Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development
Exploring Time, Mediation and Collectivity in Contemporary Schools
Michalis Kontopodis
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The argumentation presented in this book moves, however, to different directions than the above-mentioned articles and chapters. The book focuses on concrete student cases whereas the articles and chapters presented above focused on school institutional and organizational issues as well as on epistemological issues concerning the concept of development.
Introduction
Looking to the Future

PRELUDE

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

When a person decides to live in Beijing, work in Beijing, or to take a tour of the city, their decision is, in fact, synonymous with accepting and fulfilling a role in a drama; with hopes of making himself or herself part of the future and is promise of excitement brought about by an urban life, more active than in any other place. This decision is also synonymous with moving into a public space in which the visitor only has the future, never the past. For any person, China Central Place is a symbol that represents the modern city of Beijing, the capital of China. (Inscription on Monument, China Central Place in Beijing, written originally in both English and Chinese—see Figure I.1)

Figure I.1 Looking to the Future. China Central Place in Beijing, 2011 (photo by the author).
I was very surprised when I saw the quote above in a newly built huge monument in the center of one of the newly built areas in Beijing, China, last summer. Although the monument claims that it concerns only the future, it is written with golden letters on marble thus imitating a quite traditional technique (non-Chinese by the way). If the same text had been presented with modern lighting techniques, that would eventually be more appealing to what is the “future”—but then, it would just would just look like a commercial. Still, could this be considered a monument at all? Usually monuments materialize past memories. This monument contradicts the very notion monumentum, from Latin monere that means to remind: It is a monument that deletes the past and witnesses only the future. It enacts “a public space in which the visitor only has the future, never the past.”¹

The informed reader could understand here the underlying opposition: This new Beijing central square has only a future, as opposed to Tiananmen Square that has been the central square since ages. Tiananmen Square cannot move to the future, as it is caught in past memories. Tiananmen Square is the place where the still-open-to-visitors Mao Zedong Mausoleum materializes the contradiction between the free market economy and the previous regime; it is also the place where the former imperial buildings materialize the long and contradictory history of the entity that is nowadays called “China.” What is even more important, as seen from my perspective is that among these memorial places, all evident traces of the protests and of the students’ assassinations that took place there in 1989 are the cautiously deleted while the memories and imaginations of “the coming tanks” are still there (cf. Agamben, 1993).

But why should one bother with all this history and the politics involved in it? The discourse on the monument continues:

Place yourself in China Central Place: you will be astonished by the perfect match between its sceneries, architecture and open spaces which are divided by the buildings. Every element echoes others. Even a small factor is designed for actual use in daily life. China Central Place is a complex project conveying an ideal about perfect and detailed designs, which cannot be reflected in any individual element. China Central Place is giving people who work, live or just visit here unparalleled enjoyment and a multitude of services. (Inscription on Monument, China Central Place in Beijing, written originally in both English and Chinese—see Figure I.1)

“China Central Place is giving people who work, live or just visit here unparalleled enjoyment and a multitude of services”—what else can one wish for oneself?

I was supposed to be one of those people who had access to the multitude of services, however, this did not seem very appealing to me. What can people do at a place without any history? It seemed to me that the only future
that such perfectly designed spaces promise is the excitement of consuming: a "promise of excitement brought about by an urban life, more active than in any other place" (Inscription on Monument). This excitement is just personal, since there cannot be any sense of community without past memories.²

And not only the past is here deleted—but also the present: Instead of "looking to" the multiple and heterogeneous pasts, presents and futures of the people living in Beijing, China, this square is "perfectly designed" as a non-place that offered the experience of non-time. If the names of the places were removed, the above quoted lines (which anyway were originally written in English, too) could have been written for similar central squares that are "perfectly designed" in Los Angeles, Berlin, São Paulo or Moscow. This indeed is global neoliberalism—a certain way to look to the future while not seeing anything else . . .³

**NEOLIBERALISM**

It has already been more than 15 years since Arjun Appadurai in his groundbreaking book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996) described how even inhabitants of remote mountain villages in India dream of the life in New York and Hollywood. He argued that media images circulate throughout the world much easier than before, and even if there is a person that might have never seen a film or a commercial, this person will have listened to narrations by migrants or their relatives about the life there. Appadurai described how people, information, images and capital flow from one place to the other to a greater extent than ever before thus turning the world into an interconnected whole.

