

# ONTOLOGY OF LANGUAGE, A NEW DEVICE FOR THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NEOLIBERAL SUBJECT?

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## Ontología del lenguaje, ¿un nuevo dispositivo para la construcción del sujeto neoliberal?

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### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to analyze critically the implications of language ontology and transformational learning for education and social order reproduction. The hypothesis supports that these formulations can be understood as a new device of neoliberal subjectivation that internalizes the notion of performance based on linguistic reductionism. The criticism is inscribed in the debate on the construction processes of neoliberal subjectivity and collective action. The foundational premises of language ontology are contrasted with critical learning experiences of Chilean militant's university students and with educational experiences developed by the Landless Rural Workers movement in Brazil. The results show that is experiencing a process of intensification of a new dominant rationality, which is necessary to justify the transformations of contemporary capitalism in all the orders of human existence. We conclude that the ontology of language means, in short, the internalization of the logic of the market in the constitution of being-in-competition, which seeks to reproduce the neoliberal ideology. It is observed that the new interpretation of the human being and the world proclaimed by the ontology of language, denies the world itself on which this notion is based, considering the individual as the central value of society and language as the source of its transformation. In this way, a postmodern relativist ideology is promoted that finds in the subjective —and its transformation potential— a new technology of the self to consolidate the notion of the individual-company. It is concluded that the ontology of language means, in short, the internalization of the logic of the market in the constitution of being-in-competition, which seeks to reproduce the neoliberal ideology.

### Keywords

Ontology, language, neoliberalism, subjectivity, learning.

### Resumen

El propósito de este trabajo consiste en analizar críticamente las implicancias de la ontología del lenguaje y el aprendizaje transformacional para la educación y la reproducción del orden social. Se sustenta la hipótesis de que estas formulaciones pueden ser entendidas como un nuevo dispositivo de subjetivación neoliberal que interioriza la noción de rendimiento a partir del reduccionismo lingüístico. Se inscribe esta crítica en el debate sobre los procesos de construcción de la subjetividad neoliberal y la acción colectiva. Se contrastan las premisas fundantes de la ontología del lenguaje con experiencias de aprendizajes críticos de universitarias y universitarios militantes chilenos y con experiencias educativas desarrolladas por el movimiento de Trabajadores Rurales sin Tierra de Brasil. Los resultados muestran que vivimos un proceso de intensificación de una nueva racionalidad dominante, la cual es necesaria para justificar las transformaciones del capitalismo contemporáneo en todos los órdenes de la existencia humana. Se observa que la nueva interpretación del ser humano y del mundo pregonada por la ontología del lenguaje, niega el propio mundo sobre el cual se sustenta esta noción, al considerar al individuo como valor central de la sociedad y al lenguaje como fuente de su transformación. De esta manera, se promueve una ideología relativista posmoderna que encuentra en lo subjetivo —y su potencial de transformación— una nueva tecnología del yo para consolidar la noción del individuo-empresa. Se concluye que la ontología del lenguaje significa, en definitiva, la interiorización de la lógica del mercado en la constitución del ser-en-competición, con lo cual se busca reproducir la ideología neoliberal.

### Palabras clave

Ontología, lenguaje, neoliberalismo, subjetividad, aprendizaje.



## Introduction

In the context of the great transformations of the capitalist world-system characterized, according to Wallerstein (2001), by the incessant accumulation of capital, in the mid-twentieth century in the central countries of Europe and the United States, philosophical criticism found a new bifurcation: the linguistic turn. This new stream of reflection installed in the center of its concern the question of language, which, according to Oliveira (2001), became a common interest of the schools of Philosophy. This reflection was echoed and diversified and broadened the debates in different fields of the social and human sciences, resignifying the way in which the human being understands reality, his being and the world, according to Ibáñez (2003). Knowledge about the real, mediated by reason, ceased to be seen as a faithful representation of reality and the essence of things to be conceived as a social construction relative to the position of the observer who enunciates.

The language became conceptualized as performative, that is, with capacity to construct the meaning of the human being and the world, as opposed to the idea of language as a mere instrument of communication. For Gergen (1996) language is action on the world, a social artifact that works based on patterns of relationship. The meaning of things, according to Foucault (1978), is given by the discourses that constitute the objects that wish to be known. Language, says Dutra (2014), is a dimension of the constitution of the world, as an institution of social reality. It is not, in the final analysis, about knowledge that becomes part of a progress oriented towards objectivity defended by modern science.

Rodríguez (2013) considera que, a la base del giro lingüístico, pueden identificarse a lo menos cuatro ejes de crítica a la razón moderna y a la filosofía de la conciencia. These axes constitute an important part of the core of postmodern thought, namely: a) the transition from the idea of the subject sovereign of consciousness to the idea of subjectivation and production of subjects; b) the transition from the possibility of understanding the totality of history, as progress, towards fragmented non-objective narratives; c) the transition from the claim of universality of knowledge as the faculty of reason to the plurality of universes that come from specific cultural contexts; and d) the transition from the idea of ideology to the idea of social discourses and imaginaries inscribed in multiform power structures. These transitory critiques opened new paths for the construction of criticism, ethics and politics, allowing to establish new comprehensive frameworks around the processes of social and institutional domination and hegemonic thinking.



Derived, in part, from this broad reflexive tradition, a new selective perspective appears that has become popularized as a language ontology. The ontology of language acquires its specific content from a set of philosophical premises related to the construction of an interpretation of the human being, of the meaning of the human and the world. This could be recognized as new, because, as Echeverría (2003) states, it is confronted with the classical metaphysical program of medieval philosophy and aims to overcome modern philosophy. It is, therefore, postmetaphysical and postmodern. It is nourished, at the same time, by specific postulates that are organized as an eclectic framework and that select specific aspects of different ways of thinking such as those of Nietzsche, Humberto Maturana, Fernando Flores, Heidegger, among others.

