

“Absolute Modernity” or “the Fragments and the Ruins” of Culture: The School in the Time of the Detraditionalization

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EDUCATION: THE NEW AND THE UP-TO-DATE

In a speech given in Barcelona, “*La escuela, el invento más fatídico de la historia*” (“The school, the most fateful invention in history”), the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk highlighted how at the same time as they invented the school and discovered pedagogy, the Greeks became aware “that the older and the younger generation cannot understand each other. School has something to do with this.”¹ Indeed, school should be construed as that device which endeavors to counter the process of dis-continuation (that is, of a break in the continuity) due to generational passage: “since Socrates and Plato there have been from 60 to 80 generational changes. In each generational change the whole process could be destroyed and, actually, this has happened in different occasions, and the need for a laborious restoration of it has, accordingly, obtained. This process has kept a semblance of continuity. But actually there is no continuity.”²

The permanent risk of dis-continuity will turn into “an open break of continuity” in the twentieth century because there is “a very modern cult, based upon the rejection to continue to do things as they have been done up to the current date.”³ This approach leads Sloterdijk to contrast dis-continuity with tradition, the latter occurring “when educators are so strong that they are able to cause an educational Stockholm syndrome in [the] terrible children. These children, therefore, end up identifying themselves with their teachers and fathers and take on their arguments. This is the tradition.”⁴

I have gerry-mandered these quotations, which are included in a grander narrative about the *enfants terribles*, that is, those who balk at the burden of continuity and of tradition and who are the real protagonists of Western history, after the French Revolution and the epic deeds of Napoleon, which have constituted a major and unbridgeable hiatus.⁵ In consequence of the latter, “all generations ... run the risk of perilous and harmful mutations to an incomparably wider extent than their forebears.”⁶

We could interpret these remarks also as the diagnosis of a radicalization of a phenomenon, which Georg Simmel was ready to spot as early as 1918, when he noticed that the “usual” *conflict of the culture* was becoming increasingly serious.⁷ Indeed, in Simmel’s view, the fact that the creative life cannot but become embodied in (cultural) forms, which are, though, immediately experienced as inadequate by life itself in its incessant creativity, is intrinsic in the dynamics of culture, so that culture and life are doomed to engage in incessant strife. But this dynamic was attaining a new level, Simmel highlighted, insofar as the modern wo/man did not have to come to terms only with the struggle between the old cultural forms becoming lifeless and the new, emerging forms filled by the creative life, but, rather, in that they had to face an unprecedented situation, namely that the principle of form itself was under

attack, a fact to which the characteristic formlessness (*Formlosigkeit*) of modern life bore witness.

This epoch-making discontent with any form could be defined as the upshot of “absolute modernity.” The expression refers to Arthur Rimbaud’s *Une saison en enfer*, where he states that “one must be absolutely modern” (“*il faut être absolument moderne*”).⁸ What might still have been a project, an aspiration or a should-be (“*il faut être*,” Rimbaud writes⁹) in 1873 could have turned into a sheer actuality, and this has allowed us to understand the force of the adverb accompanying “modern.” Being *absolutely* modern is being modern in an absolute way, the latter understood in an etymological sense as the condition of *those who have been made free and have broken loose from any previous bond with the past*. If modernity is the condition of what is within the limits and has the extent of the present,¹⁰ absolutely modernity is the movement that has been asymptotically making the extent of the present thinner. We could call it the condition of *up-to-dateness*.

I would suggest distinguishing newness and up-to-dateness. The former is intrinsically related to modernity: as Theodor Adorno finely pointed out, one of the pivotal questions of philosophical modernity, that is, the Kantian question, “how are the synthetic *a priori* possible?,” could be reformulated as “how is the new possible in general?”¹¹ Modernity is the time of the new insofar as this cannot be, however, totally disconnected from the old. Whether this articulation of new and old is spelled out — to mention only three instances — in Kantian terms (that is, in terms of an *a priori*), or whether it is developed in a Deweyan, naturalistic perspective as a “continuity of experience”¹² and as the dialectic between habits and impulses¹³ (possibly a Deweyan version of the aforementioned Simmelian conflict between cultural forms and life), or whether it occurs in the Arendtian care for the continual renewal of the world through the cultivation of the possibility of new beginnings growing up in an old common world¹⁴ is a derivative difference — although anything but meaningless — in comparison with the chief modern gesture: the recognition and the valorization of the new, but without denying its emergence out of the old.

