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Re-enchanted education: *Bachilleratos Populares* in Argentina as a commoning experience

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ABSTRACT

Bachilleratos Populares (henceforth BPs) are free and self-managed high schools by grassroots social organizations after the Argentine crisis of 2001 to provide an option for youth and adults to finish their secondary education as a response to the gap the neoliberal reform left in this educational modality during the 1990s. After some BPs received state recognition to issue degrees in 2007, their number increased rapidly to almost a hundred BPs by 2015. Based on a literature review, this article offers a work of a theoretical nature: it deploys the neo-Marxist approach to the commons as a theoretical-analytical framework through the experience of the BP movement. This approach denounces the processes of enclosure (commercialization and privatization) of shared material and immaterial resources while also promoting commoning practices as seeds that anticipate an anti-capitalist future in the present.

ABSTRACT (SPANISH)

Los *Bachilleratos Populares* (BPs) son escuelas gratuitas y autogestionadas creadas por organizaciones sociales de base tras la crisis argentina de 2001 para proporcionar una opción de estudios secundarios a jóvenes y adultos ante el vacío estatal que la reforma neoliberal dejó en esta modalidad educativa en los noventa. Tras el reconocimiento estatal para emitir títulos de los primeros BPs en 2007, su número aumentó rápidamente hasta casi un centenar de BPs en 2015. Sobre la base de una revisión de literatura, este artículo ofrece un trabajo de naturaleza teórica en el que desplegamos el enfoque neo-marxista de los comunes como un marco teórico-analítico a través de la experiencia del movimiento de BPs. Este enfoque denuncia los procesos de cercamiento (mercantilización y privatización) de los recursos comunes materiales e inmateriales al mismo tiempo que promueve las prácticas de commoning como semillas que anticipan en el presente un futuro anticapitalista.

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Introduction

‘Let us re-enchanted the world through commoning practices.’ This is the suggestive invitation of Silvia Federici (2019) in a clear reference to Weber’s recognized theory. This re-enchanted is not a nostalgic return to a primitive pre-capitalist past, but rather a call for an insurgent and revolutionary path of collective action to escape the capitalist law of value and build here and

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now the seeds of a utopian future alternative to capitalism. *Re-enchanting the world* is a call to explore the ‘reasons and logics other than those of capitalist development,’ an activity that is ‘central to most anti-systemic movements and a precondition for resistance to exploitation’ (Federici 2019, 288). This call to action seems to be the same one that inspired the Cooperative of Popular Educators and Researchers (*Cooperativa de Educadores e Investigadores Populares*) to ‘take education in their own hands’ (Ampudia 2012, 5), and promote the first ‘High School for Youth and Adults’ (*Bachillerato para jóvenes y adultos*) in 2004 in the city of Buenos Aires (IMPA 2016). This experience was simultaneously replicated by the Popular Stoker Organization (*Organización Popular Fogoneros*) in the suburbs of Buenos Aires and in subsequent years by other grassroots organizations, reaching almost a hundred BPs in 2015 (GEMSEP 2016). As we will explain in more detail later on, BPs emerged in response to an educational landscape marked by a high percentage of young and adult population without primary or secondary education degrees (Elisalde 2008), and by insufficient state coverage, which had been particularly worsened by the neoliberal reform of the nineties (Gluz 2013). In this way, BPs break into the Argentine educational landscape without prior state mediation and, through their action, vindicate themselves as legitimate educational actors who claim to bring ‘a new school for a new world’ (Wahren 2020, 106).

This utopian horizon of the BPs, which is typical of the *commons*, is seen not only in their explicit objectives, but also in their organizational praxis, which, again, reflects the key principles of *commoning* practices (Federici 2019): (i) self-management marked by horizontality and use of assembly; (ii) their use at the territorial and community level; (iii) their motivation to respond to a social need that the capital-state alliance has exposed; and (iv) the affirmation of their autonomy, from which they distance themselves from ‘the public’, understood as connected to the state and, therefore, to the traditional schooling format. However, since education is a field highly regulated by the state (Gluz 2013), BPs will soon see the need to fight for their degrees to be recognized and develop a strategy to question the state (Echegaray, Dorado, and Gil 2009; Elisalde 2008), which will lead to a tension between the autonomy of their projects and the heteronomy of the state (Wahren 2020).

This paper draws upon the empirical reference of BPs to deploy a theoretical-analytical framework to address commoning practices in education. This theoretical-analytical framework does not offer a commons model to follow. To pose the commons in this way would be to adopt a positivist and technocratic logic of the revolution that is contrary to its transformational spirit *from below* (De Angelis 2017). Consequently, I do not engage the BPs to measure how far they are from an ideal of the commons, but with the objective of understanding, based on their experience of almost twenty years, how the challenges of commoning practices function in the field of education. In this way, this article aims to fill a gap in the literature on educational commons, which has been developed with little empirical observation (Pechtelidis 2021). To do this, first I expose the coordinates of the neo-Marxist debate around the commons. I then review how this neo-Marxist approach has been deployed, with few empirical contributions, in the field of educational research. In the latter part, I break down the central elements of the BPs that allow us to understand them as a commoning educational experience. I pay special attention to the relationship between BPs and the state, which accounts for the challenges faced in commoning education, which is a sphere highly regulated by the state. The article concludes with a synthesis of the main reflections drawn from the experience of the BPs.

