

## The figure of the teacher in Estonian school discourse

*Ott Puumeister and Mirjam Puumeister*

**T**he article concerns itself with the figure of the teacher in Estonian society. We do not concentrate on the educational system as a whole, but on one specific and crucial element in this apparatus – the teacher. We begin by offering a brief historical overview of the conditions of pedagogues in the 20th century before moving on to describe the adoption of neo-liberal free market policies since the 1990s and the effects these policies had and still have on education. Our main concern is to understand the teacher as an actor in power relations; to achieve this understanding we have selected as our examples 1) surveillance techniques in school environment that have direct relations to the state and the market; and 2) the 2012 educational workers' strike that made it quite clear that the teachers have been fixed to a position of wage workers. The overall and more abstract aim of the paper is to think about the social role of the teacher in Estonia.

**Keywords:** neo-liberal school; sousveillance-surveillance; educational policy; power relations

### Introduction

The educational system – as one subsystem in culture and society as a whole – is regarded as one of the most important systems of production and reproduction of cultural, social and economic values. It is, at one and the same time, a site of (future) innovation and preservation. The word future ought to be taken out of

brackets, in fact, because the subjects that are being formed in and that emerge from the educational system are, literally, “our future” – those who will give shape to a world that we will inhabit in a few decades. In what follows, we will not deal directly with the process of this production of the future (through constant reproduction of current values). Instead, we will concentrate on one specific and crucial figure in the operation of this apparatus – the teacher.

However, formal education does not simply mean the complex of schools-teachers-students. We can see this clearly from Estonian state budget of 2014: the amount of funds assigned to education is 205.9 million Euros which must also be used to support 1) the training of pre-school teachers; 2) student homes; 3) prison and hospital education; 4) the integration of new immigrants; 5) the augmentation of wages in language immersion classes; and 6) the teaching of Estonian in Russian language schools.<sup>1</sup> The educational system, then, is far broader than simply schooling. We, however, limit our analysis strictly to what we may call “school discourse”; we will not deal with the educational system as a whole but with statements situated in a specific discourse. This means also that we will not engage in any kind of ethnography, we will not concentrate on individual subjects; instead, we will concern ourselves with meaning-making surrounding and, in a way, constructing the figure of the teacher. A *figure* is, precisely, a meaningful unit present in socio-cultural space and time; the figure is an existent multiplicity of meaning-processes and elements. We can say that our approach is semiotic.

We are interested in a discursive formation that places the teacher in the service of the neo-liberal market as a service provider who is responsible of fulfilling the needs of 1) the students, 2) the market, and 3) the state. Although *needs* are the basic and fundamental concept here, we will not concentrate on what exactly those needs are (although we cannot avoid touching upon them); instead, we are interested in the mechanisms that are designed

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Estonia. <http://www.fin.ee/hariduskulude-toetus-jaotuspohimotted> [Retrieved 7 May 2014]

to insure the fulfillment of those needs. In other words, we will consider the surveillance mechanisms concerning the figure of the teacher. Our main concern, then, is not the (re)production of values nor the creation of needs but the teacher who is seen as a social and cultural actor who must achieve 1) the (re)production of values in a culture and 2) the fulfillment of needs in a society by shaping and responding to the students.

For these purposes we shall 1) give a brief overview of the principles of schooling in Estonia over time and see how they relate to the principles of neo-liberal governance; 2) turn to (decentralized) surveillance techniques that position the teacher in a space of constant visibility; and 3) consider the figure of the teacher in Estonian society on the basis of the educational workers' strike in 2012. This movement from general principles to specific events helps us see the (potential) influence of the teacher in our society and culture and ask if the teacher could, under current conditions, be anything other than a service provider for the students and the market. During the text the reader should thus bear in mind the problem that arose rather sharply during the above-mentioned strike: is the teacher capable of attaining a position that would be something other than a wage worker? Is the current figure of the teacher capable of politics; is the figure of the teacher capable of becoming a political subject? 'Politics' and 'political subject' should here be taken in the sense given to them by Jacques Rancière: the first signifies the production of new relations and subjectivities in a society while the latter signifies an actor capable of producing this new that has the power to transform social relations.<sup>2</sup> The further and more abstract aim of the paper, then, is to consider the paradigm of governance or management against the action of politics as described by Jacques Rancière. In this way, we will introduce to each other a specifically Estonian context and the theoretical writings of current critical political philosophy.

But first, in order to create some context for our analysis, let us give a brief overview of the situation of pedagogues since 1918.