This particular proposal of the ontology of language is understood as a positive derivation centered on the interiority of the individual, in contrast to the broad spectrum of negative instituting criticism that exists in different currents of thought influenced, in different ways, by the philosophy of language. Among these is Lacanian psychoanalysis and the social-institutional and epistemic critique carried out by Foucault, Habermas, Austin, Wittgenstein, Jesús Ibáñez, Derrida, Deleuze; among many others. Authors who decentralized their analytical attention to objects-things-to focus on words, language, communication, and discourse.

This derivation of the ontology of language is made of individual positivity because it presupposes the discovery of a new paradigm that is oriented to the future, to action, to results, to subjective transformation and the world; where the individual is the protagonist of the change for that promising future. In this sense, following Echeverría (2003), it is stated that: “a new and radically different understanding of human beings is being developed. This is one of those special events in history that have the power to reconfigure the possible and to modify the future” (p.14).

This affirmation, so convincing and suggestive, motivates to examine what is that which is presupposed in the central premises of this self-described new paradigm, which affirms to provide a new horizon of positive meaning to the world. It is worth highlighting the fact that the conditions of possibility and concrete realization of these proposals have been developed in the world of companies, large corporations, high performance groups, international seminars, and training courses in *ontological coaching*; but it has also been influencing the field of formal education. In these social spaces there is a growing interest in the ontology of language, product of its pragmatic utility to improve personal and organizational effectiveness. This results in a set of questions worthy of



analysis: What implications does this new understanding of human beings have for education and the current social order? What is the real power of transformation over the possible and the future that this perspective assumes, putting in the center the question of language? What is the world of reference that must be changed and what is the horizon of meaning of said change? What limitations can be found in the tools proposed for the change? To what extent is this proposal related to the reproduction of neoliberal globalization?

In response to these questions, the hypothesis is supported that the formulations of the ontology of language and transformational learning can be understood as a new device of neoliberal subjectivation that internalizes the notion of performance based on linguistic reductionism. To present this argument the article is organized into two sections: first, we delve into the premises and presuppositions of the ontology of language, examining its limitations and contradictions. This is to affirm that we are dealing with the configuration of a language according to the construction of the neoliberal subject and an ethic of coexistence that is in tune with neoliberal globalization. Secondly, the category of political subjectivation is retaken as an analytical key to understand the relationship between learning and social transformation, and resituate the proposal of transformational learning, which is a central objective of *ontological coaching*. To this end, the experiential content of young Chilean university activists and the educational experiences promoted by the Movement of Rural Landless Workers of Brazil (MST) are examined. Finally, the most important conclusions and the implications of the proposal of language ontology for the field of education are synthesized.



## From the ontology of language to the language of the neoliberal-being

Due to the economic recession of 1973 that affected much of the planet, there was a complex process of restructuring the world-system, which resulted, after the debt crisis of 1982, in the violent generalization of the process of neoliberalization of the social-economic system. This meant a redefinition, in theoretical, social and political terms, of the relationships between government management, civil society and the market. This process of redefinition, marked by the imposition of the well-known Washington Consensus, the crisis of real socialism and the fall of the Ber-

lin Wall, needed to rebuild new normative, evaluative, and discursive systems to legitimize the new social and economic order in expansion.

Dardot and Laval (2016), consciously surveying the nefarious consequences of the implementation of neoliberal policies in the world, asked themselves: How is it possible to continue deepening this type of policy without having a strong response from society? The answer given by these authors lies in the thesis that this is a new phenomenon. A new rationality of the world is being constructed that consists in constituting and spreading a specific type of neoliberal subjectivity, of patterns of consumption and way of life. Díez (2019) argues that neoliberalism is the instrumental reason of contemporary capitalism. A capitalism fully assumed as a contradictory historical construction and general norm of life, which creates, maintains and justifies a single thought.

Neoliberalism is not a simple ideology of the time, fleeting or momentary. Nor is it a simple economic policy that gives importance to the market and that may or may not be incorporated by the States. Neoliberalism is the dominant form of our existence. Hence, we understand the idea of neoliberal subjectivation as a process of social construction of the self-linked to the demands of the social system. However, the argument is emphasized, according to Dardot and Laval (2016), that the subject of this era is a being-in-competition, which comes from the logic of the market society itself.

Now, it is in this framework that the emergence of the proposal of the ontology of language is understood. This allows to situate the production of new knowledge and its effects in a horizon of meaning that crosses, directly or indirectly, all the dimensions of human life. In the following section its most important postulates are analyzed.

### *A new universal: linguistic reductionism and being as interpretation*

As suggested by Echeverría (2003), the proposal of the ontology of language is affirmed in three general premises with a claim of universality: “we interpret human beings as linguistic beings. And we interpret that human beings create themselves in language and through it” (p.19). From it we can infer that the human being is by his ability to interpret and interpret himself in language. The interpretations give an account of the observer who interprets, so the ontological character would be given by the meaning associated with what the human being is, by the particular way of being as we are.