This work is based on a documentary analysis of academic literature on BPs, complemented by the analysis of some documents elaborated by BP and their coordination bodies. To do so, in the first step, I searched relevant academic works in various databases, such as ERIC, Google Scholar, Redalyc, and Acta Académica. I used a combination of the keywords in Spanish ('bachillerato popular', 'bachilleratos populares' and 'Argentina') and English ('popular education' or 'popular education high schools' and 'Argentina'). This search yielded an extensive number of documents: 50 academic articles, 37 contributions to academic conferences, 7 book chapters, 1 book, and 2 research working papers. Additionally, I included 5 documents acquired from libraries (3 book chapters and 2 books). Thus, the overall result of this search yielded a total of 102 research documents on BPs.

It is worth making some observations about this body of documents. Firstly, the vast majority of these works are written in Spanish. We only found two articles in English. This reveals the limited international academic dissemination of the experience of BPs. Secondly, it is worth highlighting the work developed by the GEMSEP research group (University of Buenos Aires). Their members, who also actively participated in one of the pioneering BPs, have conducted notable research on BPs in the emerging field of social movements and popular education (Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018; Rubinsztain, 2012; GEMSEP 2015; 2016; Rubinsztain & Blaustein, 2015; Said 2018; Wahren 2020). Thirdly, as in the case of GEMSEP, much of the academic production on BPs is characterized by a militant research style that connects theoretical reflection with the researcher's own participation in BPs, as educators and even as founding members.

Thus, their scholarship adopts a spirit similar to the 'systematization' methodology¹ proposed by the important researcher and popular educator Óscar Jara Holliday (2018), which aim is to make popular education experiences visible. Fourthly, it is worth highlighting those studies developed from the perspective of the ethnography of education, which moves away from the goal of making BPs visible to focus on understanding the meanings of education that come into play in these experiences (Caisso 2017, 2021; López Fittipaldi 2019, 2022; García 2017).

In a second step, drawing upon the abstract of these works, we have selected those studies that address the shared traits of BPs linked to the guiding principles of commoning practices. To do this, we have excluded the documents that did not provide any information in this regard, such as papers on teacher training, specific didactic experiences in BPs, or that only describe the trajectory of a single BP without further analysis. Thus, we have included all the papers that provide an overview of the BPs on the following dimensions: (1) Origins of the BPs (² *Aguiló and Wahren 2014; *Elisalde 2008; *Rubinsztain, 2012), (2) political-pedagogical aims and organizational principle (*Blaustein et al. 2018; Cabrera y Brusilovsky, 2014; *Sirvent & Santana, 2021), and (3) their relationship with the state (García 2011; *Echegaray, Dorado, and Gil 2009; *Facioni, Ostrower, and Rubinsztain 2013). Many documents included in the analysis shed light on more than one of these dimensions (*Alfieri & Lázaro, 2019; *Ampudia, 2008, 2012; *Ampudia & Elisalde, 2015; *GEMSEP 2015 y 2016; Gluz 2013; *Moñino, 2021; Ouviña 2012; Sverdlick y Costas, 2008; *Wahren, 2020). Furthermore, we have included (4) qualitative studies (ethnographic and interview-based studies) that allow for a deeper understanding of some tensions and contradictions in the experience of BPs in relation to the prior three dimensions (Caisso 2017, 2021; López Fittipaldi 2019, 2022; García 2017; *Said 2018). In this way, the final sample of analyzed documents consists of a total of 26 academic documents.

In the third step, I analyzed the sample of selected documents through the lens of the neo-Marxist approach to the commons. Our analysis strategy consisted of tracing in the documents the guiding principles that organize BPs as commoning experiences. As we will explain in further detail in the following section, these principles include 1) a utopian horizon, (2) assembly formulas, (3) horizontality, and (4) autonomy from the state. In regard to the autonomy principle, we have traced the challenge to the state posed by the movement of BPs. Within the analysis offered in this paper, the references to some documents prepared by BPs (IMPA 2016) or their coordination bodies BPs (BPMPLD, 2013; RBPC, 2011) illustrate in detail the overall arguments posed.

The Neo-Marxist revolution of the commons and commoning experiences in Latin America

In the last two decades *the commons*, with various formulations—*the common*, *common goods*, *commoning* or even *the community* and *the communal*—has sparked intense academic debate among Marxist thinkers (for an overall review, see Pérez Fernández and Zamora García Forthcoming) and seems to inspire numerous collective direct-action initiatives in response to the accelerated *enclosure* dynamics (privatization, commercialization) of material and immaterial resources in the neoliberal era. These thinkers—Hardt and Negri (2009), Laval and Dardot (2015), Bollier and Helfrich (2019), Federici (2019); De Angelis (2017); Linebaugh (2008); and Raquel Gutiérrez (2017) and Raúl Zibechi (2017) in Latin America—explore revolutionary-emancipatory paths within the *common* linked to forms of direct democracy that do not go through the control of the state.

In the European context, *the common* comes to the forefront in the face of discontent with the state's management of the 2008 crisis through privatization and austerity policies (Bollier 2016; Laval and Dardot 2015), which made the historic capital-state alliance on which capitalist development is based crudely visible. In Latin America, however, the common gained prominence beforehand, within the cycle of social struggle in the 1990s (Zibechi 2017). These social movements were not only articulated as a protest against inequality and poverty exacerbated by the neoliberal reforms of the eighties and nineties, but their distinctive feature was the launch of numerous community-popular initiatives—*commoning*—that were autonomous, self-managed, and horizontal to respond to the (re)production needs of life that the capitalist order systematically threatens (Svampa 2008). Here I am referring to spaces such as soup kitchens, popular economy cooperatives, recovered companies,³ or Popular Education initiatives, such as the BPs in Argentina. A repeatedly cited example of struggle for the common is the community water supply system of Cochabamba (Bolivia), whose defense against the government's privatization attempts was resolved in the water war in 2001 (De Angelis 2017; Laval and Dardot 2015). These examples reveal the strength of the popular community horizon (Gutiérrez 2017) of *'another world'* (Zibechi 2017) that is organized from the south. Herein, the South is not a geographical set of coordinates but 'a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimizing such suffering' (Santos 2016, 18). Within the resistance of the south, the decolonial is not confined to academic debate but is articulated in the social struggle of subaltern groups (such as indigenous peoples, women, youth, and unemployed workers) in these movements (Zibechi 2017). In this way, community-popular experiences are a hopeful reservoir of knowledge in movement built and accumulated in the South.