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<sup>2</sup> Rancière, 1995

## A brief overview of the history of Estonian general education (1918–1991)

We will take as our point of departure the time of the first Republic of Estonia, from 1918 to 1940. This was the period that saw the development of Estonian educational system as such, that is, the emergence of an educational system specific to the independent nation state. People involved in setting up the system were also active in the National Awakening and so it was to be expected that schooling was built on national and patriotic values. High school teachers were mostly, during the first years of independence, young males (aged 20–32).<sup>3</sup> The teachers had extremely various backgrounds: Russian army, Baltic German clergymen, etc.<sup>4</sup> The main thing to note here is that teachers were not strictly confined to the school but were active participants in and organizers of social life. In 1933, for example, during the 11th Teachers' Congress, the teachers demanded that the government obey strictly democratic laws and rules.<sup>5</sup> Thus they were also politically *engaged*. In the Soviet period, however, we can see that the teachers will become politically *used*.

In the beginning of the 1940s Estonia experienced occupation from both Germany and Soviet Union. This meant an extreme upset for the educational system, as both the Germans and Russians restructured the collective of teachers according to their own needs. For example, in 1940, during the first Soviet occupation, the most dangerous groups of society were considered to be officers and teachers; 10–13% of the latter were deported, arrested or killed, and a considerable amount escaped to the West.<sup>6</sup> In consequence of these repressions, the percentage of non-qualified and female teachers increased.<sup>7</sup>

With the second Soviet occupation which lasted until 1991 Estonian teachers experienced increasing ideological pressure: their

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<sup>3</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2001:71

<sup>4</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2001:77

<sup>5</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2001:100

<sup>6</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2007:305

<sup>7</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2007:79

political convictions were placed on the foreground and they were not allowed to be politically indifferent or passive.<sup>8</sup> In addition to this, data of the teachers and their relatives' activity during the period of independence and of war were placed under scrutiny. In a letter written in 1950 to Iosif Stalin it was confirmed that during the last three years 1022 teachers were let go on political grounds.<sup>9</sup> In addition to the release, relocation and arrest, the Communist Party strove to gain foothold amongst educational workers: if in 1946 there was only 82 communists among the teachers, then in 1952 we can already count 482.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the teacher became responsible for political and ideological upbringing.<sup>11</sup> The first resistance to this political usage can be noticed during the Khrushchev Thaw when repression and political pressure gave a little way, and teachers were able to express that they were no longer content with the role of "state functionary".<sup>12</sup>

During the 1980s, the period of the weakening of the Soviet Union, the teachers became one of the first organized professional unions of intelligentsia to act against the state and for the liberation or independence of Estonia. To take some concrete examples, they resisted the importing of Soviet teachers, and acted towards the unification of educational programs between Russian and Estonian language schools.<sup>13</sup> Despite constant political pressure, then, the teachers were able to organize and form at least some kind of localized resistance to Soviet ideological expansions and intensifications.

The liberation from the Soviet Union involved also the 'liberalization' of Estonian society as a whole – a process to which we shall

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<sup>8</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2007:304

<sup>9</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2007:310

<sup>10</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2007:311

<sup>11</sup> We cannot possibly go into detail here, so we hope that our schematic remarks will give the reader at least some picture of state of affairs during the Soviet era.

<sup>12</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2007:337–338

<sup>13</sup> Karjahärm and Sirk, 2007:340

turn next in order to approach more thoroughly the conditions under which the teacher finds itself.

## **Liberalism, neo-liberalism and the Estonian educational system**

The collapse of the Soviet Union brought about significant changes in Estonian society in general: the development of democratic institutions, the adoption of free-market economy, extensive privatization. The principles of governance imported from Western Europe were seen as liberating in themselves just because they enabled to oppose to and get rid of the Soviet institutions and practices. A liberal ‘economic utopia’ was born that aimed to govern the economy without intervention.<sup>14</sup> The liberalization of economy was seen as correlative to the independence of the state itself; the emergence from the regime of socialist intervention equaled the liberation of social relations. “Being a liberal meant that one was an anti-communist and anti-communists were (and still are) the only true Estonians.”<sup>15</sup>

When the goal was to reach the economic level of Western and Northern Europe, one had to give free reign to the market that according to Pierre Bourdieu and Loic Wacquant signifies freedom, openness, flexibility, self-transformation, novelty, growth, individualism, diversity, and democracy.<sup>16</sup> Estonia had to open itself up to the global market. Of course, as Chantal Mouffe has pointed out, there is “no necessary relation between” the distinct traditions of liberalism and democracy, the first being constituted by “the rule of law, the defense of human rights and the respect of individual liberty,” and the latter “whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty.”<sup>17</sup> The principal tension, then, can be found between the interplay of liberty and equality. In democratic liberalism, equality is supposed to be guaranteed by liberty, or, more exactly,

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<sup>14</sup> Kattel, 2013:390

<sup>15</sup> Saarts, 2007

<sup>16</sup> Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001:5

<sup>17</sup> Mouffe, 2000:3

by the freedom of the market. Democracy is achievable through non-governance.

