

Politics, Imagination, and the Problem of Antiquation Embracing Old and New Materialisms

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Article abstract

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Politics, Imagination, and the Problem of Antiquation

Embracing Old and New Materialisms

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Abstract

Political imagination has never been more important, yet it is very often foreclosed in conservative educational spaces. It's important to question the occlusion of political imagination from both science and education on a general level—something STEM-types are actively discouraged from thinking about. In order for education fields to progress and face the crises of our century there must be space to dream/think/imagine 'the political' along infinite horizons. This essay is an attempt to clear some space for political imagination by problematizing quick dismissals of older critical perspectives (e.g. materialisms), and suggests that any turn to ontology needs to be continually interpreted and politicized. Giving space to politics and imagination is vital as educators dream about different futures in the ruins of capitalism. This paper speaks to the 'ontological turn' that is still occurring in various academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.



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It has seemed to me that something would be achieved if we began to realize how firmly we are locked into a present without a future and to get a sense of all the things that limit our imagination of the future. (Fredric Jameson as quoted in Buchanon, 2006, p. 131)

An Infinite Political Horizon for Education

This paper addresses the increasing occlusion of political imagination as a vital part of justice oriented education.¹ There is a general lack of engagement with politics in fields like science education—which stand to deliver so much hope if they would accept some responsibility for social and ecological transformation. This occlusion prevents educators from engaging the realities surrounding poverty, white supremacy, environmental destruction, as well as vital concepts such as aesthetics, critical consciousness, oppression(s), power, subjectivity, materiality, and the notion of a ‘political Left’. Yes, I think it’s important for educators not to shy away from being vocal about the promise of reimagining a political Left (reimagining forever).

Science education, as a field of practice and research, is a good example of a field that openly disavows or occludes not only politics but imagination. When politics and imagination are foreclosed an apt response is to go looking for them (and they will be found because possibility and politics are immanent to any field even when they’re made invisible or unrealizable). Working against white supremacy, heteronormativity, neocolonialism, and capitalism is only strengthened when educators accept that politics is a never-ending horizon of possibility.² It’s difficult to pin something like a political horizon down, let alone how to engage such a horizon. Amidst the ontological turn taking place in the social sciences and humanities today imagining and expanding the horizon of politics might include:

1. Making space for creative ontologies that centre politics;
2. Exploring both corporeal/material and incorporeal/virtual realities (Grosz 2017);
3. Affirming multiplicities and remaining open to different figurations and entanglements;
4. Resisting privatization/ownership/enclosure of the educational commons.

In this paper politics is conceived using Jacques Rancière’s (1999) notion of dissensus in the name of equality—which is never ending and can be thought of as existing along an infinite plane of immanence (Deleuze and Guattari 1988). Politics is enacted through dissensus-making, as opposed to consensus, and the inclusion of those not counted equally. That is, the inclusion of that *part of no part*.. If I were to draw it out it might look something like this:

¹ This paper was written in 2017 (5 years before its publication), and speaks to the ‘ontological turn’ that is still occurring in various academic disciplines in the humanities and social sciences. Instead of viewing this paper as something antiquated, it’s perhaps more interesting to view this paper as something that perhaps couldn’t be written in the same way post COVID-19. It addresses, however partially, the question of politics and the ‘ontological turn’ in education over the past 5 to 10 years. Another version of this paper was published in the book *An Intense Calling: How ethics is the essence of education* (Bazzul 2022).

² I use the words ‘work and labour’ specifically as a reminder that labour is an aesthetic experience. Like art, or the ineffable, it is something that, although limited by space/time, still offers an infinite horizon of creative experience (Rancière 2013).



Figure 1. Representation of Jacques Rancière's Politics of Dissensus.

This view of politics is specific yet acknowledges that everything is coextensive with politics. What is visible and sensible are the very stakes of politics. However, this specificity also spares politics from platitudes like “*Everything is Political!*” as well as confusing politics with ethics—which is not to say that politics doesn’t need ethics. What politics looks and feels like is always an open question. All aesthetic experience—what can be seen or sensed—exists along an infinite and immanent plane. This immanent ‘here and now’ quality to politics also brings the ethical question of ‘how should I be/become?’ to politics. And, continuing on this Deleuzoguattarian line of thinking, there is always a *macro* and *micro* politics to things.

