the politicization of the educable child through aethereal power

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abstract

The paper argues that a prevalent conception of power in the educational sciences is detrimental to pedagogy both as a field of practice and as a discipline and inept as a scientific concept from an epistemological standpoint. The designation of this power concept as 'aethereal' can provide the education theoretical discourses with a means to analyze and criticize positions and arguments that have undermined the autonomy of education since the establishment of Foucauldian thinking in the educational sciences. First, this article argues that the pedagogical notion of the educable child depends on the concepts of individuality, plasticity, and autonomy within the framework of a negative ontology. Second, it problematizes the effects of the substitution of these concepts in the postmodern power-critical educational sciences for pedagogy in general and the child as its key concept in particular. The politicized child is conceived of as subjugated, passive, vulnerable, and what is crucial: as a thing-like, i.e. pedagogically ineducable but only powerfully moldable identity. Third, it analyses the philosophical basis of this shift towards the politicization of the child by introducing the concept of 'aethereal power'. The article concludes with a sociological reflection on the societal dimension of this fundamental transformation of education and hints at the emerging post-critical pedagogy as a possible remedy.

keywords: power; critical pedagogy; subjectivation; politicization; autonomy.

la politización del/a niño/a educable a través del poder etéreo

resumen

El artículo sostiene que la concepción de poder que prevalece en las ciencias de la educación es perjudicial para la pedagogía como campo de práctica y como disciplina, e inepta como concepto científico desde el punto de vista epistemológico. La designación de este concepto de poder como "etéreo" puede proporcionar a los discursos teóricos de la educación un medio para analizar y criticar las posiciones y los argumentos que han socavado la autonomía de la educación desde el establecimiento del pensamiento foucaultiano en las ciencias de la educación. En primer lugar, este artículo argumenta que la noción pedagógica del niño/a educable depende de los conceptos de individualidad, plasticidad y autonomía en el marco de una ontología negativa. En segundo lugar, problematiza los efectos de la sustitución de estos conceptos en las ciencias de la educación postmodernas críticas del poder para la pedagogía en general y el niño/a como su concepto clave en particular. El niño/a politizado es concebido como subyugado, pasivo, vulnerable, y lo que es crucial: como una identidad semejante a una cosa, es decir, pedagógicamente ineducable pero una identidad sólo moldeable a través del poder. En tercer lugar, analiza la base filosófica de este cambio hacia la politización del niño/a introduciendo el concepto de "poder etéreo". El artículo concluye con una reflexión sociológica sobre la dimensión social de esta transformación fundamental de la educación y apunta a la emergente pedagogía post-crítica como posible remedio.

palabras clave: poder; pedagogía crítica; subjetivación; politización; autonomía.

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the politicization of the educable child through aethereal power

a politização da criança educável através do poder etéreo

resumo

O artigo argumenta que uma concepção predominante de poder nas ciências educacionais é prejudicial à pedagogia tanto como campo de prática quanto como disciplina e é também inepto como conceito científico do ponto de vista epistemológico. A designação deste conceito de poder como "etéreo" pode fornecer aos discursos teóricos da educação um meio de analisar e criticar posições e argumentos que têm minado a autonomia da educação desde o estabelecimento do pensamento foucaultiano nas ciências educacionais. Primeiro, este artigo argumenta que a noção pedagógica da criança educável depende dos conceitos de individualidade, plasticidade e autonomia dentro da estrutura de uma ontologia negativa. Em segundo lugar, problematiza os efeitos da substituição destes conceitos nas ciências educacionais pós-modernas críticas do poder para a pedagogia em geral e a criança como seu conceito chave em particular. A criança politizada é concebida como subjugada, passiva, vulnerável, e o que é crucial: como uma coisa, ou seja, pedagogicamente ineducável, mas uma identidade apenas moldável através do poder. Em terceiro lugar, ela analisa a base filosófica desta mudança em direção à politização da criança, introduzindo o conceito de "poder etéreo". O artigo conclui com uma reflexão sociológica sobre a dimensão societal desta transformação fundamental da educação e sugere a emergente pedagogia pós-crítica como um possível remédio.

palavras-chave: poder; pedagogia crítica; subjetivação; politização; autonomia.

