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What can be done when monsters arrive? Knowledge and education after hegemony

*The old world is dying away, and the new world struggles to come forth:
now is the time of monsters (Žižek 2012).*

Introduction

In contrast to the democratisation of the 1990s, the last decade will be remembered for the return of political authoritarianism, geopolitical tensions and war. The first of these trends, applies equally to the countries of the western world and those outside this area. During this period China, Russia and Belarus, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Egypt, Venezuela, as well as many others have undergone an evolution of forms of government from democratic or quasi-democratic to authoritarian, or from authoritarian to borderline totalitarian (Nord et al. 2025). At a global level, the number of coups, wars, and civil wars has also increased (ACLED 2025). The United States – a country that had stabilised the global economic and political system for four decades – gradually lost its ability to play a hegemonic role and eventually began to drift towards authoritarianism itself.

To some extent, this trend is surprising. Admittedly, there was a moment at the beginning of the 21st century when the stability, ability to plan for the long-term, and capacity for generating economic growth in countries such as China and Singapore might have seemed attractive when compared to the chaos that characterises democratic systems, but that moment has passed. Most countries where authoritarianism has intensified have started to show the typical problems of this model:

a tendency to stifle economic activity (Lemoine et al. 2024), the loss of objective knowledge concerning the state of the system, aggressive foreign policy and internal repression, as well as the inability to abandon failed projects when this could undermine the power of the leader or the dominant party (the Chinese response to the COVID epidemic or Russia's war in Ukraine are good examples). In short, authoritarianism no longer seems more economically efficient than liberal democracy, and its stability is bought at the expense of ever-increasing repression.

The situation during the last crisis of globalisation, capitalism, and the world geopolitical system – i.e. between 1914 and 1945 – was different. United with populist ideology, the authoritarian or totalitarian forms of government present in the USSR and the fascist countries may have seemed a good alternative to an unreformed liberalism constantly shaken by economic crises, torn apart by gigantic social inequalities and lacking full democratic legitimacy. The eventual victory of liberal forms of government resulted not so much from a rigid adherence to the idea of *laissez-faire*, but from a selective absorption of features from regimes that threatened them. This transformed western countries into mixed systems – combining elements of the free market and socialist economies. At the same time, opportunities to participate in politics and benefit from the development of national economies have been extended to all (or, as in the case of the USA, most of) citizens.

Given the apparent weakness of contemporary authoritarianism, the current situation poses greater interpretative problems. The drift towards illiberal forms of government does not seem to be dictated by either historical or pragmatic necessity. At the same time, it puts considerable pressure on social institutions, including educational ones, which are exposed to conflicting demands from political forces seeking either to instrumentalise them for the purposes of a populist revolution or to protect the liberal *status quo* from populist attacks.

The aim of this paper is to attempt to look at the current socio-political situation in the Western world from a different perspective and to draw conclusions for education. Our reinterpretation consists in placing the populist political turn in the context of knowledge about the course of hegemonic regime crises drawn from Gramsci (2014) and his followers. From this point of view, the changes we are experiencing are a predictable reaction to the collapse of the neoliberal system, which, like the hegemonic regimes that preceded it, has disintegrated as a result of a series of crises (economic and refugee crises, the pandemic). Those problems either could not be tackled by neoliberalism's control mechanisms or – as in the case of immigration or social inequalities – were not perceived as crises within its framework. The collapse of neoliberalism has allowed for the reemergence of political conflict, that was previously suppressed by the existence of a hegemonic normative framework and the institutions, both local and supranational, that guarded it. After a long period of post-political freeze, active – and polarised – politics is seen by citizens as an illegitimate threat to their freedom.

It follows that at least part of the experience of ‘authoritarian drift’ is linked to the emergence of forms of political conflict that have been absent for a long time but can still be understood as a part of the democratic framework. This also means that the educational response to these conflicts does not necessarily have to take the form of defending the mechanisms of status quo against populist threats or post-truth mechanisms, but should rather consist in teaching how to weigh individual political arguments from a perspective that goes beyond the affective interpretative structures created by both sides of the political divide. This interpretation was inspired by our reading of Paolo Freire (1983, 1985) which, while not precisely in line with the letter of his texts, seems better suited to reproduce their meaning in the context of XXI century post-hegemonic politics.

The twilight of neoliberal hegemony

It is difficult to pinpoint the exact moment when neoliberal hegemony came to an end. As with any complex system, its decline was a slow and arduous process, but we can attempt to identify two symbolic dates marking its beginning and end.

On 23 October 2008, Alan Greenspan, chairman of the US Federal Reserve from 1987 to 2006, appeared before a US Congressional committee. Until his departure from office, Greenspan was considered a miracle worker – a man whose balanced interventions (or often his refraining from them) ensured two decades of rapid economic growth for the United States (Gerstle 2023).

However, the economic system he helped create began to falter shortly after he left office and eventually collapsed in 2007, triggering the Great Recession and, with some delay, the eurozone crisis.

During a congressional hearing, when asked whether his decisions were guided by ideology, Greenspan replied:

Alan Greenspan: Well, remember that what an ideology is, is a conceptual framework with the way people deal with reality. Everyone has one. You have to — to exist, you need an ideology. The question is whether it is accurate or not.

And what I’m saying to you is, yes, I found a flaw. (...) Flaw in the model that I perceived is the critical functioning structure that defines how the world works, so to speak.

Henry Waxman: In other words, you found that your view of the world, your ideology, was not right, it was not working?

Alan Greenspan: That is — precisely. No, that’s precisely the reason I was shocked, because I had been going for 40 years or more with very considerable evidence that it was working exceptionally well

(PBS News, 2008).

The mistake Greenspan referred to was the assumption that free market entities allocate money rationally, discounting all possible sources of risk, and therefore should not generate a crisis that, at the time of the hearing, was destroying Western economies.

Almost exactly fourteen years later, on 25 October 2022, the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Liz Truss, resigned from office. She survived in her role for forty-five days, making her the shortest-serving prime minister in the country's history. The reason for her rapid resignation was the economic chaos that erupted in response to the mini-budget published a month earlier¹. The budget included significant tax cuts for the wealthiest segment of the population and the suspension of a planned corporate tax increase. Despite the resulting decline in state revenues, the budget did not assume any reduction in spending.

In response to the publication of the mini-budget, the British pound collapsed, falling to its lowest level in history. The price of British bonds also fell, putting many pension funds (which use bonds as a safe haven for capital) on the brink of bankruptcy (Marsh 2023). The situation was saved by a swift action from the central bank and Truss's eventual resignation. As a result of the turmoil, the UK's debt rose by around £30 billion (Keegan 2022).

The significant part of this story is that Lizz Truss, in her bid to become leader of the Conservative Party (and thus prime minister), presented herself as the reincarnation of Margaret Thatcher, a neoliberal icon. In planning her mini-budget, she and her advisers relied on the Laffer curve (Helm, Inman 2022), a neoliberal model suggesting that lowering taxes can increase, rather than decrease, government revenue. The reaction of the right-wing press to the planned changes was ecstatic. The financial institutions, lying at the heart of the free market system, were much less enthusiastic.

The tone of these two events was very different – Greenspan's fall was a tragedy, while Liz Truss's was a farce². In 2008, one of the founding fathers of neoliberal ideology expressed doubts about it while in 2022 even the free market could no longer be counted among the believers. In the time between these two events, many assumptions about the economy were questioned, but no new consensus emerged from the chaos. The old world was gone, the new one has not yet been born, and in the gap between the two states of stability, a struggle is underway to determine the shape of the future global order.

¹ A partial budget statement, concerning changes planned for the next year by the Chancellor of the Exchequer – the British equivalent of the Minister of Finance.

² When Liz Truss was still in power, an article appeared in *The Economist* magazine, which stated that her government had a "shelf life of a lettuce" (*The Economist*, 2022). Three days after this publication, a tabloid began a livestream showing lettuce (with googly-eyes and a smile, wearing a wig) and a photo of the incumbent Prime Minister. The title of the livestream was: Can Lizz Truss outlast a lettuce? Six days later the vegetable emerged victorious.

