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The problem of the present

On simultaneity, synchronisation and transnational education projects

Pieter Vanden Broeck

Abstract: The current inclination, at the European level, to fund education in the form of projects radicalises the modern orientation towards the present as the attempt to bind a yet indeterminate future. This article proposes a close re-reading of Niklas Luhmann's sociological oeuvre in order to problematise the place of the present in modern education. In order to sketch out the need for a new educational ecology, it then draws attention to how transnational projects articulate their educational meaning.

Keywords: project-led education, curriculum, Europeanisation, systems theory.

Numerous social activities are today thought of and organised as a project. We still appear to live in what Daniel Defoe (1887[1697]) once proclaimed the Projecting Age: the present is experienced as the fertile ground for vast undertakings that are "too big to be managed", therefore "likely enough to come to nothing" but nonetheless steered towards a "suitable perfection". The sociology of education usually tends to narrow down such a diagnosis of the modern predicament to the national project of mass schooling (Duru-Bellat & van Zanten, 1999). Almost as a rule, sociological analysis identifies education with the latter's formal organisations – school or university – and then delineates its field of interest according to the resulting split between formalised education and mere socialisation. This may explain why the emergence of educational projects, somehow falling between the two, has largely escaped its attention.

Yet, in and outside classrooms, education too is increasingly articulated as an opportunity for projecting endeavours. This enterprising attitude characterises in particular the transnational level of the European Union, where educational activities now may find financial support under its current Erasmus+ banner, *if* shaped as projects. The EU thus funds a wide array of educational activities that range far beyond the institutional limits of school education. Somehow parallel to its funding efforts in the field of research, it offers financial support for projects of transnational networks that are capable of gathering, even if only temporarily, a plurality of organisations, educational and non-educational alike, around a once-only pedagogical objective, that is not expected to be repeated. This contribution focuses on such

projects and develops the hypothesis that the resulting educational practice is above all a matter of time, rather than of space and mobility, as has been claimed hitherto (Favell, 2008; Fligstein, 2008). The questions I wish to raise then concern above all their function or raison d'être: which problem do transnational education projects help to solve? And how does time come into play?

In order to address these questions, I will draw on social systems theory, as elaborated by the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Projects occupy a minor position in his conceptual framework. The phenomenon has never been the subject of a stand-alone inquiry but has been covered sporadically as part of broader investigations, far exceeding the question of projects (*cf*. Luhmann, 1978; 1990b; 1995a; 1997b). What the various intuitions expressed in these publications might imply or mean for education – and vice versa – has hitherto only been explored partially, mainly in the matter of school reform (*cf*. Corsi, 1998). Educational practice that was itself shaped as projects, however, remained largely out of sight. Drawing on Luhmann's rich conceptual toolkit, this article offers an examination of how such an approach via transnational projects differs from formal education, in order to tease out its function.

My considerations take their premise in particular from his characterisation of the modern present as problematic (Luhmann, 1990c). Education, law, economy, family life or politics: according to systems theory's most central observation of modern society as functionally differentiated, all these and other functional domains always happen within the same present, but without any centre or hierarchy able to integrate them into a single logic (*cf*. Nassehi, 2008). The present, the continuously vanishing moment wherein the whole of society runs at once, can hence only be observed as *chaos* – as the "wilderness of what happens simultaneously" (Luhmann, 2012, pp. 319). The present thus comes under pressure, since it constitutes the here and now where order must be actively created via the planning of time. With regard to this problem of the present –how to regenerate order from the wild chaos of simultaneity– this article will highlight and compare two educational forms of time-binding that attempt to turn such uncontrollable simultaneity into favourable constellations and opportunities, the (national) school curriculum and transnational education projects.

I will proceed according to the following steps. First, the school curriculum will be addressed, with a view to summarising its relation to the possibilities and constraints of formal education. Using Luhmann's understanding of meaning as defined in three dimensions – temporally, materially and socially – I will outline how, in the hope of thus influencing what might happen in the future, the curriculum structures school time by establishing what should be learned and who should be addressed. Time-binding, according to Luhmann's (1993, pp.