When I visited for research purposes¹ Guarani Indians in the region of Espírito Santo in Brazil 2 years ago, even if they lived in houses made of soil and wood without using any modern technologies, they took electricity from the one central street lamp just in order to be able to have their TVs and their antennas plugged in. The same was the case for all the other countryside communities around—even the Landless Rural Workers, whose radical movement and schools I will refer to in detail in Chapter 4. It has been in such places that I realized the validity of Appadurai's analysis. These rural places seemed to be very near to the *China Central Place* described above—more than ever before.

One could say that the interconnected world that Appadurai described—or the Empire, to use another term proposed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000, 2004)—is mainly marked by two tendencies: (a) the desire to be successful and to consume—not to enjoy, share or create but to consume things, services, even people or immaterial goods and (b) the inability to be successful and access, appropriate and consume all those things, services, and goods (cf. Bauman, 2007; Gill & Schäff, 2011; Giroux, 2009). The more dazzling the commercials and other images of these goods become, the more
excluded or marginalized feel the people who cannot access and consume these goods. Precariousness, flexible and cheap labor, unequal distribution of wealth, inflation and thus inability to consume mark the so-called economic, societal and/or ecological crisis that most Western media speak about during the time these lines are being written (cf. Bauman, 1997, 2003).

The desire to consume as a dominating tendency, which has been spread throughout the world, marks also a deeper, less apparent, ethical-political crisis. It marks a crisis of ethical-political principles (individualism over altruism, competition over solidarity, hostility over peace and collaboration, homogeneity over heterogeneity) that renders almost impossible any form of non-hierarchical collective organization. This book is being written in a very critical moment in which on the one hand, capitalist economy is in such a severe crisis (foremost a crisis of consumption) that threatens its very foundations, but on the other hand, the desire to consume has to such a great extent penetrated every aspect of life—even imagination, that it seems impossible to overcome or to escape from the crisis. These conflictual tendencies are what in my view can be called neoliberalism—thus an absolutely destructive process that pervades literally all domains of life across the most diverse places or contexts (cf. Zizek, 1997, 2011).

NEOLIBERALISM AND PEDAGOGY

How do children and young people grow up in interconnected rural and urban territories that are organized by the desire and—in most of the cases—the inability to be successful and consume? How is school education organized in this context? Is there any way out of the economic, societal, ecological and ethical-political crisis briefly outlined above—where to and how? How can education support children and young people in creating new and (more) viable ways to live? How can different futures be imagined? What can educational psychology as well as educational theory and educational science be in a context where even imagination is appropriated by neoliberalism?

These questions gain in importance when referring to an ever-growing population of marginalized young people, whose education and inclusion has since always been a problem for politicians and a challenge for educational and developmental psychological theories. Nowadays, in most Western developed countries, adult life is increasingly organized on the basis of short-term work contracts and reduced social security funds. In this context, it seems that producing efficient job-seekers and employees becomes the main aim of educational programs for the "next generation."

There is a whole new set of practices of communicating, ordering, directing and stabilizing youth development toward this aim. Secondary schools become more and more interconnected with the job market and student development is conceived in terms of vocational education, professional
orientation and development of job-finding skills (cf. Daniels, 2011). While education gets more and more privatized (Macrine, 2009) and social security funds are reduced (Rose, 1999), marginalized youngsters and young adults are increasingly expected to accomplish transitions from one institution to another and manage their everyday survival on their own without depending on institutionalized forms of direct supervision.

In this context, schools and educational projects often encourage students to engage in guided practices of reflecting about oneself, their past performance and their future career. These practices aim to increase independence and self-discipline as well as orientation and motivation toward the achievement of concrete aims—usually related to the job market. The question poses itself, however, whether and how this kind of reflection supports marginalized youth in dealing with complex everyday situations such as unexpected pregnancy, homelessness or racial segregation as well as in actively participating in societal improvement.

As we will see in the following chapters, “reflection,” “learning” or “development” are neither natural processes nor neutral concepts. They often implicitly reproduce the neoliberal values of individualism, success and competition. Yet a great deal of research in school and educational psychology and educational science on learning does not explicitly take into account the broader neoliberal context in which it takes place. Most research interrelates a few directly observed variables without considering the broader context in which the observed phenomena and correlations occur (cf. Pressley & Roehrig, 2003).

