Olivier 2011), and of popular magazine articles on the latest fashion in self-enjoyment, ranging from reflexology, aromatherapy and lessons in tantric practices to Reiki for the leisurely rich. By contrast, the attainment of autonomy in the Hellenistic world was difficult, austere and demanding by comparison, insofar as it was aimed at a kind of mastery of the self in the face of any of the eventualities, no matter how disruptive or painful, that may confront one unpredictably in the course of one's life. What should be added is that the 'care of the self' as systematic practice in the Hellenistic-Roman era, was predicated on human fallibility, finitude and comparative powerlessness regarding forces that vastly exceed one's own resources of power. At the same time, however, these practices signalled a belief in the capacity of individuals to develop their own 'power' in the form of self-mastery, on the assumption that it would enable one to endure whatever sufferings life might inflict on them, and presumably also to resist such overwhelming forces to a certain extent.

The imperative *epimeleia heautou* is encountered in many of the philosophical teachings of the time. For example, Seneca (quoted in Foucault 1988: 46) demands that individuals dispense with other occupations, and through 'varied activity' 'develop oneself', 'return to oneself', and 'transform oneself' in the quest for the relative autonomy in question here. Such 'varied activity' was to be practised with the utmost dedication and discipline – something that indicates the difficulty involved in developing the (relative) autonomy of which one is capable. It is no easy matter, but entails, in terms of Foucault's discourse theory, the painstaking acquisition of a new discourse or discursive regime, keeping in mind that a 'discourse' entails the intertwinement of language and action, such that anyone subject to discursive power is able to affirm *or* resist it (Foucault 1990: 84**;** Olivier 2003). In his turn Epictetus – who represents, for Foucault (1988: 47), the apogee in the philosophical development of this theme – emphasises that such care of the

self is a 'privilege-duty, a gift-obligation that ensures our freedom while forcing us to take ourselves as the object of all our diligence'.

I believe that – in light of what was said earlier about living in the age of 'Empire' – unless we as educators today show ourselves capable of laying the groundwork, at least, for the further cultivation of a comparable capacity for relative autonomy, we are failing our children and students. It should be clear at this stage that, among the ancestors that our societies have 'murdered', Oedipus-like, are true democracy (if it ever existed), and a capacity for relative autonomy. But there is more.

Zombies at the Crossroads

To be able to give greater concreteness to this tentative answer, phrased in terms of 'relative autonomy', to the question regarding the recovery of democracy via education, and at the risk of belabouring the metaphor of 'crossroads', I shall turn to one more telling instance of its use, this time in cinema. In Zack Snyder's remake of the horror zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead* (2004)[8], the metaphor of a crossroads, together with the metaphorical significance of the figure of the zombie (or 'living dead'), plays a central role, which highlights one of the possible reasons why education, too, faces a crossroads today. Briefly, the film narrative revolves around the inexplicable[9] appearance in an American town, apparently from nowhere, of zombies which proceed to attack people in their homes, in the streets and even in shopping malls. One such shopping mall is the location for most of the action in the film narrative, being the ostensibly fortified space where the handful of survivors of the initial onslaught by the zombies retreat to, only to be besieged by hundreds (if not thousands) of the undead, milling about outside the mall. Appropriately, this mall is called the Crossroads Shopping Mall,

[8] I owe my familiarity with the film to one of my 4th-year Philosophy of Culture students, Lyndon Brand, who wrote an essay on it, interpreting the zombies, persuasively, to my mind, as the (metonymic) embodiment of consumerism. They are, literally, consumers.

[9] Inexplicable, except for the vague suggestion that their condition is caused by a 'virus' of sorts, which would make such a virus another telling metaphor for what may be interpreted as the malady of 'consumerism'.

suggesting that humanity as a whole finds itself at a point of decision, or defining moment, in its history; hence its suggestiveness for the theme of education being at a crossroads of sorts.