From a typical educational viewpoint, it is this recognition, for instance, that is at work when Dewey insists that “the inescapable linkage of the present with the past is a principle whose application is not restricted to a study of history”¹⁵ and indicates “connectedness in growth” as the educator’s “constant watchword.”¹⁶ Indeed, “in the case of Child vs. Curriculum ... the verdict”¹⁷ amounts also to the need to state that the “surveyed and arranged result [the studies as the logically organized past] occupies a critical position in the process of growth. It marks a turning-point. It shows how we may get the benefit of past effort in controlling future endeavor.”¹⁸

Essential to modernity has been this tension towards the “humanly possible new” — in the engaging phrase of the German philosopher Odo Marquard¹⁹ — that is not the absolutely new which has severed any bond with the old. This tensional nature of modernity has resulted in the stress upon the conflict that has accompanied its self-reflection (from the quarrel of the ancients and moderns to the Simmelian conflict of culture, so to speak). The appeal to an absolutely modern, instead, is a different gesture, for which I have suggested the term “up-to-dateness.” Indeed,

the relationship between the up-to-date and the outdated does not parallel the one between the new and the old: while, in the latter, a mutual articulation is at work, the former implies the logic of replacement. The outdated is doomed to the dustbin of time and cannot in any way represent a driving force within the up-to-date. Indeed, the up-to-date is precisely that which, by obtaining in the stead of what was formerly there, makes the latter outdated.

One of the major challenges of our times could be that of preserving the project of education as the promotion of the new by preventing it from capitulating to the rhetoric of the up-to-date. Or, to put it differently: the challenge is that of avoiding, on the one hand, the Scylla of the school as the site of the perpetuation of tradition in which the new generations wind up succumbing to deadening traditionalism and see their potential of renewal stunted, and, on the other hand, the Charybdis of the demise of the school replaced by sites of fast learning, organizations that insist on up-to-date competences and skills to use in the labor market and that are ultimately guided only by the logic of employability.²⁰

One of the educational versions of the question of how the new is humanly possible in general could be represented by the question of whether it is possible to imagine schools as sites of dialogue with the past, without fostering the Sloterdijkian “educational Stockholm syndrome” but rather by mobilizing commerce with the past as a factor contributing to a genuine liberation of new possibilities. By engaging with this question, I will not advocate the line of defense deployed by Marquard, although some of his analyses are noteworthy. I have already mentioned his compelling expression “humanly possible new”: Marquard argues that the number of innovations that human beings can bear is not infinite — that is, in the vocabulary adopted here, absolute modernity would turn out to be in-human. From the idea that “the new is not possible without much old,”²¹ which he expresses with the motto “the future needs a past” [*Zukunft braucht Herkunft*], Marquard draws the following conclusion: “Because human beings, insofar as they are conditioned by the brevity of their lives, are never able to get out, so to speak, of the skin of their origin in an absolute way and as fast or as broadly as they may choose, they are fundamentally sluggish in transformation; or to put it differently, they are ... fundamentally slow.”²²

While the idea of a fundamental human sluggishness in transformation could raise some misgivings, construing it in terms of slowness could be, instead, educationally promising or, at least, worth exploring: should schools be (also) the place where the drift of the up-to-dating which dominates all the domains of our lives is slowed down? Does the possibility of the new transforming the old — in a generative continuity — require the attunement to a pace that does not consist either in the inertia of the passive reproduction of the past or in the frantic volatilization of the past into the outdatedness? Could not schools be the sites where the belatedness constitutive of the human condition²³ — insofar as we are born in a world that pre-dates us and in which, therefore, we enter as latecomers — not only should not be dismissed or gainsaid but rather should be recognized and, in a way, cultivated? Is this one of the reasons that could lead us to an advocacy of schools as the time of *suspension* and *delay*, as Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons have finely depicted them?²⁴