Imagination is necessary for politics because politics cannot be based on anything proper or implicit to a (dominant or normative) community itself. It’s not something that can easily be implemented ‘ready-made’ to complex situations and institutions (Rancière, 1999).³ Politics in the name of equality manifests as a challenge to the ‘sensible’ community. Having an a priori for politics is like insisting that art only be made with paint and paper. For Deleuze & Guattari (2014) the same goes for modern Western philosophy. It must always question its assumptions, which includes its claim to ‘the good’ and ‘the true’. The inherently shaky foundations of politics makes imagination essential to justice-oriented education. In this vein, Derek Ford (2017) challenges the Left in education to combine critique with magical acts of creation. This can also be read as a call to double-down on dreams. To be sure, imagination and dreams are always obscure, unfinished, and risk exclusions in the way they fumble, omit, fold, open and close. I’m a white male educator in Canada. I’ll always be entangled with whiteness, settler futurity (versus Indigenous futurity) and middle-class existence (McKinley 2005; Althusser 1970). To speak touches historical wounds, contradictions, and oppressions. I can only say that making space for imagination and politics might place social inequality and environmental justice front and centre in educational practice and research.

The increasing occlusion of politics by neoliberal capitalism, right wing populism, and neocolonialism will inevitably force the political Left to respond in a variety of ways. Political theorists like Jodi Dean (2012) emphasize that any crisis with the political left is not because of an obsession with critique, but rather due to losing sight of an expansive political horizon. According to Dean, “Communism is re-emerging as a magnet of political energy because it is and has been

³ The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed inequalities related to environment and health. Yet even after this exposure it’s (still) unclear what the way forward is for the Left organizationally in terms of dismantling capitalism and colonialism. One way forward is to look foremost to Indigenous social/climate movements like Idle No More for direction and leadership.

the alternative to capitalism. The communist horizon is not lost. It is Real.” (p. 11). Dean attributes the force and appeal of communism today, not to a definitive political philosophy or its failed twentieth century experiments, but to a collective desire for communal forms of life that elude so many people today. For Dean, it isn’t just capitalism but “the absence of communism shapes our contemporary setting” (p. 16)⁴. It’s rather obvious that a desire for communal forms of living haunts our present (often in the form of lament and nostalgia.)

Political imagination is necessary to create communal forms of life. So it’s especially frustrating when the institutions of education and science are not generally interested in forms of collectivity and politics. Even though both science and education are embedded with forms of global domination that put the natural and social commons at risk (Bazzul and Tolbert 2017). Without strong commitments to rebuilding and reimagining collective life on a damaged planet science education likely has little capacity for resistance, creativity, and community engagement (Haraway, 2016). Part of the task for educators involves outlining the forces working to occlude politics and enclose the commons (Slater, 2014; De Lissoyoy, Means, and Saltman, 2015). One of these forces is the right wing populist normalization of white supremacist and fascist thinking and the intensifying attacks on the 2SLGTBQAI+ community and groups like Black Lives Matter that would fight them. Another involves neoliberal culture that works to actively dismantle communitarian narratives and compels people to (self)invest in the simulacra of hyper-capitalism—and make no mistake science education continues to be a sought after part of neoliberal governance (Carter, 2008). In university settings the occlusion of politics and its infinite horizon sometimes come from scientific realists who rightly question the effect politics has on science and knowledge production. In their objections these scientific realists often miss the fact that so-called ‘neutrality’ is a clear political stance, because it comes with all the violence needed to keep things the same. Politics can also be ignored by ‘post’ scholars who rightly caution against prescriptions for what political engagement looks like; however in the process of critique can miss, or even prevent, possibilities for political entanglement, action, thinking, and creation.