51-72) use of Alfred Korzybski's expression, indeed means here precisely the attempt, in the present, to restrain or expand the scope of future events. In a second step, the thus created characterisation of school education will be used to draw attention to the differences that emerge when education is organised through the time-binding of transnational projects. Via a selective re-reading of Luhmann's oeuvre, I will lay out which new opportunities and risks then arise. In conclusion, Luhmann's theorem of a double present is introduced to give a tentative answer to the question of which problem transnational projects thus help the education system to address.

I. The school time of the curriculum

Through the particular lens of systems theory, the birth of modern education can be abridged as the systematic effort to address the indeterminacy of a pedagogical thought that has lost much, if not all of its premodern certainties (*cf.* Luhmann & Schorr, 2000, pp. 66-105).[1] Instead of mere moral vigilance over what was deemed the child's good nature, the fall into discredit of such premodern pedagogical thought left a void – a lack of legitimacy – which opened the space necessary for an education system that could now understand its task as *intentional change*. Education could no longer be practised as guiding growth towards its natural completion but had to include the possibility of deliberately changing children. The pedagogical intention could thus create chances for its own failure or success, while leaving the supposed nature of the child out of consideration: "The child either learns or does not learn what he is supposed to learn. He does his homework – or not. He's a good or a bad pupil" (Luhmann, 1992b, p. 114).

The resulting *technologisation* of the relationship between teacher and pupil – considered effective when realising its intentions, broken if not – extends to the organisation of time. The specific temporal horizon of education can now be observed as the difference between instruction (before) and obtained results (after). This basic distinction allows education's own time to appear, in the form of a succession of rigidly defined "periods", such as class hours, modules, school years, school types and so on. Technologisation goes hand in

[1] Considering that this issue underpins the whole of Luhmann's sociological description of education, it constitutes a recurring theme in most of his oeuvre. An accessible introduction, overviewing the broad wealth of his relevant writings, can be found in the recently published *Niklas Luhmann: Education as a Social System* (2017), by Claudio Baraldi and Giancarlo Corsi.

hand with a "periodisation" of school time (Luhmann, 1990a), which makes the difference between education's beginning and end manageable in the classroom. A timetable can be prepared in order to orchestrate the pedagogical interaction, so that pupils arrive in time for class and "the teacher does not have to wander around the corridors trying to find acceptance for his ideas somewhere" (Luhmann, 2002, p. 160). Only in this way can lessons be anticipated in advance and instruction become a matter of planning. When to teach what to whom becomes an open question and hence appears in need of decisions. Precisely in that respect, the curriculum constitutes an example of what Luhmann once called the "logistics of time" (Luhmann, 1995b, p. 187): the right points in time to start or stop instruction no longer follow from nature, but from the detailed planning of school time itself. If school time thus requires programming in the shape of a schedule or course of study that establishes *who* is expected to learn *what*, the question can be posed: which problems are addressed in these two dimensions –the material (what?) and social (who?) dimension of education – and how do the solutions offered by the curriculum shape the meaning of school education in accordance with them?

Akratic aftercare and precaution

In its material articulation, the curriculum serves the pedagogical codification of subject knowledge into teaching "matter". The educational system can thus distinguish maths from music, or literature from science and then profit from the above-illustrated periodisation to distribute them all across different class hours. The teachability of such knowledge – its "conveyability" – soon, however, emerges as a problem (Kade, 1997; Luhmann, 2002). Especially when teaching aspires to keep track of new research results in its area of competence, it has to weigh the value of keeping up with truth against didactical effectiveness. For the scientist, it may certainly be true that "sugar is sugar, coal is coal" (Bachelard, 1963), but in the education system there can be more licence towards such and other truths.[2] Scientific truth is allowed to shift into digestible schemes and crude simplifications, if it helps to get the message across. What is taught necessarily balances between the two ambitions: it can never amalgamate them fully, nor can it completely disregard one (truth) in favour of the other (efficiency). Didactical transpositions hence reveal above all that the curriculum is an

[2] This, in a nutshell, is Gaston Bachelard's criticism of Maria Montessori regarding the lack of theoretical background and scientific precision flawing her approach, for example when she illustrates that "sugar, which is white, is essentially a piece of coal".

institution that, on the one hand, involves the outside world *and*, on the other hand, always participates in the education system's "internal fate" (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000, pp. 94-102). It illustrates how this difference between the outside world and education inevitably returns internally as a structural antagonism, that is, as an "irritation" that education needs to address.