Hegemonic power

It is impossible to address contemporary events, such as the emergence of populist and authoritarian politics, without mentioning the concept of hegemony, which was created by Antonio Gramsci to describe political reactions to a historical situation similar to our own.

Hegemony, as understood by Gramsci, is a category close to the concept of legitimacy: “It means political leadership based on the consent of the governed, a consent that is established through the dissemination and popularisation of the worldview of the ruling class” (Bates 1975: 352). Since hegemonic power rules in accordance with widely held ideas about what is right, true and meaningful, it does not, in most cases, need to resort to the use of force, even if it is based on the exploitation of the majority by the minority.

Economic malaise is not enough to bring about the collapse of hegemony. Such a possibility arises only in the event of an “organic crisis” affecting both the base and the superstructure, and manifesting itself in a loss of faith in the network of narratives explaining the behaviour of the ruling class:

An organic crisis is manifested as a crisis of hegemony, in which the people cease to believe the words of the national leaders, and begin to abandon the traditional parties. The precipitating factor in such a crisis is frequently the failure of the ruling class in some large undertaking, such as war, for which it demanded the consent and sacrifices of the people (Bates, 1975: 364).

Over the past five decades, Gramsci’s theory has been used and developed in many ways. The most interesting theories, from the perspective of this paper, focus on the institutional and discursive dimensions of hegemony. If we look at it from the perspective of categories such as Bob Jessop’s (2002) “imagined economies,” Norman Fairclough’s (2001) “imaginaries” or Gary Gerstle’s (2023) political orders, the core of neoliberal (or any other) hegemony is made up of interconnected systems of knowledge and social, political and economic institutions created and managed on the basis of that knowledge.

Neoliberalism, understood as a system of knowledge, consists of a set of claims that include academic theories (the ideas of Hayek, Friedman, neoclassical economics), but also quasi-scientific models (the Laffer curve, trickle-down economics) and slogans (“a rising tide lifts all boats”, “the state should steer, not row”, “there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families”). These claims allow us to describe the social world, but they also serve to generate political emotions and assume a certain moral perspective³ (Gerstle 2023).

The narrative part of hegemonic discourse is similar to what Alan Greenspan called “ideology”. It provides guidelines on the correct use of existing institutions

³ According to Gerstle, there are two conflicting neoliberal moral perspectives: neo-Victorianism and optimistic cosmopolitanism.

(the central bank, the tax system, the social welfare system, etc.) or a list of necessary adjustments that need to be made for these institutions to function properly (the central bank should be independent from democratic authority, the level of public debt should be constitutionally limited). This knowledge also acts as a generative structure, as it allows for the design of new institutions to deal with various social issues (e.g. education vouchers as a form of subsidising universal education, CO2 emission markets as a method of combating climate catastrophe). In this sense, neoliberalism is practical knowledge and a source of institutional models that enable people to manage the social world, to diagnose problems arising within it, and to generate solutions.

A mature hegemonic system will be based on three pillars. First, the knowledge at its core becomes “common sense” – opposing it is not a starting point for discussion, but at most for an expression of outrage or pity. The language itself seems to disobey us when we try to imagine a non- or counter-hegemonic world, and for most people, “translating one’s own experiences into a vision of the world that is incompatible with the hegemonic culture is difficult, if not impossible” (Lears 1985: 569).

Secondly, because the hegemonic system of knowledge shapes institutional reality, plans to oppose dominant practices may indeed have no chance of success – for example, raising taxes is not possible because it would require the expansion of the state, and that is not possible because the low-tax state always lacks funds (Rothstein 2005), alternatively tax hikes would cause taxpayers to flee the system because it is so leaky that every or almost every citizen can engage in ‘tax optimisation’. Neoliberal institutions and membership in international bodies promoting such policies freeze states on a certain path of development, punishing them for any attempt to deviate from the prevailing model.

These two pillars of hegemony: ideology normalised as “common sense” and the rigidity of local and global institutional solutions mean that political forces based on the dominant doctrine can easily obtain legitimacy for their actions, while those that oppose it – even if they win elections – quickly realise that their plans are impossible to implement. One consequence of this state of affairs is the emergence of a third pillar of domination: the post-political demobilisation of the masses. Neoliberal post-politics, also known as depoliticisation (Buller et al. 2019) or post-democracy (Rancière 2004, Crouch 2004), can be defined as follows:

A consensual mode of governance where argument and dissent are marginalised and political space is colonised in the defence of neoliberal values and norms. In this sense, depoliticisation signifies a retreat of “the political”, where “the political” is synonymous with the qualities of contestation, deliberation and participation. Broader contradictions that may exist within political systems are reduced to discrete policy problems that need to be managed; citizens as a potentially disruptive collective have become a disparate set of individual consumers in a world where everything is increasingly commodified; elections are nothing more than a mechanism for choosing between similar administrators of the same neoliberal logic (Buller et al., 2019: 4).

The post-political regime is well suited to neoliberal ideology, which sees the state as a main source of evil and seeks to shift decision-making away from the political regime and into the hands of individuals, experts or independent institutions. Additionally, promoting free-market globalisation limits the influence of individual countries' domestic policies on the fate of their citizens.

The multitude of locations in which hegemonic forces are rooted, their structure of self-fulfilling prophecy and the political inertia they generate does not make them immune to all challenges. Reality is too complex to be captured by any model, and even if such an attempt was made, elements not included in the model could interfere with the functioning of structures based on it (Jessop, Oosterlynck 2008). In addition, hegemonic knowledge systems (and, consequently, attempts to implement them) are not free from internal contradictions (Jessop 2002).

Thus, the most serious challenge to a hegemonic system are problems that are not taken into account in a given model of social reality (in the case of neoliberalism: global warming, pandemics), are not recognised as problems (e.g. social inequalities, excessive immigration or emigration) or appear to be generated by the system itself (the crisis of 2007).

This means that, like any man-made socio-economic model, neoliberalism is prone to crises. Bob Jessop describes a hegemonic crisis as follows:

Crisis is never a purely objective phenomenon that automatically produces a particular response or outcome. Instead, a crisis emerges when established patterns of dealing with structural contradictions, their crisis-tendencies and dilemmas no longer work as expected and may even aggravate the situation. Crises are most acute when crisis-tendencies and tensions accumulate across several interrelated moments of the structure or system in question, limiting room for manoeuvre in regard to any particular problem. (...) This creates (...) a potential moment of decisive transformation and an opportunity for decisive intervention (...) as well as for attempts to 'muddle through' in the (perhaps hopeless) hope that the situation will resolve itself in time. (...) Which of these alternative outcomes eventually emerges will be mediated in part through discursive struggles over the nature and significance of the crisis and what might follow from it. In periods of major social restructuring there is an intersection of diverse economic, political and sociocultural narratives that seek to give meaning to current problems by construing them in terms of past failures and future possibilities. Different social forces in the private and public domains propose new visions, projects, programmes and policies (Jessop 2002: 92).

Between 2007 and 2024 neoliberalism encountered obstacles belonging to all three of the categories described above. The solutions adopted during the Great Recession (bailing out banks with taxpayers' money, the socialisation of risk taken to achieve private gains, while offering no protection for ordinary citizens) were contrary to its ideological framework and, in addition, were perceived as grossly unfair. As it transpired, the sacrifices required by the market economy must be borne by everyone with the exception of the rich (Gerstle 2023).

Neoliberal solutions also failed or were not even considered when subsequent shocks occurred: the eurozone crisis was intensified rather than mitigated by

ordoliberal 'austerity policies' (Engler and Klein 2017), the pandemic was an event about which neoliberals had little to say, while the intensification of geopolitical tensions directly linked to the period of weakness in the West exposed many of neo-liberal assumptions (the possibility of democratisation or liberalisation of China or Russia through globalisation and economic development, *Wandel durch Handel*) as naive at best. Other issues, such as inequality, global warming and migration, also fall outside the neoliberal framework of interpretation, which means that, overall, it does not provide answers to any of the most pressing problems of our time. Recently, this has also been true of economic growth, which requires different policies (friendshoring, de-risking, tariffs, Bavarez et al. 2023) than those pursued during the era of rapid globalisation (offshoring, free trade agreements, removal of barriers to capital flows).