The high heterogeneity in the forms of *commoning* and in the demands articulated around the *commons* address the diversity in models of statehood, the social needs that the capital/state alliance reveals, and the characteristics of the community ties within civil society (Bollier 2016). This heterogeneity makes it impossible to speak of a *model* of the commons one could follow, which would also be a positivist and technocratic reduction of social change against which the commons rebel (De Angelis 2017). But it is also a sign of the plebeian character of community-oriented work and the strength of its versatility (Gago and Sztulwark 2019).

Towards defining the commons

The commons are defined, firstly, in opposition to the notion of *enclosure*, a category that designates the dynamics of privatization and commodification through which capital develops. In the chapter of *Capital* where he develops the notion of primitive accumulation, Marx (1975) exposes the processes of land enclosure that swept away the communal rights of peasants in England between the 15th and 18th centuries to put the land at the service of capital accumulation, giving birth to capitalism. In 1990, the collective Midnight Notes, with Federici, Caffentzis, and Linebaugh among its members, revised the category of 'enclosure' to denounce neoliberal globalization as a movement of new enclosures over natural, social, and cultural resources, including state public services (Federici 2019). With the recovery of the category 'enclosure', they bring to the fore the expropriatory nature of capital development, recovering the memory of the violent history of divestment and dispossession that characterizes capitalist development.

This *commons/enclosures* opposition is not, however, static. Enclosures are not events that occur once and for all, forever eliminating the common, but rather the common is 'continuously being enclosed and appropriated by capital in its commodified and monetary form' (Harvey 2011, 105). Along the same lines, the commons are not 'something extant once upon a time that has since been lost, but something that, like the urban commons, is continuously being produced' (Harvey 2011, 105). To account for this tense commons/enclosure dynamic, De Angelis (2014) describes a 'double movement' of 'enclosure and commons creation [that] therefore somehow expresses the historical rhythms of the class struggle within capitalism' (p. 300). The commons and enclosures are, thus, two rationalities for the construction of the social that are in dispute while, precisely due to their nature as rationalities, may also emerge intertwined.

As a second feature, it is emphasized that the commons are not a *resource*, but a type of *social relations*: '[c]ommons are not things, but social relations' (Federici 2019, 94); they are 'the bonds that we build to continue being, to make life be life; links that cannot be limited to institutions or things (water, land, nature)' (Zibechi 2019, 59). For this reason, Federici prefers the term *commoning*. Attending to this relational nature, De Angelis (2017, 98) and Bollier and Helfrich (2019) define commons as social systems: 'living social systems through which people address their shared problems in self-organized ways' (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, 17) to 'meet real needs while changing culture and identity' (p. 28). Laval and Dardot (2015) point to this relational character by defining the common as a political principle for the construction of the social. Although Hardt and Negri suggest an understanding of the common as *material resources* (natural or produced) in their earlier formulations, in their latest works they underline its relational character by defining the

common as a ‘social structure or technology’ (Pérez Fernández and Zamora García Forthcoming).

Without aiming to establish a replicable model, Federici and Caffentzis (in Federici 2019) break down several features of anticapitalist *commoning* practices: (i) they anticipate ways of life of a utopian future in the present, thus configuring themselves as ‘experiments in self-provisioning and the seeds of an alternative mode of production in the making’ (p. 89); (ii) they are organized horizontally, providing equitable access to satisfying the needs of commoners; (iii) they are articulated around models of direct democracy that require community members to cooperate and negotiate conflict; (iv) in defining themselves as the relations between commoners, Federici and Caffentzis reject the possibility of global commons and underline the appropriation various international institutions have made of the discourse of the common with the aim of co-opting the revolutionary efforts of these struggles; (v) based on these principles, the commons distances itself from ‘the public’, understood as ‘which is owned, managed, controlled, and regulated by and for the state’ (p. 96).

In relation to the fifth point, the neo-Marxist debate around the commons has devoted much attention to the relationship (or lack thereof) between the state and the commons. Hardt and Negri (2012) identify the force of the common in the multitude’s power to act as ‘a kind of exodus from the existing political structures’ (p. 43). As a strategic option, Federici (2019) advocates for an intermediate path of struggle in defense of public services in the face of dynamics of privatization and commodification, since they consider that the state ‘is the site of the accumulation of the wealth produced by our past and present labor’ (p. 96). De Angelis (2017) insists on the dynamic nature of the relationships between the common and the state/capital through the idea of ‘structural coupling’ (p. 330), which mutually conditions both. Taking this as a starting point, he understands that the relations between the commons and the state/capital co-evolve and are marked by the rhythms of the class struggle. Gutiérrez (2017), considering the case of Bolivia, identifies a ‘community-popular political horizon’ that systematically overflows the institutional frameworks of liberal political relations and, therefore, is not defined so much by its anti-statism but rather by its struggle for the social reappropriation of available material wealth. She thus points to an irrepressible tension between conservation efforts and transformation efforts.

