

THE RISKS OF THE NEOLIBERAL CAPTURE OF PESTALOZZI'S  
EDUCATIONAL LEGACY: NOTES FOR DEBATE

*OS RISCOS DA CAPTURA NEOLIBERAL DO LEGADO EDUCACIONAL DE  
PESTALOZZI: NOTAS PARA O DEBATE*

*LOS RIESGOS DE LA CAPTURA NEOLIBERAL DEL LEGADO EDUCATIVO DE  
PESTALOZZI: NOTAS PARA EL DEBATE*



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**ABSTRACT:** This article examines the impact of neoliberalism on Brazilian educational policies, highlighting how educational guidelines, despite being presented as promises of emancipation and freedom, reinforce the capitalist logic and social reproduction. Drawing on the legacy of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, the discussion explores how Pestalozzi's pedagogy has been appropriated by the neoliberal framework. Although his innovative contributions to education, such as valuing affectivity and autonomy, remain relevant, the contemporary educational context has relativized these principles, transforming them into tools that perpetuate capitalist ideals, with a focus on reproducing inequalities and preparing individuals for the labor market.

**KEYWORDS:** Education. Pestalozzi. Neoliberalism.

**RESUMO:** *Este artigo analisa o impacto do neoliberalismo nas políticas educacionais brasileiras e mostra como as diretrizes educacionais, embora se apresentem como promessas de emancipação e liberdade, reforçam a lógica capitalista e a reprodução social. A partir da análise do legado de Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, discute-se como a pedagogia de Pestalozzi vem sendo apropriada pela lógica neoliberal. Mesmo com suas contribuições inovadoras para a educação, como a valorização da afetividade e da autonomia, o contexto contemporâneo da educação relativizou esses princípios, tornando-os instrumentos que servem para perpetuar ideais capitalistas, com foco na reprodução das desigualdades e na formação para o trabalho.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Educação. Pestalozzi. Neoliberalismo.*

**RESUMEN:** *Este artículo analiza el impacto del neoliberalismo en las políticas educativas brasileñas, destacando cómo las directrices educativas, aunque se presentan como promesas de emancipación y libertad, refuerzan la lógica capitalista y la reproducción social. A partir del legado de Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, se discute cómo la pedagogía de Pestalozzi ha sido apropiada por la lógica neoliberal. A pesar de sus innovadoras contribuciones a la educación, como la valorización de la afectividad y la autonomía, el contexto educativo contemporáneo ha relativizado estos principios, transformándolos en herramientas que perpetúan los ideales capitalistas, centrándose en la reproducción de desigualdades y la formación para el mercado laboral.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Educación. Pestalozzi. Neoliberalismo.*

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## Introduction

The debate surrounding educational guidelines and their relationship with neoliberal perspectives has intensified, particularly in light of the growing influence of these ideologies within the field of education. In this context, the educational legacy of Pestalozzi and its appropriation by the neoliberal logic of education emerge as objects of critical analysis, revealing the neoliberal masking involved in the construction of educational policies.

Based on this premise, this essay proposes a reflection on how the purposes of education articulated by the Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi—such as emancipation, freedom, and equality—can be captured by the logic of capitalist reproduction within the educational environment. This process is especially evident with the advance of neoliberal rationality, exposing the nuances of this phenomenon and its implications for the formation of contemporary society.

The essay is organized as follows. In the first section, we briefly discuss how the logic of capitalist reproduction affects educational policies in the current Brazilian context. We then examine the context in which Pestalozzi's work was produced, followed by a discussion of the author's legacy and its possible contributions to understanding contemporary reality. Subsequently, we offer analyses aimed at situating Pestalozzi's work in relation to other authors who developed educational ideas within the same historical context, highlighting the complex network of relationships among ideas, authors, and contexts. Finally, we present concluding considerations intended to problematize the importance of Pestalozzi's educational legacy and to emphasize the need for constant vigilance so that it is not captured by neoliberal discourse, which seeks to engulf contemporary educational policies.

### An Instrument for the Reproduction of Capitalism: A Critical Analysis of Brazilian Educational Guidelines

How can we understand contemporaneity without a critical analysis of the process of subject formation? How can we assess the naturalization of social processes within contemporary capitalist dynamics? In our analysis, we begin from the assumption that the fetishization of different aspects of human life in society—directly related to the development of capitalism—is intrinsically linked to the formation of subjects, particularly through the internalization and naturalization of a specific conception of labor: abstract labor. The centrality



that the logic of abstract labor assumes in contemporary social reproduction leads most social subjects to be unable to imagine themselves outside the logic of labor exploitation.