It is not a matter of the glorification of the belatedness per se. Cultivation of belatedness can be enacted with a stress upon the past (the new *needs* the old) or, rather, upon the future (the new breaks in and transforms the old in a generative continuity). It is here that the main difference between the way of engaging with the past and our belatedness that I would recommend and that of Marquard lies. His general attitude is rooted in an anthropology of compensation, while I would rather hold on to an anthropology of (connectedness in) growth.²⁵

The response to current, “absolutely modern” educational scenarios cannot consist in sticking to the canon of the humanistic culture as it used to be.²⁶ This tendency to cling to a classic idea of culture, without recognizing the postculture that has been emerging, is the secular version of the myth of the fall, the paradise lost being the educational ideal of the *Bildung* of the bourgeois society in the century between the first decade of the nineteenth century and the rift of 1914.²⁷ The “camel pedagogies” — to use idiosyncratically one of Friedrich Nietzsche’s Zarathustra themes — risk confining themselves to, as T.S. Eliot writes, “shoring up cultural fragments against their ruins.”²⁸

But the response cannot even be a yielding to the vertigo of the absolute modernity which, by liquidating any bond with the past, risks being the accomplice to the liquefying of existence that Zygmunt Bauman has diagnosed in postmodern societies.²⁹ Also, the compensatory view of Marquard, according to which “also and precisely nowadays” the future needs a past, can really represent nothing but “the helpless interjection in the global drift,” as Sloterdijk puts it.³⁰ The question, therefore, is finally, over and over again: how, in general, is the new as growth in connectedness, today more than ever, educationally possible?

THE *REPUERESCENCIA* OF THE TEACHER AS A REPETITION

The tangle of issues discussed in this essay has found a significant elaboration in the educational reflections of Marcel Gauchet. It is useful to pass through some of his insights in order to delineate a possible educational proposal that responds to the challenge of how to promote the new as growth in connectedness. Gauchet presents his tenets as a way of addressing educational questions by highlighting how they are connected with a phenomenon far beyond the pedagogical domain, for it is “a cultural and anthropological fundamental phenomenon, which cannot be tackled validly if not by getting out of the framework of educational institutions.”³¹

Indeed, what is at stake is the very status of knowledge in our societies: “For a beautiful irony of history the knowledge society could turn out to be the one where the desire of knowing is ungrounded” (*Des savoirs*, 68). Without denying the plausibility of this analysis, which invites us to situate contemporary educational questions in a broader perspective, I will try to imagine a way of engaging with this phenomenon *within the classroom*.

Gauchet takes his cue from the connection between the loss of meaning of knowledge and the vanishing of the sense of transmission. He spells out this phenomenon educationally in terms of “detraditionalization” (*Des savoirs*, 69–75) and of the replacement of “anticipation” with “individualization” (*Des savoirs*, 75–79).³²

By detraditionalization he means “the dissolution of tradition as an effecting social form.... There is, in practice, tradition whenever it continues to be recognized tacitly that there exists in the past a reserve of perpetual present upon which we do not cease to draw” (Des savoirs, 70). School as a modern agency had an ambiguous relationship with tradition: “On the one hand, it builds itself against tradition. It appeals to the method and to the reasoned transmission against the way of appropriation through impregnation.... On the other, it is based, in its everyday workings, upon that dimension of tradition that in principle it rejects” (Des savoirs, 71). The aforementioned prestige of humanistic culture as the backbone of the curriculum is just one example of this role of the “spokesman” of the past assigned to the school. The balance of these two (seemingly) opposing trajectories was found, according to Gauchet, in the role of the learner, who was considered as the one who could learn only to the extent that he or she had acquired rational principles.

This balance is tipped due to two factors: first, *futurization* (*futurition*), that is, the privilege attributed to the future over the past in our societies; secondly, *individualization*, that is, the emphasis on the individual and his or her independence. The outcome is the unprecedented situation of schools attended by “beings who, spontaneously, are contemporary with no past. We are the first in history for whom there is but a dead and dumb past” (Des savoirs, 73). This corresponds to the condition that I have called “absolute modernity.”