Here, the question is relevant, how can language be signified, from language itself? This places a problem that is difficult to solve when study-



ing language from one's own language, since it is not a thing. This circularity of the problem goes through the very formulation of the object of reflection when we contemplate on what is meaning, and therefore, an interpretation. To say that the being depends on its interpretation and that it depends on the language with which it is referred, implies assuming that what is indicated carries a meaning. But, how do words connect with the objects of the world? In common sense it is assumed that the answer to this question is, precisely, the meaning as the central axis in the cultural constitution. This problem, which is central to the reflection on language, is absent in the analytical proposal of language ontology. It is accepted that the language activity is interpretive, but it is not known how the language organization systems that speak to itself work. Signification is source and product of itself, because its activity is contained in language and not in things.

This question raises the epistemological problem of subjectivist relativism, which can be recognized in three principles proposed by Echeverría (2003). The first principle indicates that: "we do not know how things are. We only know how we observe them or how we interpret them. We live in interpretive worlds" (p. 25). In this principle, it is presupposed that the act of knowing things depends on the constitution of individuals to establish judgments about them, even if one cannot know things as they are. If the question of truth and the possibility of knowledge ultimately depends on the particular observer, then it is subjectivism because it reduces all truth and judgment about things in the world to individuality, from which the impossibility of truth arises. Each point of view is valid from the point of view of who declares it under certain conditions of reference, which implies that the universal validity of the formulations on how things are is not possible. But the capacity for interpretation is based on the capacity of the language that is constitutive of the human being. Every individual lives in language and from it, therefore, the capacity for interpretation is based on a new universal: language.

Language becomes an absolute in the sense that it seems to carry a universal validity. When the question is asked, how are interpretative differences between individuals explained? It is found that there is an absolute at the base: language. Without that universal, or substantive capacity of the human being, the act of interpretation is impossible. Thus, a universal formulation that rests in a subjectivist relativism is constituted. There is a general property that is activated by each individual, however, each individual cannot make judgments about the whole system, because there are as many possible interpretations of language as there are ob-



serving individuals. Consequently, the theoretical activity of the social historical system is practically impossible. The relationship between universality and particularity in human formulations is a dilemma that has no centrality in the debate of the ontology of language, but which is fundamental when thinking about the transformation of that social system.

The second principle, says Echeverría (2003), refers to: “not only acting according to how we are, (and we do), we are also according to how we act. The action generates being. One becomes what one does” (p. 29). The third principle presented by Echeverría (2003) complements the previous one by asserting that: “individuals act according to the social systems to which they belong. But through actions, although conditioned by these social systems, such social systems can also change” (p. 37). Here arises the philosophical problem of the intentional action of human beings and the question of social change. Echeverría (2003) contrasts his proposal with any type of metaphysical essentialism. It is even claimed that today continues to dominate a metaphysical thought in the common understanding that the being is something immutable. But what common understanding do we mean? In fact, the notion that things are constantly changing and becoming is a principle of political liberalism, of enlightenment and of modern ideas of progress and of Eurocentric Western civilization. Enlightenment is based on the belief that human societies are structures that can be known and understood, given that human beings have the capacity to affect their world. If one does it from a rational condition, then one will achieve good society. This faith in the possibility of the improvement of humanity was the foundation of modernity and the company is the institution that embodies the idea of progress and prosperity. It seems that it is unknown that this matrix is typical of the development of the capitalist system that must generate innovations and new conditions to deploy capital accumulation strategies.

And what is social? According to Echeverría (2003) “the social, for human beings, is constituted in language. Every social phenomenon is always a linguistic phenomenon” (p.13). This definition, although consistent with the general formulation, does not explain the social. The social is reduced to a mere linguistic phenomenon. Poverty, political violence, discrimination by gender, race, socioeconomic status, wars, authoritarianism, inequality in all its expressions, commercial monopoly, the dispossession of common goods from transnational corporations, are they issues that can be conceived as problems of interpretation of the social? Is it possible to change the world with a change of interpretation that comes from the universal linguistic subject? There is doubt about it. The social





cannot be reduced to just language because it obscures the possibility of understanding the structuring of social power relations. This is precisely the way in which the multiple and complex unit that is the social, as Osorio (2012) argues, is reduced to a problem of subjective-relative interpretation, because the structures of interpretation of reality are cultural. The being and the social as interpretation leads to a properly metaphysical conception, since the explanation is based on language as the fundamental principle of the reality of the human being, it is an entity, a being, not a thing. The human being as such is a being in language.

There is no rigorous formulation of what social change is, because the constitution of the social system is not analyzed in terms of its conflicting structuring and its history. But, although it is affirmed that there is no teleology in the formulation of the ontology of language, it does assume a very clear one: that of the result. The actions are oriented by results. They acquire their meaning when goals are achieved and behaviors and emotions are changed. This teleology is towards/for itself. It must transcend towards the modification of the subject itself.



### *From the ethics of the coexistence of the neoliberal-self to the ethics of life*

The ethics of human coexistence is for the defenders of the ontology of language a substantial concern. Faced with the new challenges of globalization it is necessary to build innovative proposals for social coexistence, which lies in an intrinsic relationship between language, body and emotion. For Echeverría (2003):

Language can affect emotions, just as emotions can affect language. Due to our emotional state, we will engage in certain conversations and will not be available to others. (...) We consider the emotional aspect of the person as the most important aspect when it comes to, for example, learning and *coaching*. The emotional field of the person is the factor that defines their limits for change and personal improvement. (p. 213)

These general formulations insist on the idea-force that the source of the problems lies in the being of the individuals and in the external conditioning factors that hinder that being. Faced with the dissatisfaction of the being and the distressing difficulty of responding to the mandate of performance and effectiveness-efficiency of interpersonal actions and relationships, a change is necessary. If the reference of the problem is based on the being of the people then the change must be placed in the construction of a new being of such persons. The change requires orien-

tation training in the areas of language, emotions and body, to achieve the desired results. It is about looking for a new interpretation of the world and of oneself, because the problem is formulated precisely as an inadequate interpretation of the world and of oneself, therefore of being.