When the formal education system thus plans out its teaching ambitions via the curriculum, it can try to anticipate or compensate for its environment (*cf.* Luhmann, 2004a). It can observe how pupils' past socialisation stems from the most divergent households and then offer itself as aftercare for inequalities created elsewhere; or it can picture their future ahead and try to programme itself in the light of what supposedly will come next – the job market, for example – in life after school. But like the dynamic illustrated above, such attempts to *synchronise* education always become bogged down in the self-established difference from its environment. Since school education upholds its autonomy as a euphoric overestimation or hypostasis of the own function (*cf.* Luhmann, 1995b, pp. 464-465), the external world is never allowed to participate directly. In order for the curriculum to synchronise what is taught with what happens in the outside world, school education demands the *exclusion* of the *simultaneously present environment*, so as to compose its own sequential rhythms of instruction and evaluation. The simultaneity of the outside world is always domesticated, as it were, tamed into sequences of teaching material; and there the curriculum finds its function.

If one can understand in this way the principle behind school education's time-binding attempts via synchronisation, it is important to underline that the outcome can never be understood as synchronicity. Synchronisation, to avoid any misunderstanding, does not designate the creation of simultaneity, which constitutes the initial problem rather than its outcome (Luhmann, 1990c). As the sociology of education likes to demonstrate, school does not eliminate inequalities (one example standing for all: Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), nor does it guarantee professional success (their canonical opposite: Boudon, 1974). Education's internal sequencing of time can never match point-for-point the rhythms of other societal domains – let alone all of them at once (*cf.* Luhmann, 1995b, p. 185). Education always arrives both too late and too soon, since it happens simultaneously with the rest of society in the present. The developing dynamic of unsatisfactory attempts at synchronisation outlines a particular course, Luhmann (2004a, p. 235) ironized, which is best summarised by the ancient Greek notion of *akrasia* ("weakness of will"). School education swirls back and forth between its self-created oppositions –truth versus didactical efficiency, equality versus excellence, general knowledge versus job-specific skills, etc.– since it can never completely renounce one in favour of the other. The resulting lack of direction may then of course present and legitimise

itself as the outcome of democratic reform, but it is above all the result of a closed system and its efforts to deal with the paradoxes resulting from its unattainable aspirations or "irritations" (*cf*. Luhmann, 1986).

The mechanical solidarity of schooled society

Modern education, as I have shortened Luhmann's central thesis, coincides with the abandonment of pedagogical ideas that understood instruction as a matter of nature or maturation. The question of when and how to start teaching has since had to be answered by the logic of the proceeding pedagogical interaction itself. That is: instruction has since had to be planned and sequenced in the light of what the pupil has previously achieved or failed to achieve, while disregarding his or her supposed nature. Instruction needs to rely on didactical method and its outcome, which creates the problem of how to group together all pupils who should start to learn at the appropriate moment. The solution, Luhmann (2004b, p. 98) writes, relies on a specific, largely implicit form of synchronisation: the teacher's "methodical diachronisation requires a synchronisation of pupils, who should start specific educational programmes at specific times. The differentiation into one-after-another requires a de-differentiation at the same time: a homogenisation of the beginning." In order for the temporal differences created by didactical method to gain precedence as the accomplishment of a purely internal logic, initial differences between pupils are demoted to illegitimate "noise" that disturbs the instruction. Everyone is assumed to be equal at the point of departure, so that all differences emerging among them afterwards can be attributed to the educational interaction itself and then used to establish what should be taught next.