Closely interwoven with this evolution is the second aspect: as long as — despite its ambiguous role — tradition played a major part in schools, there was a sort of “precedence” of knowledge that required the anticipation, which is “the fundamental principle of the modern school as an institution” (Des savoirs, 77). The teacher ushered the young into the domain of knowledge because “the one who had to enter into what pre-existed ... need[ed] a mediator to do that” (Des savoirs, 76). On the contrary, individualization refers to constructivist pedagogies (although Gauchet does not use this expression) and corresponds to that evolution of the educational discourse that Gert Biesta has defined as “learnification.”³³

In the context of this present reflection focused on how the new is possible in education, it is interesting that, from different viewpoints, misgivings have been emerging about the constructivist-individualizing approach, and, more specifically, about the fact that it is unable to account for the learning of the genuinely new. If Wolff-Michael Roth highlights that the idea of construction of knowledge is “a non-viable approach for understanding learning from the perspective of the learner when it comes to the learning of the radically new (concepts),”³⁴ Biesta switches the perspective to teaching by noting that “if teaching is to have a meaning *beyond* the facilitation of learning, if it is *essential* rather than *accidental* to learning, then it has to come with a notion of ‘transcendence.’ It has to be understood as something that comes from the *outside* and brings something *radically new*.”³⁵

What Biesta is invoking, as I read him, is not only the abandonment (or, at least, the limitation) of the logic of learnification, by recovering the rights of teaching, but also the need to elaborate an idea of teaching that takes leave of the horizon of anticipation in which, as Gauchet states it, “teaching is to put oneself in the place

of and somehow replace the child or the adolescent: it is to exert a wardship by making him go on a path, the necessity of which he will only really able to grasp at the end” (Des savoirs, 77).

The question of how it is possible to let the new emerge in educational settings — in reference to culture and to the past³⁶ — could be rephrased as the question of a teaching that is neither a Stockholm-syndrome-inducing anticipation nor merely the facilitation of learning.

In conclusion, I would like to attempt to sketch out the profile of this kind of teaching in broad strokes. By referring to the aforementioned definition of Gauchet, I will state that a nonanticipation-oriented teaching is that in which the teacher puts himself in the place of a student, who he himself can still be, but without replacing that student whom he is addressing. I will call this “the *repuerescentia* of the teacher.” The Latin word *repuerescentia* (re-turn to childhood) is taken out of an educational treatise of Desiderius Erasmus, the prince of the European Renaissance humanists.³⁷ He uses it to indicate the need for the teacher to re-turn into a child in order to be loved by the pupil, for “like rejoices in like.”³⁸ In Erasmus’s view, the *repuerescentia* is meant essentially as a “remembering” of what it is like to be a child in order to treat the pupils kindly and not overburden them. The contemporary French philosopher Denis Kambouchner, who shares many of Gauchet’s concerns and also the latter’s general attitude in education, draws ingeniously upon the Erasmian notion, by giving it another spin: “in educational matters, the point is ... the following: *the more there is that should be transmitted, the greater is the need for a mediation, that is, the need for the kindred to find the kindred through the difference of the statutes and degrees of experience.*”³⁹ While remaining within the “anticipation framework,” Kambouchner mobilizes the notion of the *repuerescentia* to weaken that framework by taking seriously some of the insights of child-centered pedagogies while engaging with them from within the humanistic tradition. I do not want to comment on Kambouchner’s move in detail because I will endeavor to give another — fairly idiosyncratic — reading of the *repuerescentia*. I will consider it not as the way through which the teacher, by remembering his⁴⁰ own childhood, becomes closer (more similar) to the pupil; rather, it is a movement triggered by the actual encounter with his students’ transcendence (students are not within the domain of knowledge that the teacher (re)represents) and resistance (students seem not able to be so much “modern” as to be contemporary with the past of the discipline he teaches),⁴¹ and, through this movement, the teacher, by engaging with that transcendence and resistance, develops a new relationship with the tradition, the past and the world of culture. It is, then, not a coming-back but a self-transcending — activated by the encounter with a transcendence — which is, at the same time, a going beyond culture as a fixed repertoire of contents and themes, fragments shored up against the ruins of “a dead and dumb past.”