Neo-Marxist commons and education

In 2006, Sahlberg coined the term ‘Global Educational Reform Movement’ (GERM), which has been widely used in educational policy studies, to designate a set of policies globally promoted since 1990s, with its first reforms in 1980s (in Chile, UK and USA). With its context-specific adaptations, Sahlberg (2023) identifies this reform as a neoliberal educational change. From the neo-Marxist of the commons, this global reform movement constitutes an enclosure movement on education and the school that takes various forms (Saltman 2018). This enclosure includes, firstly, the dynamics of privatization that transform educational institutions into business spaces (Saltman 2018). Relevant works, such as Ball’s (2012), report on the global nature of business networks and of public privatization policies. Secondly, this enclosure takes the form of ‘*human capitalization*’ (Means, Ford, and Slater 2017, 5): it globally promotes a narrow conception of education as a ‘self-capitalization’ process (Rizvi and Lingard 2009, 86) inspired by a neoliberal governmentality. A third form of this enclosure operates through the so-called ‘hidden

privatization' (Ball and Youdell 2007) of public-state institutions, which include measures such as: managerial governance of schools, regimes of accountability, and discourses of austerity inspired by the notion of efficiency (Means 2013). Additionally, Means (2013) and De Lissovoy (2015) also emphasize a fourth dimension of this enclosure: its punitive face in the USA context, which particularly affects racialized students. As they argue, neoliberal policies reveal to be based not only on market-driven policies but also on securitization and militarization measures for those public schools located in low-income inner-city neighborhoods, and mostly attended by racialized students. As we can see, this body of work has exploited the analytical potential of the category of 'enclosure' to frame the neoliberal educational reform of recent decades, highlighting its exclusionary and segregating character.

Focusing on mass schooling, this institution has always been involved in the reproduction of inequality within the frame of capitalist society (Bowles and Gintis 1976). In tune with the 'open career to talent' inaugurated by liberalism (Hobsbawm 1996), the liberal matrix that organizes mass schooling reflects a tension between the equality of opportunities and the inequality of meritocracy. That is, inspired by formal equality, however, it legitimates inequality (Pineau 2001). Given its configuration within the context of the formation processes of modern states (Green, 2013) and its global expansion (Ramírez and Boli 1987) as a sign of 'development' in a Eurocentric sense (Castro-Gómez 2000), mass schooling erased the *other* forms of socialization youth experienced before arriving there (Ramírez and Ventresca 1992). For this reason, I understand the configuration and global expansion of the school for the masses as constituting a type of original enclosure of the socialization of young people (Fernández González and Monarca 2022). Paradoxically, this original enclosure enabled a common space that, although liberal, reveals signs of horizontality and equity such as, for example, its foundation in formal equality and the promotion of schooling as a universal right. Thus, it configures a kind of ambivalent '*state-center common*' that is full of contradictions and, therefore, open to dispute in defining its more or less emancipatory orientation. As a result of this original enclosure, the current hegemonic meaning of education is inextricably linked to school access as a *universal right* that must be guaranteed by the state. Thus, adopting the expression of De Angelis (2017), I understand school as interwoven in this tense 'double movement' between conservative and emancipatory forces.

As a constructive response to this neoliberal enclosure, the neo-Marxist debate around the commons has offered an original and innovative way to explore the principles that should inspire a utopian education or *common* school. For instance, combining this neo-Marxist approach of the commons with reflections on 'democracy' from heterogeneous thinkers (Dewey, Rancière, Mouffe), Collet (2020) calls for building up democratic common schools, understanding democracy as a shared experience of equity. De Lissovoy (2015, 2017) argues that educational commons should organize experiences and understandings of oppression and resistance from the lens of the decolonial turn (authors such as Mignolo or Quijano) and the feminist contributions, like that of bell hooks. Slater (2019) draws on the critique of the ecological educator Chet Bower on schools and modern pedagogies—including critical pedagogies—which he accuses of being anthropocentric and ignoring the impending ecological crisis and its consequences, which disproportionately affect minorities living in more contaminated environments. He thus calls for eco-justice to be situated as the central principle to guide educational commons. In educational theory scholarship, scholars have discussed other guiding principles that should govern the educational

commons, such as the boundaries between politics and education that Korsgaard (2019) claims, or the exodus regarding private sectors, but also public ones like Lewis (2012) explains, following Hardt and Negri's work. It is worth highlighting, however, the theoretical-prescriptive nature of this scholarship. While in other social areas—such as the urban or digital commons—research has been developed through a close dialogue between theory and empirical observation, thus far little research in education has connected both aspects (Pechtelidis 2021). None have systematically addressed the intersections between the educational commons and the state. This is a significant gap given the crucial role of the state in the construction, control, and high regulation of the formal education space.

Against this backdrop, I identify numerous experiences in the Latin American tradition of Popular Education that can be read in terms of *commoning*. Some of these educational experiences, such as the Zapatista schools in Chiapas, the *Movimento Sem Terra* schools in Brazil, or the BPs in Argentina, that are addressed in the next section, erupt without prior state mediation to occupy the space of formal education. These experiences are part of emancipatory and anti-capitalist movements that pursue transformation *from below*. As Zibechi (2017) points out, the 'new social movements' of the 1990s in Latin America paid particular attention to the formation of subjects from the perspective of the Popular Education tradition, where education constitutes a path of social transformation (Freire, 1970/2005). These experiences are, therefore, important empirical references to understand the functioning and challenges of commoning practices in the field of education.