“Learning” and “development” are often labels for practices that point to the future in the same way that the monument in the Central China Place did: They are “synonymous with moving into a space in which the [student] only has the future, never the past” (see quote above, Inscription on Monument). Even if research on memory has been the basis of most learning theories, memory is understood only in terms of information processing—and not as anything that has to do with collective pasts, local history or politics of suffering and/or resisting. But what can “learning” and “development” be when a student feels imprisoned in the contradiction between the desire and the inability to consume, as described above? Increased rates of school failure, youth violence and deviant behavior make visible in very direct ways the dead ends of pedagogy in the neoliberal era (Giroux, 2009).

Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development argues that the way to overcome this contradiction is through collectively redefining the past and the future. As we will see, the very moment in which a young student realizes the historicity of his or her everyday experience, for example, of success or of failure, his or her experience acquires totally different qualities and what might have been seen as a very individualized experience turns into a very collective endeavor. Experiencing collectivity can create radically different conditions for learning and development and open escape routes from nowadays’ all-level neoliberal crisis.
TIME, MEDIATION AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Critical pedagogy, critical and cultural-historical psychological research, sociological and anthropological approaches to children/youth and education offer rich descriptions and elaborate interpretations and understandings about what can be seen as neoliberal educational politics, youth marginalization, classroom interaction or radical approaches to teaching and learning. It is also well discussed how education reproduces the existing distribution of power and wealth and favors white, masculine, middle- and upper-class people while excluding all others.

Following these approaches, one could emphasize the strong contradiction that the U.S., Germany—and currently Brazil—are among the richest world economies, but even there, lots of young students have very limited access to education and are condemned to being low-paid workers or unemployed for the whole of their lives. This marginalization often implies for women being housewives or housemaids, for men engaging in illegal activities and, in some other cases, for both genders being homeless or suffering under psychiatric disorders.

The present book aims to develop further this critical body of work by bringing together different levels of analysis that usually are not studied in interrelation. Central in this cross-level investigation is the notion of time. The relation among the past, the present and the future is not conceptualized in this book as given and linearly organized. I will argue that the past, the present and the future do not exist as such—ontologically speaking—but can be enacted, done, organized, mediated or performed and brought into interrelation to each other in multiple ways. Following this line of thought, one could distinguish between a potential development—when a concrete already given version of the future is realized—and a virtual development in which different, not yet given, ways to connect the past, the present and the future are actualized. This distinction will be one of the main analytical focuses throughout the book and will be further explained on the ground of empirical examples.

A major theoretical inspiration in this endeavor will be the work by the Soviet psychologist Lev Semjonovic (or Semjonovitsj) Vygotskij—his name most commonly written Vygotsky—a work that has also transcended disciplinary boundaries and been informed by psychology, political economy, political philosophy, anthropology and the arts as well as the natural scientific debates of Vygotsky’s time. Vygotsky’s theoretical and research work—but also his practice as a member of various committees and local networks were explicitly political and devoted to overcoming the difficulties and challenges of his era and society. A complex set of concepts built a theory of human subjectivity as the product of an open-ended historical process, that is, of subjectivity at the same time as it is constituted by and constitutive of history.

Vygotsky’s theory brings together different but interconnected levels of analysis and offers ways to analyze pedagogy and human development as
Introduction

processes of collective becoming that entail crises but at the same time create the possibilities to overcome or escape these crises. As we will see, the concept of crisis as well as the concept of development in Vygotsky is primarily temporal—an aspect in his work that has not been adequately discussed so far. Building up on Vygotsky’s theoretical legacy as well as on post-structuralist approaches, I will make strong the distinction between “potential” and “virtual” development and discuss its implications in understanding learning and developmental processes—especially taking under consideration the neoliberal crisis and the present-day challenges that education and human development need to respond to.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH FIELDS

The focus of this book is on marginalized students and their everyday struggles to survive. This focus is not accidental. Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development is founded not only on a critical understanding of time, pedagogy and society—critical in terms of critical social theory, critical psychology, and critical educational approaches (Holzkamp, 1995; McLaren, Macrine & Hill, 2010; Papadopoulos, Stephenson, & Tsianos, 2008) but also in the sense of meta-reflection or meta-critique as defined by Christoph Wulf (2003) in his historical anthropological approach to critical educational theories. The focus on marginalized students implies this critical and meta-critical stance.\(^9\)

With this focus, I regularly conducted ethnographic participant observation and multi-method research inside and outside schools at different marginalized places in Germany, Brazil, and the U.S., from 2004 to 2012. My investigation began with a 1-year long ethnography in only one urban experimental school in Germany, where I spent almost every day for the whole school year 2004 to 2005. I soon expanded this research to different urban contexts in Germany, the U.S., and Brazil—as well as later on in the Brazilian countryside, which included fieldwork with Guarani Indians, small-scale farmers as well as with Quilombolas (often collaborating, then, with other colleagues who have been longer engaged in research in those places\(^11\)). A particular focus of my research in Brazil became soon the Landless Rural Workers’ Movement, which I consider as a highly interesting example of resistance against the neoliberal politics outlined above (for more details see Chapter 4).