Exposing neoliberalism to successive waves of "unsolvable" problems caused the collapse of the hegemonic framework that had ruled the Western world for four decades. The collapse of hegemony is a long-term process, but in recent years – with American economic protectionism, the pandemic and the intensification of geopolitical tensions – it has entered its terminal phase. The next part of this paper is devoted to describing this process and its consequences.

Morbid symptoms

In one of his most famous passages, Antonio Gramsci writes about the crisis of hegemony: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born. In this interregnum, a variety of morbid symptoms (*fenomeni morbosi*) appear." (Gramsci 2014: 276) – it is, in a more blunt paraphrase by Žižek, a time of monsters (Žižek 2012).

This passage, as well as our everyday experience, suggests that the decay of hegemony is not a gentle process – it is a moment of rupture in political, institutional and intellectual continuity, during which the most grotesque ideas are born and die, and most unpredictable movements and tendencies appear and disappear. Moreover, this takes place at a time when the political stakes are extremely high – the conflict is to determine who will participate in shaping the new balance between social forces and nations (Jessop 2002).

To describe the crisis of hegemony, we must refer to the three sources of stability guaranteed by the hegemonic system: strong political legitimacy and corresponding demobilisation of the masses, institutions limiting the freedom of action of the authorities, and 'common sense', i.e. knowledge about the functioning of the world shared by the majority of the population.

First let's discuss the first two pillars. When crisis comes, state authorities and political parties find themselves in a situation where they are required to take vigorous action to control the multiplying problems, but are cut off from the sources

of legitimacy that came from submitting to hegemonic ideology and practice. This leads to the emergence (not necessarily in a fixed order and not always all at once) of a series of symptoms:

First, in search of new sources of legitimacy, various political forces refer to the will of the voters, which formally constitutes the basis of every democracy but is often ignored in hegemonic regimes (Gilens, Page 2014). For Gramsci, a Marxist who assumed the relative monolithic nature of the ruling class, the opposite of hegemonic and legitimised power is power that subjugates the population by force (Gramsci 2014). During the current crisis, however, the legitimacy deficit has so far been reduced mainly through populist policies.

Secondly, the institutions inherited from hegemony often hinder rather than facilitate the resolution of emerging problems. Just as the desperate maintenance of the gold standard destroyed national economies during the Great Depression of 1929–1933 (Bernanke, James, 1990), so too can the adherence to old rules such as central bank independence, constitutional debt limits, the right to asylum, supervision of the executive by the judiciary, freedom of speech, trade, movement and association, the inviolability of private property and, finally, human rights. The difference between the centrist forces seeking to preserve the remnants of the status quo and the populists lies in the enthusiasm and speed with which the safeguards designed to protect the hegemonic system are being removed, not in whether or not they are being removed at all.

Thirdly, with the breakdown of institutions and the collapse of certainties that distinguish between what is politically possible and what is not, other issues (e.g. women's rights, minority rights, migrants' rights, membership of supranational organisations and clubs, state support for the economy and citizens, free movement of goods and capital, the degree of government interference in culture) are returning to the political arena. This raises the stakes of the electoral process: on the one hand, it can lead to real change rather than just a continuation of the status quo; on the other hand, many of the proposed solutions are met with significant public opposition⁴ which overall translates into increased voter turnout⁵ and political engagement.

⁴ This gives rise to a phenomenon referred to in a report by The Economist (2024) as “anti-politics”. It is defined as political and electoral engagement that is motivated by aversion to certain political forces rather than by support for their opponents.

⁵ In Poland, turnout in the 2019 and 2023 elections was 74% and 61% respectively, while the average turnout in parliamentary elections between 1991 and 2015 was 48%. In the United Kingdom, elections held at a time when Brexit was the main political issue attracted the highest percentage of voters since 1997 (although both the decline in turnout and its subsequent increase were much smaller than in Poland, with turnout falling from an average of 74% in the 1980s and 1990s to 63% in the years before Brexit, only to rise to 69% in the elections related to Brexit). In the United States, turnout in the 2020 presidential election was at a level last seen in 1900 (in 2024, turnout was comparable to the 1960s). Overall, compared to the 1964–2020 average, turnout in recent years has increased in the US by 10% for presidential elections and 20% for congressional elections. The situation was

Fourthly, the alternative between legitimacy and violence does not only refer to the relationship between state power and the population. Legitimacy also protects the authorities from citizen aggression. When systemic legitimacy weakens, there is a visible increase in political violence, which some individuals and political forces see as a legitimate method of fighting illegitimate authority (Piazza 2024)⁶.

The third pillar of the hegemonic system, after legitimacy and stable institutions, is the existence of an ideology that sets the boundaries of political “common sense”. According to the supporters and followers of Gramsci’s theory, the struggle for the shape of the future world takes place primarily at this level. The forces that emerge victorious from a period of chaos are those that are able to present a convincing interpretation of past events and a positive vision of the future, and capable of gathering a political coalition that will lay the foundations for a new order consistent with their interpretation (Jessop 2002; Jessop, Oosterlynck 2008; Gerstle 2023). As in the case of political debate, this is not a harmonious process and has little to do with rational public discourse. The breakdown of hegemonic institutions also means a loss of confidence in the existing ways of establishing and disseminating facts and arriving at the truth.

From educational perspective, this is the most important level of conflict, as education is often seen as a force that might prevent the disintegration of the realm of ideas – a phenomenon that is often referred to as post-truth.

Post-truth

If there was a turning point in the history of the decline of neoliberal hegemony, it was 2016, when Donald Trump won his first victory in the US presidential election and the citizens of the United Kingdom voted in a referendum to leave the European Union. The term post-truth was coined by the mainstream American media in response to these events (Peters 2017). Its popularity may be linked to the fact that post-truth (defined as “a situation in which people are more inclined to accept arguments based on their emotions and beliefs than on facts”) was named the word

similar during the last parliamentary elections in France (2024), where the highest turnout since 1997 was recorded. In each of the above cases, the mobilisation of voters was likely influenced by the dominance of controversial populist politicians or parties in the local political system (sometimes, as in the United Kingdom in 2019, on both sides of the political divide). Nevertheless, in many other countries, despite the presence of populists, there was no increase in participation (or participation did not decline significantly in the period preceding the current decade).

⁶ Most examples of increased political violence come from the US. Probably the most striking example is President Donald Trump’s use of violence in politics. His opponents are exposed to threats from his supporters (Tait 2025), who in turn may assume that if they carry out their threats, they will be pardoned, as were those who participated in the attack on the Capitol in 2021. In this way, it is possible to exert constant pressure on individuals who resist political change, even when real violence is very rare or non-existent.

of the year 2016 by the Oxford English Dictionary. The flexibility of this new term in capturing many elements of today's public sphere, meant that it was quickly adapted by academic discourse.

Subjectivity – the belief that everyone has their own truth – was part of the term's original definition but it is also considered a key feature of post-truth by academic thinkers (Prado 2024, McIntyre 2018). More complex descriptions of post-truth take into account not only individual but also systemic conditions for its emergence. In a paper on the potential of education to counteract it, Sarit Barzilai and Clark A. Chinn define post-truth as follows:

- (1) Increasing prevalence and influence of misinformation and disinformation. (...)
- (2) Increasing rejection of well-established claims. (...)
- (3) Placing personal belief and experience above facts and evidence. (...)
- (4) Declining trust in institutional providers of information such as journalism and science. (...)
- (5) Increasing fragmentation and polarization of information consumption. (Barzilai & Chinn, 2020, s: 108–109)

Although the phenomenon described here was defined only eight years ago, its components, listed above, have a much longer tradition.

The fragmentation and polarisation of the mass media is a process that has been ongoing since at least the 1980s, i.e. since the emergence of media aimed at narrow groups of the population (narrowcasting instead of broadcasting, Fulge 2014). This phenomenon has intensified with the maturation of the internet and the emergence of social media platforms – channels of communication that disrupt the traditional division between sender and receiver, algorithmically tailoring content to the “preferences” of individual users.

Disinformation and the rejection of established claims were present in politics since its inception.