Although the film can be seen, at one level, as just a zombie movie, a more nuanced interpretation allows one to perceive in the zombies the metonymic embodiments of 'consumers' (which is what zombies are) impelled to behave, once they have been 'bitten' – by implication, by the 'virus' of consumerism in the economic sense – in an utterly predictable, monodimensional fashion, and not simply cinematic creations designed to horrify cinemagoers as much as possible. From this perspective, the fact that this is a 'zombie' film merits some attention. The term denotes, as said before, the 'living dead', or 'undead' – or, as one of the characters who finds temporary refuge in the mall says, beings who are 'dead-ish'. Zombies literally 'consume' living people, killing them in the process, but also transmogrifying them into something else (more zombies), which behaves as if it is alive, but which lacks the defining characteristics of the living, such as being relatively autonomous or self-directed, being able to distinguish between actions that must be prioritised and those which can wait, and so on. In contrast, a zombie is possessed by only one craving, namely to 'consume' the living members of the human race. Jeff Collins's (1996: 21) remark, that 'Zombies are cinematic inscriptions of the failure of the 'life/death' opposition' sums it up well, and already reveals why one is led to see in them the embodiments of what we know as consumers.

The name of the mall – Crossroads Shopping Mall – with its implication of a turning point or place of decision, is crucially important here. So is the fact that those characters hiding from the zombies in the mall start behaving like typical (economic) consumers at a certain point in the narrative (trying on clothes, trying out gym equipment, and so on), together with the tell-tale gathering of zombies on the open space next to the mall, as if they sense that this is where they 'belong'. Taking all of this together, it is difficult not to interpret the figure of 'the zombie' in this film as representing 'the consumer'. The logic of this interpretation seems compelling to me, and casts the 'consumer' in a very revealing axiological light in so far as the multi-faceted nature of what Kaja Silverman (2000: 10; 25) understands as one's distinctive, partial 'look' at things, makes way, in the zombie, for a 'one-track look', bent on consumption (in the film, literally) at all costs, which aptly symbolises the reductive, one-dimensional mode of behaviour of millions of

people in global society today. In brief, the film can be understood persuasively as giving horrific metaphoric visual incarnation, through an extended elaboration, to the homogenising function of consumer capitalism in contemporary global culture, and issues an implicit warning that this culture stands at a crucial juncture – a crossroads, precisely – in its history.

Snyder's film therefore reinforces Havel's observation (above), that postmodern society seems to have lost its way, in a certain sense, in contrast to our ancestors who, despite lacking our 'scientific' knowledge, had a sense of orientation, of knowing their place in, the universe (further emphasised by Foucault's investigation into Hellenistic ethical practices). And it underscores the urgent need for recovering a modicum of autonomy, *a lá* Foucault, in the face of the widespread tendency, to relinquish autonomy at the altar of consumerism[10]. But why is consumer capitalism implicated here? Is it not – as conventional beliefs seem to confirm – the most 'successful' economic system in humanity's history? It all depends on what one understands by 'successful', and further, more importantly, on whether it can be demonstrated that this economic system is causally implicated in severing the bond with a set of ancestral principles or beliefs (the 'father' and 'mother' that we, like Oedipus, may have unconsciously killed at the crossroads) which (in a different sense of 'success') 'successfully' guided humanity for centuries. Here Joel Kovel is an invaluable critic.

Education, Ecology and Capitalism

In *The Enemy of Nature* (2002) Kovel demonstrates, to my mind convincingly, that the current ecological crisis is largely attributable to the imperative of endless (economic) growth through profit, inseparable from the capitalist economic system. Needless to say, the idea of limitless growth within a finite ecological system is an absurdity, but the evidence adduced by Kovel that, in the 21st century, nature is in a precarious state, confirms Havel's point about contemporary humans having lost what their ancestors

[10] While I have paid attention to Foucault's characterization of modern society as one where, through various 'normalizing' mechanisms, people are reduced to 'docile bodies', one could heed Deleuze's (1992) claim, that we are already beyond that, in 'societies of control'.