the politicization of the educable child through aethereal power concepts

This paper introduces the concept of aethereal power as an analytical tool to differentiate, define, and criticize the way in which power is conceived in the educational sciences. Aethereal power refers to the conception of power as a ubiquitous, universal, and generative medium in certain definitions or arguments. In such conceptions, power is presupposed as a universal a priori of all educational and even social scientific concepts. This paper argues that an aethereal conception of power is detrimental to the educational sciences, to pedagogy as a distinct form of practice, field, or system in general, and to the medium[2] of the child in particular. After demonstrating this, the metaphysical dimension of aethereal conceptions of power is explored and criticized. The analysis of this metaphysical dimension is necessary to fundamentally question its viability as a scientific concept. As an analytical tool or heuristic instrument, the concept of aethereal power cannot be conclusively linked to specific scholars, works, or theoretical stances but rather to modes of use in concreto. Although it would not be difficult to find passages, e.g., in Foucault's work, that contradict an aethereal conception of power, it is the thesis of this paper that the enormous prominence of the concept of power in the educational sciences is grounded in a metaphysics of power that cannot be understood, let alone be discussed, as a scientific paradigm in the strict sense of the word. Making visible the epistemological shortcomings of the aethereal concept of power and its problematic impact on the educational sciences and on pedagogy will hopefully enable the articulation of alternative, e.g. affirmative, stances towards pedagogy as an autonomous (not necessarily power-aethereal) sphere.

1. the politicization of the educational sciences

Political and activist concepts such as power, equality, discrimination, oppression, marginalization, and privilege that were indicators of radical critical stances a few decades ago are now central and ubiquitous – arguably mainstream – concepts in the educational sciences. Without any doubt, power is now seen as a central, originary, and even constitutive concept in this field. Currently relevant – if not predominant – theories and studies including governmentality, discourse theory,

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[2] The concept of the medium of the child is explained in the second paragraph.

intersectionality, critical race theory, gender and feminist theories are openly grounded in concepts of power and many others, such as diversity, praxeology, and ethnography have critical branches concerned with power.

Since Foucauldian analyses have 'unmasked' (cf. Mac Naughton, 2005; Smith, 2012) and 'debunked' Vlieghe/Zamojski 2020, 4) all attempts to increase degrees of freedom in pedagogical systems as an intensification and differentiation of oppression of freedom through freedom, the constitutive pedagogical difference between freedom and "submission to the necessary restraint" (Kant 1900, 27) has irrevocably shifted. Submission now also appears on the side of freedom; not in the Kantian form of emancipatory self-discipline, but rather as an internalized social oppression. Consequently, not only has our relationship to the world but also our relationship to ourselves has become fundamentally political: "If everything is power, it becomes impossible to distinguish between activities which are educational and activities that are not" (Rømer 2011, 758). After the "turn from subject to subjectivation"[3] (Weiß 2020, 77) the concept of the (subjective) child as the medium of education (cf. Luhmann 1991) is deeply compromised.

2. the politicization of the child as the medium of education

Modern pedagogy is grounded in the idea of the child as an educable subject with at least three necessary features: individuality, plasticity, and autonomy. Plasticity as the basic concept of pedagogy[4] must be counterbalanced by the axiom of the autonomy of the child. Otherwise, education could not distinguish itself from manipulation or oppression. The autonomy of the child presupposes an individual subject that actively differentiates itself from its environment including, of course, other subjects. The epistemological questions that can be raised here are not even relevant as the individual, educable (*plastic*), and autonomous child is not being discussed as a *phenomenon* but rather as a constitutive pedagogic *semantics*, i.e. pedagogical self-descriptions (cf. Luhmann 1990c). To frame this as a thought experiment: if we negate, or even only compromise, one of those key concepts, pedagogy is impossible on all levels. Without plasticity, pedagogy is impossible as pedagogic interaction could not leave durable impressions; without autonomy, these

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[3] Transl. by author.
[4] "Der Grundbegriff der Pädagogik ist die Bildsamkeit des Zöglings" (Herbart 1984 [1835], 5).