Education for just futures requires being *un/disciplined*—simultaneously faithful and rebellious to particular relationships, knowledges, people, and stories. It also requires grappling with family, friends, lovers, and colleagues who challenge commitments to sociopolitical and ecological transformation. Those that interfere with ethical commitments and discipline centred on collective wellbeing (our ‘being-disciple’ is another way to put it). However, it also entails conflict with those who impede a radical flight from discipline toward possibility and just futures. Fidelity and transgression are both risky. Especially in their most intense forms of *love-as-fidelity* or *love-as-transgression* (Badiou, 2014). Educators are more like artists when they disrupt/create to facilitate new worlds in-common (Rancière, 1991). To this end, engaging an infinite political horizon is a broad appeal to desire, creativity, love, experience and difference—things that are made possible by the commons and in turn grow the commons.

Science education frequently neglects both politics and imagination—though things are slowly changing (Tolbert and Bazzul 2017). You can see this in the way the field approaches fundamental problems such as ‘Nature of Science’ debates, which seem to be less about epistemology and more about whether to allow social, cultural, and political forces to inform a Western, liberal, middle class, androcentric and capitalist approach to science. The separation of

⁴ Slavoj Žižek (2017) has made similar appeals for social democratic bureaucracy; and argues that access to electricity, healthcare, and clean environments requires a larger, relatively seamless entity (e.g. a state) that, while alienating, would allow people to lead a non-alienating local life.

politics from everyday life and knowledge production signals the success of liberal/neoliberal ideology—that some private untouchable rational core exists inside each of us forever tucked away from the world. This ideology allows people to think they can perceive some ‘big picture’ ahistorically and apolitically. The notion that any academic field can put aside questions of politics is dangerous. Not every discussion or research project needs to be explicitly political, but the denial of politics becomes even more dangerous when it’s ideologically seamless. Educators need to muddy those ideologically sterile waters with politics.

The three movements that follow affirm the practice of critique as the reading of the world. Namely the infinite possibility that lies in another reading of a material, historical, and sociocultural and ecological context. They also include a very short commentary on materialisms, both old and new, and how educators might keep the question of politics tied to these materialisms. I conclude with a small provocation about the politics of ‘economized life’ as one of the dire landscapes for political imagination today. All three movements are concerned with (re)valuing political imagination as a crucial part of justice oriented education.

Imagination and Critical Position: Is Critique Passé?

There is no reading that works innocently beyond, before or beneath the theoretical, no reading that can put itself out of play. (Rooney, 2017, p. 135)

One problem with ‘post’ perspectives today is that they sometimes don’t seem to value past imagination, historical turns, or political visions that don’t fit their particular ontology or theory of ethics. Posthumanisms, poststructuralisms, and postqualitative thought, irrespective of whether the post label is at all useful, are at their most imaginative when they perform addition or multiplication operations. In other words, following Deleuze’s suggestion of a continual process of ‘and this, and this, and this...’ (Deleuze & Parnet 2007). Like many education scholars, I draw from ‘post-y’ areas of theory like new materialism and poststructuralism. A concern some of my colleagues raise about new materialisms is the way they can neglect a space for politics or political imagination, even when they make difference(s) more visible and palpable (Matthew Weinstein, personal communication April 25, 2017). Making something visible and calling for disruption in the name of equality often happen simultaneously but these two important tasks retain a difference. Just like art and politics are different (Rancière 2013). Questions educators need to continually ask of social theory are: To what extent do they allow an opening of political possibility and imagination? To what extent do they address or facilitate dissensus in the name of equality? These questions are similar to the critique of Marxism by thinkers like Michel Foucault who challenged the idea that Marxian analysis could, on its own, guide all political questions of the day (Foucault & Faubion 2000). In an age of right-wing populism, climate change, and growing social inequality, asking where the politics lies in educational research may be essential. This is of course an understatement of sorts. As just futures seem more and more unimaginable—as the opening epigraph from Fredric Jameson suggests—Hollywood movies are becoming more successful at portraying brutal dystopias.