'knew', which here concerns the awareness of an intimate connection with nature in all her variegatedness[11]. Moreover, although the elite Club of Rome called for a limit to economic growth in the late 20th century already, today 'even the idea of limiting growth has been banished from official discourse' (Kovel 2002: 5)[12]. Kovel continues:

> Further, it has been proved decisively that the internal logic of the present system translates 'growth' into increasing wealth for the few and increasing misery for the many…'growth' so conceived means the destruction of the natural foundation of civilization. If the world were a living organism, then any sensible observer would conclude that this 'growth' is a cancer that, if not somehow treated, means the destruction of human society, and even raises the question of the extinction of our species. A simple extrapolation tells us as much, once we learn that the growth is uncontrollable. The details are important and interesting, but less so than the chief conclusion – that irresistible growth, and the evident fact that this growth destabilizes and breaks down the natural ground necessary for human [and non-human; B.O.] existence, means, in the plainest terms, that we are doomed under the present social order, and that we had better change it as soon as possible if we are to survive.

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[11] Elsewhere (Olivier 2005; 2007 and 2010a) I have elaborated on this theme of interconnectedness between humanity's social ecosystems and natural ecosystems in different contexts.

[12] Various publications list the geo-signs of environmental degradation, and even implicate industrial activity in relation to global warming, yet few of these point a finger directly at capital or capitalism. When they do, it is largely because of industrial activity associated with it, and shared, moreover, with socialism and communism. See for instance *National Geographic* (2004: 11), where editors Appenzeller and Dimick quote Jerry Mahlman of the National Center of Atmospheric research as saying that controlling the rise in heat-trapping gases 'would take 40 successful Kyotos …. But we've got to do it'. At best, therefore, capitalism is indirectly implicated.

Unlike most books on the ecological crisis today[13], Kovel connects all the obvious signs of environmental degradation and ecosystemic breakdown relentlessly with the social and economic system referred to above, pointing out (2002: 6),

- That the 'reigning system' in question is capitalism, the dynamism of which, capital, is a strange beast indeed, not at all accessible to common sense, and extending far beyond its usual economic implications.
- That the 'growth' in question is essentially capital expressing its innermost being.
- That this is incorrigible; thus to seriously limit capital's expansion throws the system into deep crisis [and there are many such instances, such as September 11, 2001; B.O.]. For capital, it must always be 'Grow or Die!' It follows that capital cannot be reformed: it either rules and destroys us, or is destroyed, so that we may have a lease on life.

To illustrate, Kovel (2002: 28-38) discusses the notorious Bhopal industrial accident of 1984[14] in India as paradigmatic instance of the causal functioning

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[13] Thomas Berry (1996; 1999), for instance, approaches the ecological crisis from a theological point of view, while Carter (2001) adopts a political-theoretical perspective. Berry does sometimes make the connection with capitalism, but not in a sustained analytical way (as Kovel does) – remarking, on occasion (1999: 110), that neither socialism nor capitalism, given their industrial exploitation of planetary resources, is acceptable to the ecologically minded. Although Carter (2001: 66-67) also addresses capitalism and its relation to the environment – notably in the context of socialist claims that capitalism's destructive technologies and consumerist ethos are responsible for the ecological crisis – he does not pursue the matter in a sustained manner either.

[14] On 29 November 2004 a radio news report (SAFM) stated that Dow Industrial, with which Union Carbide has merged since Bhopal, has denied any further responsibility for either the people still suffering from the after-effects of the 'accident', or the natural environment still being adversely affected by the continuing leaking of toxic materials from the remains of the factory, 20 years after the event.

of capital. This concentrates the causality in question into a single, but multi-layered event which foregrounds the structural dynamics of capital in relation to global eco-destruction. Bhopal confronts one with all the signatures of capital's characteristic functioning, most centrally, the need to minimise costs and maximise profits. For this reason Kovel's reconstruction of the disaster[15] (where thousands of people perished when 46.3 tons of a pesticide called methyl isocyanate [MIC] were released from a factory owned by multinational Union Carbide Corporation; Kovel 2002: 30), is intended to uncover the intricate causal connections that resulted in its occurrence. This includes the existence of the factory and the workers at the Bhopal facility as well as the corporation itself which was responsible for the factory being built there, all of which function causally at specific levels – instrumental,