To a certain extent, this occurs because the school system, in a predominant manner, does not encourage criticism of this logic. On the contrary, what we observe is its ideological reinforcement, even when expressed through other terms, such as entrepreneurship, protagonism, among others. The intrinsic reproduction of this logic is reflected in the drafting of governmental documents that underpin the Brazilian educational system, such as the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC) (Brazil, 2018), the Law of Guidelines and Bases of Education—LDB (Brasil, 1996), and the National Education Plan—PNE 2014–2024 (Brasil, 2014), all of which incorporate the idea of education as preparation for work.

From our perspective, these documents promote a false discourse of education oriented toward freedom, autonomy, and the humanization of the subject, when in fact what is expected is the formation of citizens prepared to carry out, throughout their lives, the production and reproduction of labor—and, consequently, of capital. Below are some examples of how this appears in the country's main educational legislation:

Art. 1, §2. School education shall be linked to the world of work and to social practice (Brasil, 1996).

Art. 2. Education, a duty of the family and the State, inspired by the principles of freedom and the ideals of human solidarity, aims at the full development of the learner, preparation for the exercise of citizenship, and qualification for work (Brasil, 1996).

Art. 35, II. Basic preparation for work and citizenship, enabling learners to continue learning in order to adapt flexibly to new conditions of occupation or subsequent professional development (Brasil, 1996).

In the BNCC, competence is defined as the mobilization of knowledge (concepts and procedures), skills (practical, cognitive, and socioemotional), attitudes, and values to address complex demands of everyday life, the full exercise of citizenship, and the world of work (Brasil, 2018).

Art. 2, V. Education for work and citizenship, with an emphasis on the moral and ethical values upon which society is founded (Brasil, 2014).

As demonstrated, there are numerous references to so-called preparation for the world of work in these documents, which leads us to the following question: how did we arrive at a point where education fulfills the indirect role of maintaining the capitalist system through the centrality of reproducing labor power?



It is a fact that education shapes subjects and occupies a position within social reproduction that has historically been disputed primarily by the bourgeoisie and the Brazilian elite, as indicated in the excerpt below:

We consider, from the outset, that education is a process that cannot be eliminated from human development and is one of the conditions through which human beings acquire their fundamental attributes throughout the historical-social process. In this sense, it can be considered one of the main constituents of the “inorganic body,” that is, the set of socially constructed objectifications, such as objects, uses, customs, meanings, knowledge, among others (Martins, 2012, p. 49, our translation).

Access to education in Brazil, initially restricted to those in the highest social classes, became necessary for other classes within the capitalist world, since it is also necessary to educate the working class—but not in the same way as the elites. They must be educated for work, for the reproduction of capitalism without questioning it.

The perpetuation of the idea of a free individual, endowed with freedom of choice and not educated to perceive themselves within this system, is part of the bourgeois educational project. It is within discourse itself and pedagogical practice that these fetishized ideals are reproduced. The pedagogical theory of so-called *escolanovismo*, developed by and for the bourgeoisie, has at its ideological core an idealization that underpins this oppressive discourse. Its genesis can be traced back to Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi in the eighteenth century. In the next section of this essay, we analyze the socioeconomic context in which Pestalozzi’s ideas emerged.

### **The Historical and Philosophical Context of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi: An Analysis in Light of the Revolutions and Enlightenment Ideals**

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi was born in 1746 in the city of Zurich, Switzerland. He was a prolific writer, producing a total of 40 volumes. He made significant contributions to studies of pedagogical practice and conducted various educational tests and experiments throughout his life, seeking effective teaching methods consistent with his worldview.

An analysis of the foundations of Pestalozzi’s thought, from a perspective that situates him within his space and time, points to possible interpretations of his theoretical construction. This distinction is necessary, given that his work constitutes one of the pedagogical approaches that currently structure the documents governing Brazilian education.



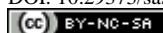
Switzerland is located in Central Europe. Under current border and nation-state configurations, it borders Germany to the north, France to the west, Italy to the south, and Austria and the Principality of Liechtenstein to the east. When Pestalozzi was born, Switzerland had already been formally recognized as independent by neighboring European powers. In 1798, the armed forces of revolutionary France took control of Switzerland. During this period, military confrontations took place on Swiss territory, with Austrian and Russian armies also participating in these battles. France supported the formation of the Helvetic Republic, a centralized parliamentary government modeled on the French system.

This period—interestingly defined by Eric Hobsbawm as the Age of Revolutions—is marked by diverse geopolitical tensions and by technical-scientific revolutions that transformed society in an unequal and combined manner, including the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the Napoleonic Wars. Although Pestalozzi is considered one of the pioneers of escolanovista ideals, it is important to note that this terminology and the global scope the movement later achieved postdate the thinker discussed here (Arce, 2015).