And this was exactly the strategy adopted by Estonian government in the early 1990s. This period in Estonian society and education has even been called classical liberalist<sup>18</sup> in that it presupposed a strict withdrawal of state institutions.<sup>19</sup> The dismantling of socialist intervention was seen as possible only through unlimited freedom. But we have to keep in mind here, as Michel Foucault reminds us, that already for the physiocrats, this ‘freedom’ did not mean individual freedom: government is limited “by the evidence of economic analysis which it knows has to be respected.”<sup>20</sup>

Liberal freedom does *not* equal individual freedom, it is the liberty of the market, this quasi-natural subject-object within which we must live in today’s world, because, as Deleuze and Guattari tell us, there are no exterior limits to capitalism, it is itself the exterior limit to society.<sup>21</sup> Market economy is the limit to social equality and not its presupposition. We can see this clearly in newly independent Estonia, where education became the principal means to compete successfully on the job market; education became one of the most important means in a fight against unemployment that was increasing rapidly.<sup>22</sup> Thus, education and the market economy were placed in an interdependent relationship. When in the Soviet era schooling served mostly ideological pur-

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<sup>18</sup> Thorsen and Lie, 2006:5: “Whereas “classical” or “economic” liberals favor *laissez-faire* economic policies because it is thought that they lead to more freedom and real democracy, modern liberals tend to claim that this analysis is inadequate and misleading, and that the state must play a significant role in the economy, if the most basic liberal goals and purposes are to be made into reality.”

<sup>19</sup> EHDR, 2011:97

<sup>20</sup> Foucault, 2008:61–62

<sup>21</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, 2000:230–231: “If capitalism is the exterior limit of all societies, this is because capitalism for its part has no exterior limit, but only an interior limit that is capital itself and that it does not encounter, but reproduces by always displacing it.” We can think here of the global effect of the market economy from which no subject in the world can be thrown out; excluded, yes, but then left with no possibility of economic activity.

<sup>22</sup> Jõgi *et al.*, 2008:14

poses, the 1990s started to accentuate strictly economic principles.<sup>23</sup>

Characteristic of what is called the second period (from the mid-1990s) of independent Estonia's educational system is exactly this realization, and thus the "return of the state": "This was the period when compulsory state exams for secondary school graduates were introduced, the Examination and Qualification Centre and the Qualification Authority were established [...] Financing tools, as well as quality control measures, were utilized more decisively [...]"<sup>24</sup> This regulation of curricula and financing should not, however, be understood as the regulation *of* the market, but, instead, regulation *for* the market.

The revitalization of liberal ideas in the 20th century entailed a kind of reversal in which the state acquired a positive role in relation to the market:

[F]or neo-liberal perspectives, the end goals of freedom, choice, consumer sovereignty, competition and individual initiative, as well as those of compliance and obedience, must be constructions of the state acting now in its positive role through the development of the techniques of *auditing, accounting and management*.<sup>25</sup>

Characteristic of (especially American) neo-liberalism is thus the (re)structuration or redefinition of "the social sphere altogether, so that the economy was no longer one domain among others but rather embraced all areas of human action [...]"<sup>26</sup> This grip by the economic sphere can also be seen in the case of education, which is understood as the fundamental basis of our contemporary economy, the 'knowledge-based economy'. The knowledge-based economy presupposes the openness of the educational system in

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, we are not talking about a non-ideological system here. It is clear that the first years of independence were strictly anti-Soviet in nature, and the school system promoted strictly Western values. This can be seen in the fact that Russian was no longer compulsory, but were pushed to the position of second language behind English and on the same position as German.