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[15] It is worth noting that, in *Risk Society* (1992: 12-13), Ulrich Beck already pointed out that in the contemporary society of 'risk production', in contrast to the society of 'wealth production' that preceded it, the 'logic' of risk production dominates that of wealth production, and no longer the other way around. 'At the center', he says, 'lie the risks and consequences of modernization, which are revealed as irreversible threats to the life of plants, animals, and human beings ... these can no longer be limited to certain localities or groups, but rather exhibit a tendency to globalization which spans production *and* reproduction as much as national borders, and in this sense brings into being *supra*-national and *non*-class-specific *global hazards* with a new type of social and political dynamism…' What Beck demonstrates, is that the gains in power, from techno-scientific and economic progress, are increasingly being overshadowed by the production of (often invisible) risks to the life of all living things on the planet. Carl Sagan (1997: 156), too, wrote eloquently about the invisible risks confronting humans today: 'We are at risk. We do not need alien invaders. We have all by ourselves generated sufficient dangers. But they are unseen dangers, seemingly far removed from everyday life, requiring careful thought to understand, and involving transparent gases, invisible radiation, nuclear weapons …' In this book (1997: 71-138) Sagan also elaborates on the consequences of global warming, and on what needs to be done to ameliorate the risks involved.

efficient, and so on[16]. Crucially, however, he demonstrates (2002: 35-37) that all of these were constrained to function causally as they did (and still do in the dominant global economic system) by the encircling 'force field' of capital. He elaborates (2002: 38):

> The 'giant force field' is a metaphor for capital, that ubiquitous, all-powerful and greatly misunderstood dynamo that drives our society. The established view sees capital as a rational force of investment, a way of using money to fruitfully bring together the various features of economic activity. For Karl Marx, capital was a 'werewolf' and a 'vampire', ravenously consuming labour and mutilating the labourer. [Recall Snyder's film! B.O.]. Both notions are true, and the second one, applied to nature as well as labour, accounts for the ecological crisis in all essential features.

Kovel points to the tendency (2002: 38) of capital '*to degrade the conditions of its own production*' (through perpetual cost-cutting in the guise of staff-retrenchments, for example) and its imperative to '*expand without end in order to exist*' (through the pursuit of innovation, efficiency, new markets and the inculcation of consumer-dependence). From this it follows that the growing ecological crisis is 'an iron necessity' (Kovel 2002: 39), the piecemeal attempts within the system to control individual disasters notwithstanding. At the core of capital it is a self-reproducing expansion process[17], infiltrating every nook and cranny of the human life-world. This

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[16] Kovel (2002: 30-35) provides an account of Union Carbide's explanation of the accident in terms of 'individual blame' (never substantiated by the corporation), as well as a summary of massive counter-evidence to the effect that, far from a disgruntled saboteur having been responsible for the disaster, it was a complex set of neglects and cost-cutting measures on the part of Union Carbide which finally led to the fatal event. Ironically, after paying the Indian government much less in damages than the latter had asked for, Carbide shares rose to such an extent that its shareholders made a handsome profit (Kovel 2002: 37).

[17] In the *Grundrisse* (quoted in Kovel 2002: 41), Marx observes that 'capital is the endless and limitless drive to go beyond its limiting barrier. Every boundary is and has to be a barrier for it'.

includes nature to the extent that humans enter into relation with it, for the sake of the accumulation of money (through profit) and development of new markets, without regard for the fragility of ecosystems or the thought that humans are, in fact, a crucial part of these. The case of Bhopal illustrates this in exemplary fashion, where the interests of both people and nature took a back seat to the ever-present capitalist prioritising of lowering costs for the sake of more profit[18]. In the process the medical profession, traditionally underpinned by the Hippocratic oath (which pledges medical healing skills to all those who need them) is transformed (or perverted) into a capitalist business primarily interested in profit for its shareholders[19].

It is easy to forget that capital is not itself a living organism, but rather a 'kind of relationship' (Kovel 2002: 39) set up between humans and their environment. Once locked into this relation, humans unavoidably violate nature's ecological integrity by establishing endlessly self-replicating structures, regardless of their effects on this environment. It is of crucial importance to educators concerned about the well-being of the youth (which implicates that of nature) to note that this does not happen without conspicuous effects on the individuals who are the agents of capital. 'It is humans living as capital', Kovel reminds us pointedly (2002: 39), 'people who become capital's personifications, who destroy ecosystems'. The reason for this has to do with the way individuals are 'shaped' by capital (Kovel 2002: 38):

> People who are genuinely forthcoming and disinterestedly helpful do not become managers of large capitalist firms. The tender-hearted are pushed off far down the ladder on which one ascends to such

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[18] The extent of the cynicism – or perhaps rather complete indifference – on the part of capital and the individuals shaped by it regarding the fate of people and nature is evident from the fact that when Kovel's book appeared (2002: 30) the Carbide factory ruins still disfigured the city, and toxic materials were still released into the environment.