The Industrial Revolution marked a process of reconfiguration of social and economic structures, while the French Revolution promoted ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity. The former points to the reconfiguration of relationships between humanity and the domains of nature, consumption, and labor; the latter denotes the progressive introduction of newly incorporated ideals into the reality of the white, bourgeois, European man of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment, which permeated the eighteenth century—and was therefore already part of the European human mentality at the time of Pestalozzi's birth—promoted belief in progress, scientific and economic reason, and the liberal ideal of the individual as the architect of their own destiny. As will be shown, these conceptions directly influenced Pestalozzi's educational work.

### **The Ambiguity of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's Legacy: Between Pedagogical Innovation and the Reproduction of Power Structures**

Among the pedagogical experiences developed by Pestalozzi were several schools, one of which stands out in particular. The Yverdon School, located in a castle granted to Pestalozzi, became a reference center for education in Europe. At this institution, he implemented an innovative approach characterized by an affective relationship with children. At the Yverdon School, teachers taught classes and participated in outdoor activities with students. Pestalozzi valued connection with nature as an integral part of education. The school was designed to be



a stimulating and affective environment. Weekly, children had the opportunity to speak directly with Pestalozzi, who also held meetings with educators—that is, he actively participated in the educational process.

Pestalozzi carried the legacy of Rousseau which, combined with his Protestant faith, shaped his views on education and the importance of nature in the integral formation of children. His approach influenced not only the educational practice of his time but also served as a foundation for subsequent educational movements.

The way Pestalozzi perceived and idealized the school involved originality and distinctiveness in relation to the educational methods of his era. His innovative, affectivity-centered approach played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for the *escolanovista* movement. One of Pestalozzi's most significant contributions was his emphasis on the role of affectivity in the educational process: the affective bond between educator and student becomes a fundamental element for the success of the pedagogical process. For Pestalozzi, love should be transparent and explicit, constituting an essential part of the educational relationship.

The triad of heart, head, and hands marks Pestalozzi's view of human development and permeates his entire conception of the educational process. Human abilities—emotional, cognitive, and practical—should be developed simultaneously within (and beyond) the school environment, ensuring integral and balanced formation. His work also stands out for its studies on childhood, recognizing this stage as fundamental to human development. His educational experiences, always child-centered, sought to provide an environment that stimulated physical, cognitive, and emotional growth simultaneously, once again relating to the triad. Pestalozzi rejected mere theoretical exposition by the educator and sought to develop practical experiences that engaged students in meaningful ways (Pestalozzi, 2010).

Pestalozzi's trajectory was marked by various challenges and frustrations, with several unsuccessful attempts to apply his pedagogical process, which nevertheless culminated in the aforementioned Yverdon School. The originality of his method lies in fostering students' freedom and autonomy. He is recognized as the creator of the intuitive method—although there are critiques suggesting that the concept is more closely associated with perception than intuition. This innovative approach, for its time, focused on children's natural understanding, adapting teaching to individual needs and valuing knowledge acquired spontaneously through learners' perception and will.

The idealized discourse of *escolanovismo*, which emphasizes the student as an autonomous agent endowed with freedom and personal desires, can be understood as a



manifestation of the pedagogical theory of “learning to learn.” Like many other characteristics of this pedagogical theory, which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century and draws from Pestalozzi’s *escolanovista* foundations, this perspective is also present in the National Common Core Curriculum (BNCC), as illustrated in the following excerpt:

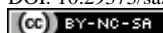
It requires the development of competencies to learn how to learn, to manage the increasingly available information, to act with discernment and responsibility in digital culture contexts, to apply knowledge to solve problems, to have autonomy in decision-making, to be proactive in identifying the elements of a situation and seeking solutions, and to coexist and learn from differences and diversity (Brasil, 2018, p. 15, our translation).

This romanticized view often ignores the underlying power structures of capitalism, thereby perpetuating an oppressive and unequal system. While both approaches emphasize student autonomy, it is important to recognize how these ideas can be co-opted and instrumentalized to maintain existing hierarchies and reinforce social and economic inequality. Moreover, in a country such as Brazil, this approach disregards the role of maintaining structural and historical inequalities that permeate the educational system and society as a whole. The emphasis on student autonomy, although commendable in its intent to promote individual emancipation, often fails to account for disparities in access to educational resources, unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, and deficient public policies that limit opportunities for full development for all students.

Thus, while recognizing the importance of Pestalozzi’s legacy in promoting student-centered education and valuing affectivity and nature in the educational process, it is essential to understand the limitations and contradictions of his ideas within a broader context. A critical approach is required—one that not only empowers students but also questions and challenges power structures and social injustices that perpetuate inequality. Only then can we move toward a truly emancipatory and inclusive education, capable of transforming not only individuals but also the social structures that surround them.