<sup>24</sup> EHDR, 2011:97

<sup>25</sup> Olssen and Michaels, 2005:315

<sup>26</sup> Vestergaard, 2009:206



that it should be intertwined with the economic sphere; and, in fact, every subsystem must be flexible and limited only by the flow of capital. As Gilles Deleuze says, “one is never finished with anything – the corporation, the educational system, the armed services being metastable states coexisting in one and the same modulation, like a universal system of deformation.”<sup>27</sup>

Contemporary societies are experiencing the dissolution of institutional boundaries. OECD economies have experienced a rapid transformation from industrial to ‘knowledge-based systems’ in which lifelong learning and innovation are central. They are asking questions how to ensure high quality, efficient, equitable and innovative education. We can say that, in some sense, OECD is hijacking John Dewey’s notion of lifelong learning (*education is development – is life – is growing*). Dewey, of course, was concentrating on individual development and his treatment of lifelong learning was somewhat tautological: the educational process has no end beyond itself.<sup>28</sup> OECD channels, however, this individual development “for itself” into the dynamics of the job market (as Europe’s population is ageing, the job market needs *everyone’s* involvement). Dewey’s notion of individual development is transformed into perpetual training that is a key pillar of a strong knowledge economy.

The concept of ‘knowledge-based economy’ is central to the third period of Estonian educational institutions which arrived when Estonia joined the European Union in 2004 and can be called “networking with Europe”.<sup>29</sup> Knowledge production was – and still is – subjected to constant surveillance in the form of tests, international comparisons, quality control, etc. Again, when we talk about knowledge-based economy, we should not think that economic activity is guided or directed by educational institutions; exactly the opposite is the case: the success of educational institutions is measured by their (potential) profit and produced (human) capital. Educational institutions must contribute to the

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<sup>27</sup> Deleuze, 1992:5

<sup>28</sup> Dewey, 2004

<sup>29</sup> EHDR, 2011:98

production of valuable knowledge through which the economic field must innovate itself. A good education is the basis of state competitiveness and the key to its economic sustainability.<sup>30</sup>

The question we should ask here is: what form should the educational system acquire, and what is the role of the teacher in this system and its institutions? It has, quite often enough, been suggested that the teacher has become a public servant in an institution resembling more and more a business corporation.<sup>31</sup> The student-teacher relationship has evolved into one of between the customer and the service provider, the latter being responsible for fulfilling the former's needs and complying with his or her interests.

One of the techniques of power where this relationship finds its expression is that of surveillance. The techniques and practices of surveillance used to measure the success or failure of educational institutions are mostly directed at measuring the performance of teachers (especially how they manage to prepare students for national and international exams).<sup>32</sup> Surveillance techniques are one of the most important manifestations of that which Michel Foucault has called productive power, as opposed to repressive or prohibitive.<sup>33</sup> Surveillance techniques and technologies, then, insure the production of the correct behaviour for the market and the state; in other words, they are formative of social subjects and their conduct. And this is why they offer an excellent example on how the figure of the teacher is positioned and formed in relation to the market and the state. Concentrating on surveillance, we can see what kind of conduct is expected of the figure named teacher – how it fits into the larger social field.

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<sup>30</sup> EHDR, 2013:27

<sup>31</sup> Pener, 2010. <http://www.ekspress.ee/news/arvamus/arvamus/ramo-pener-opetaja-klienditeenindaja-ariettevottes.d?id=35356325> [Retrieved 31 October 2013]

<sup>32</sup> One could, of course, make an objection here that the measurement of exam results are directed to the performance of the students; but, it is, in fact, the teacher who will get the credit or the blame for these results; it is the teacher's performance that will have to be *modified* according to these results if necessary.

<sup>33</sup> Foucault, 1978

## Surveillance in the school environment

Surveillance has mostly to do with ‘scientific’ analysis of the behavior of a population. This is exactly the point that Michel Foucault wished to make in his famous book *Discipline and Punish* where he showed that behind the apparent rationale of punishment lie the dreams of a well-ordered, scientifically managed, and transparent – and thus, just – society.<sup>34</sup> ‘Panopticism’ refers to a rationality of government that is based on methods of observation which aim to reveal the truth of the human being – render him or her transparent and unearth his or her inner mechanisms.

Bureaucracy – the accumulation of documents, the documentation of every action – should be understood within the framework of scientific management which aims to make everything not only visible but *accountable*. Every action must be taken into account in order to predict the patterns of behavior, in order to analyze, break down actions into smaller elements and reassemble them in a more efficient system. We already said that economic activity of a population is viewed in scientific terms and that any kind of social behavior can be (and often, is) viewed in the context of economic behavior.