Subjectivism and distrust of institutions, in turn, have a long tradition in academic thought – from the postmodern end of grand narratives (Lyotard 2022), through feminist and postcolonial standpoint epistemology (Toole 2022), to various forms of ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ exposing the dependence of institutions and discourses on political and economic power (Gramsci himself is one of the representatives of this current). These are usually left-wing narratives, but the right also has a tradition, both academic and non-academic, of opposing the state's claims to control individuals – this includes libertarianism (Van Der Vossen 2017) and quasi-anarchist movements steeped in conspiracy theories, such as Sovereign Citizens (Berger 2016).

What has led to the linking of these diverse elements into a single phenomenon are the political processes currently underway. The breakdown of the hegemonic framework initiates a search for new narratives that could allow a new stable regime to be built on the ruins of the previous system (Jessop 2002, Jessop, Oosterlynck

2008). In conditions of full-blown hegemonic crisis, this process will generate effects similar to those described in the definition of post-truth.

The collapse of the public sphere begins with the weakening of social trust in institutionalised sources of information associated with the dying regime (for neoliberalism, these will be science, mainstream media, experts). The role of these institutions in the system is twofold: firstly, they are trustworthy sources of knowledge. They present facts established by reliable methods and techniques, as well as their interpretation. Secondly, they play the role of gatekeepers, marginalising heterodox narratives.

Fulfilling both of these functions has become difficult in the face of intersecting crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (mainly in the United States; Hamilton, Safford 2021) and a series of migration “crises” – from the migration of workers from Central and Eastern Europe to the United Kingdom to the arrival of refugees from Syria in Europe (Bielicki 2018, Valero 2018). In both cases, the presence of “noble lies” – insincere communication aimed at achieving positive social effects – and the stigmatisation of citizens’ fears, treated as manifestations of irrationality (in relation to COVID-19) or racism (in the case of migration) had a particularly damaging effect on public trust (Pamuk 2021, Powell, Prasad 2021).

The weakening of hegemonic institutions leads to the progressive fragmentation of the public sphere, and the emergence of many diverse actors whose statements do not pass through the filter of “official” narratives. It is also becoming increasingly difficult to establish facts. The sophisticated truth-finding procedures of institutionalised sources of knowledge are meaningless if a large part of the population does not trust that these procedures or their results are used in an unbiased manner. The populist political actors use the public sphere to mobilise voters, who are their main source of legitimacy. From their perspective, the stakes of public communication are not about agreeing on facts and finding the truth, but mobilising the masses. They support (or at least refrain from condemning) even the most radical movements, as long as they can gain political support from doing so.

One of the most prevalent forms of mobilisation consist of creating a division between “us” and “them”. Polarisation is a natural way for people to increase group cohesion, and it also generates altruistic motivations to punish deviations from group norms, even at the expense of one’s own interests (Bernhard et al. 2006)⁷. The division between “us” and “them” is often based on apocalyptic narratives claiming that the victory of a given group’s opponents will be tantamount to political, social, cultural or ecological catastrophe.

It should be noted that the strategies described above are not used exclusively by the populist right. Apocalyptic discourses may speak of the decline of the white race, religion, masculinity, Western civilisation and culture, the loss of sovereignty or

⁷ The punishment of dissenters is a mechanism that generates a great deal of satisfaction and a sense of meaning in life (Elnakouri et al. 2022).

the domination of a new global leviathan, but they also refer to collapse of democracy or the economy, a catastrophe related to global warming, the domination of an aggressive, racially exclusive majority, or simply the fascistisation of politics⁸. All these narratives are capable of generating high levels of engagement and, in extreme cases, of motivating political violence. Since a return to the discredited status quo has limited motivational power (especially if the populist authorities have managed to undermine existing institutions), mainstream parties also begin to adopt similar polarising strategies.

The result of the processes described above is the emergence of an anarchic, Hobbesian state of cultural ‘war of all against all’. Individuals immersed in this state may completely lose the ability to distinguish between truth and falsehood and, as a result, fall into a state of anomie or seek to reduce cognitive dissonance by joining one of the cognitive coalitions, even if the worldview it offers does not seem to correspond to reality.

Authoritarianism or the perception of authoritarianism?

The description of the crisis of hegemony presented so far allows us to ask an important question: in a crisis of hegemony, are we able to distinguish between authoritarian and “normal” politics? And can we even talk about normal politics in such a situation?

It is quite obvious that the majority of the population, including academics, identify with one side of the dispute, often considering its rivals to be the harbingers of the apocalypse. It is difficult to make objective judgements from such a point of view.

Apart from this, there are several other structural reasons why the perception of authoritarianism will be heightened in a period of post-hegemonic conflict.

The first reason for this stems from Gramsci’s theory: hegemonic power, by definition, has strong legitimacy, while post-hegemonic power’s legitimacy is limited and often drawn from sources that are not seen as legitimate by its opponents. As a result, after the collapse of hegemony, we face a situation in which power elected by democratic means may not be recognised by some part of the population. The very fact of being exposed to illegitimate power can be interpreted as being subjected to violence. Some individuals or groups may respond to this perceived usurpation with violence directed at supporters, institutions or representatives of the authorities. An illegitimate authority that defends itself against the aggression of its own

⁸ The above list contains what could be described as “realistic” apocalyptic scenarios – in the sense that they are based on the perception of real processes or threats. Of course, in a completely fragmented public sphere, they will coexist with much less realistic scenarios, such as the global domination by shape-shifting lizards, gangs of cannibalistic paedophiles or the Frankfurt School’s sleeper agents (Harper, Sykes 2023).

citizens risks further loss of support, with its actions being interpreted in radically different ways by its supporters and opponents. The former will see democratically elected representatives fighting against usurpation, and the latter – an authoritarian authority defending itself against a popular uprising.

The second reason for the heightened perception of authoritarianism lies in the fragility of the institutions left behind by the hegemonic regime. Some of these institutions are supposed to act as guarantors of citizens' freedoms, but there is a possibility that they will constitute an obstacle to crisis management.

A violation of existing rules by one of the key institutions may be interpreted differently depending on whether we consider the authority to be legitimate and whether, within our cognitive framework, the justification for its actions can be considered reasonable. For example, if the authorities restrict freedom of movement due to a pandemic, we may see this situation either as rational procedures or as an authoritarian attack on individual freedom. Moreover, the same decisions (e.g. restricting the influx of migrants) may be interpreted as justified interventions in one case and as a manifestation of authoritarianism in another, depending on whether we identify with the current authorities. Additionally, as it is impossible to overcome the crisis of hegemony without reforming some of the institutions that were fundamental to the previous order (if it was possible, we would not really have a hegemonic crisis), no authority can avoid accusations of authoritarianism.

The third reason lies in the change in the functioning of the public sphere. The hegemonic system relies on the exclusion of heterodox narratives from the public discourse. The strongest narratives in the fragmented, post-hegemonic public sphere will try to use the same strategy, but due to the pluralism inherent to this space, their actions will be perceived – rightly or wrongly – as authoritarian attempts to restrict freedom of speech. This is a dimension of political conflict that is particularly evident in the United States, where both the left and the right are trying to shape public discourse – from social media posts to academic course content – through means such as online verbal aggression, protests, denying certain people a voice, and legal restrictions targeting certain narratives⁹. Each side attempts to recreate a homogeneous field of hegemonic communication through means that are based on various forms of violence. It seems that even if our political habits have become more benign in the century since Gramsci, his alternative of legitimacy versus violence is still present in the realm of discourse.

In short, post-hegemonic politics will weaken our ability to distinguish between actions of the authorities that are authoritarian and those which are not. This is mainly because the word 'authoritarianism' refers to a certain set of norms that determine which uses of power are legitimate or illegitimate, and this framework – following the collapse of hegemony – is undergoing a deconstruction. In many

⁹ The most visible effect of this dispute in recent times is President Donald Trump's attempt to shape the policies of academic institutions (Reif 2025).

cases the actions of the authorities may be perceived as necessary, reasonable or inevitable, in which case we would not usually describe them as ‘authoritarian’. In post-hegemonic conditions, opposing sides of the political spectrum will perceive different ‘necessities’ and thus their interpretation of what is authoritarian will differ significantly.

