

Introduction

Tobias Lensch, Krassimir Stojanov

Critical philosophical reflections on education have a long tradition. Both within academic discourses and in social debates, questions about the goals, possibilities, scope and limits of education date back to ancient times. However, addressing educational issues from the perspective of the Critical Theory (in the strict conceptual sense of that term) is a relatively new and still underdeveloped enterprise. This is astonishing, since social pathologies in education – for example pathologies of injustice in terms of exclusion, inequalities of opportunities, or epistemic violence – became a main focus of Philosophy of Education in recent years.

In June 2025, the conference *Education and Social Critique – Critical Theory and Philosophy of Education in Dialogue* was held at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt that took that desiderate as reason to foster a dialogue between Philosophy of Education and key concepts of the Critical Social Theory.

The sessions and presentations were framed by four keynote addresses titled “Ecologically Entangled Ethical Agency: Renewing Critical Theory, Reconfiguring Bildung” (Maeve Cooke), “One-Dimensional Education” (Douglas Yacek), “Losing the War to Win the Peace? The Civil Educational Condition as an Emancipatory Interest” (Christopher Martin), and “Populism as a Topic of Critical Theory of Education” (Krassimir Stojanov).

All contributions at the conference offered a forum to explore the ways, in which the main purpose of the Critical Theory not only to describe the society, but also to change it in a positive way could be spelled out in relation to education policy. In particular, we discussed, how central perspectives and topics of the Critical Theory (for example its focus of social pathologies and socially caused suffering) might offer relevant new answers to classical normative questions of the *Philosophy of Education* like the ones about goals and values of institutionalized education, or about equity and educational justice. As a result, a dialog between critical theorists and philosophers of education from

various schools of thought (e.g. Analytic Philosophy, Poststructuralism etc.) were established at the conference. The contributions to this edited volume are the direct results of the conference presentations and discussions held afterwards. The subtitle of the volume (“Normativity, Social Pathologies, and Educational Justice”) reflects the fact, that not only the presentations of the speakers but also the majority of the questions and contributions of the attendees of the conference – most of them students of our university – addressed these issues.

In the first part of the volume, ‘Normativity and public reason’, *Christopher Martin* claims that contemporary liberal societies should prioritize civic reality as a democratic educational aim. More specifically, citizens must learn how to engage in interpersonal public reason without depending on partisanly defined epistemic authorities. This deliberative know-how helps citizens to sidestep forms of political influence that aim to divide liberal publics and undermine civic learning.

Imke von Maur argues that emotions in the context of the climate crisis are produced and selectively cultivated within institutional contexts that have their own stakes in what is felt and what is not by drawing on the Frankfurt School critique of instrumental reason and a critical theory of emotions that understands affects as socially mediated and politically consequential.

In his paper, *Tobias Lensch* outlines a Critical Theory of Education that aims to highlight how and why a commitment to propositional truth makes sense for liberal democracies, particularly in times of populism, by linking this commitment to truth with an alethic realism.

The second part of the volume is called ‘Processes of emancipation and power structures’, where the authors ask about the possibility of emancipation processes, an education for maturity or diagnose identificational thinking for capitalist exploitation.

Christian Hofmann deals with the topic of education for maturity under the conditions of digitalization. In addition to many opportunities, there are challenges, especially for young people in relation to the use of social media, such as addiction, threats to mental health or the spread of fake news, which also leads to problems for democracy. This is where the danger of a dialectic of enlightenment becomes apparent. To counter this, education is needed for a critical and reflective approach to digital media, in which one should also include a

critique of the business models of the major tech corporations and their connection with a new authoritarianism.

Edda Mack argues that AI as technology and medium of communication is used to outsource and commodify thought and colonizes the activity of thinking – for capitalistic exploitation – by deepening conformity under capitalistic hegemony by drawing on Adorno's critique of the Culture Industry and his concept of identificational thinking: a sociological theoretical analysis of AI tools and especially the 'casual' use of said tools – especially LLMs like ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Gemini (Google) – bring to light a (different) mode of Marxian Alienation: an Alienation of reason.

Nadine Randak reflects on the concept of emancipation as a goal of education as several authors of the critical educational theory in 1970s' Germany have elaborated. She argues that these Habermas-based works in the field of education mark a relevant change in the conception of emancipation, as they logically link the subject of the emancipation process to its condition or mode and thus personalize this former a-personal entity – demanding consequences for the status of subjectivity in educational settings.

Sebastian Gräber also examines the link between education and emancipation. Drawing on the work of Henry Giroux and Herwig Blankertz, the paper demonstrates how both authors tend to view the emancipatory potential of education as a historical constant. This argument risks projecting normative expectations onto the past and oversimplifying the complex dialectic between emancipation and domination in historical educational processes. The article concludes by outlining perspectives for a critical historiography of education as a contextualized approach to understanding education's emancipatory potential while not neglecting its inherent regressive tendencies.

The last part of the volume, 'Educational (In)justice and their mechanisms', starts with the paper of *Fedor Korochkin* and *Polina Vasineva*. It proceeds from the framework of systemic indoctrination, a concept describing instances of indoctrination where authorities — as the primary agent of this process — instrumentalize the entire education system to shape closed-mindedness. They ask: What are the mechanisms through which this happens, and what are the consequences — not only for educational practice at present, but for the long-term epistemic and moral capacities of teachers and students? They argue that the chain reaction that begins with educators' fear may result not merely in the diminishment of academic freedom but in enduring structural epistemic harm that may outlast the conditions that produced it.

Ionut Untea argues that a position of in-between-ness involves the task of education at a more profound level, that of a vocationality, or what Habermas himself called, capitalizing on Weber, the 'call'. This entails the democratization of the pedagogical position, as not only the professional philosopher may engage in this endeavour, but anyone able of the translative back and forth between spaces. Exemplarity remains intimately connected to the translative stance, as the translator-educator will have to find exemplary cases and behaviours to encourage not only the translation of theory into praxis, but also to encourage the identification of performative kinds of praxis.

Rémy Bocquillon and *Mark van Loon* argue that 'pedagogical idealism' systematically misreads structural contradictions of labour and capital as interpersonal or behavioural failures, leading to an ideological and depoliticizing personalization of power in children and youth care. Against the false security of an abstracted, disembodied and idealized self-image, they propose a clinical materialism as a diagnostic reading of education practices oriented toward reintegrating a dialectic of cognition and emotion, theory and practice. Rather than cultivating mere resilience, they ask what 'weird pedagogies' capable of genuine response-ability might look like at the end of the world.

It is important to us, to mention, that we were able to organize the conference because of the generous project funding of the DFG (German Research Association). Without it, this conference would not have been possible the way it was realized. Many thanks to Christine Geyer, Elisabeth Moßburger and Ursula Kunz for their tremendous support in preparing for the event, Marie-Carla Ev Markhoff and Anna-Maria Blasaditsch for ensuring it ran so smoothly on-site, and Niklas Hilgarth for assistance in preparing the contributions for being published here.

Eichstätt, April 2026

Tobias Lensch and Krassimir Stojanov (eds.)