Schooling is, of course, a privileged site for the analysis of efficiency. The school is supposed to be the production line of future producers-consumers, and most importantly, innovators. The school is the future of the knowledge-based economy. So, how to ensure the impeccable operation of this factory of knowledge and knowledgeable individuals all eager to pump some fresh blood into our crisis ridden society? Of course, one needs to implement more and more meticulous measurement tools, observation. We have already mentioned the integration of Estonian educational system in the European Union’s measurement programs (most

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<sup>34</sup> Foucault, 1991

prominent of them is PISA);<sup>35</sup> but within Estonia the comparison of schools' exam results<sup>36</sup> is shaping the *market* of schooling.<sup>37</sup>

In 2013, the new Middle and High School Law<sup>38</sup> was adopted in Estonia which gives teachers more freedom, but what does this freedom entail? It obligates teachers to devise a concrete curriculum for each class they are teaching and thus, indirectly, they are made accountable for the results the students are able to achieve. The new catchword used in this case is 'formative assessment' which means that teachers will have to integrate their subject within the entire educational process (languages have to be integrated with geography, etc.). Teachers are given more 'creative freedom' in order to give each child the best education possible. But this creativity is contradictory to the external measurement techniques used to evaluate the teachers success in educating his or her students: external evaluation techniques rely extensively on quantitative tools.

From the viewpoint of the student, then, the teacher is evaluated *qualitatively* (schools and ministry of education uses student feedback as official observation methods); but from the viewpoint of the economic field the teacher's activity is measured *quantitatively* in the form of concrete numbers. To satisfy the needs of every client, but, in a way that is compatible with the interests dominating in the market. That is: the teacher must transform market interests into the needs of the students, while operating

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<sup>35</sup> The PISA test assesses the students' knowledge in three categories: functional reading, natural sciences and mathematics (Estonia has participated since 2006). Bertrand Russell's statement that "without analysis there can be no development" characterizes the ethos of the PISA test rather accurately: everything must be submitted to meticulous analysis in order to enhance its capacities for growth.

<sup>36</sup> Eesti koolide pingerida 2013. <http://www.postimees.ee/export/riigieksamid/2012/> [Retrieved 31 October 2013]

<sup>37</sup> The school market is a concept used to refer to the competition between schools. In Estonia schools get, for each student, a concrete sum of money, and the publication and prioritization of exam results shapes significantly which schools get the "brightest" students.

<sup>38</sup> Riigi Teataja, <https://www.riigiteataja.ee/akt/102072012014> [Retrieved 8 May 2014]

under strict observation.<sup>39</sup> The teacher is at a crossing-point of different institutions: ministry, the media, the students, but also the school officials and parents. Vision as a fundamental form of the exercise of power in modern societies has become synonymous with domination.<sup>40</sup> The visibility of the teacher and his or her activities from various viewpoints subjugates him or her to institutionalized techniques of power.

But there is more to observation and visibility than simply institutionalized techniques of surveillance. We also have to account for a relatively new phenomenon that has been labeled ‘sousveillance’, that is, ‘inverse surveillance’, a “counter measure to organizational surveillance.”<sup>41</sup> Gabriel Ganascia has described the coinage of the term:

The word sousveillance is a neologism built on the model of “surveillance”, the latter from French *sur*, meaning “over” and *veiller*, to “watch”, and which literally means “watching from above”. By analogy, sousveillance has been built to designate the act of watching (*veiller*) from below (*sous*). In the case of sousveillance, the *watchers* are socially below those who are watched, while in the case of surveillance it is the opposite, they are above.<sup>42</sup>

In the context of school environment, the term has commonly been used to describe student activity, but we would counter this statement by saying that we need to understand sousveillance rather as *non-institutional techniques and practices of observation* (that are mostly made possible by the development of portable technology). That is, sousveillance practices would mean a *decentralization* of surveillance networks, a destabilizing force contesting institutionalized forms of surveillance. It is our suggestion, then, that we do not understand sousveillance in a vertical

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<sup>39</sup> We will not deal here with the paradoxical simultaneous production of individuality and cultural homogeneity this conjunction of qualitative and quantitative values – which must always lead the qualitative to success in quantitative terms – brings about, since we are limiting our analysis to the figure of the teacher.

<sup>40</sup> Yar, 2003:260

<sup>41</sup> Mann; Nolan and Wellman, 2003:331

<sup>42</sup> Ganascia, 2010:5

manner (from bottom up) but in a horizontal one (observation of one's peers). One main characteristic of *sousveillance* is that it does not follow a strict rationality (as the panoptic surveillance) of ordering and structuring: when one student is recording the actions of another, s/he is not attempting to organize his or her environment in a more efficient manner.<sup>43</sup>

The practices of *sousveillance* acquire meaning, significance, and purpose only in relation to the institutionalized practices of surveillance. What do the acts of *sousveillance* *tell us about* the institutional order; how should the institution *react* to these acts; what kind of significance should non-institutional practices acquire in a highly institutionalized environment (for example, should they always be viewed as illegitimate)? In short, *sousveillance* is, for the institutional authority “a form of “reflectionism”” and a “philosophy and procedures of using technology to mirror and confront bureaucratic organizations.”<sup>44</sup> It is not dependent on specific subjects but on the specific relationship to institutional authority.