During the Great Depression, when Franklin Delano Roosevelt raised the top income tax rate to 75% and created new government agencies, his actions were “authoritarian” from the *laissez-faire* perspective, but most Americans saw them as necessary to save the US economy and society. In contrast, the use of the National Guard to suppress strikes – a practice ended by Roosevelt (Gerstle 2023) – was not considered authoritarian (but a legitimate defence of private property) within the *laissez-faire* hegemony that dominated the 19th and early 20th centuries. The early actions of the fascists and Nazis were also seen as “necessary” to stop communism, which was seen as an apocalyptic threat hanging over Europe (von Mises 1978).

Of course, this way of thinking exposes us to the possibility of a tragic mistake – a situation analogous to that described in Martin Niemöller’s poem beginning with the words: “First they came for the communists...”.

From a pedagogical perspective, the question that should be asked at this point is: does education have a role to play in the current situation? Edda Sant, a researcher in political and democratic education, writes:

Dominant forms of democratic good life appear to be in crisis, and it does look like society is progressively moving to an interregnum between what we were and what we are to be (...). Our current existential problems are unlikely to be solved within the parameters of the morbid system, and the knowledge from our immediate past no longer provides the energy to build any future. The present reality is politicised and polarised, our social relations are unstable and there are multitude of open conflicts. We struggle to keep up-to-date on the changing landscape of political questions that demand our constant repositioning. In modern times it was easy to see how progressive commitments directed people to react to events such as workers’ strikes, civil rights movement, women’s and LGBT rights. But, how do the same people react today to Brexit, pandemic recommendations, regional separatism or environmental claims? Uncertainty is the norm and the new catchall word from which this analysis cannot escape. As we are submerging ourselves into the crisis, young people will continue to feel the signs of the interregnum (...).

Political education needs to acclimatise to the current circumstances of conflict and uncertainty rather than pretending that it is business as usual. Political educators need to acknowledge that they are in a tunnel with shaky lanterns with no light at the end. It is crucial to think how children and young people can be prepared to navigate in these present conditions and how they can be assisted. It is not about telling students that there is a light at the end of the tunnel (...). It is about thinking about how we respond to our present needs (Sant 2021: 123–124).

Education in a post-hegemonic reality

In a post-hegemonic reality, education faces the same fate as any other social phenomenon in a moment of organic crisis. All sides of the dispute see a role for it in building the new world order they propose. As one of the main players in the discursive conflict over the shape of social positivity, it becomes a tool for realising the “phantasmatic narratives” of all parties involved in social and political conflicts (Sant, Brown 2020). Admittedly, the phenomenon of the political and social instrumentalisation of education (Szkudlarek 2020) is nothing new, and the “educationalisation of social problems” – understood as giving education the status of a universal remedy for diverse social problems (Smeyers, Depaepe 2009) – has been with us for almost two decades, but the current “populist moment” (Mouffe 2018) and the emergence of post-truth are further increasing interest in education, whether in the form of a “scapegoat” blamed for unfulfilled political promises or a “voodoo doll”, i.e. a place for implementing difficult or impossible remedial projects (Carusi and Szkudlarek 2020: 4).

According to Tony Carusi and Tomasz Szkudlarek, this phenomenon has a deeper, ontological character. Education in its very essence can be understood in terms of a “tropological register of the social,” which, given the ontological impossibility of society, provides an opportunity to confront its absence (ibid.: 12). Thus, education constitutes a kind of discursive resource or repertoire, and a source for the construction of any political entity, “becomes a horizon for different normative and instrumental projects by promising the completion, closure and accomplishment of those projects” (ibid.: 9). This means that the crises of legitimacy reveal the fundamental “world-creating” nature of education (Szkudlarek 2017), and that at the moment when a hegemonic order is crumbling the ontological resources of education will be exploited most intensively.

In the case of populism, post-truth and authoritarianism, the choice from the available “tropological register” consists primarily in choosing how to define a situation identified as problematic or crisis-ridden. The most common tendency is to treat all these phenomena together (Zembylas 2021) and diagnose them in terms of a threat, a cause of collapse or a “pathology” of the democratic order, or as a form of illiberal democracy (Wodak 2022). Both the causes and remedies for the pathology are seen as primarily educational, because the pathology itself is defined as a subjective problem, a deficiency in cognition, awareness (Barzilai, Chinn 2020), critical capacity (Bowell 2017, Giroux 2018) or even morality (Gozálvez et al. 2023) of individuals. This is linked to a noticeable tendency, both in academic and public discourse, to associate populism with ignorance and educational deficiencies (Gerard 2019, Stavrakakis 2017) and the perception of post-truth as a phenomenon that violates proper, rational epistemological parameters (Friedman 2023).

One of the dominant responses to the current political and cultural situation is therefore, as A. Sant and T. Brown write, a kind of “anti-populist fantasy” in which

education is supposed to be the cure for the “disease of populism” while giving us, at the same time, a possibility of a closure of the social reality (Sant and Brown 2020: 411). In this perspective, the task of education is, among other things, to provide the relevant knowledge (based on evidence and free from emotion and subjectivity) and critical cognitive skills necessary to expose populist rhetoric (ibid.: 418).

The epistemological and subjective conditions for the persistence of the contemporary post-truth conditions are described in a similar interpretative register: lack of knowledge acquisition skills, knowledge gaps and deficits; lack of critical analysis skills in relation to digital information; incorrect methods of acquiring knowledge; lack of due concern for the truth; disagreement on the accepted methods of obtaining information (Barzilai, Chinn 2020). The educational response should be: the development of digital competences and digital literacy; teaching how to deal with errors and cognitive limitations; cultivating intellectual virtues and epistemological vigilance; renewing the epistemic authority of science; developing the ability to discuss and evaluate arguments, etc. (ibid.).

Emphasising critical skills and raising awareness is also a fundamental motive for radical currents of reflection (Giroux 2018), especially when they diagnose the current trends, not only in terms of a simple lack of knowledge or skills, but, as H.A. Giroux writes, as a “willful denial” and conscious illiteracy.

The new form of illiteracy does not simply constitute an absence of learning, ideas, or knowledge (...). On the contrary, it is a willful practice and goal used to actively depoliticize people and make them complicit with the forces that impose misery and suffering upon their lives. At the same time, illiteracy bonds people, offers the pretense of a community bound by a willful denial of its celebration of ignorance. How else to explain the popular support for someone like Donald Trump who boldly proclaims “I love the poorly educated!” (...). Illiteracy provides the foundation for being governed rather than how to govern (Giroux 2018: 202).

For this reason, critical pedagogy also calls for action based on responsibility, ethics, civic skills and inquisitiveness, aimed at rebuilding the public sphere and renewing social imagination (ibid.).

However, the solutions presented above have several fundamental problems. The first is that the current crisis situation seems to fulfil such aspirations of critical educational theory as: the restoration of social agency, a focus on social change, double reading of reality, monitoring power relations, building attitudes of doubt, exposing supra-subjective processes that keep people in a situation of subordination and injustice, and finally, putting into practice the critical slogan that “truth” is essentially ideological.

If populist narratives turn to education, it is precisely to reveal its political nature, ideologization and affiliation with ideological apparatuses of violence directed against the masses by the elites (Sant, Brown 2020), and thus to point to the arbitrariness that underpins it. Even conspiracy theories, as Rancière writes, are “the extreme form of a type of rationality which is generally valued in our societies: that

which commands us to see in every particular fact the consequence of an overall order” (Rancière 2024: 43). Thus, “the possibility of denying everything is not part of the ‘relativism’ questioned by those serious-minded people who imagine themselves to be the guardians of rational universality. It is a perversion inscribed in the very structure of our reason” (ibid.: 44). Even if, as Bruno Latour points out, academic hermeneutics of suspicion constructs more lofty causes for hidden processes than those found in conspiracy theories, there is still “something troublingly similar in the structure of the explanation, in the first movement of disbelief and, then, in the wheeling of causal explanations coming out of the deep dark below” (Latour 2004: 229). Although the variants described are borderline cases, they show how anti-systemic, critical thinking was based on the previously dominant parameters of rationality. One of the main features of post-hegemonic reality, on the other hand, is the transparency of the arbitrariness of human knowledge.