Although already installed in the symbolic domain of what Kambouchner would call “*mathesis*,”⁴² the *repuerescens* teacher acts neither as an anticipator nor as a facilitator of learning, but as a partner in a dialogue which takes place between two ways of being new in reference to culture, both serving as a renewal of the latter. Furthermore, the notion of the *repuerescentia* allows us to capture the peculiar

historicity of this dialogue because, on the one hand, it is not merely the encounter between rational minds (as in the modern model depicted by Gauchet, insofar as it was against tradition) nor, on the other, is it the mere introduction of someone situated at a lower level of a developmental trajectory into the upper levels (the tradition pole of the aforementioned model).

The dynamics of the renewing appropriation of culture taking place in the dialogue between the student and the (*repuerescens*) teacher is inspired by what Biesta — in the wake of Emmanuel Levinas — has compellingly defined as “being taught by” as distinct from “learning from.”⁴³ The student accesses the domain of the *mathesis* that is experienced as something “strange.”⁴⁴ What happens to him is not “a process of development of what is already ‘inside’ nor a process of adaptation to what comes from the ‘outside,’ but is an ongoing dialogue between ‘self’ and ‘other’ (in the widest sense of the word ‘other’) in which both are formed and transformed.”⁴⁵ But the same formula could be used also for the *repuerescens* teacher, who neither confines himself to sticking to culture as an insider (and, therefore, as an anticipator) nor to adapts himself to an “outside,” by functioning merely as a resource for the learning-from of the student or — to use the constructivist watchword — as a scaffolding, but rather he undergoes that self-transcendence hinted at above.

We can spell out the dynamics of this so-understood *repuerescentia* in terms of a Kierkegaardian “repetition.” In his homonymous treatise, Kierkegaard states that “repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what I recollected has been, is repeated backwards, whereas *genuine repetition is recollected forward*.”⁴⁶ The *repuerescentia* of the teacher as the *mathematikós*⁴⁷ is this *re-collecting* — insofar as the *mathesis* qua the systematic arrangement of the knowledge comes from the past — *forward* (that is, it does not aim at the mere reproduction through anticipation: we do not have to do with the repetition backwards required, instead, by the school as an agency of the perpetuation of tradition in Sloterdijk’s sense).

It is the way to ensure that the world is preserved for the latecomers, but it is preserved without “strik[ing] from the newcomers’ hands their own chance at the new,” as Hannah Arendt puts it.⁴⁸ This is not the (semblance of) continuity enforced by the Sloterdijkian school; it is rather the only continuity possible for us human beings as, to refer again to Arendt, “basically we are always educating for a world out of joint ... To preserve the world against the mortality of its creators and inhabitants it must be constantly set right anew. The problem is simply to educate in such a way that a setting-right remains actually possible.”⁴⁹

1. Peter Sloterdijk, “La Escuela, el invento más fatídico de la historia,” *La Maleta de Portbou*, no. 4 (2014): 8. All translations in this essay are mine unless otherwise specified.

2. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

3. *Ibid.*, 9.

4. *Ibid.*

5. These thematic trajectories are not developed in the quoted article but in Peter Sloterdijk, *Die schrecklichen Kinder der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014).