Again, we must detach the notion of institutional authority from that of specific subjects: an institutionalized structure offers spaces to practice a concrete authority, to enact a concrete power relation. It is not the case that the teacher is always in the position of power in the school. As we have tried to argue, the teacher has here become rather a service provider. We could speak here of the *empowerment* of the students who have the institutional *obligation* to subject the teacher under observation.<sup>45</sup> The observation and measurement of teachers by the students is thus an institutionally authorized practice which emerged with the liberalization of schools.

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<sup>43</sup> This juxtaposition also indicates to a central characteristic of institutionalized actions: they always serve a certain purpose, which, however, does not refer back to the subject's will or consciousness, but to the mechanisms of institutional structuration activity (government).

<sup>44</sup> Mann; Nolan and Wellman, 2003:333

<sup>45</sup> We stress obligation because in many school, for example, the student feedback forms are made “voluntarily obligatory”.

Ganascia, however, has suggested that contemporary societies allow much broader scope of non-institutional and decentralized practices of observation and that non-authorized groups are becoming more and more influential.<sup>46</sup> The authority of centralized knowledge is disappearing (for example, students have the possibility to search the Internet for answers and correct the teacher). The development of portable technology has significantly transformed the (potential) distribution of knowledge-based authority.<sup>47</sup> Since the logic of school authority is based on the legitimation of centralized knowledge and authority, the exploratory, border-crossing, and experimental activity of the students has revealed the school's authority as more fragile than we have imagined. We propose that the school is developing beyond the disciplinary logic of power.

This shift in power relations is most radically revealed, precisely, in the practices of *sousveillance* where students observe and record the actions of other students. The students' attitude towards the teacher as someone who is put in front of the class to serve them is expressed in an extreme manner in a video clip recorded at Tõstamaa high school which shows teenage boys taunting and even physically attacking a teacher.<sup>48</sup> We are not, of course, saying that this kind of behavior finds its *cause* in neo-liberal economic and social policies; it is, in any case, rather dubious to speak of cause-effect relationships in social analysis. We wish to stress, however, that what we are witnessing in this case is the extreme form of a power relation, a form that borders on violence, that is, in the passive subordination of one party to the other. We can see in the video that the teacher has no means available to confront the boys, he tries talking to them, but this can hardly

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<sup>46</sup> Ganascia, 2010:8

<sup>47</sup> The institutional use of observation technology (for example, CCTV) assumes an objective position and vision that operates on a rationality of disciplinarianism and prevention, the students' use of technology, however, is regarded as subjective, it results in a subjective gaze in the sense that it is not *rationalized* by institutional practices.

<sup>48</sup> The video was uploaded on 29.01.2013: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fd7iMwQOG9U>

work at this point. As the principal of Tõstamaa high school also noted: “Everything we can do is talk, talk, and talk.”<sup>49</sup>

The teachers’ authority depends upon the students’ believing in his or her authority. But the question here is not, of course, that teachers should be authorized to use violence against their students; it is a question, to use Chantal Mouffe’s formulation, of maintaining the *agonistic* nature of power relations and keeping them from developing into *antagonistic* relations (those of war and violence).<sup>50</sup> In Michel Foucault’s words, every power relation presupposes free subjects whose actions cannot be predicted with total certainty; subjects who are presumed to have certain agency.<sup>51</sup> In the present case the teacher is stripped of agency: he is reduced to passivity. And it is our argument that this passivity of the teacher is already produced on the symbolic or signification level: the teacher is excluded from the political community; s/he is stripped of his or her voice, the ability to speak. By subjugating the teacher to an immense amount of observational practices, s/he is given “more freedom” only formally: s/he still has to fulfill the needs of the market and its future actors (that in many cases reduces one to teach the students how to pass exams).

In Henry Giroux’s words (already published in 1985), the teacher is seen as “a dedicated public servant reproducing the dominant culture in the interest of the common good.”<sup>52</sup> And his or her role is to implement the policies of efficient management. And, if the teacher has as his or her goal to insure the production of already

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<sup>49</sup> Eesti Päevaleht, 2013. <http://www.epl.ee/news/eesti/tostamaa-koolijuhtsaame-ainult-raakida-muud-pole-meil-teha.d?id=65600514> [Retrieved 31 October 2013]

<sup>50</sup> Mouffe, 2000:13: “[...] I propose to distinguish between two forms of antagonism, antagonism proper – which takes place between enemies, that is, persons who have no common symbolic space – and what I call ‘agonism’, which is a different mode of manifestation of antagonism because it involves a relation not between enemies but between ‘adversaries, adversaries being defined in a paradoxical way as ‘friendly enemies, that is, persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way.’”