The second problem is, that there exists a certain nostalgia for the past and a hope for the restoration of epistemological “normality” present in the dominant “reformist” educational, academic, political and journalistic narratives, which essentially means a demand for the return of a supposedly “neutral, allegedly non-political-epistemic superiority based on the possession of a (single) truth and on incarnating a *supreme rationality*” (Galanopoulos, Stavrakakis 2019: 2). However, the problem is not epistemological, but political. The political nature of the definition of post-truth becomes apparent when we try to reverse it. If our contemporary problems are indeed related to the five elements of post-truth mentioned earlier (Barzilai, Chinn 2020: 108–109), then the expected return to normality would consist of:

1. The absence of disinformation and misleading information.
2. Acceptance of established claims.
3. Putting facts and evidence above personal beliefs and experiences.
4. A high level of trust in institutional sources of information, such as journalism and science.
5. Consumption of non-polarised and non-fragmented sources of information.

If we reverse the definition of post-truth, the result will not describe an environment that allows for the efficient establishment and transmission of “truth”, but a hegemonic environment ruled by a strong normative system and excluding anyone whose statements do not comply with the “common sense” defined within it. In other words, the populist interpretation of reality is not opposed to knowledge or reason, but questions the very foundations of the legitimised knowledge of the elites (Galanopoulos, Stavrakakis 2019: 3).

The nostalgia for the epistemological domination of the elites described above is linked to another problem, which, following Rancière, can be described as a new version of “hatred of democracy”. While in its original form it meant the outrage of the elites against making a lifestyle previously reserved for the few accessible to many (Rancière 2014), it is now associated with an equally elitist response to populism and post-truth. According to Rancière, the category of populism is not used

to characterise any political force, nor does it denote an ideology or a specific political style, but rather constitutes an interpretation used to create an image of a certain type of people as combining “possibilities” arising “from the raw power of large numbers” and “impossibilities” arising from ignorance attributed to the same force (Rancière 2024: 13).

Rancière convincingly argues against interpretations of the turn towards populism as a result of the frustration, envy and anger of the people that were politically abandoned by educated elites and by the victims of economic and social transformations. In his view, this intellectually convenient “pseudoscientific” description is based on the creation of an a priori “sociological subject-people”, whose political expression is interpreted as a reflection of a specific position in the system of social stratification. Meanwhile, according to Rancière, the political change takes place elsewhere: at the level of institutions, procedures, forms of action, but also words, phrases, images, representations and, above all, a specific affective regime. The latter is not intended for a specific social class, nor is it based on frustration. As Rancière writes this system of affects is not based “on the satisfaction of its condition, not on the feeling of an inequality to be repaired but on the privileges to be maintained against all those who would like to attack them” (ibid.: 46).

What leaders such as Donald Trump are turning to, in his view, is not potential equality, but “the passion for inequality, the one which equally allows the rich and the poor to find for themselves a multitude of inferiors over whom they must at all costs maintain their superiority” (ibid.). It is, in other words, an equality to generate inequality:

Just as the stubbornness to deny is not the mark of backward minds but a variant of the dominant rationality, the culture of hatred is not a characteristic of deprived social strata but a product of the functioning of our institutions. It is a way of making the people, a way of creating a people that belongs to the logic of inequality. Nearly two hundred years ago, the thinker of intellectual emancipation, Joseph Jacotot, showed the way in which inegalitarian unreason turned the wheels of a society in which every inferior was able to find someone even more inferior and enjoy his or her superiority over them (ibid.: 47).

Rancière’s concept seems to shed new light on the cultural and identity wars (Starego 2024) taking place in the post-hegemonic public sphere, where fundamentally inegalitarian and militarised populist and antipopulist fantasies, post-truth regimes, including the failed, authoritarian, modernist epistemology of the enlightened elites compete in order to determine who will ultimately impose a new hierarchical order of reality.

Agonistic education and the shaping of political emotions

In the literature on the subject, we can also find concepts that attempt to distance themselves from epistemologically understood, politically entangled phenomena such as post-truth, populism or even new authoritarianism, or at least perceive the educational challenges they generate in a more nuanced way. These positions also go beyond an unambiguously negative understanding of populism, whose Laclauian interpretation (Laclau 2005) allows researchers to see analogies between populist and educational logic. They are therefore linked to a general awareness that education cannot simply be a tool for fighting undesirable or inconvenient political tendencies and cannot become an easy-to-implement preventive or therapeutic instrument (Sant, Tryggvason 2024, Tysklind, Tryggvason 2024).

The broadest perspective in this field is provided by concepts that define education strictly through the prism of populist logic. According to Włodarczyk, virtually any educational concept that contains some utopian element, or at least those that construct visions of possible change based on criticism and opposition to the existing status quo, will be populist in nature (Włodarczyk 2023). In Szkudlarek's view, school is the right place to produce "empty signifiers", i.e. flexible terms that are originally devoid of meaning, such as "culture", "nation", "democracy" etc., whose use in education provides the basis for a populist understanding of the identification process (Szkudlarek 2011: 122).

Based on this concept, Edda Sant (2021) proposes the formula of "weak/open pedagogy", which she presents in three possible versions that complement or are alternatives to educational implementation: "pedagogy of difference", "pedagogy of articulation" and "pedagogy of equivalence".

The first of these, "pedagogy of difference" consists in searching for "empty signifiers" that could be politically channelled in a school setting. The basic educational goals here would be, on the one hand, to raise awareness of diversity and, on the other, to show the abundance of alternative options for identification (Sant 2021: 129–130). The task of the "pedagogy of articulation" is to create conditions for learners that facilitate the formation of relationships, thereby enabling them to discover and express diverse forms of subjectivity. The aim here is to find new forms of community at sites of diversity, and second, to show the overdetermined nature of the existing, seemingly monolithic identities (ibid.: 131). The aim of the last element, "the pedagogy of equivalence," is to build possible alliances both within and outside the class, thereby raising awareness of the importance of group solidarity and showing the possibility of influencing hegemonic processes (ibid.: 133).

Andreas Mårdh and Ásgeir Tryggvason see populism – understood as a form of political articulation – as an important complement to Dewey's democratic education, defined in terms of community and collective categories (Mårdh, Tryggvason 2017). In their view, Laclau's theory of populism allows us to take into account three elements: the often ignored political demands, political conflicts

and the affective dimension, all of which are crucial to the current political context. This means drawing attention to the need of shaping political emotions and thus avert the danger of political conflicts becoming moral and essentialist identity conflicts (Ruitenberg 2009). This concept is part of a relatively new approach to democratic and civic education called “agonistic education” (Sant et al. 2021, Koutsouris et al. 2022). This concept is based on Chantal Mouffe’s theory and focuses on the problem of taming antagonistic conflicts between essentialist enemies by transforming them into political conflicts of an “agonistic” rivals (Mouffe 2005).

According to its proponents, the most fundamental challenge of agonistic education is to create educational conditions that will prevent social conflicts from taking the form of national, ethnic or racial conflicts, and thus prevent the emergence of chauvinistic and racist tendencies (Ruitenberg 2009, Ruitenberg 2010). Agonistic education is therefore seen as an educational approach that can help schools deal with the dramatic consequences of political polarisation in populist times (Sant 2021).

A detailed description of the basic principles of agonistic education can be found in Ásgeir Tryggvason (2023), who reconstructs them in the context of the educational conditions and opportunities necessary for their implementation. The first principle mentioned is the articulation of political demands, which, according to the concept of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001), forms a base of the mechanism of constitution of collective identities. In a school setting, this means allowing students to articulate political demands based on those whose “silent” presence has been previously identified by the teacher, and then enabling them, through communication, to express them in accordance with the fundamental principles of democracy, freedom and equality (Tryggvason 2023).