[19] Fifteen years after the accident people were still dying at a rate of 10–15 a month. In South African private hospitals (such as the Netcare Group) this indifference to people as human beings manifests itself in the refusal to admit patients unless a substantial deposit is paid, or medical aid membership *and* creditworthiness are proved.

> positions of power. For capital shapes as well as selects the kind of people who create these events [such as Bhopal; B.O.].

Understandably, therefore, once introduced into a society, capital functions like a virus (or Snyder's zombies), transforming it systematically into what is known as 'capitalist' society, which manifests itself in three domains, namely the temporal, the existential, and the institutional (Kovel 2002: 52). Small wonder that, increasingly, people's lives globally are predicated on capital's terms. This is what Hardt and Negri (2001: 22-41; 364-365) call 'biopower' and 'biopolitical production' – the fundamental construction of human life under certain (capitalistically) predetermined economic, social, and political conditions. This entails that the temporal rate of consumers' lives continually accelerates, and their world is incrementally structured by interconnected institutions which ceaselessly extend and secure the rule of capital.

Of course it is only the exception to the rule among consumers who would find anything wrong with this (complacency is an attitude determined by capitalist 'biopolitical production'). But, as Kovel (2002: 52-76) argues at length, the structure of the human and natural 'life-world'[20] is radically altered in the process. Recall the recent BP oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, or what happened at Bhopal, the consequences of which will be felt far into the future[21].

Given what has been argued so far regarding the need for autonomy in the face of pervasive social mechanisms that tend to reduce people to being 'passive' consumers, it is imperative that educators heed Kovel's unmasking of a crucial aspect of capital cultivating 'capitalism' as a state of social being. He draws attention to capital's invasion of life-worlds by introducing (2002:

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[20] This is a term coined by Husserl to indicate the world of one's primary, 'unreflective' experience. It is employed by, among others, Habermas to critique the 'colonization' of the life-world by 'technical imperatives'.

[21] Kovel refers to many other examples of such disintegration of life-worlds which cannot be discussed at length here (see especially 2002: 52-58). There are reports of frightening social and 'natural' instances of this to be found in many other publications, of course, including the *National Geographic* (2004) cited earlier.

52) 'a sense of dissatisfaction or lack[22] – so that it can truly be said that happiness is forbidden under capitalism, being replaced by sensation and craving'. The craving, which again recalls Snyder's depiction of consumers as all-consuming zombies, is for commodities that fleetingly satisfy carefully 'constructed' needs on the part of 'consumers' (by the colossal machinery of capitalism, chiefly advertising). With keen insight, Kovel indicates that, where such craving for commodities perverts life-world conditions, a twofold modification happens: commodities (such as caffeine-laced soft drinks, leaf-blowers, or four-wheel-drive SUVs) are eco-destructive as well as profitable (stimulating further technological innovation for need-creation and its satisfaction). Moreover, the people who crave and use them are themselves 'anti-ecologically' transformed, which means that they are assimilated by the zombie-movement of capital and are therefore blind to its eco-destructiveness (Kovel 2002: 53). Lest people forget this, Kovel reminds one that 'ecology' pertains not only to nature, but to society too, given that certain aspects of social life are analogous to the interrelatedness of natural ecosystems, such as history, community or tradition. Capital accumulation can only proceed at optimal rate if these are negated, 'torn up'. 'Hence capital's relentlessly forward-looking attitude', he says (2002: 53), 'and its iron lock on the logic of modernity'.