### Weaving Rhizomatic Connections: Pestalozzi and His Influence within the Complex Network of Educational Thought

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1995), discuss the concept of the rhizome in contrast to the traditional arborescent model of thought that seeks roots. A rhizomatic analysis considers the multiplicity of factors that connect with one another through complex, non-hierarchical relations, allowing for a more fluid and non-linear understanding of

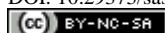


phenomena. The rhizome suggests an approach that values interconnection, heterogeneity, and transversality, in contrast to the hierarchical and linear structure of the tree of knowledge. In this sense, a rhizomatic analysis seeks to explore the horizontal connections and multiple branching pathways that characterize the non-linear and unpredictable nature of complex systems (Deleuze; Guattari, 1995).

It is through this intersection and dialogue among authors that it becomes necessary to understand the influences of Pestalozzi's thought on other philosophers of education. This leads us to the following question: how do Pestalozzi's ideas engage with different educational theories, delineating their unique contributions and the connections that permeate pedagogical conceptions that are either subsequent to or contemporary with him? The dialogue among thinkers opens a pathway to understanding Pestalozzi as a nodal point within a complex network of influences, highlighting the richness and diversity involved in the construction of educational thought and scientific practice. In this sense, the rhizomatic approach proposed by Deleuze and Guattari (1995) can shed light on this dynamic by emphasizing the multiplicity of connections and influences that permeate the development of educational theories. From this perspective, Pestalozzi's ideas are not confined to a linear structure of influence but rather branch out and intertwine with other thinkers and currents of thought, forming a complex and interconnected web of pedagogical conceptions. This rhizomatic perspective enables a more fluid and holistic understanding of Pestalozzi's influences and of his role in shaping contemporary educational thought.

The influence of his thinking is undeniable when we consider the relationship between his pedagogical principles and those of other prominent educators, such as John Dewey, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, and Célestin Freinet. Pestalozzi shared with Jean-Jacques Rousseau the contradiction inherent in the pursuit of a liberating education that, paradoxically, ends up confining subjects. In his work, he developed the concept of rejecting verbalism—an idea theorized by Rousseau—emphasizing the importance of a more practical approach centered on the integral development of children.

By engaging with different educational theories, Pestalozzi's ideas resonate in the work of other major educators of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Montessori, influenced by Pestalozzi, Freinet, and Rousseau, also focused on child development and implemented innovative practices that value autonomy and individuality, in line with Pestalozzi's postulates. The author's contribution is likewise reflected in the New School movement, particularly in Brazil during the 1920s and 1930s, where his ideas were fundamental to the creation of practices



such as the *Aula Passeio* (Educational Field Trip), which encouraged leaving the classroom and conducting inquiry in the surrounding environment in order to promote more contextualized learning.

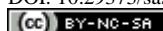
## Final Considerations

Johann Pestalozzi, a central figure in the history of pedagogy, developed an innovative educational approach grounded in affectivity, the pursuit of integral human formation, and an emphasis on children's physical, cognitive, and emotional development—his triad of heart, head, and hands. However, when his ideas are confronted with contemporary reality, profound contradictions emerge. The neoliberal context, permeated by capitalism and liberalism, distorts and instrumentalizes Pestalozzi's principles, transforming them into tools for maintaining the status quo.

The growing influence of neoliberalism on educational policies has promoted an education that, rather than emancipating, perpetuates social and economic inequalities. The emergence of early childhood education, aligned with *escolanovista* ideas, masks the true nature of education by serving as a mere ideological arm of the prevailing economic system. In this sense, educational guidelines are shaped not to promote emancipation, freedom, and equality, but to perpetuate and legitimize existing power structures.

Faced with the social and economic transformations of the Age of Revolutions, Pestalozzi and other educators confronted the challenge of reconciling their pedagogical ideas with the realities of a growing industrial society. However, the co-optation of their ideas by neoliberalism transforms education into a tool for reproducing structural and historical inequalities. The discourse of student autonomy—so prevalent in theories inspired by Pestalozzi—often masks disparities in access to educational resources and unfavorable socioeconomic conditions that limit opportunities for full development for all students.

Thus, Pestalozzi's legacy, although seminal in the history of pedagogy, is distorted and instrumentalized by neoliberalism, serving the interests of the dominant elite at the expense of genuine emancipation and equality. In light of this scenario, it is imperative to adopt a critical and reflective approach to Pestalozzi's legacy, exposing neoliberal strategies in education and advocating for a truly emancipatory and inclusive education—one capable of transforming not only individuals, but also the social structures that surround them.



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