By unveiling the person's being, we can identify that which can be modified to work on the source of dissatisfaction of human existence. That is why it is fundamental to live the principle of lifelong learning, since society and the world are rapidly changing. It is an ethical imperative, therefore, that a new duty be rebuilt to 'be' in the world: self-realization and effective personal development. The self stands as the privileged field of veneration and cultivation, of change and transformation. The self happens to be conceived as a consumer of tools that are useful for its empowerment. In fact, there is a fairly diversified market that offers multiple therapies to enhance that self, to add value and distinction. Díez (2019) identifies techniques such as coaching, neurolinguistic programming (NLP), transactional analysis and multiple procedures linked to a school or a guru.

A permanent evaluation of the self must be developed to reproduce the economic and social mandate of innovation, competitiveness and leadership. This implies, according to Castro-Gómez (2010), to undertake self-management that entails the ability to "constantly reinvent oneself and manage our own human capital" (p. 216). People must conceive themselves, according to Becker (1983), as a profitable human capital that seeks to maximize profits in the future, as a result of previous investments. They must submit to continuous self-control in social development. Becoming, which, in terms of López-Ruiz (2007; 2013), is plagued by changes, in such a way that the singularity of people's being tends towards their homogenization, due to the construction of a new ethos that promotes a set of values derived from economic theory and business administration. That is, a standardization of desirable behavioral patterns in a context determined by social competence, since it is personal identity that is subordinated to the reproductive mandates of corporate neoliberalism. For Díez (2019) competition becomes the canon of universal behavior of every person. The singular being must be constituted as a being-brand in order to establish differences and thus be completed in the market of beings-companies that compete with each other to improve their offers.

The void that implies the construction of the meaning of life facilitated by the ontology of language is filled with a change of attitude and mood. According to Echeverría (2003):



If someone is not in the right emotional state, he will not see the new possibilities that are shown to him. To see these possibilities, one often has to modify our emotional state first. However, once this is achieved and that someone sees possibilities that he did not previously observe, it could even happen that his emotional state did not allow him to take those actions that he now sees possible. The emotionality that allows us to observe something is not necessarily the same that will lead us to act within that space of possibilities. Many times, another emotional change is required to generate the disposition that will lead to those actions. The anthological coach has the responsibility to design all those emotional interventions. (p.214)

Not only must we become competitive beings, we must be emotionally stable, prone and predisposed to the proximity with the other, with the team, as the self, for Olalla (2008) is always found in the other. The relationship between emotion and language is in the judgments that are made based on the interpretations and the meaning that one has.

Notwithstanding the above, and in line with Han (2014), the neoliberal mandate calls for more performance and does so by appealing to our emotions, for which it becomes a capitalism of emotion. Consumption capitalism capitalizes emotions because it sells meanings, not values of use, but emotional values. It promotes the emotionalization of the productive process to generate needs and boost consumption. The manager, for example, must generate positive emotions and be motivators par excellence.

In line with the statements of Han (2014), we live in a system that promotes internal forms of coercion that limit individual liberties by the fact of guiding human action to the pursuit of performance and optimization. This neoliberal mandate is clear in the proposal of the ontology of language, by implying that each person must be in permanent improvement and obliges himself to respond to the model of the subject to which he aspires. This is what Han (2012) calls exploitation of oneself, which is a form of efficient exploitation since it is done voluntarily in response to the performance imperative.

Neoliberalism turns the worker himself into an entrepreneur. It is a being-company, so that contradictions cease to be associated with material conditions and increasing inequality in order to be experienced as an individual problem. The entrepreneur must develop within himself, which is monitored by the self, not by an external disciplinary system. This is so because of the development of what Han (2014) calls psychopolitics, which is an instrument of domination that allows intervention in the thought, emotion and action of people. Neoliberalism seeks, precisely, to dominate the psyche, to reproduce and expand.



Happiness is related to the achievement of selfish goals. We must prepare for happiness by exploiting the narcissism present in the need for success that is part of an internal emptying and continuous dissatisfaction. The exploitation of narcissism occurs in the exploitation of dissatisfaction promoting competition and complacency of narcissistic desire. This is an essential component of the process of commodification of life, as new innovative niches must be created to satisfy that human appetite. Then, there is an economic and cultural construction of that state of perpetual dissatisfaction, which must be processed with new goods to seek comfort, distinction, ostentation and overvaluation of personal self-image.

The fundamental reason for the unhappiness of humanity, which is denied by the professionals of the ontology of language, refers precisely to the reproduction of a social system that is based on the incessant accumulation of capital and power. The alienation of being is due to the naturalization of the structuring of society in social groups that deserve more than others. In effect, neoliberal thinking for Hinkelammert (1984) is a thought of legitimization of bourgeois society that defines its identity by distancing itself explicitly from a socialist society proposal. The aim is to avoid self-improvement of bourgeois society by means of market thinking that is based on polarities: on the one hand chaos, on the other, the market and perfect competition. This supposes the old idea of infinite progress that in reality is not realized. For Hinkelammert (1995) “modernity leads to a self-destructive carousel. The neoliberal policy does nothing but boost the speed with which the carousel moves. It is a carousel of death” (p.148).