Hence, the curriculum synchronises students by homogenisation and, in Luhmann's account, one can thus explain the mechanism behind the creation of class groups or year cohorts and understand how instruction becomes increasingly dependent upon organisation (*cf*. Vanderstraeten, 2004). But because this homogenisation of initial differences extends to the pupils' personal past and background, the historical relevance of this assumed homogeneity stretches much further. It ushered in a new mode of inclusion for the then nascent education system, which from then on could act with increasing indifference to the status differences that shaped pre-modern forms of education. Modern education could hence become mass schooling (*cf*. Luhmann & Schorr, 2000; Luhmann, 2002, pp. 111-140). From then on, the curriculum should not only organise the teacher's and the pupils' presence in the same classroom, but it

has to do so under the postulate of universal inclusion. But how does this combination of isolated class groups and universal inclusion relate to the rest of society?

Although the question was not contemplated by Luhmann in these terms, a possible answer can be composed when considering his remarks on the finitude of school education and the thus emerging time frame. Compared with other domains, such as economy or law, education's universal inclusion indeed demonstrates this striking feature: it is temporally circumscribed in a very specific way. School time culminated, at least until fairly recently, in higher education at the latest, if not earlier at the end of compulsory schooling. Education, when organised as schooling, has not only a beginning, but also an end (*cf*. Corsi, in this issue). The curriculum, likewise, can be observed not only as a sequence of smaller periods, but also as a measure that specifies the entire timespan deemed necessary or sufficient to reach a certain idea of individual development (Luhmann, 2004b, pp. 99-102). Much more than the actual realisation of such an idealised outcome, however, the curriculum designates this particular time-frame – school time – wherein everybody included performs similar activities.

Going back to an illustrious Durkheimian distinction, Luhmann (1990c) once attributed to such time measures a particular function: such *mechanical* forms of coordination, orchestrating everybody in unison for a set time, serve to bridge the difference between the present and the absent. They make up for the boundaries of interaction contexts, by establishing a "solidarity" that extends beyond those present in the interaction. Just as religious celebrations congregate worshippers beyond their own church, school time bridges the isolated context of the classroom and so lays out the basis for a "schooled society" (*cf*. Baker, 2014) versus its "apostates", the dropouts (*cf*. Vanderstraeten & Van der Gucht, 2016). Precisely this mechanical understanding of its universal inclusion, I would argue, is how school education addresses the function Luhmann attributes to education. In order "to make premises for otherwise unlikely social contact possible – and to make them possible for contacts that would normally lie outside the education system", the time set out by the curriculum mechanically establishes a society of schooled people, after which "every individual can assume in his contact with everyone else, that they too were raised and educated in such a system" (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000, p. 34).

Stepping beyond Luhmann's highly abstract re-descriptions of mass schooling, one might however ask if the insistent and ubiquitous stress on lifelong learning, in both pedagogy and policy, does not offer an abode to new and *different* time logistics to re-specify the modern pedagogical intention. In the remainder of this article I will answer such a question affirmatively, advancing the current praxis of transnational education projects as one such

means. The question then becomes how the meaning of education changes when its finitude cannot be understood as the expectation of human development or maturity – the end of school time – but merely as a deadline that expects nothing but the realisation of its own self-imposed goals. Does the difference between education and the rest of society then still appear as the need for synchronisation – as the domestication of simultaneity? Is the simultaneously present outside world still kept at a distance from its learning and instruction processes? Or does this ecological difference between the education system and its external environment indeed obtain a new form and hence warrant renewed attention?

II. Towards a new educational ecology

When proceeding to outline how projects relate to the planning of educational time, the difficulty arises that the notion always implies a certain vagueness. Anything, so it seems, can become the object of projecting ambitions and anybody can, indeed should (Boltanski & Chiapello, 1999) foster such ambitions. But if a project is such an indistinct phenomenon, why nonetheless consider it a distinct *form*? And if so, what new meaning would the resulting morphogenesis of education via transnational projects be able to articulate?[3]

A formless form

It is possible to discern more solid contours when beginning, with Luhmann, from the observation that the notion is content with the stipulation of a restrained yet variable period of time. One can have a project for the day or for the next thirty years and anything in between or beyond that.[4] Projects merely establish "a time-limited order" (Luhmann, 1990b, p. 338). They

[3] The notions of morphogenesis and form are used in reference to cybernetic tradition (as in Krippendorff, 1984) and in particular to Luhmann's understanding of the creation of forms as the emergent process that moulds an indistinct range of possibilities into a distinctive shape (Luhmann, 1999). Morphogenetic processes denote then above all differentiation processes: they 'use differences, not goals, values, or identities, to build up emergent structures' (Luhmann, 1990d, p. 179). My thesis would then be that the differences of concern here articulate first and foremost a formal deviation from the constraints of the 'grammar of schooling' –a differentiation from what Guy Vincent has dubbed the *forme scolaire* (*cf*. Author).