Commoning education: the movement of *Bachilleratos Populares* in Argentina

BPs are defined as free secondary schools, aimed at young people and adults, and guided by the tradition of Popular Education, which is strongly inspired by Freirean thought (Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018). They emerge with the aim of providing a possibility for the completion of secondary studies after the gap left by the neoliberal reform in the area of education for youth and adults. The first BP was created in 2004 (IMPA 2016) and in 2015 there were almost a hundred BPs throughout the country, most of which are concentrated in the province of Buenos Aires (54) and in the city of Buenos Aires (33) (GEMSEP 2016), reflecting their eminently urban nature. BPs are a counter-hegemonic political-pedagogical proposal that rejects neoliberal educational reform (Wahren 2020) and that challenges the liberal matrix of the traditional school format (Gluz 2013).

BPs reflect a wide heterogeneity based on the social movements in which they take shape (cooperatives of workers in recovered companies, picket movements, unions, or cultural centers, among others) and the characteristics of the territories in which they are based, which range from middle-class neighborhoods to shantytowns (GEMSEP 2016). Despite this diversity, it is still possible to speak of a broad *movement* of BPs to refer to the growing interaction between organizations that promote BPs, and their common traits (Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018).

BPs emerge in the heat of the cycle for social struggle from 1993–2003 in Argentina, which ends with Néstor Kirchner's progressive government (Svampa 2008). The 90s are a decade of intense social struggle against neoliberal reforms in Latin America (Zibechi 2017). In Argentina, the social uprisings on December 19 and 20, 2001, constitute a critical moment of protest that makes the potential of popular power visible. Between 2001 and 2003, high levels

of social mobilization resulted in the forging of frameworks of meaning and self-managed collective experiences around various social areas such as housing, health, decent work, or education. Many persisted during the following decade (Rubinsztain 2012) and some, like BPs, to this day. While the roots of BPs are linked to this context of increased social organization, they nevertheless also emerge and expand at a time of decline in protest actions as a result of the institutional recomposition of the country under the Kirchner governments between 2003 and 2015 (Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018).

The emergency motivations of BPs are linked to the bleak assessment of the educational situation marked by a certain 'risky educational level' (Elisalde 2008; Sirvent and Santana 2021) and an educational system deteriorated by the neoliberal reforms of the 1990s Menem government (Gluz 2013; Sverdlick and Costas 2008). The label 'risky educational level', coined by Sirvent et al. (2006), refers to the statistical probability within a population to suffer different modalities of exclusion—labor, social or political—due to the low educational level caused by the expulsive effects of the educational system. Using data from the 2001 census prepared by the Argentine government, Sirvent et al. (2006) contribute to illustrate the expulsive nature of formal education at that time: 67% of the youth and adult population aged 15 or over (approximately 14 million people) had not completed secondary education, and a significant part of this sector of the population (17%, approximately 3.5 million people) did not complete primary education. Gluz (2013) and Sverdlick and Costas (2008) observe the emergence of the BPs as a social response to the neoliberal reform of the 1990s, marked by privatization, deregulation, and the decentralization of responsibilities together with a non-democratizing recentralization of political regulation (Feldfeber and Gluz 2011, 340). In those years, education for youth and adults, which historically provided a second chance to patch up the damage of this expulsive effect, suffered serious deterioration (Gluz 2013; Sverdlick and Costas 2008). The National Directorate for Adult Education (DINEA from *Dirección Nacional de Educación de Adultos*), which had been created in 1968 in the heat of the impulse of the Pedagogy for Liberation in those years, was closed in 1993 (Elisalde 2008). In addition, Gluz (2013) points out two crucial aspects that resignified education to hold a privatized and fragmented meaning. Firstly, the move from a universalizing framework insistent on the right to education to a compensation framework through targeted policies promoted by international organizations (Bonal 2009). In addition to the risk of stigmatization for the target sectors, these policies generated differentiated school trajectories for these populations, articulating a model of inclusion that does not necessarily combat inequalities (Gluz 2013). Secondly, the Federal Education Law of 1993 (Law Number 24,195), eradicated the term 'public education', which is the term typically used to describe state education in Argentina and is understood to be an inclusive and democratizing project. The wording of article 7 of that law included the 'recognized private management entities' under the jurisdiction of the state at its different levels, equating them to public-state management centers. In this way, the law dilutes the difference between public-state centers and private centers. The overall result of this set of measures is the configuration of a highly fragmented school, where 'school segregation debilitates the construction of a "common education"' (Gluz 2013, 84).

At the end of the 1990s, in a context of high social mobilization and in the face of this deteriorated educational panorama, social movements began to test popular education initiatives for young people and adults within their respective territories of action and with the encouragement from groups of researchers and educators at the University of Buenos Aires. These initiatives ultimately led to the opening of the first two 'High Schools for Youth

and Adults' (*Bachilleratos para Jóvenes y Adultos*) in 2004, which starting in 2005 are known as 'Popular High Schools' (*Bachilleratos Populares*) (Wahren 2020). In 2004, a space for exchange and dialogue between BPs was created, which got the name 'Coordinator of Popular High Schools in Struggle' (henceforth Coordinadora from *Coordinadora de Bachilleratos Populares en Lucha*) a year later (GEMSEP 2015). Within the frame of the Coordinadora, BPs debated various topics in the field of education but above all articulated a plan to struggle with the state. Given the need expressed by their students, they decided to demand recognition from the state to issue official diplomas, which is a competence that remains in the jurisdiction of each province in Argentina. This demand is maintained to this day within the Coordinadora, since not all BPs have been officially recognized. Thus, in a show of mutual aid, unrecognized BPs issue degrees to their students through recognized BPs (Gluz 2013). Secondly, and based on the understanding that state wealth is collective and must be reappropriated, they include among their claims to the state the financing of their infrastructure and materials, student scholarships, and teacher compensation. Not all BPs share these demands or argue the same position before the state, which is why some of them have left the Coordinadora to articulate themselves in other coordination spaces (GEMSEP 2015; Wahren 2020). I will delve into this more fully in the section dedicated to the relations between BPs and the state.