For Jameson (1974), a transformation of consciousness comes from being *shocked*. The sanctioning of white supremacy, human-induced mass extinction, and the purposeful creation of disposable populations are indeed shocking when made explicit and vivid against a detailed sociohistorical backdrop. Using history as backdrop for injustice is the core of Jameson’s dialectical method of analysis. Something is shocking when it was previously unthinkable and

surfaces in all its terror and ugliness. In critical classrooms shock is wonder's smaller twin (smaller because spiritually speaking the world is mostly wondrous). Wonder and shock invoke a similar aesthetic experience that screams: *I can't believe this is happening!* The genocidal details of how millions of Indigenous peoples have been killed by colonialism and the pursuit of capital are shocking enough. They do not become any more shocking when another right wing ideologue is elected. What is actually shocking is the realization that whiteness, capital, anthropocentrism, and violent hetero-patriarchy pervade *all* elements of contemporary life. A larger shock is hard to imagine; besides the shock of being alive (or dead for that matter). This is how one is able to unite students across political divides—the material reality we share is the best curriculum as Indigenous education has long argued (see for example Robin Kimmerer's (2013) work).

Being imaginative also requires educators to consider what past imaginings have to offer. For example, today Marxist concepts are often dismissed prematurely without much consideration. To newer scholars something like a dialectic method may not seem very imaginative. Instead it might seem antiquated, rigid, and easy to critique. However a dialectical analysis, according to Jameson, does not have any a priori method except attention to history. That is, real events and detailed relationships (Buchanan 2006). Part of the task of critique is to determine what *cannot be said* in a particular context or moment, and to think about the material and historical forces that shape these silences. A dialectic, like imagination, can be described as thinking that has not come into being. A form of future-thinking. Another example of a Marxist concept that gets easily dismissed when looking for explanations for social phenomena is the abstract notion of superstructure. However superstructure can also be an imaginative political concept if it's understood that power, ideology, and agency is always already imminent, with/in a superstructural world that's ultimately determined 'from below' (following Althusser and Spinoza). The theological element here is powerful—as this view of superstructure embodies Spinoza's view that an infinite God—in the form of an infinite substance(s)—is immanent and present in all creation. Change, when it happens, spreads to all social and material relations. It transforms who we think we are and affects the very air we breathe. With a view of superstructure as something immanent and malleable, the ethical problem of how beings might come to realize their immanent powers in industrial societies becomes vitally important. Or in Foucault's terms, how one might live life at the nexus of power relations (Deleuze 1988). Dismissing structuralism(s) means losing its overall 'Spinozan' message of immanence: there is structure/substance and it is immanent! This is not to say that educators stay mired in one tradition. As a Marxist, Jameson looked to poststructuralist scholars like Deleuze to ask critical materialist questions such as: how might this assembly of things work?; and why this assembly in the first place? If educators dismiss the creative power of older critical traditions they risk diminishing creativity and imagination.

It's worth noting that the recent 'crisis' of criticism—the rise of post-critique and the skepticism of the critical posture—coincides with a crisis of the political Left and the decline of the humanities. Such crises cannot be totally explained by government/corporate forces attempting to financialize, silence, and control universities. They are also entangled with progressive forces and broad responses to critical theory. Literary scholar, Ellen Rooney (2017) suggests that it's no coincidence that the rise of STEM, with its blind faith in pragmatic interdisciplinary commercialized engineering, has coincided with increased suspicion of criticality and symptomatic analysis (a way of reading that focuses on the presuppositions of a text or thing). *Antiquation*, the practice of declaring something obsolete and over with is a power(ful) move, because it also (re)characterizes the present. Asking why some approaches to justice work have been antiquated,

for example the end of humanisms, is important, because what is at stake are the forms and significance of imaginative critical work in the present.

So while antiquation happens frequently and is productive, there's also a danger in declaring something antiquated in the present because it may leave important ongoing political work/questioning unfinished. Instead of dismissing the critical position as passé, Rooney (2017) suggests reinvigorating critical practices of reading. One of the ways to do this is by recognizing that acts of critical reading change the original form of something (text, context, object, etc.). A critical reading always exposes yet another reading, not just in the reading itself but in terms of the very possibility of a next reading. Critical reading and writing are never innocent as they silently work to create the next reading through the production of yet another form. From a materialist perspective reading is not just something performed by a conscious subject, but material fields and their effects. This is why critical reading is full of surprises. It's something that *undoes* (Butler 2002). All is provisional.