[4] The example is not casually chosen but alludes to the oft-cited and fittingly improbable genealogy of systems theory: "On my appointment to the Department of Sociology established at the University of Bielefeld in 1969, I was asked what research projects I had running. My project was, and ever since has been, the theory of society; term: thirty years; costs: none" (Luhmann, 2012 p. xi)

require that the course of time ahead be punctuated with a beginning and an end, while relying on the identification of a specific problem to establish their own finitude (Luhmann, 1990b, p. 427). They indicate the time deemed necessary to move from a problem to its proposed solution. The duration between the two then emerges as a frame for free variability (*cf*. Schutz, 1972), either as regards what needs to be done or who to include. Form and formlessness hence do not exclude but instead require and profit from each other: only because projects come with a considerable degree of freedom does one voluntarily submit to the grip of their deadlines. The attractiveness of projects derives from the duality of freedom and restraint, amorphousness and its ensuing temporal formalisation. Via periodisation, they convert "poorly manageable orders into profitable practice" (Lehmann, 2008, p. 54).

As contemporary educational practice illustrates, the lack of a more defined shape does not preclude the insertion of projects into curricula. On the contrary, the two forms of time planning seem capable of coexistence. But it is easy to understand how the elasticity of projects finds itself at odds with the stricter organisation of school education. That might explain why their use is no stranger to educational theory (*cf*. Kilpatrick, 1918) and even achieved a modest fortune once pragmatism gained a foothold, if not earlier (Knoll, 2012). As Herbert M. Kliebard (1986) has documented, project-based instruction had its heyday especially during the curriculum reforms of the 1930s, when a doctrine of social efficiency was spearheaded both by sociology and psychology.

The elasticity of projects also explains, on the other hand, why the practice was never fully embraced and failed to gain mainstream acceptance (Tyack & Cuban, 1995), which in turn resulted in the limited sociological attention already mentioned. Except perhaps for Basil Bernstein (1975), who saw an "invisible pedagogy" revive during the seventies, the educational use of projects went largely unnoticed. Luhmann himself also never elaborated on project-led education. The notion comes up briefly when discussing German *Reformpädagogik* and the differentiation of school types (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000, p. 241), but leaves mostly unchallenged an earlier formulated critique that the progressivist over-appreciation of attractive metaphors (warmth, proximity) barely conceals a lack of real didactical innovation (Luhmann & Schorr, 2000, pp. 226-227).

As far as it was then indeed possible to see, the educational use of projects was restricted within the classroom and the novelty of the transnational education projects that I will next discuss remained necessarily out of view. These EU-financed projects are indeed not constrained to the classroom of a single school but used to coordinate the activities of participants from multiple organisations, usually situated at considerable distance from one

another. Furthermore, these networks of organisations are not restricted to the realm of formal education, but regularly include organisations that would ordinarily address other societal functions. In this way, very heterogeneous networks emerge, which can include just about anything imaginable between kindergartens and Global 500 companies.[5] In the subsequent discussion I wish to argue that the flexible form of such projects enables a far more supple understanding of the ecological difference between education and society and I will therefore show how their time-binding enables new liberties and constraints, which when compared with the curriculum stir up the meaning of education both materially (I) and socially (II).