Another principle is to take political emotions into account in schools. The presence of this principle is linked to a broader affective turn in the social sciences and humanities (Clough 2007). In the field of education, especially democratic and civic education (Zembylas 2021), the need to take into account the affective and emotional dimension is emphasised, especially in the context of counteracting the negative consequences of the general populist political climate, post-truth and the growing interest in extreme right-wing and fascist ideological tendencies or the growing sympathy for political authoritarianism (Westheimer 2019). The focus on affects and emotions is intended to help renew democratic education and allow for a deeper understanding of how right-wing populism and the closely related phenomena of extremism, post-truth and micro-fascism are produced in educational practices and through education.

Breaking with the mantra of “knowledge growth”, “awareness” and “digital literacy” and taking into account the power of the affective and emotional dimension of experience should help teachers and schools to develop pedagogical approaches that will enable the implementation of new affirmative practices to counteract the normalisation of nationalist, racist, homophobic and xenophobic rhetoric.

If any reference is made to political literacy, it is understood in terms of educational reflection on ideological divisions between right-wing and left-wing politics and their changing historical and social contexts (Ruitenbergh 2009). The aim is therefore to develop a kind of affirmative 'affective counter-politics' rather than a negative critique of current political trends (Zembylas 2021: 5).

Taking into account the affective and emotional dimensions in agonistic education means, first and foremost, distinguishing between their legitimised (political) and non-legitimised (moral) forms and enabling the latter to take on a fully political (agonistic) dimension (Ruitenbergh 2009). This requires raising awareness of the antagonistic tendencies present in the affective and emotional narratives while recognising that they are an inherent part of democratic life and, consequently, of education. As Claudia W. Ruitenbergh emphasises, shaping political emotions means building an agonistic public sphere and restoring the political. The educational process of redirecting students' dissatisfaction and anger from the realm of morality into the realm of politics is associated with valuing only those emotions that serve the political, enable the formation of social solidarity and express disagreement with injustice (Ruitenbergh 2009).

Another principle of agonistic education is the formation of political identities based on educational material that addresses social issues. Moving beyond antagonistic essentialist identities towards political and agonistic ones is possible by transcending the identity-based dimension (e.g. nation, race), moving towards articulation of specific social demands and expectations (Ruitenbergh 2009). In one of their latest articles, Emma N. Tysklind and Ásgeir Tryggvason (2025) write about school as a place (and time) where previously established identities, can be renegotiated in relation to various political issues. This means that schools have the potential to become places where it is possible to prevent the reinforcement of undesirable identification tendencies, strong identity antagonisms or cultural conflicts. According to Ruitenbergh, young people feel a particular need to identify with a collective, and the apolitical identities they bring to school can be channelled in a political direction (Ruitenbergh 2010).

The last principle defining the conditions for agonistic teaching and learning, according to Tryggvason, is the hegemony of the democratic order (2023). This principle stems from the primacy, in Mouffe's theory, of a "commonly shared symbolic space" which, based on the values of equality and freedom, guarantees the preservation of pluralism (Mouffe 2005). This means, on the one hand, the defence of democratic values, which are crucial if the school settings are to become an agonistic political sphere, and on the other hand, the active contestation of those values that seem to reject the principles of equality and freedom. This can be considered a broader normative horizon of agonistic education, which, especially in the post-hegemonic period, requires additional theoretical work.

For this reason, theoretical attempts to supplement Mouffe's concept of hegemony are emerging in the field of agonistic education. Mouffe herself, in one of her

recent books, shows the direction in which political theory and practice should go in a period of crisis of the hegemonic formation and the accompanying populist moment. In her opinion, the main goal should be to establish a left-wing populism that is sensitive to the role of affect and emotion, and then to create a new hegemonic order within the existing liberal-democratic institutional framework (Mouffe 2018).

However, both in her earlier and current writings, Mouffe does not develop a positive idea of how it might be possible to create the conditions for counter-hegemonic articulations and for a new hegemony in post-hegemonic times. As Sant and Tryggvason (2024) write, there is a theoretical gap in Mouffe's concept between the macropolitical and microcultural dimensions, which should be filled in the field of education. The proposed solution is cultural work carried out through education, which, using the new affective articulations, would enable the emergence of a new common sense, while preserving democratic values (ibid.: 13).

Education as reading the world

Most visions that propose fighting post-truth through education, see the existing crisis as a result of cognitive problems rather than problems related to the sphere of emotions, identity or the ideological and political spheres that organise them. In this view, the fight against post-truth boils down to education about the legitimised (hegemonic) sources of information. This strategy does not take into account that resistance to knowledge obtained from these sources may be related not to ignorance of how to use them, but to a critical distance and distrust of the system on which their legitimacy is based.

The alternative theories described in the last subchapter and based on the ideas of Laclau and Mouffe combine a reluctance to perceive populism as the *bête noire* of the contemporary political space with an awareness of the existence of features in the post-hegemonic public sphere that correspond to some of the aspirations of democratic societies – the spread of a critical distance from ideological sources of knowledge, the democratisation of agency, and an awareness of the omnipresence of the political.

At the same time, despite significant differences, those two methods for dealing with post-hegemonic reality in the educational sphere have a common core. Their starting point, the ideal of the public sphere, is not dramatically different. One can recognise in it an analogue of the liberal public sphere shaped by the requirement to exclude certain attitudes and discourses, thereby prioritising the stability of the system over its ability to create an inclusive framework for social agency and participation. The first of these perspectives sees danger in the irrationality of citizens or their inability to communicate correctly (see Habermas 1986), the second in the inability to perform the emotional work necessary to establish an agonistic (rather than antagonistic) relationship between the parties of a political

conflict (Mouffe 2005). In both cases, the aim of education is to shape the citizens' cognitive and emotional capabilities so that their involvement does not carry the risk of populist or fascist degeneration of the public sphere.

Both approaches share a key element that distinguishes them from the perspective dominant in post-hegemonic reality: they agree that individuals are the main threat to the political sphere and must be the primary targets of any preventive intervention.

From the perspective of post-hegemonic populism, individuals are a resource that is mobilised to gain political legitimacy in a fragmented public sphere. Discourses that paint a picture of an apocalyptic future and suggest that there is a single political movement, party or leader that can prevent the impending catastrophe are used as tools for mass mobilisation. As a result, the interests of a given political entity are identified with the interests of a majority of the population (nation, civilisation, gender, race or all of humanity).

The acquisition of legitimacy by political entities is not a one-sided transaction – in exchange for support, individuals receive knowledge about the logic of the functioning of reality and the possibility of acting on the basis of this knowledge. In post-hegemonic conditions, reality is overdetermined – there is both too much knowledge about it (because there are diverse sources) and too little (because none of them are trustworthy). By accepting a given discourse, the individual gains a rational framework for interpreting their experience so that it makes sense within a given theory of reality. Their participation is therefore, in a sense, an act of exchange of goods that the post-hegemonic public sphere produces in insufficient quantities – political legitimacy and trustworthy knowledge.

Just as there is a certain common element linking liberal and critical anti-populist narratives, it is also possible to find a common core to seemingly radically different pre- and post-hegemonic attitudes. It lies in the attempt to establish the political as a sphere with its own sovereign, independent existence and not just a place for the negotiation of collective interests. In both cases, the existence of the political sphere imposes certain obligations on individuals – whether it be adherence to certain rules (rationality or agonism) or taking part in a fight against the impending catastrophe. In both situations, remaining outside the political sphere is seen as an individual choice resulting from personal deficits and generating a cost for the person refusing to participate – in the first case, it is a lack of political representation; in the second, a lack of access to trustworthy knowledge.

This unity, on which liberal, critical and populist attitudes towards politics are based, underlies every educational project associated with them. It seems that if there is a way forward for civic education in a period of hegemonic crisis, it may be to move beyond the perspective of the individual's "responsibility" towards an increasingly greedy political sphere and to attempt to restore balance between the spheres of politics and everyday life.

In order to imagine restoring this balance, we must first examine the educational consequences of the current crisis. It seems that the main problem we encounter when trying to construct educational responses to the post-hegemonic situation stems from the impossibility of reducing the educational goal to the transfer of objective knowledge. With the collapse of the *status quo* and the removal of politics from the realm of common sense, content that is both political and neutral ceases to exist.