The selective and positive philosophical content of the ontology of language denies philosophy itself because it avoids contemplation, leisure, imagination, doubt, existential anguish. The term *negocio* (business) comes from the Latin *negotium*, which in turn is composed of the adverb *nec* negation and *otium* which means leisure. Business as a buying and selling activity is the denial of leisure, of reflection. The mercantile activity, as it is known in the capitalist system, is based on the principle of instrumental, interested and speculative rationality. To relate philosophy to business profitability is, to say the least, problematic and dangerous. The need for performance generates the opposite of happiness: anxiety, the tension to achieve the goals set for optimal institutional functioning. The reinforcement of this imperative is given by social approval and economic growth.

This type of rationality reifies the social system and the modes of neoliberal capitalist domination. Not only is there a denial of the world, but there is a domestication of being in the world for the dominant type



of economic, social and political relationship. The negation for the case of the ontology of language is concealment of the conditions over which life is produced, reproduced and transformed in an unequal manner.

The criterion of ethical judgment must be based on a criterion of life, from which one speaks of social coexistence. The transformation of the neoliberal self passes through the social system that gives it a sense of being, that is, the overcoming of neoliberalism. The positivity that is sought with the neoliberal subject rests with the ego itself. It is a reflection of itself. It is an ego-entrepreneur ethic. More than affective coexistence there is a decomposition of coexistence based on the imperative of being-in-competition. There is an ideology that operates as thought and action schemes, with which the misery of others is not problematized, but rather problematizes why the ego does not achieve its objectives of performance and optimization. To follow, the reasons why the ontology of language can be understood as a new component of neoliberal ideology are specified.



### *Why is the ontology of language a neoliberal ideology?*

The ontology of language is an ideological construction. Ideology, according to Chauí (1986), is a specific form of the modern social imaginary. It is a necessary way by which social agents represent for themselves the social, economic and political appearance. Appearance that, by virtue of being the immediate and abstract mode of the manifestation of the historical process, is the concealment or dissimulation of the real. Ideology is a body of representations and coherent norms and rules that teach us to know and act, institute an order and are able to explain and justify concrete reality. It follows that the ideological discourse aims to coincide with things, to cancel the difference between thinking, saying and being. It operates a logic of identification that unifies thought, language and reality, in order to obtain the identification of all social subjects as a particular universalized image, that is, the image of the ruling class.

The ideology of language ontology gains coherence by universalizing the particular and eliminating differences, contradictions, and disarming attempts to question it. The revised principles clearly express this. The search for universals in language, interpretation and human being. There are no explanations about the gender, ethnic differences, the unequal distribution of wealth in capitalist society and the increase of social and territorial inequality in neoliberalism. Explanations are obscured on the determinations that organize and structure neoliberalism,

and therefore, the conflicts related to the various existing processes of accumulation and domination. The problems are formulated as a matter of relative interpretation of reality, which, be it present, cannot be known. In this sense, the real that is found in the language (positive version of the ontology of language) is inverted, a tool for the naturalization of social inequalities that guarantees that, contrary to what they propose, everything remains the same: society structured based on social relations of one social class domain over the others.

It is fundamental to understand that ideas are not the determinants of the historical process, but that they are constituted by the historical process. In the ideology of language ontology, ideas assume the form of knowledge, that is, of instituted ideas propagated as competent discourses that appeal to aspects of philosophy and biology. These discourses are preferred, authorized and dominant. For Chauí (2014) the ideology of the competition realizes its domination by the power and prestige of the knowledge and scientific-technological ideas. This ideology had its origin in the factories with the scientific managers. They were supposed to know more about work than the workers themselves. This conception then spreads throughout society under the notion of the knowledge society. The competent discourse is, in effect, that of specialists, of those who know about some dimension of the nature or life of people and who teach to live better. This has a central political consequence: society, thus understood, is divided between competent individuals who command and incompetent individuals who obey. This replaces the idea that society is divided into social classes.

The ontology of language, as a competent discourse, justifies and legitimizes the construction of a new neoliberal being in the world of anti-philosophy, that is, of business and success as a universalized particular value. The neoliberal subject characterized by its ability to innovate, to establish cordial and affective relationships, which is, in turn successful and competitive, which must apply a permanent self-assessment and modify its behavior by resorting to new interpretations of itself and the world; becomes the universal subject. This neoliberal discourse circulates on multiple forms: educational institutions, media, large international and intergovernmental organizations, social policies; among others. The new norm of life remodels the subjectivity of the people what implies, as they refer Dardot and Laval (2016), that this new reason of the world acts at a deeper level than the ideology.

The universalist ideologies present in neoliberal globalization seek the homogenization and expansion, not only of the market society, the degra-



dation of the public sphere and the supremacy of the private sphere, but also and above all, as indicated by López-Ruiz (2013), the construction of processes of political subjectivation oriented to depoliticization. This is because the condition of the company configures a new mode of subjectivation.

Next, the relationship between the processes of political subjectification and the notions of learning and education, oriented to social change, is examined. This is in contrast to the notion of the neoliberal school whose purposes, according to Laval (2004), are not conditioned by the human need for responsible training of citizenship, but rather by economic efficiency, where students are conceived as human capital. The school, for Diez (2010), is submitted to the economic reason and the pedagogical ideal is put at the service of the needs of companies and the market, so that education provides flexible and versatile people.



## Political subjectivation: a repositioning of transformational learning in the educational field

In the line of reflection of Foucault (2009), government consists of a set of actions that are made to influence the behavior of others and direct their lives. In addition to this government of the others, there is self-government, which consists in the influence of the government around the actions that the subjects carry out with themselves, which constitutes a certain type of individual. The neoliberal rationality configures a process of subjectivation that must be compatible with the changes in the prevailing rationality in society. Neoliberalism is a way of being and thinking, a way of governing life with a regime of social practices. In other words, devices of neoliberal subjectivation are activated that (re) create a subject of epoch, akin to the systemic demands. Hence, following Foucault (1999), the subject does not pre-exist but is instituted by means of discursive mechanisms associated with the institutions of knowledge and power.