Untamed simultaneity as educational event

A project – as one could reformulate the above – is a form used to observe self-established causalities, moving from a problem (cause) towards its solution (effect). A specific problem is first identified and then placed in a sequence that constructs solutions as the result of the project's actions, usually without much regard for how external factors interfere (Luhmann, 1995a). With such an orientation to problems there inevitably comes a certain selectivity, because anything can indeed become the object or theme of a project, but only as long as it can be formulated as a problem that will be solved. While the stress on generating solutions tends to exclude certain endeavours from being formulated as a project, like social theory (Luhmann, 1990b, p. 339), it also opens up new possibilities. For as long as they can be observed as "difference-minimising programmes" (*cf*. Luhmann, 1997b), bridging the gap between the current situation and a desired future, projects can be used to address problems whose solution appears to lie *far beyond school education*. One can start, for example, from the problem of early school-leaving and perceive a possible solution in the consumer activism organised by not-for-profits, hoping that the thrill of learning to protest will rekindle interest and prevent pupils from dropping out.[6] But also problems well beyond the educational system can be explored, not only by education's formal organisations but also by formalising solutions outside of school. A growing lack of tolerance can be problematised, for instance, and then be addressed by artistic practice aiming to teach religious and secular persons alike how to live

[5] *Cf*. the European Commission's own online Project Results Platform: https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/
[6] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2015-1-FR01-KA201-015031

together.[7] The strict line that school instruction draws between education and society at large to uphold its own autonomy, symbolised by the isolation of the classroom, starts to stir in favour of projects steering themselves towards solutions that are able to construct the boundary between the two very differently, even fluctuating from project to project (*cf*. Besio, 2009, p. 289).

Taking up a little-developed distinction coined by Luhmann (2004c, pp. 381-382), the difference can be condensed as follows: where school organisation couples the education system *structurally* to an otherwise unattainable world and leaves it to the curriculum to overcome its self-established boundary, transnational projects couple education and environment only *operatively* (*cf*. Lieckweg, 2001). The distinction between the two couplings can be more clearly grasped by reference to time. Structural couplings constitute a durable mechanism that allows the simultaneity of the present, analogously passing at a single speed for all of society, to be processed by the coupled systems internally and thus according to their own criteria. As Hartmut Rosa (2013) has famously elaborated, differences in speed thus emerge – compared to economic transactions, for example, the educational rhythm of school instruction and evaluation moves considerably more slowly – and create space for the synchronisation attempts that I have elaborated upon for the curriculum. Operative couplings, on the other hand, live off the unprocessed simultaneity of system and environment. Operations that are usually attributed to the system's environment – protest or art production, as exemplified above, but equally research, labour or other activities – now instantaneously couple to the system's own operativity, as if they could kill the proverbial two birds with one stone. There is no need to synchronise, because what happens can be observed as simultaneously participating in both systems at once. In transnational education projects, hence, synchronisation is omitted in favour of a *non-synchronised simultaneity*. The "wilderness of what happens simultaneously" is no longer domesticated by excluding simultaneity, but recklessly allowed – at least momentarily– in a close encounter.

Ephemerality, to which projects add their own interdiction of repetition, is indeed the price such couplings have to pay for their bravado. Operative couplings can only last momentarily, Luhmann (2004c, pp. 381-382) warns. One learns to make art for a week or, more exceptionally, to protest for a couple of years, but no longer than planned or eventually the differences between the two activities risk disappearing. The temporal organisation of

[7] https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/2017-3-PT02-KA105-004725

projects in strictly defined periods, I would argue, finds herein a first function: they help to frame what is learned or taught as a passing but extraordinary *event,* whose clear temporal boundaries help to avoid the risk of de-differentiation. As a result, transnational education can present a state of exception as the new normal: the ecstasy of education as a "real-time" event, instead of the learning of a faint copy in class, now redefines what can be taught (*cf*. Stiegler, 1998).

In order to successfully interface between all involved orders, if translating systems theory into Goffmanian vocabulary (1983), what is learned or taught typically needs to maintain an *ambiguous* status. One may learn to protest, to iterate the same example, but only when clearly avoiding a scholastic approach (which would render the activism moot) and shunning at once activist practices that would make the teachers blush. What is learned in transnational education projects needs to maintain such an irresolvable duality, necessary to enable retro-active identifications by all systems involved. For the duration of an event, the form of projects offers a (playful) frame (Bateson, 1976) for activities that, once finished, appear to have reproduced the processes of more than one social order – as if they could temporarily orchestrate multiple systemic affiliations at once. Such projects are therefore always a question of form and flows (Wagner-Pacifici, 2016): they first take shape as an event and only then do they evolve along several pathways. In hindsight, they then effectively may appear as having constituted *Mehrsystemzugehörigkeiten* ("belonging to several systems") (Luhmann, 1990 pp. 38, 89), but in the moment of the event their status remains unclear.