The primary common problem among the various groups of the students whom I investigated in Germany was their careers of school failure that prevented them from engaging with educational and job-related activities of high profile in the future, not only because of lack of funds and opportunities (as might have been the case in the U.S. or in Brazil) but also because of legal regulations that prevent social mobility and create distinct categories of public schools that facilitate tracking of and categorization of pupils from the time students are around the ages of 12 or 13.\(^12\)
Beyond this difference, most of the students with whom I engaged in research, in Germany, the U.S. and Brazil faced a variety of problems related to minimal economic resources, homelessness, high consumption of alcohol and drugs, unexpected pregnancy, racism and/or sexual discrimination. Extreme violence among different local peer-groups has been a problem in the U.S. context that has not been the case in Germany or Brazil. The U.S. examples that I employ for the purposes of the argumentation presented in this book do not come, however, from my ethnographic investigations but from a much older school project, the "Freedom Writers," which took place at the Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California, that I did not have the chance to investigate ethnographically. The materials on this project come from the books the teacher Erin Gruwell has published about this project (Gruwell, 1999, 2007a, 2007b) as well as from a posteriority examination of a series of other sources such as webpages and reports by other people.

My methods are thus mixed: I employ analyses of life stories, of interviews and video-recordings, of ethnographic and other written materials and of archives. Central here is the methodology of case study—which implies that even a case that might seem "unique" reflects the "whole," that is, entails qualitative information that can be generalized—not in the sense of population statistics but through interpretation and theory building (Simons, 1980). Still, I do not use my materials for the representation of a particular field (cf. Kontopidis, 2011b) but as examples for the illumination and development of a broader theoretical argumentation.

In his famous book about learning, the critical psychologist Klaus Holzkamp explains how important the choice of examples is for theory building and takes the example of himself learning to listen to Schoenberg's music as learning that is adequate to contemporary culture (Holzkamp, 1995, pp. 194–205). Following a quite altered approach, that of critical ethnography, instead of analyzing my own learning, I will draw on examples taken from the everyday lives of marginalized students as documented during my research.

*Neoliberalism, Pedagogy and Human Development* does not thus aim to analyze or evaluate a concrete school or educational approach or to compare two or three different schools or approaches. Still, I will try in every case to situate my examples, presenting adequate information about the concrete local contexts and history of practices to which these examples refer. The presented examples, if not otherwise noted, refer to common day-to-day practices and not to exceptional cases. Further details about my access to the different fields and materials and the concrete steps of data analysis are presented in the Appendix.

**BOOK OUTLINE**

Following previous critical works by myself and colleagues (cf. Kontopidis, 2009d), I investigate in this book emerging educational practices by
focusing on case studies of marginalized students from secondary schools in Germany, California, U.S., and Espírito Santo, Brazil. I take a critical stance toward what can be seen as neoliberal pedagogics and search for alternatives to it.

The first two chapters of the book explore cases of students who undergo developmental crises at a German experimental secondary school. This school is strongly interconnected with the job market and can be seen as indicative for the above-mentioned emerging youth policies. It combines social work, teaching in the classroom and vocational education. By focusing on one exemplary case as well as on teachers' discussions about deviant students, the first chapter explores how techniques or technologies of the self, that is, available discursive meanings, but also diagrams, questionnaires and other mediating devices, shape student development within neoliberal power relations. It is argued that a developmental crisis is experienced subjectively as a personal drama and at the same time reflects broader socio-economic and ethical-political contradictions.

Referring to the same secondary school like in Chapter 1, the second book chapter, "Either Now or Never: The Developmental Temporalities of School-to-Work Transition," examines the last months of schooling in the case of another student. The chapter analyzes how this student entered the job market, thus, being considered one of the most successful students of the school. The analysis critically distances itself from the school discourse, examining how options were posed to this student as dichotomies, such as "either now or never" or "hairdresser or housewife," encouraging her to act in a specific way, as an accountable subject. It is argued that a developmental crisis is dealt with not only in a particular way but also in a particular tempo, which is set by the school in coordination with the job market. These two chapters are followed by a brief Interlude that points to the difficulties that this developmental pedagogics entails for marginalized students—especially when taking the broader neoliberal crisis under consideration.