<sup>51</sup> Foucault, 1982

<sup>52</sup> Giroux, 1985:22



defined needs, s/he is placed within a very specific framework of conduct from which s/he cannot step outside. This kind of framing of the goals and conduct of the teacher weighs heavily on his or her social and cultural position, to which we will turn in the next section, and ask: is there a possibility that the teacher would be able to step outside this framework of the service provider? In other words, is s/he capable of acting politically under current conditions?

## The figure of the teacher and political potentiality

One of the goals set in the *Estonian Human Development Report 2013* was to “improve the reputation of the teacher.”<sup>53</sup> But how is this reputation going to improve in the eyes of government and of teachers themselves? In Estonian public discourse, the question of the role and importance of the teacher has revolved mainly around strictly managerial problems. It is, however, important, to raise this problem as a political one.<sup>54</sup>

It has been stated quite often that neo-liberal education is de-politicizing in its nature, as it operates by “reframing political issues in economic terms through processes of commodification and by assuming and promoting a broad consensus in relation to this economizing agenda – in each case, backgrounding the struggle over values central to both policy and politics.”<sup>55</sup> That is, the only *value* relevant to these policies is the economic output of the education system, a value that forces out of sight the question of “political subjectification”, the “promotion of a kind of citizenship that is not merely about the reproduction of a pre-defined template but takes political agency seriously.”<sup>56</sup> Here we are talking about the possibility of political agency on the part of teachers. But what does it mean to be a political agent?

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<sup>53</sup> EHDR, 2013

<sup>54</sup> We borrow the term ‘political’ from Jacques Rancière who conceives of it as the possibility of reworking and reconfiguring the currently dominant and fixed social relations. In this view, governance is not political but simply a practice of power.

<sup>55</sup> Clarke, 2012:298

<sup>56</sup> Biesta, 2009:42

Contemporary political philosopher Jacques Rancière has critically revived the Aristotelian idea that a political subject is the one who is able to speak, that is, whose speech is recognized as *intelligible* speech, and not just the expression of pain and pleasure. Rancière's critique, however, is targeted against this very distinction between the ones who can speak and the ones who can only produce unintelligible noise. While Aristotle equates political animals with humans, saying that man is "fit for politics to a fuller extent than any bee" insofar as he possesses *logos*.<sup>57</sup> The divide between animals and humans are made on the same grounds as that between political and non-political. Rancière tells us that this understanding enables us to regard some subjects in the social field as *inherently* incapable of political agency (less than humans proper). Politics, according to Rancière, has to be directed at this division and the exclusion based on this division. Politics, then, is "the struggle over the question of speech as such."<sup>58</sup>

In the case of education, we can say that those who possess *logos* are precisely those who conduct management and surveillance: policies are formed and decisions made on the basis of those *experts*, that is, those who can find more cost-effective modes of management. It is curious that the teacher is excluded from this field of experts: s/he is only given control on how to guide his or her class to *proper* results. We can see this exclusion clearly in the case of the 2012 strike of educational workers in Estonia. Strike has, in the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, been one of the most fundamental activities of political protest and subjectification. But in this case it failed to make any significant impact on the public figure of the teacher. Our question is simply why? Why did the teachers not achieve the ability to speak as political agents?

The national strike of educational workers took place 7–9 March 2012 and the main demand of The Estonian Educational Personnel Union was that the wages of the teachers would be raised

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<sup>57</sup> Aristotle, 1995:3

<sup>58</sup> Rancière, 1995:43

20 per cent and that the wage of the junior teacher would rise to the minimum of 729, 82 EUR, that of the teacher to 772, 85 EUR, that of the senior teacher to 883, 28 EUR, and that of the teacher-supervisor to 1066, 66 EUR.<sup>59</sup> Of course, the Ministry of Education said immediately that these demands surpass the budget possibilities by a huge amount. At the same time the Ministry stated that “teachers must receive a fair wage.”<sup>60</sup> But this “fair wage” must be in accordance with the state budget, with how much money the state has, which means simply that the demands cannot be met on purely *objective* grounds.

Objective grounds that have been established *based on knowledge*; that is, based on the efforts of financial experts (those who possess the *logos* of management). And these grounds can only be disputed, called into question by the *same* expert language. As the minister of finance at the time of the strike, Juhan Parts, stated, the way the teachers solve these kinds of problems “seems to me naïve.”<sup>61</sup> These sorts of statements were common among members of government, statements that can be summed up in one single phrase: the teachers do not know what they are talking about.