From solidarity to social memory

Both the curriculum and projects organise time into periods, that much is clear. A closer look, however, reveals how they offer two diverging solutions to a single problem. Both forms of time management exemplify how, when time itself loses its capacity to establish synchronised rhythms, the burden of coordination moves to the social dimension. Instead of drawing blindly upon an idealised nature to determine the appropriate moments when to educate, both now "must refer to normative orders, to law, to values, to legitimate interests, for which consensus can no longer be determined, but at best can still be assumed" (Luhmann, 1990c, p. 114). As is well-known, school education relies on compulsory schooling and national legislation in order to establish (quasi-)"cosmological guarantees" (ibidem) for a clearly circumscribed inclusion period. Its curriculum thus bears some last resemblance to (premodern) time

measures, I have argued, that could still specify what everybody needs to do (or learn, in this case) during a single period. Projects, on the other hand, are primarily bound by their own contractual basis (Teubner, 2011) and do not specify anything but themselves: a single project cannot give full expression to pedagogical ideals of self-fulfilment or learning ability, now spun out over an entire life course. It does not seek to define where education ends, once and for all, but only its own deadline; nor can it claim universal inclusion within a common time span. In sum, there is no mechanical solidarity in Europe's transnational regime of education, but instead here too an unsynchronised simultaneity unfolds.

The unsynchronised simultaneity of a bewildering myriad of projects, where everybody does "different things at the same time" (Luhmann, 1990c, p. 114), does not mean that arbitrariness – anything goes – has free rein. On the contrary, precisely because transnational education cannot unproblematically fashion its own relevance as universal, it faces the problem of how to redefine its educational universality, while nonetheless maintaining a certain degree of specificity (*cf*. Luhmann, 2012, p. 225). When observing the life of transnational projects, two mechanisms, mostly foreign to school education, to address this problem can be identified.

As in many other areas (Besio, 2018), an *ex-ante* evaluation, staffed by educational experts, is introduced in order to assess the promises made by the project. They seek to watch over the project's *specificity*, which, when addressing its social dimension, means above all assessing the reputation of participants (*cf*. Luhmann, 1990b) in order to establish if everybody who will be included is necessary for and capable of solving the project's self-imposed problems.

Universality, on the other hand, is constructed as a desirable outcome of the project, not necessarily as active or equal participation. In order to obtain a worldwide application, educational projects are increasingly expected to share their obtained results through a variety of dissemination techniques, especially privileging digital platforms. Obtained results, prescribes Euro-policy, should aspire to reach everybody with a possible interest, expanding thus the project's impact beyond the actual participants. Such universality does not rest on the (impression of a) mechanical solidarity established through the participation of everybody-at-once, but leaves it to the discretion of others when, even if to take an interest at all. Through such practice, a sociality is established that is no longer comprehensible as collective solidarity, built upon the assumption that everyone has been socialised similarly, but which relies on a social memory *sui generis* that, although available to all, is constituted largely independently of whether it is collectively shared or not (*cf*. Luhmann, 2012 pp. 352-358).

The task of such transnational education, one could summarise with another notion from the Durkheimian tradition, no longer coincides with organising the individual appropriation of

knowledge as the necessary condition for a presumably collective consciousness – or collective memory (*cf*. Halbwachs, 1968) – but as the use and creation of new technologies that release both individuals and society from the burden of such collectivity (*cf*. Esposito, 2008). "With unstructured simultaneous access to everything at once," solidarity fades against the backdrop of the memory of (online) archives, which leave us "alone with an oversized offer" (Gehring, 2000 p. 117).