The elements of radical hermeneutics of suspicion contained in the narratives of groups fighting for dominance in the post-hegemonic public sphere are intended to immunise their audience against the messages of their political opponents. In such a situation, the more the teacher assumes the role of a channel for the transfer of hegemonic content, the more his or her message will be read as an untrustworthy political narrative, and its very presence in school may confirm conspiratorial visions of reality rather than offer an alternative to them.

Attempts to refer to critical theory will be equally problematic. In a situation where most citizens are exposed to some form of “hermeneutics of suspicion” a lecture on critical theory will be seen as one of the – many and varied – conspiracy theories intended to inspire political activism.

In other words: in a post-hegemonic reality, there is no content whose political nature is hidden; all politics is perceived – based on the hermeneutics of suspicion – as a manifestation of someone’s interests, and most political interests – according to populist logic – are considered to be contrary to the interests of the general public.

The solution to this political invasion and a way to restore balance may lie in reversing the logics of the anti-populist reaction suggested by liberal civic education and Mouffe’s political ethics on the one hand, and overly politicised populist narratives on the other. The first of these logics considers citizens a threat to the political sphere, while the second is based on the imperative of engagement and the refusal to adopt a neutral stance. We will begin our discussion with the latter.

Paolo Freire, one of the key thinkers of critical theory in education, wrote about the attitude of the teacher:

When we try to be neutral, like Pilate, we support the dominant ideology. Not being neutral, education must be either liberating or domesticating. (...) Thus, we have to recognize ourselves as politicians. It does not mean that we have the right to impose on students our political choice. But we do have the duty not to hide our choice. Students have the right to know what our political dream is. They are then free to accept it, reject it, or modify it. Our task is not to impose our dreams on them, but to challenge them to have their own dreams, to define their choices, not just to uncritically assume them (Freire 1985: 17–18).

The refusal to adopt a neutral stance stems from the assumption, consistent with the logic of the post-hegemonic sphere, that the status quo is subordinate to forces whose interests are not identical to those of the general public.

At the same time, in a situation where the status quo has broken down and most active political forces are seeking legitimacy by forming citizens into “armies

of discourse”, fighting for dominance in a fragmented and polarised public sphere, it is not engagement but neutrality — the refusal to be instrumentalised in the service of any political camp — that best corresponds to the postulates of critical theory.

Of course, from the perspective of an individual experiencing a crisis, a neutral stance is difficult to maintain. According to populist (and, probably not coincidentally, religious) logic, each of the competing ideologies asserts that “whoever is not with me is against me,” and not opposing the forces leading to disaster makes us responsible for it. However, neutrality in this case is not meant to be a political stance with which teachers identify, but rather – as in the proposals for civic education and agonism – an attitude relating to the sphere of cognition and ethics.

While the reversal of critical theory’s logic consists in recognising that in the post-hegemonic public sphere it is not commitment but neutrality that is radical, the reversal of the logic of liberal and Laclau and Mouffe inspired theorists consists in stating that in times of crisis it is not (future) citizens who pose a threat to the functioning of the public sphere, but rather that it is this sphere – with its catastrophic and polarising discourses – that poses a threat to them. The posthegemonic public sphere is inclusive, but in the same way that war is inclusive – it does not divide perpetrators and victims according to age categories. Contemporary political education is not theoretical or academic in nature, but takes place online, as the life experiences of children and young adults are filtered and explained not only by peer groups, but also by politicised, discursive war machines.

Political actors seeking to construct a new hegemony offer an easy way out of cognitive chaos, but it is a way that prioritises the political interpretation of human experience. One feature of this interpretation lies in de-empathisation, the division of humanity into friends and enemies, the reflexive rejection of “hostile” interpretations and arguments, and the feeling of aversion towards those who present them. Influences of this kind can transform entire societies, as can be seen in division of American society along the party lines (Pew Research Centre 2022).

Referring again to Freire, this situation can be interpreted as a result of an imbalance between two ways of knowing the world. Writing about the practice and learning of reading, he stated:

Reading the world precedes reading the word, and the subsequent reading of the word cannot dispense with continually reading the world. Language and reality are dynamically intertwined. The understanding attained by critical reading of a text implies perceiving the relationship between text and context (Freire 1983: 5).

“Reading words” and “reading the world” are related in this view, but they are not entirely equal – both the first and last steps in the process of cognition are awareness and knowledge about the world, a process which allows us to put the second-hand descriptions and interpretations of that world into proper context.

Post-hegemonic politics violates this division by placing political interpretation of experience above the experience itself and establishing the stakes of political

confrontation with a demonised enemy in such a way that they dominate over individual or group interests.

If we recognise that it is not fanatical passions or the irrationality of citizens that threaten the political process, but that the very process, torn from its hegemonic state of equilibrium, seeks to subordinate the experience and actions of citizens to its own priorities, then civic education – at least in times of crisis – should not aim to prepare people for life in a state of hegemonic stability (the future form of which is impossible to know), or to present some – or even all – of the competing perspectives. Rather, its aim should be to establish a basis for perceiving the political sphere as subordinate to our own experiences and interests. It should focus on “reading the world” rather than “reading the word”, on showing how our own and shared experiences can be used to filter and explain political discourses, rather than being filtered and explained by them.

This, of course, is a path fraught with danger. The experience of the group and the interactions among its members: a non-anonymous community of people with diverse backgrounds and views, should be just as important as individual feelings. And it might be hard to escape conflict when pupils are already part of that or other “war machine”. What is also important is the correct perception of the goal – in accordance with the principle of neutrality derived earlier, it should not be a political goal (the creation of the potential for a new, non-polarised politics) but a purely educational one: an attempt to propose a perspective that will make it easier to preserve humanity in a polarised world. Finally, because this is an activity that goes against the entire public sphere, which operates through much richer, more ubiquitous and intrusive channels of communication than in the pre-internet era, it should always be accompanied by an awareness of the possibility, or even inevitability, of failure.

Returning to Freire one last time, let us emphasise that the attitude that should shape our ambitions, both in terms of knowledge and action, is humility.

Humility is an important virtue for a teacher, the quality of recognizing – without any kind of suffering – our limits of knowledge concerning what we can and cannot do through education. Humility accepts the need we have to learn and relearn again and again, the humility to know with those whom we help to know ((Freire 1985: 15).

Humility should have a cognitive dimension – and this is not only about respect for the knowledge of pupils or students and recognising the limits of one’s own agency, but also about maintaining a distance from one’s own beliefs and not looking for an easy way out of cognitive chaos. Nevertheless, in spite of all the dangers and uncertainties, the process of teaching and learning should be based on a deep, albeit humble, conviction that both we and our students are capable of reading the world around us, rather than allowing others to read it for us.

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Summary

What can be done when monsters arrive? Knowledge and education after hegemony

The purpose of this paper is to reconstruct contemporary authoritarian politics and to develop an alternative to educational projects rooted in liberal and critical traditions, which are often proposed as antidotes to authoritarianism.

Contemporary authoritarianism is described as a manifestation of the disintegration of the neoliberal hegemonic regime. The processes of de-hegemonization have led to liberalism losing its role as a commonsensical point of reference for other ideological discourses, as well as to institutional decay and the loss of access to hegemonic sources of political legitimacy.

One of the consequences of this condition is the emergence of the phenomenon of “post-truth,” typically defined as the prioritization of personal emotions over facts and rational argument. From an educational perspective, post-truth represents the most significant symptom of the post-hegemonic condition. Strategies rooted in liberal concepts of civic education – such as enhancing the cognitive competencies of future citizens – are intended to counteract this phenomenon. Critical strategies, drawing on the thought of Laclau and Mouffe, aim instead to establish, through education, the foundations for non-antagonistic political relations.

Both of these approaches are considered problematic by the authors due to their grounding in the attitudes and institutions of the decaying liberal hegemonic regime. As an alternative,

the authors propose a concept of programmatic educational neutrality – drawing from, yet also diverging from, the thought of Paulo Freire. This neutrality stems from both an epistemic distance toward the fragmented and polarized public sphere, and from the conviction that education should support students' ability to critically "read the world" based on their own lived experiences, rather than facilitate the translation of those experiences into the conflicting languages of political ideologies.

Keywords

authoritarianism, populism, education, citizenship education, hegemony