The point of this 'excursion' on capitalism and ecological degradation should be clear. The extent of eco-destruction, driven mainly by the insatiable appetite of capital, today is such that it ought to be central to school and university education everywhere. Not only is it imperative for the survival of all life-forms on the planet, but also an urgent ethical imperative. This should be obvious, especially in an international educational context. Perhaps education is the best place to start addressing these problems. It cannot be emphasised too strongly: *unless the leading powers of the world*

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[22] Note that this sense of 'lack' systematically cultivated by capital(-ism) presupposes a more fundamental 'lack' as fertile soil for its superimposition of an artificial dissatisfaction, namely the 'lack' that Jacques Lacan singled out as the most fundamental characteristic of the human subject. Human 'desire', for Lacan, is an expression of this lack, but ironically individuals who understand that 'lack' is a fundamentally unalterable human condition, would be most resistant to capitalism's false promises of finally fulfilling all desires and removing all lack (see Olivier 2004a).

take the ecological crisis seriously enough to start implementing an alternative to energy-through-oil, for example, and put everything into play to limit economic growth in a judicious manner (which does not threaten livelihoods), it is a real possibility that humanity will have to take responsibility for the utter devastation of all natural life on this planet, as well as of the human cultures that have developed in dependence on nature. Think of the rate at which forests are being destroyed for economic gain today, which simply ignores the fact that these forests are the 'lungs' of the planet, and no financial profit could ever replace their indispensable function for the survival of all life on earth. It is worth noting that in a recent book ecological thinker Thomas Princen (2010: 1) quotes the following dire warning from the 2008 Living Planet report (words that resonate with Kovel's indictment of capital): 'Our global [ecological] footprint now exceeds the world's capacity to regenerate by about 30 per cent. If our demands on the planet continue at the same rate, by the mid-2030s we will need the equivalent of two planets to maintain our lifestyles'. If this does not give educators pause, I don't know what will.

Not that it would be easy to resist the economic *status quo* through education at school or university level. Gilles Deleuze has pointed out that contemporary society is already beyond what Foucault conceived of as disciplinary society (referred to earlier), where the familiar 'examination' is one of the chief mechanisms for inducing docility on the part of subjects by means of its hierarchising and normalising functions. In Deleuze's words (1992: 5): 'Indeed, just as the corporation replaces the factory, *perpetual training* tends to replace the *school*, and continuous control to replace the examination. Which is the surest way of delivering the school over to the corporation'. Any university lecturer today can testify to the tendency of introducing 'continuous control' into the teaching curriculum in the shape of, for instance, frequent testing – to such an extent that students arguably no longer have any time for true 'learning' (which requires time-consuming, critical reflection on what one has heard in class or read in textbooks). In other words, the spirit of the corporation has already entered the university, and few university teachers have the wherewithal to resist it effectively. To be able to do so, one has to understand what is happening in contemporary society, and thinkers such as Foucault and Deleuze, but also the others drawn on in this paper, are invaluable sources of discursive transformation in this regard. Within schools and universities this battle of transforming people

(students) can take many forms – introducing students to the theories in question is just one of them. At a more practical level something such as 'ecological literacy' – which already features at many schools in different countries, including South Africa – is indispensable for sensitising students to the inseparability of human or social ecosystems and natural ecosystems. A strong argument could be made that this is even more important than the kind of critical philosophical theory I am defending here; for example, teaching students the actual practice of permaculture as an increasingly valuable alternative to a life of capitalist consumption and soil exhaustion may prepare them for an immeasurably more eco-sustainable way of life. This can be done even within cities (Hasse 2012).

Wouldn't it be the greatest irony if the very beings (human beings) capable of 'taking responsibility' for nature as her *guardians*, turned out to be its (and their own) *destroyers*? This would be the gravest Oedipal error of all, to 'murder' that which has generated all life. And does this not point to the greatest international educational and ethical priority of all, namely to inculcate in the youth a realisation of what is at stake, and find ways to help them develop a degree of autonomy, to be able to say no to useless capitalist imperatives and dedicate themselves to a worthwhile cause? Instead of calibrating educational institutions worldwide for the promotion of optimal economic development through 'growth', such development should be pursued in such a way that it does not impact so negatively or destructively on ecological conditions as to place the very survival of life on earth in peril. (These thoughts are pursued further in Part 2 of this article.)

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