In organizational terms, BPs structure their political-pedagogical project into three grades. With few exceptions, they follow an evening schedule with the aim of meeting their students' needs, most of whom work while they are studying (GEMSEP 2016). In addition, many BPs provide childcare services during school hours to facilitate access for mothers. This is because, among the students of BPs, women typically take on the primary responsibility for childcare, rather than men. In this sense, the memory, and experiences of the type of working-class education that proliferated at the beginning of the twentieth century strongly resonate in the BP movement (Sirvent and Santana 2021). As is typical of so-called 'alternative learning arenas' (McGregor and Mills 2012), BPs place a great emphasis on creating flexible and inclusive environments to support their students in obtaining their diplomas.

Commoning education in the BPs: guiding principles

The BP movement presents the traits of the seeds of a utopian future that Federici (2019) refers to as the practices of *commoning*. Descriptors such as 'prefigurative' experiences (Ouviaña 2012; Rubinsztain 2012) or 'fields of social experimentation' (Aguiló and Wahren 2014), are used to highlight their ability to project a 'new order "here and now", accelerating the future to enable the gradual overcoming of both authoritarian and monological education and, on a more general level, of capitalist social relations, without waiting for the taking of power to begin this process' (Ouviaña 2012, 9). In this way, BPs are configured as a reinforcement of the emancipatory projects that these social movements promote in their territories (Aguiló and Wahren 2014).

This emancipatory horizon crystallizes in a reiterated objective of 'forming political subjects' (Ampudia 2008, 256; Ampudia and Elisalde 2015, 160; Areal & Terzibachian, 2012, 521; Cabrera and Brusilovsky 2014; Elisalde 2008, pp. 87, 93; Sirvent and Santana 2021, 196). This expression points to a type of critical, participatory, reflective subject (Said 2018, 143) who is 'aware of the inequalities of the capitalist system and its capacity to distort reality' (Areal & Terzibachian, 2012, 521) and 'able to break with the capital accumulation

logic' (Alfieri and Lázaro 2019, 13). Said (2018) unravels the meaning of this expression—*political subjectivation*—as opposed to the hegemonic processes in the current context of *individuation*: the construction of an individual who owns one's self and is capable of self-sustaining. The liberal-meritocratic matrix of the traditional school format configures the school as a key institution in this individuation process, where the conception of education as human capitalization is a form of this individuation. In contrast to individuation, BPs adopt an approach to political subjectivation that Said frames in dialogue with the work of Freire and Rancière: understanding that people are social subjects, but not necessarily full political subjects, educational praxis has as its objective that the oppressed—in Freirean terms—and uncounted—in Rancière's vocabulary—become aware of their humanity, their historical condition, and their capacity to build history. How? Through the *word*, which Freire (1970/2005) describes as that which unites action and reflection (p. 87). This focus on the *word* materializes in the dialogic educational model that is followed in BPs classrooms and in the participation of students in the assemblies.

This goal of political subjectivation frequently collides with the expectations of students, who approach BPs with the aim of obtaining a high school diploma. Burdened with negative narratives around schooling articulated in terms of failure, students search for the possibility of successful *individuation* in the BPs; however, they sometimes find a pedagogical proposal of *political subjectivation* that does not meet their initial expectations (García, 2016; Said 2018). This discordance unleashes a tension that defines the praxis of BPs (Gluz 2013) and is part of the very process of change in the subject they take as central to their approach (Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018).

This objective of political subjectivation crystallizes in the curricular content of many BPs, which include cooperativism, especially in BPs that work in recovered companies (IMPA 2016), guidance in Human Rights, Community Development, or Popular Education (RBPC, 2011; BPMPLD, 2013). In addition, there are BPs that direct their political-pedagogical project towards specific emancipatory commitments. For example, the Mocha Celis BP is especially dedicated to the trans community and prioritizes feminist frameworks and queer theories (Scharagrodsky 2017).

As an emerging experience within the framework of 'new social movements' (Zibechi 2017), BPs, like the commons, reject the hierarchical structures of political parties and traditional unions and, instead, organize themselves following formulas from grassroots democracy and inspired by the principle of horizontality. The assembly is the organizational decision-making body. Generally, BPs have two assemblies: one for educators and another for educators and students, which typically meet monthly. All the relevant processes happen there, such as defining the curriculum, organizational decisions, and conflict resolution. It is understood that participation in the assembly is not only an organizational issue, but is also part of the pedagogical *praxis* of the project: as an instance of dialogue and participation, it is part of the objective of political subjectivation that guides the BPs. That being said, the difficulty in maintaining student participation in the assemblies is repeatedly pointed out (Gluz 2013) since, on the one hand, it requires a commitment on their part and, on the other hand, it does not meet their educational expectations of *individuation*. In this regard, through an ethnographic study that focuses on conflict as a particularly revealing moment, Caisso (2021) shows that, in conflict situations, students do self-organize through the tool of assembly to defend their positions. Caisso observed a situation where students dissatisfied with their math teachers' pedagogical approach organized an assembly. She interpreted this situation as a reappropriation of the assembly by the students,

who typically did not participate in general assemblies with the teachers. This situation highlights the pedagogical power of the assembly praxis, as even non-participating students recognized it as a valuable tool to address a conflictive situation.