Criticality and Materialisms

The Main Point is there will be no Adam--and no Jane--who gets to name all beings in the garden. The reason is simple: there is no garden and never has been.
(Haraway, 2004, p, 83)

New materialisms, or socio-materialisms, can provide justice-oriented educators with new weapons, to put it in Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) words, by employing creative ontologies to engage political phenomena. There are similarities between 'older' and newer materialisms and no reason why one has to preclude the other. Both are skeptical of the rational (modern Western) subject and look to material fields for explanation. There's a common ethical question that can be asked of materiality, history, and ontology when they serve as the backdrop of intelligibility and imagination: Is it a singular view of history to which critical scholars must adhere? Is it a singular ontology that explains social phenomena? (e.g. Karen Barad's (2007) theory of agential realism and intra-actions). The answer that leaves the most room for imagination and creativity is 'of course not!'. Making room for politics and imagination means that Karl Marx's view of history and Donna Haraway's (2016) speculative figurations can intertwine and rework each other. While new materialisms have very robust ethical theories related to entanglement, response-ability, and the more-than-human world (Barad, 2007; Bennett, 2009) they seemingly have yet to theorize an engagement with politics that exceeds an ethics. This perception may have something to do with the pragmatic US-based school of New Materialisms or the notion that these theories of ethics are meant to be inclusive of politics (the term ethico-political sometimes signifies this meaning).

A turn toward ontology in some sense involves a move toward valuing realism(s) on a general level, and this can be productive for imagining politics so far as they work to expand and nurture what we share in-common. Karen Barad (2014) points out that different things are entangled differently or cut-together-apart. Imagine a politics of dissensus surrounding a discontinuous history of ontological 'cuts' leaving an open space for articulating, interpreting, and reading of a cut—which will always be something different than 'what was'. An invitation to the next reading. Modern Western science cannot help but become important to a turn toward ontology. Both in terms of what it contributes to our understanding of materiality and wellbeing, but also environmental destruction. Can materialisms both politicize their creative ontologies yet also take the risk of becoming one reading in-common with others? As Hardt and Negri (2009) point out,

there is no such thing as a private ontology. What is, what can be seen or sensed, at a fundamental level, belongs to all. One test for materialisms is to see how they grow and nurture along horizons of what is visible, possible, and in-common to both humans and the more-than-human.

The open-endedness of the future along with its capacity to deviate from domination and normalization requires linking ethics, how one might live, with politics, how collectives add that part of no part in the name of equality (Bazzul 2018; Grosz, 2017). Getting creative with ontologies, which includes their ethics and politics, must consider both materiality and ideality. Idealities are coextensive with materialities (Grosz, 2017, p. 13). These ontologies are always immanent to the world and not transcendent. This partly has to do with whether they are considered to be shared or kept private. Oftentimes they are future oriented in that they call upon people, relationships or living things who do not yet exist (Deleuze, 2004). The ethical task of increasing our imminent powers is infinite in scope when we acknowledge the multiplicities that make these powers possible. When it comes to education for justice there are no a priori claims to ‘correctness’. Therefore the political push for equality and wellbeing of the planet is in need of wild imagination. I’ll conclude with a provocation highlighting the economization of life as an example of why imagination is needed today.

The Economization of Life and the Importance of the Imagination

It often requires a bit of imagination to understand our current political moment, and various critical scholars have discussed the entanglement of life and politics: Michel Foucault (1978) from the standpoint of the modern governance, power and subjectivity; Nicolas Rose (2001) from the standpoint of the history of medicine medicine, and Anne Stoler (1995) from the standpoint of the colonial biopolitical state. Educators should be curious about the entanglements of education, power, and all biological and social life. Historians of science and science studies scholars have long studied the convergence of economic governance and the commercialization of the sciences (Thorpe 2008). To do this kind of analysis of the sciences and science education means challenging the idea that science is purely objective and has no politics, or that its politics are straightforward and obvious. Quite the opposite is in fact true, which can be seen when different ‘progressive’ camps attempt to lay ideological claim to science. In the Indian context for example different political narratives—Hindu nationalist, postcolonial, communitarian—vie to become the institutionally sanctioned narrative for science (see Raveendran, 2017; Chadha, 2005). Following Thorpe (2008), science generally falls under the communitarian umbrella in that it involves a series of processes, practices, and knowledges that develop what is common. The worst part for educators however is that we are subtly taught not to directly address the economics of science education whose main objective has arguably been the production of human capital and technoscientific innovations (or maintaining the status quo of this production). While economic concerns never fully determine social or political realities, economics is often necessary to understand them intimately (Rajan 2012). Capitalism, like it or not, remains the overdetermining backdrop by which people come to understand political alternatives—although it could be said that colonialism describes our current situation more). Schools, forests, populations, economy, and war are all intimately wrapped up in the control and dividing of life in advanced capitalist-colonial societies.