And this was indeed the biggest problem: they did *not* know. Simply because, from the start, they adopted the language of numbers, a language that has been established as *the* language of neo-liberal policies. But it is a discourse occupied by very specific experts who indeed know what they are talking about. In short, grounding the strike mainly on the question of wages did not allow the teachers to contest this very discourse. As Jacques Rancière says, a strike can not be political if it demands solely the augmentation of wages; the strike as a political act must construct “a relation between things that have no relation.”<sup>62</sup> The problem of the Estonian teachers strike was thus that it equated

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<sup>59</sup> “Õpetajate streik”, Delfi, <http://www.delfi.ee/teemalehed/opetajate-streik> [Retrieved 31 October 2013]

<sup>60</sup> Postimees, 2012. <http://www.postimees.ee/748414/ministeerium-opetajate-noudmised-uletavad-kaugelt-eelarvevoimalusi> [Retrieved 31 October 2013]

<sup>61</sup> ERR, 2012. <http://uudised.err.ee/?o6247808> [Retrieved 31 October 2013]

<sup>62</sup> Rancière, 1995:65

the role of the teacher in society with wages of the teacher: better wages equal a better position (and this is a relation already well established in our society). If the figure of the teacher would be transformed, it would not be possible *in the classroom* – the privileged space of speaking for the teacher. And this is especially important when we consider that the institutional and non-institutional authorities are making their way in the classroom and thus putting into doubt the teacher’s capability to produce authoritative knowledge even inside these walls.

If, as the project for the Estonian Educational Strategy 2012–2020 states, one of the main goals in the development of education is to improve the reputation of the role of the teacher,<sup>63</sup> it cannot be based on giving the teacher more freedom in the space s/he is already recognized as the holder of *logos*. There is, we argue, no point in “rethinking the teacher as an intellectual” if his or her speech outside the classroom is not recognized as speech. Giving the teachers an increase in wages cannot, indeed, be regarded as the *problematization* of the role of the teacher who is regarded as a public servant. But the reaction of members of government to the strike was surprising in that it did not even consider the strike as a *legitimate* form of expression. Again, the minister of finance stated that his mother, also a teacher, “would never have gone on strike,”<sup>64</sup> implying that the social role of the teacher should *not* be problematized, that is, not turned into a political question. Indeed, the improvement of reputation is seen from a purely managerial viewpoint: if we increase wages, more people will want to become teachers, and thus people will find the job more “attractive”.

The question, then, is how to break down the (virtual) walls of the classroom that limit the discourse the teacher has access, and the task is to understand that the teacher are not simply an actor within the confined space of the school but also in society as a whole. That is, how to interrupt the discourse of numbers, budgets and managerial policies, and make them listen, admit

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<sup>63</sup> Eesti hariduse, 2012

<sup>64</sup> ERR, 2012. <http://uudised.err.ee/?06247808> [Retrieved 31 October 2013]

that there are other actors in the social world that can speak *politically*. How to barge in to the governmental experts “feast of rationality” and make them admit: “Upon my word and honor, I do not know any longer what I did say!”<sup>65</sup>

## Concluding remarks

We have tried to trace out the figure of the teacher in the ways it is formed in (neo)liberal democratic governance. For this purpose we used the examples of surveillance and sousveillance practices that relate to and derive from this form of government. In addition, we utilized the public discourse surrounding the Estonian teachers’ strike in 2012. We have come to the conclusion that the position of the teacher in Estonian society is far from that of a political agent, or, in other terms, a socially influential subject; instead, the teacher is a public servant who is obligated to produce individuals capable of economic innovation. If, indeed, the teacher’s position and reputation should ‘improve’, it cannot be done through these established practices that fix his or her position. It would, instead, be necessary to dismantle and reconfigure the social practices of power that constitute the currently dominant position of truthful knowledge.

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<sup>65</sup> Plato, 2008:147

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*Ott Puumeister* (b. 1985) is a PhD student in the University of Tartu. His main research interests are political semiotics, subjectivity in politics, and biopower. He attained his Masters Degree in Semiotics from the University of Tartu in 2013. e-mail: ott.puumeister@gmail.com

*Mirjam Puumeister* (b. 1987) is an editor for the publishing house Maurus that deals with educational literature. She graduated the University of Tartu in 2013 and attained a Masters Degree in Semiotics. e-mail: mirjam.puumeister@gmail.com

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