In correlation with the assembly format, the principle of horizontality guides the internal institutional structure of the BPs. This implies permanent care to challenge the meritocratic liberal matrix of the school (Gluz 2013) in various ways: a curriculum decision-making process in which the students also participate through the assemblies; a dialogical educational format that revolves around problematization and the co-construction of knowledge (Sirvent and Santana 2021), moving away from the banking education model (Freire, 1970/2005); challenging the figure of a single teaching authority through classroom work in pairs and even pedagogical trios (Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018); innovative evaluation formats that replace numerical qualification with qualitative feedback, co-assessment models, and self-assessment (Gluz 2013). To reciprocate horizontality in the evaluation, BPs also issue evaluation bulletins for teachers prepared by students and replace the terms ‘student’ or ‘teacher’ with ‘comrade’ (BPMPLD, 2015).

Given that educational common sense is strongly marked by the traditional mechanisms of schooling and by a conception of education that tends towards *individuation*, the use of these horizontal, participatory formats that are oriented to political subjectivation requires constant epistemic vigilance (Said 2018) by teachers and students. They are built, as well as a trial-and-error praxis, where self-reflection is crucial.

Challenging the state

The principle of autonomy emerges from the horizontal assembly model. It is linked to a desire for radical democratization of educational management (Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018; García 2011; Gluz 2013) that allows them to define their project *from below*, one that is self-managed and without interference from other entities. To the extent that purports to be an emancipatory project that rejects the logic of the market, it stands in opposition to the meaning that the neoliberal reform in education has attributed to the term ‘autonomy’ (Verger, Fontdevila, and Parcerisa 2019). This principle of autonomy is repeatedly pointed out as an articulator of BPs, both academically (Areal & Terzibachian, 2012; Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018; García 2011; GEMSEP 2015) and in their own documents (BPMPLD, 2015; IMPA 2016; RBPC, 2011), and translates into the ability to self-manage curricular content and the selection of their teaching faculty. This principle of autonomy is another sign of the harmony between BPs and the new social movements of the 1990s (Zibechi 2017), which linked their forms of assembly to independence from the state, political parties, and hierarchical organization. Nonetheless, autonomy is never total, but relative within the social order since no human activity is outside the pressures of the hegemonic order (Michi, Di Matteo, and Vila 2012). The BP movement quickly detected the need to question the state, revealing the especially relative nature of autonomy in the field of education.

The dialogue between BPs and the state begins with the expressed need of their students to obtain a high school diploma. The importance of accreditation on people’s lives—something previously noted through the notion of ‘risky educational level’—reveals the force with which the state enclosed—captured—the valid definition of education. It also entails a strong obstacle to a fully autonomous educational praxis. The state’s monopoly on accreditation (Sirvent and Santana 2021) is the main example of its symbolic monopoly to define

‘education’. Aware of the importance of accreditation, the BP movement engages in a relationship of ‘constitutive tension’ with the state (Gluz 2013, 49): a tension between ‘the autonomy of the social movements and the heteronomy of the state’ (Wahren 2020, 91). As part of this relationship, the movement introduces demands beyond accreditation—infrastructure budgets, funding for teacher compensation and student scholarships—and deploys a set of direct actions, such as protests, public teach-ins, and *escraches*⁴ to make themselves visible in the public sphere (GEMSEP 2015)

The officialization process constitutes the first crucial axis of the relationship between BPs and the state. The jurisdiction over recognition resides at the provincial level. In 2007, with an approximate figure of 10 BPs throughout the country, the government of the province of Buenos Aires officially recognized BPs existing up to that time. In 2008, the government of the city of Buenos Aires did the same. This horizon of officialization triggered a multiplication in the number of BPs between 2008 and 2011, reaching 89 BPs in 2015 (GEMSEP 2016). This increase in BPs reveals the ‘constitutive’ nature of the tension between BPs and the state (Gluz 2013), which feeds back into the strength of the BP movement. In De Angelis’s terms (2014), we could say it is a relationship of *co-evolution*: their entry through the officialization of the BPs under the state logic—even if it is partial insofar as they defend their autonomy—gives a strong impetus to their movement, since the number of BPs is multiplied. Participating in the state logic is thus revealed to be a strengthening strategy.

A problematic dimension of the officialization process is the modality of recognition. The Education Law no. 26,206 of 2006—which replaces the 1993 law—in addition to private management and public-state management, enables the possibility of a third modality: ‘social management or cooperative management’ (Art. 13). This new modality seems to respond to the particularities of the autonomist model of BPs insofar as it escapes the state/market dichotomy (Gluz 2013; GEMSEP 2015). The legislative development of the conditions of this modality corresponds to the provincial jurisdictions of Argentina. Currently, both in the province and in the city of Buenos Aires, the accreditation of BPs is under the orbit of public management with formulas that do not give full recognition to the organizational particularities of BPs, such as their horizontal organization that do not include school management teams. Only the province of Santa Fe grants recognition to BPs under the figure of social management, although as a subtype within private management (López Fittipaldi 2019).