The neoliberal ideology of language ontology has as its central consequence the depoliticization of social and educational issues, when it naively affirms that the transformation of the world depends on the interpretation of being in the world and the corresponding actions. In effect, the notion of subjectivity is reduced to the phenomenon of language as a foundation. We talk about individuals without assuming a theory that explains the way in which the subjectivity of people is constituted and adopts a particular conception of power as a capacity to transform the world.



### *The language of power as capacity to collective action*

To reflect on the transformation of the world, it is necessary to enter into the unavoidable discussion about power. Echeverría (2003) proposes:

Our central postulate regarding power is that this is a phenomenon that emerges, as such, from the capacity of language of human beings. Without language, the phenomenon of power does not exist. (p. 222)

To the extent that language is action, language is a source of power. The way we act in language is, therefore, a crucial aspect to assess how powerful we are in life. (p.227)

This way of conceptualizing power reinforces the idea of an individual conscious of his abilities to expand his power. This vision is opposed to that of a repressive power. According to Han (2014), that is precisely what neoliberalism intends, since it expresses power silently so that the dominated do not feel dominated. Neoliberal power is more efficient than the old disciplinary power. Its objective is not to control, it is to activate and motivate rather than to prohibit. Power is more affirmative than negative and generates positive emotions, stimulates expression and exploits freedom; It is seductive and seeks to promote complacency in people. As Echeverría (2003) points out:

It is not only the capacity for action that defines the human being. It is, above all, the ability to expand our capacity for action. It is what we have called power. In today's world, in a world in which our meta-narratives, our transcendental discourses, have stopped adequately feeding us the meaning we need to live, we have no other option for living well than opening ourselves to the path of power, to the path of expansion permanent of our possibilities of action in life. (p. 236)

This positive conception of power enhances a vision of the individual limited to the ability to act in life as a desirable general rule: performance. In this framework, the relationship between power and learning is understood as the extension of individual competences that depend on certain personal judgments. For Echeverría (2003):

(...) there is no learning, as there is no knowledge, that does not refer, in one way or another, to our capacity for effective action (p. 230). [And he continues to point out], when we learn something, we expand our capacity for action and, therefore, we increase our power. Every time we acquire new skills, we gain power. (p. 231)





A richer relational vision is what provides the perspective of collective action to understand the social power and subjectivity that is (re) configured in that process. It is based on the premise that collective actions are not an isolated sum of individual actions, but are a way of understanding the configuration of individuals in their social relationship. But, a very particular one according to Corcuff (2008): the one that tends to the individual and collective emancipation. There the individual is conceived, according to Martucelli and Araujo (2010), as the consequence of an action, consecrating it in the production of a social life, since it remains immersed in the social spaces of which he is a part of, through the social forces in dispute. The individual as such exists in the domain of interpersonal life, which allows openness to the other, a solidarity that gives life to the social process, of which said individual is part and motor.

This connects with the question of power from the political. In the line of understanding of Alvarado, Ospina and García (2012), the political can be understood as a relational reality that expresses itself and acquires a body in the public sphere, in the field of the collective. It is meant by a self, charged with the instituting meanings of the private sphere. It is possible, according to Castro (2008), to link the subjectivity of the individual to a way of being, being and acting as a social being, in the perspective of being a configurator of the social world and, in turn, permeated by it. It is there where the subjects are configured as such, as social beings.

The symbolic construction implied by subjectivity is generated in correlation with others in the construction of the self, which in many cases has the capacity to generate an alternative to the institutional forms of power, constructing subjectivities that do not necessarily respond to the hegemonic normativity. It is in this way, how political subjectivity options are constituted and configured that emerge as emancipatory alternatives to the dominant power. Political subjectivity implies the empowerment and expansion of the frames that define it: its autonomy, its reflexivity, its historical awareness, the articulation of action and narration about it, the negotiation of new orders in the ways of sharing power; and the recognition of public space. There is thus, for Alvarado, Ospina and García (2012), a game of pluralities in which the subjects recognize themselves as equals as humans, as men or women who share multiple identity conditions but who, at the same time, recognize themselves as different in how particular is their biographical appropriation of the shared meanings.

Political subjectivity is, in fact and as Castro (2008) points out, contrary to intentional individualization by processes of domination, since individuals can detach themselves from imposed identity forms by not



identifying with the categories that classify them. For Melucci (1989) these individuals announce to society that there are problems of this or that type through claims that are given from symbolic and cultural projects. It is in this domain where the system is confronted and spaces of freedom are generated. Space that, mediated by political subjectivity materialized in political commitment, can be understood as a libertarian act, which comes from the dynamic relationship between individual and community.

The ontology of language ignores the discussion about the power relations that structure contemporary neoliberal society and its multiple contradictions. Rodríguez; Betancourt and Varas (2018) argue that there are real hegemonic processes of depoliticization and fragmentation of political citizenship in the educational field. At the same time there are multiple experiences of re-politicization of the students who dispute forms of contemporary material and ideological domination. These experiences constitute real places of re-existence and proposals for social change that are not based on the principle of reproduction of multiple inequalities that are created by the market society. Next, two experiences that are still in development are reviewed. The first is the educational proposal of the MST and the second corresponds to a report of a doctoral research related to the political commitment of young university students of pedagogy in Chile.