III. The problem of the (double) present

The foregoing discussion has provided an inquiry into how transnational "projectification" (Lundin & Söderholm, 1998) changes education's meaning when compared with its more familiar form of the school. My argument, to recapitulate, has been that transnational projects constitute a temporal form that turns the problem of the present, its overwhelming simultaneity, into an educational resource. Instead of relying on synchronisation, such projects delineate a time-limited order, which redraws the ecological difference between education and its environment, between inclusion and exclusion, with a fluctuating line. Rather than trying to keep up with the frenetic rhythms of the outside world, projects offer a timespan for *always different* events, wherein education can temporarily present itself as a real-time thrill. In place of mechanically including everybody for a set timeframe, projects fashion their outcomes as a social memory whose claim to universality relies on (*post festum*) accessibility, allowing the actual participation to shift between *always different* configurations of inclusion and exclusion. The educational use of projects thus reinforces the modern tendency to denaturalise what in previous epochs seemed necessary, extending this maxim now to the manmade necessities of the modern school institution. All that is solid should melt into air again. That is why the emergence of projects calls for a new educational ecology, willing to inquire how new borders are constructed, maintained or lost, when earlier institutional boundaries are crossed.

That is one way to answer the question of the function of transnational projects in the realm of education: they continue a historical evolution that further de-institutionalises education in favour of organisational forms that can do without the assumptions of stability burdening its conception as an institution (*cf*. Luhmann, 1992a). What projectification undermines is hence not so much school itself as the idea that the latter or any other organisation could represent itself as the unity, essence or entirety of education. But restoring

the contingency of (school) education might not be the only function of projects in education. Why do such transnational projects emerge in education today? Do they address any other problem?

To conclude, I suggest a supplementary answer, which draws on a theorem Luhmann developed in one of his earlier texts to indicate the necessity of two simultaneous presents (Luhmann, 1981). The first present consists of the punctual transience of events. It constitutes the present that irreversibly unfolds. It is produced at a different rate by each system but appears measurable and dateable on a global scale as the worldwide clock time that contains every event simultaneously, hence uncontrollably. The other present, often dubbed the "specious" present, is much more elusive. It is the frozen time we dwell in whenever we are completely absorbed in the here and now (forgetting that in the meanwhile the other, punctual present silently proceeds). It is a time where nothing (yet) appears irrevocable but where the space is created to negotiate what is to become. This second present establishes continuity and duration. Instead of irreversibility, it offers the punctual present the slightest chance to stretch out and extend. The experience of time, the earlier Luhmann advocated, necessarily emerges from the interaction between *both* presents.

In his later oeuvre, this distinction was mostly discarded in favour of decisions, the new centrepiece from which to theorise modern time (*cf*. Luhmann, 2013, pp. 259-260). But with decisions, it has been objected, time can only be understood as (a sequence of) punctual moments, not as duration. When Luhmann thus reduces the present to a mere succession of vanishing decision points, the experience of *duration* – hence, the experience of the *absence* of the punctual present: of having time or being free from time – is lost, together with the possibility of interrogating modernity's "politics of irreversibility" (Gehring 2007). Where, how and by whom (or by what) it is decided when we get respite from the tyranny of the punctual present, slipping away inexorably and irreversibly?

I would contend that projects serve precisely this function. In a world where the present is lived as a matter of decisions, projects re-establish the second present as a timespan that temporarily appears free from time. They show how duration re-emerges and detail under which conditions one can 'have time'. Projects re-establish the experience of duration whilst making visible the "chronopolitics" (Wallis, 1970) that is involved and they find therein their function or raison d'être. They reinstate *a time from which to escape time* – at least until the deadline approaches and new undertakings need to be found.

In the world of education, accustomed to calculating with much longer timespans, the durations of projects might then still be observed as transient events. But that should not hide

from sight that the now emerging multitude of educational “events” effectively expands the education system beyond its school time, helping it to span out over entire life courses (*cf.* Luhmann, 1997a). In projects, lifelong learning becomes visible as the expansion of school time towards this new and more distant temporal horizon. When that happens, the criteria for meaningful education begin to shift and perhaps transnational education projects find therein their most important function.

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