Although the neo-Marxist debate around the commons displaces interest in ‘the public’, to the extent that it is equated with the state, within the BP movement, their discursive struggle is articulated as a dispute for redefining what ‘the public’ is, which is once again revealed both in academic texts (Alfieri and Lázaro 2019; Blaustein, Rubinsztain, and Said 2018; Sverdlick and Costas 2008) and in documents created by BPs’ coordination bodies (BPMPLD, 2015; RBPC, 2011). The term ‘common’ appears only exceptionally and never as a leading articulator of their position. Within the framework of the Coordinadora, they define their *praxis* in favor of a ‘public and popular education’—motto repeatedly employed in their statements in their social media—⁵, where the notion of ‘popular’ completes ‘the public’ and reaffirms the role of marginalized classes in the BP movement’s conception of education. The Coordinadora understands that the state, in its capacity as guarantor of education, must take charge of education and, therefore, fighting for public financing constitutes a fight for the redistribution of the collective wealth agglutinated in the state. They assume a strategic logic of reappropriation that fits the politics of the commons that Federici (2019) and Gutiérrez (2017) observe.

The Network of Popular Community High Schools (RBPC from *Red de Bachilleratos Populares Comunitarios*) broke away from the Coordinadora in 2009 by not sharing this understanding of what constitutes ‘the public’. Later this network was renamed the Dignity Popular Movement (BPMPLD from *Bachilleratos Populares del Movimiento Popular La Dignidad*). With positions closer to anarchism and anti-statism, they separated from the Coordinadora because they did not share the demand for teacher salaries. Whilst Coordinadora understands that BPs’ teachers are ‘education workers’, the BPMPLD understand their role as ‘militant teachers’ (outside the capitalist labor orbit and outside the state). For the same reason, this network did not unequivocally perceive the officialization of BPs positively. To the extent that it forces them to take on certain bureaucratic processes, such as keeping a record of student attendance (RBPC, 2011) or appointing, even if it is only for the state, a school management team, they understand that this recognition will affect the institutionality of BPs. In response to these observations, the RBPC—later under the umbrella of the BPMPLD—define themselves as ‘non-state publics’, thus associating ‘the public’ with their autonomist praxis and, in opposition to the state (RBPC, 2011).

A final key dimension of the relationship with the state is unleashed regarding the Fines Plan, launched by the state government in 2008 with the same objective of guaranteeing the completion of studies by young people and leaning on the structure of grassroots social organizations (Facioni, Ostrower, and Rubinsztain 2013). The implementation of this plan was seen by the BP movement in terms of competition and precariousness. They understand, on the one hand, that the Fines Plan competes with BPs and, on the other, that it is a program sustained by precarious teaching work and that, although it provides educational certificates, it does not provide substantial training (GEMSEP 2015). This assessment, however, was not unanimous within the BP movement. The BPs that had relationships with organizations closer to Kirchnerism saw the plan as positive and some even chose to obtain recognition under this program; consequently, they split from the COORDINADORA to meet in the ‘Educational Battle’ coordinator (*Batalla Educativa*) in 2008 (Wahren 2020).

Conclusions: commoning, a Re-Enchantment praxis sans magic spells

This piece is a contribution to the academic debate around the question of *how to build a common education*. Thus far, the academy in education has explored this question from theoretical-normative approaches with little attention to empirical evidence. In view of this, this article poses that the numerous experiences of Popular Education in Latin America, such as the BPs movement herein addressed, constitute an emancipatory educational praxis and a broad reservoir of knowledge built from the south that dovetails with the politics of the commons. Re-enchanting the world through practices of *commoning* is a call to explore other ways of life that challenge the law of capitalist value and overcome the Cartesian and Eurocentric visions of the world that separate theory and practice and favor the former. In this article, I have called on the neo-Marxist theoretical-analytical framework of the commons to observe the empirical referent of BPs in Argentina, whose prefigurative experiences re-enchant education in the present. To do so, I have reviewed a series of documents that mainly included texts produced by Argentine academics who employ a militant research style and are committed to the BP movement. Their academic production is in and of itself a praxis that breaks with the Cartesian model of knowledge since it unites theory and militant practice.

In this text, I have broken down the organizational principles of the commons (utopian horizon, horizontality, direct democracy, and autonomy from the state) that organize BPs, as well as the challenges involved in organizing around them in the field of education. The relationship with the state deserves special attention in the commoning experiences in education, as the BP movement reveals. Because the educational field is built and defined by the state, commoning practices in education cannot avoid it. Their fight for official recognition of their diplomas and to obtain material resources from the state is a fight for the redistribution of the collective wealth (symbolic and material) deposited into the state. This struggle defines the praxis of the BPs in a constitutive tension between maintaining their autonomy and advancing their demands of the state.

Looking to the BP movement we can observe that ‘the common’ is not a spell whose mere invocation magically unleashes alternative counter-hegemonic formulas to neoliberal reform. In fact, on the discursive level, BPs dispute the materiality of their experiences under the idea of ‘the public’ to challenge the state. Thus, this interest in the common leads our gaze to the daily work of and experiences within BPs, whose praxis of commoning aims to build a utopian and counter-hegemonic crack in the system *here and now*.

Notes

1. Óscar Jara Holliday proposes the methodology of systematisation as a strategy to reconstruct of educational experiences, especially designed for the field of Popular Education. Its main objective is to obtain critical learning from these experiences.
2. We have identified with an asterisk the texts whose authors (or some of them) have been involved in BPs.
3. As a social movement in the face of the financial collapse of 2001 in Argentina, many companies were taken over by their workers, and are currently self-managed through cooperative forms of labor organization.
4. The word *escrache* was coined in Argentine in reference to a type of protest that consists of a rally in the home or workplace of the individual to whom the protest is directed. *Escraches* were firstly used by human rights groups to identify and shame those who committed genocide during the PROCESO dictatorship and were pardoned during Menem’s government. Coordinadora has held *escraches* in the Book Fair of Buenos Aires against the Minister of Education.
5. <https://www.facebook.com/coordinadoradebachilleratospopularesnelucha>

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