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### *Socially engaged learning: the experiences of the MST in Brazil and university students with political commitment in Chile*

An undeniable reality is the historical and growing inequality and marginalization that exists in Brazil. The huge concentration of land associated with the agri-export economic development model and the usurpation of the lands of indigenous peoples, Afro-descendants and peasants has perpetuated this situation of exploitation and marginalization of a large part of the population. These historical conditions of oppression have been accompanied by dynamics of exclusion in various areas, especially in the educational area by the state formal education system.

In this scenario, initiatives of rebellion and resistance emerge among some social movements, who build alternative political projects, such as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra-MST*. Organization that from its roots identifies education as one of its main axes, supported, according to Barbosa (2015), from an epistemic matrix where the sociocultural and political inscription of experience and knowledge is articulated, with its own plan of political struggle.

During the early 1980s in the first camps of the State of Rio Grande do Sul, the MST, as indicated by Bahniuk and Vendramini (2016), performs the first actions to fight for access to education in the areas of agrarian reform. By 1986 the first school of the *Anoni Fazenda* was made official, educating 600 students in the basic cycle from the perspective of field education.<sup>1</sup> From this and other various experiences, in 1988 the education sector was created within the movement, which is shaping a pedagogical proposal and strengthening the work of education for youth and adults. Process that has been based, as indicated by Kolling, Vargas and Caldart (2012), on the inclusion of 1,800 public schools of basic and middle education in the settlements, with a reach of 200,000 people among children, youth and adults Without Land; and training for about 8000 educators to work in these schools.

The educational project of the MST includes among its objectives the struggle for the recovery of its memory, cultures and identities, its liberation and political emancipation through the struggle for agrarian reform. This project contains a set of characteristics that reposition the relationship and debate between education, learning, individual and social transformation. Next, three central aspects that make it possible to contrast this pedagogical experience with the notion of transformational learning of the ontology of language are highlighted.

In the first place, the MST (2000) sees education as popular, because it is at the service of the real interests of the popular classes that make up the popular movement. According to Martins (2013), from the influences of proposals such as the popular education of Paulo Freire (2004), the social pedagogy and the education of the work of Moisey Pistrak and Makarenko, the socialist pedagogy of Krupskaya and the theories of the learning of Vygotsky, among others, the political-educational project was being configured. It is not a matter of moving from learning to entrepreneurship, as proposed by Echeverría (2003), but of a concrete proposal that contrasts with the notion projected by the neoliberal school.

In this popular education project, the subjects are immersed in their relationship with others and with the world in which they are enrolled. That is why the subject is constructed as such, problematizing the material, symbolic and spiritual social reality in his context. It is their own individuality understood from the community that is guided by principles of solidarity and commitment to social transformation. Education, in that sense, is an instrument of transformation of the complex social reality that conditions social existence for the reproduction of life.



Individuality is constructed as a political stance against the reality that transcends the notion of the egoistic-narcissistic-neoliberal individual.

Second, the educational proposal of the MST (2005), being committed to the transformation of society, which is based on social relations of exploitation of human beings and nature, constitutes a liberating social practice. Liberating because it puts at the center of the debate the contradictions of capitalist society, the democratization of the land and also of knowledge. Because it is about reading the world to identify and understand the causes of the oppression conditions of most social sectors, so as to be able to intervene on it. In this way, this proposal operates under the philosophical principles of education for: social transformation, work and cooperation, the various dimensions of the human being, promoting humanistic and socialist values; in order to build permanent processes of human formation and transformation. In this line, Erivaldo Barbosa (2015), teacher of the field schools, in a documentary says:

The traditional school is marked by the fragmentation of knowledge, by decontextualization, and say, training for the market. Our schools have fought those main characteristics of traditional education, thinking of strengthening the struggle of the working class and giving more dignity to the people living in the countryside, then, it is to give a social utility to the knowledge produced in the school, to give answer to the problems of reality.<sup>2</sup>

Education is conceived as an arena of political dispute that should promote values related to social participation, democracy and social coexistence. Therefore, this critical pedagogy translates into the idea of working together to find solutions to the problems that directly affect their communities and settlements. Therefore, collective organization is prioritized, rather than the development of individual competences.

Third, the MST (2005) proposes 15 pedagogical principles, namely: the relationship between theory and practice; methodological combination between education and training processes; reality as a basis for the production of knowledge; socially useful training content; education by and for work; organic link between educational processes and political processes; organic link between educational processes and economic processes; organic link between education and culture; democratic management; student self-organization; creation of pedagogical groups and ongoing training of educators; research attitudes and skills; combination between collective and individual pedagogical processes.



One of the principles of the political-educational project of the MST stands out: the omnilateral formation, which, according to Bahniuk and Vendramini (2016), is defined by its integrality, since it seeks to train human beings in their cognitive, aesthetic, technical-professional, political, corporal, moral dimensions among others. The aim is to decentralize the educational practice from its reduction to the cognitive and to the reproduction of capitalist morality. Rather, it is related to the debate on education as a reproducer of social inequalities that fulfills an ideological function, since it contributes to the reproduction of capitalist production relations. In this sense, Bourdieu and Passeron (1996) argue that “the education system must produce selected and hierarchical subjects once and for all and for all of life” (p.104). Unlike this present trend in formal education, the MST, in the words of Wrobel (2014), proposes that:

Education for work is given through a real and concrete work, represented in some cases in what is called *pedagogy of alternation*: students spend time taking the theoretical course and a time participating in the activities of the community and of the work of the field. (p.102)

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For Lia Barbosa (2015) one of the most important contributions of the political-educational project of the MST is the strengthening of the political dimension of education. It is conceived as a concrete space for the construction of a critical conscience and a political direction, essential for the conduct of the political project of the movement. Through an emancipatory and critical pedagogical thought, which questions and proposes new concepts, and renovates educational methodologies and practices.