6. *Ibid.*, 79.
7. See Georg Simmel, *Der Konflikt der Kultur* (Altenmünster: Jazztbee Verlag, 2012).
8. Arthur Rimbaud, *Une saison en enfer* (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1979), 116. The English translation is taken from Arthur Rimbaud, *Complete Works*, trans. Paul Schmidt (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), <http://www.mag4.net/Rimbaud/poesies/Farewell.html>, accessed October 25, 2014.
9. Rimbaud, *Une saison*, 116.
10. I am attempting to convey the fullness of the etymology of “modernity,” which comes from the Latin adverb *modo* (just now), related to the word *modus* (measure).
11. Theodor Ludwig Wiesengrund Adorno, *Prismen. Kulturgeschichte und Gesellschaft* (München: Deutsche Taschenbuch Verlag, 1963), 91.
12. See John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1925), in *The Later Works, 1925–1953*, vol. 13, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988).
13. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), in *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 14, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983).
14. Hannah Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” in *Between Past and Future* (London: Penguin Books, 2006).
15. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 53.
16. *Ibid.*, 50.
17. John Dewey, *The Child and the Curriculum* (1902), in *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*, vol. 2, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1976), 290.
18. *Ibid.*, 285.
19. Odo Marquard, “Zukunft braucht Herkunft. Philosophische Betrachtungen über Modernität und Menschlichkeit,” in *Philosophie des Stattdessen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), 66.
20. Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, “Education in Times of Fast Learning: The Future of the School,” *Ethics and Education*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2015): 84–95.
21. Marquard, “Zukunft braucht Herkunft,” 71.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*, 70. It is obviously also a theme of Arendt.
24. Masschelein and Simons, “Our Children Are Not Our Children,” 181 ff.
25. This is a point that I cannot elaborate on here.
26. Manfred Fuhrmann, *Bildung. Europas kulturelle Identität* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2002).
27. George Steiner, *In Bluebeard’s Castle. Some Notes towards the Redefinition of Culture* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974).
28. I am referring to T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* (v. 430).
29. Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006).
30. Sloterdijk, *Die schrecklichen Kinder der Neuzeit*, 86.
31. Marcel Gauchet, “Des savoirs privés de sens?,” in Marie-Claude Blais, Marcel Gauchet, Dominique Ottavi, *Conditions de L’éducation* (Paris: Pluriel/Fayard, 2010), 66. This work will be cited as “Des savoirs” in the text for all subsequent references.
32. Actually, there is a third aspect — the exteriorization of knowledge — that I will not take into account in the present context.
33. Gert J.J. Biesta, *Beyond Learning. Democratic Education for a Human Future* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2006).
34. Wolff-Michael Roth, *Passibility. At the Limits of the Constructivist Metaphor* (Dordrecht-Heidelberg-London, New York: Springer, 2011), 260
35. Gert J.J. Biesta, *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (Boulder and London: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 52, emphasis in original.

36. I specify the reference to culture and to the past because there are, of course, other ways of engaging with the question of the new in education, and, for instance, precisely the works of Biesta offer insights into what could be called, with a grain of approximation, an “existentialist” perspective focusing on subjectification.

37. Desiderius Erasmus, *Declaration de pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis*, ed. Jean-Claude Margolin (Genève: Librairie Groz, 1966).

38. *Ibid.*, 443. I adapted the spelling from the translation from the original Latin, “Lyke reioyseth in lyke,” taken from Desiderius Erasmus (1550), *The Education of Children*, transl. by Richard Sherry, Kindle Edition, 2011.

39. Denis Kambouchner, *L'École, question philosophique* (Paris: Fayard, 2013), 339 (emphasis in original).

40. I use the masculine pronoun to be consistent with the original.

41. I take the ideas of transcendence and resistance from Gert Biesta (respectively, from *The Beautiful Risk of Education* and “Giving Teaching Back to Education: Responding to the Disappearance of the Teacher,” *Phenomenology and Practice* 6, no. 2 (2012): 35–49, but I use it them in a partially different horizon.

42. Kambouchner, *L'École*, 54.

43. Biesta, “Giving Teaching Back to Education,” 36, 42.

44. *Ibid.*, 42.

45. *Ibid.*, 43.

46. Søren Kierkegaard, *La ripetizione*, trans. Dario Borso (Milano: BUR, 1996), 12 (emphasis added).

47. The reference is once again to the idea of *mathesis* in Kambouchner. It is the latter himself who uses the word *mathematikós*.

48. Arendt, “The Crisis in Education,” 174.

49. *Ibid.*, 189. While I find Arendt’s evaluation of pragmatism debatable, it is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss this issue.

The present essay falls within the framework of the research project Reconstruction of Democracy: Beyond Deliberation and Recognition (FFI2012-38009-C02-01), directed by Professor Ramón del Castillo Santos (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia – Madrid), integrated into the Frames of Understanding. A Pragmatist Approach to Norms and Forms of Life project, funded by the Ministerio de Economía y Competitividad, Secretaria de Estado de Investigación.