The following chapter, "Freedom Writers, California 1994–1998: When Meta-Reflection Creates Radically New Possibilities for Learning & Development at School," seeks alternatives to the above-described developmental pedagogics by exploring practices such as writing anonymous diaries or engaging in group activities outside the school by female and male students from ethnic minorities at a well-known school project, that of the Freedom Writers at the Woodrow Wilson High School in Long Beach, California. The analysis investigates how the students engaged in reflection about their collective past and how this opened ways for them to think of their futures in very different ways than they did before. This in turn fundamentally changed how the (formerly) marginalized students learned and developed.

Moving the focus of attention from urban to countryside education and from developed to developing countries, the fourth and last chapter of the book investigates the so-called Pedagogia da Terra in the context of the Landless Rural Workers' Movement in Brazil. This broader socio-political
movement from the very beginning demanded not only better living conditions for land workers. But it also demanded better educational chances for the “landless children” (sem terrinha). “Better” referred not only to material aspects such as access to properly constructed school buildings or books but also to the pedagogical methods followed as well as to the contents of lessons. The chapter focuses on one case study combined with a brief presentation of broader ethnographic materials and classroom interaction analysis. The interlinks between memory, imagination and collaboration are explored and the development of oneself is contrasted to the development of new societal relations—which is at the same time individual and collective.

On the ground of all presented materials, a broader theoretical model is outlined in the conclusion, which brings together Vygotskian and process-philosophical/post-structuralist approaches. Employing Michel Foucault’s notion of techniques or technologies of the self (Foucault, Martin, Gutman, & Hutton, 1988), the book explores how learning and development function (or do not function) at school as such technologies of the self that establish accountability and promote the incorporation of marginalized students in the current socio-economic and ethical-political regime. A series of concepts such as the idea of drama or crisis and the notion of the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky) are discussed in this regard.

The analysis counterposes two discrete modes of youth development: development of concrete skills (zone of potential development) and development of new societal relations (zone of virtual development). It is suggested that the relation between individual and collective pasts and futures is mediated by devices that organize, direct, stabilize, materialize, objectify and institutionalize student development in the course of everyday action and practices at school. This often happens in normative ways that institutionalize and legitimate a particular way of development in the school as the only possibility. Collaboration, collectivity and meta-reflection can enact very different relations between individual and collective pasts and futures and thus lead to radically new individual, collective and societal developments. Such a movement is urgently needed for education of marginalized students and can open escape routes from nowadays’ global neoliberal educational and developmental regimes.
1 Learning, Development and Technologies of the Self
Dealing With Critical Situations and Marginalization at an Experimental Secondary School in Germany

The book introduction briefly outlined how the current broader crisis of neoliberalism affects the lives of young people almost everywhere around the globe. Here we will have a deeper insight into what can be understood as a crisis—which, as we will see, unfolds on different scales and involves all possible levels of analysis (personal, interpersonal, institutional, societal). Although different specialists often speak of crisis in terms of their own specialization—for example, developmental crises, economical crisis, moral crisis, ecological crisis—I will argue that a crisis is experienced subjectively as a personal drama and at the same time reflects broader socio-economic and ethical-political contradictions. A personal or developmental crisis is part of a broader crisis with which a whole society is confronted—such as the nowadays’ crisis of neoliberalism as described in the book introduction.

The case of Felix—the student on whom we will focus in this first chapter—can be seen as exemplary in this regard. Felix is a previously deviant student with a failed school career now at a German experimental secondary school that has been specially designed for students like him. In following him, we will see how he employs available discursive meanings and mediating devices1 at school in the course of what can be seen as a mediating activity with the aim to resolve the crisis.

"I MADE MY PARENTS' LIFE A HELL": EXPERIENCING A CRISIS IN VYGOTSKIAN PERSPECTIVE

Extract 1

1. F: Also ich war ein Problemkind gewesen (.2) ähm ( . . . ) ich
   Well, I was a problematic child (.2) errm ( . . . )

2. hab meine Elternbeklaut, äh ( . . . ) ich hab (.2) auch
   I stole from my parents, uh ( . . . ) I (.2) also took