Over the last century the co-emergence of modern (political) economy and the life sciences have become the primary milieu for governing life. Science educators often ask students this rhetorical question: what is more important the economy or environment? It’s a serious question. Not because people must choose priorities—in fact most live without this choice—but because life

and economy are two sides of the same coin (Murphy 2017). Michelle Murphy (2017) argues that since the early twentieth century, and some would say earlier, the concept of ‘populations’ has become both a biological and economic phenomenon for government interventions dividing life into racialized, sexed, class, human and nonhuman categories of who can live, work, be left alone, invested in, or die. Race especially, even when its existence is denied, has come to play an essential role in economizing global populations through fear and ever expanding commodity markets. In education, the ‘gap-gazing literature’, which has been criticized by math educators (Gutiérrez, 2008), demonstrates that racial hierarchies can be maintained whilst denying biological race. Economic potential, instead of the usual ‘cultural’ and ‘biological’ differences, becomes a site of racial violence when STEM education becomes a seamless part of the sorting and segregating institutions of governance. Science education, which orients students to our shared material world, is entangled with institutions of modern governance and in this way remains distinctly apolitical and conservative (see Lemke, 2011).

Murphy’s (2017) historical work traces actual entomological research (literally flies in a jar) to demonstrate how the discipline of biology had lasting effects on economics and politics; and maintains “there are many possible ways to trace the extensive history of the economization of life” (p. 8). Science educators might do well to bring their thinking and practice down to the level of jars, flies, and experiments. Jameson would also have critical scholars look for the silences mentioned above. We could playfully call the (re)surfacing of an occluded politics the return of ‘repressed repressed’. In a time of ‘postcritique’, the return of the repressed idea that politics is continually repressed. And it’s in the realms of onto-politics that the commodification and capitalization of life can be engaged from below. For example, Kim Fortun’s (2012) work on the biopolitics of environmental informatics (e.g. all the infographics we observe) is simultaneously about politics of knowing, but also demonstrates how the simulacra of informatics is material, spatial, temporal, and ontological. In advanced capitalism these infographics are just as much *from below* as dirt, cement, and street protests thereby challenging the culture/nature dichotomy. Unfortunately, it’s not as simple as simply ‘erasing’ a culture/nature divide. Colonizing Western juridical systems privatize, through property and patent laws, what is common and commodify life, in part, by rendering life as inert matter that can be owned (Jasanoff, 2012). In other words, there’s a politics to this divide.

Materialists need political imagination because ontological philosophies that break down boundaries between life and non-life, like new materialisms, do so within ongoing political realities. The point is to encourage creativity and connect an ethic of responsibility with an imperative for political imagination and acts of dissensus. It’s clear that living collectively in ‘the ruins of capitalism’ requires such connections (Tsing, 2015). Political imagination resides in the assemblies of what might be as “life and capital come to be bonded together in ever more intricate assemblages” (Jasanoff, 2012, p. 182). What Anna L. Tsing (2015) would call new forms of livability after great disturbances. Disturbances that educators from all walks of life are being called to face.

Conclusion: What Powers of Imagination are Available to Us?

This essay attempts to articulate what cannot be said for many educators, especially those working in conservative fields like science education (Lemke, 2011): politically imagination is needed and we need ask after its foreclosure. As a science educator, my growth is dependent on a political education that will not be provided within a field that too strictly disciplines what I can

see, feel, look at, and write about. I have attempted to engage two foreclosures of political imagination. First and foremost, those presented by capitalism and destructive hierarchies that threaten the existence of our planet and as well as political equality. Second, are the foreclosures that come when critique and asking after antiquation are not applied to productive theoretical-methodological approaches such as ‘old and new’ materialisms, which have much to offer political imagination. I would like to end with two questions: a) what powers of imagination avail you? b) are you allowed to dream?

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