In Chile, a recent investigation by Marcela Betancourt (2019) aimed to analyze the experiences of young pedagogy students who present political commitment. Thirty dialogic interviews were applied which, according to La Méndola (2014), focuses on mutual and horizontal recognition in the communicative act. This study highlights three dimensions that make it possible to counteract the arguments of language ontology about social transformation and learning as a precondition of entrepreneurship focused on individual abilities.

In the first place, young people, who have been part of the student movement, that socially and politically claim quality education as a human right, associate social transformation with the processes of democratization of society. This is understood from a notion of individuals as citizens, not as consumers. There is a need for collective action to generate change which must be constituted from the active and committed participation in the decision making of public affairs. This need arises

from the very history of problematic family life. In most of the cases analyzed, the problems are related to overcrowding and the material precariousness of the families of the young people. Families must make an economic effort, and therefore work for life, to get their children to study at the university. This over demands and anguish to the parents product of the high monetary costs that a commodified education implies, which is translated, finally, in the imposition of the indebtedness. This is the reality that we want to modify from the collective action to gain space of student and social decision in the organization of the educational system, which is subsumed by the commercial logic of economic profit. It is desired to reverse the weak and incomplete democratic forms of the State that becomes a manager of neoliberal educational policies.

A second relevant aspect refers to the construction of spaces of freedom in the organizational autonomy from militancy. It is there where the instituting social relations, which activate new forms of social imagination, are collectivized. From that place, significant experiential learning processes are reconfigured, especially in the experiences of occupation of educational spaces and organization of the student movement's demands agendas. In the words of the student María Isabel (Betancourt, 2019), regarding collective action and political commitment:

I militate because there is indeed a possibility to transform this miserable world in which we live. (...) The contribution of the militancy is to intervene or contribute to social processes and movements and propose programs and political solutions. (...) It allows me to see life with other eyes, I have been able to share with women, workers, they change your paradigms, militancy makes you break with prejudices, for that reason the relationship with your students becomes a contribution in your life, more that only one teacher in the classroom, we are also trying to change society. (p. 155)

Consequently, they must generate negotiation strategies with the authorities to make their requests visible and commit themselves to collective improvements in both the quality of education and the material conditions tending to dignify their educational spaces. In this process a disidentification with the organizational form of the political party is evidenced by a feeling of distrust and discredit of such forms of exercise of power. Young people choose to visualize structures of domination that are present in society and in school daily life. This refers to the discussion of gender, feminism and patriarchy.

The conception of oneself as political subjects committed to social change is the third dimension that stands out. In this sense, the recogni-



tion of themselves as militants, which comes from family influences or from other students, strengthens them. This is an important aspect that accompanies them in their lives and therefore is part of the dynamics of their identity. It is the experiences of political commitment that have largely allowed them to build their spaces of autonomy, from the personal decision to their social position, which entails citizen and collective responsibilities. Political commitment is meant as necessary, as mandatory, as their lifestyle, as a contribution not only to the country's democracy, but also to their own future teaching work. Thus, their projections are in the visualization that what they learned in their militancy, will make them be democratic teachers, recognizing the differences in the ways of understanding the reality that their students have. In this sense, beyond the social value and the importance that they assign to the political commitment in their lives, for them, it is an activity where they are educated and trained, becoming better citizens and better teachers.

Faced with the phenomenon of construction of neoliberal hegemony that impacts on the political organization and functioning of educational systems, we will have to advance in the collective and reflective challenge of revealing the importance and transcendence of the critical pedagogies that exist and that are found in the margins of society. The question is, according to Rodríguez (2009), to contribute to the construction of education for social transformation.



## Conclusions

Based on the critical analysis and the concrete experiences of socially engaged learning, we argue that the central formulations of the proposal of the ontology of language constitute a new device of neoliberal subjectivation that internalizes the notion of performance from linguistic reductionism. It is observed that the new interpretation of the human being and the world proclaimed by the ontology of language, denies the very world on which this notion is based, considering the individual as the central value of society and language as the source of its transformation. In this way, a specific type of postmodern relativist ideology is promoted that finds in the subjective -and its transformation potential- a new technology of the self to consolidate the notion of the individual-company.

The interference of this type of rationality in the field of education creates a series of controversial implications that need to be problematized by the philosophy of education and the critical social sciences. It



is noted that on the ethical level the ontology of language promotes the construction of the student under the imperative of performance and the logic of self-assessment. A relationship with himself is established as being a human capital. Learning becomes an instrument that seeks to strengthen the idea of entrepreneurship, expanding the power of action of individuals through the development of personal skills in a competitive world. At the political level, the question of power is addressed to oneself and the school becomes an active political instrument for the formation of competitive-beings, and therefore depoliticized. At the subjective level, personal performance is sought based on the conception of oneself as being-company, innovator and consumer.

The ontology of language in its positive version means, consequently, the internalization of the logic of the market in the constitution of being-in-competition, with which it seeks to reproduce and expand the neoliberal ideology. Business rationality affects the processes of subjectivation, where each person is conceived as a human capital that must be managed to bear fruit. The extension of commercial rationality expands to all spheres of human existence, making neoliberal reason, as Díez (2019) and Dardot and Laval (2016) argue, a new world-reason.

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## Notes

- 1 For a detailed and grounded systematization on 'field education' see "Caderno de educação N 13. MST Escola" of the year 2005. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2Iw84Vr>
- 2 This story was taken from a documentary that we recommend. The translation is ours. It can be seen at: <https://bit.ly/2KBV5nS>

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