impressions would be manipulations or even violence. Finally, no relation, no 'gaze', no field, no organization, no profession, and no system can be called pedagogical without the assumption of the educable child as an individual. Individuality itself holds a threefold negation. Seeing or treating someone as an individual means to see her or him as unsubstitutable, unfathomable, and indivisible. To observe the child differently means not to observe them pedagogically. If the child is seen as a sum of competencies or properties (divisibility) this implies that this child is substitutable by any other child with the same or higher quantity and quality of these properties. The axiomatic presupposition of the opacity of the child (unfathomability) renders any such functional approach towards children impossible: if a child is not transparent, it cannot be compared, measured, and categorized. This seeing-as performs an ontological transformation; it creates the child in a specific form that renders pedagogic interaction meaningful. In other contexts the child can 'be' a *patient* in the health care system, a *case* in the system of social work, a *member* of an organization, or a *consumer* for the economic system. The specific pedagogical mode of observation that creates the child in the specific form sketched out above is, of course, contingent. Pedagogical observation and interaction are neither just given nor necessary, but rather highly unlikely, as corruptions and interruptions of this mode are possible at every moment. Testing and diagnosing children, explaining, standardizing, and normalizing their behavior and development are such corruptions that are institutionalized in pedagogic fields. Pedagogy is, thus, a precarious mode of observing, interacting, and communicating that is contingent on the highly counterintuitive, specialized, and paradoxical concept of the pedagogic child: a negative being that is plastic but not moldable, autonomous but dependent (cf. Dewey 1916, 109), individual but social, present but ahead of itself.

The power-critical re-description of pedagogy dramatically shifts this concept. The table below depicts a polarization of this shift that is, of course, as a shift not binary and static on a phenomenal or empirical level.

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	Pedagogical child	Politicized child
Mode of subjectivity	autonomous, active	subjugated, passive
Mode of intersubjectivity	recognition	interpellation / subjectivation
Mode of identity	negative	positive
Mode of internal structure	plastic	fragile, vulnerable
Mode of individuality	unsubstitutable indivisible unfathomable	substitutable by members of community (of oppression) intersectional (i.e. 'divided') intelligible by intersectional history of oppression
Temporality	existential: "Being-ahead-of-itself"	categorical: subject to development and therein implicit time concepts (hence, determinable)

In contrast to the aforementioned paradoxical and negative ontology of the pedagogical child, the politicized child offers a positive ontology that identifies the child with the effects of the world on it. It is a passive being that is categorized by its 'membership' in its – as the postmodern jargon puts it: intersectionally oppressed group, subjugated by the gaze of the other, molded by wounds inflicted, and defined by powerful discourses. Its *esse est opprimi* and every notion of something a priori and thus independent of oppression – such as an individual, autonomous, spontaneous subject – must be denied, from this stance.

The concept of the pedagogical subject is often criticized at an epistemological level as it seems to be incompatible with (de)constructivist, poststructuralist, or generally postmodern lines of thinking. Deviating from this paradigm is seen as an ontological fault. This is true in the case of essentialist conceptions of the subject, for example, those that circle around humanist semantics of wholeness and authenticity (cf. Reichenbach 2003). However, many of the ontological conceptions of the subject since the Enlightenment work difference-theoretically and point out the paradoxical status of an identity that is inherently in difference to itself and to the world.

Maybe the best expression of the pedagogic concept of subjectivity can be derived from Jean-Paul Sartre's seemingly enigmatic definition of the for-itself as "a being which is not what it is and which is what it is not" (Sartre 1966, 127). Negativity, in one or the other way, can be said to be the key principle of any conception of the subject in educational theory. As opposed to psychological, therapeutic, and some

social work approaches, the pedagogical child is not a thing that can be identified, a carrier of properties that can be observed, or a developmental state that can be at risk, nor a case determined by its past. When the child is seen as a vulnerable and fragile being, constituted as a subject by powerful discourses (cf. Ball 2017) and constructed as an identity on the crossing of various intersections of oppression, this is no longer the medium of education; that is, it is no longer a child in the originary pedagogic sense. This substantial politicization of the child and of pedagogy not only challenges the integrity and autonomy of education as a social system or field of practice but also has gravely transformed the concept of childhood on a cultural level in such an extraordinarily short period of time that it may be more appropriate to speak of a revolution than an evolution of semantics. The explanation attempted here proposes the usefulness of an analogy of the aether concept to the current power concept as a heuristic instrument.

3. the aether metaphor

The concept of aether refers to a universal, ubiquitous, originary, and generative (or creative) medium, or even, the medium of media: the first medium–a medium that has itself no elements[5]–a medium that can be no form for another 'deeper' medium. In this context, it is not necessary to properly introduce this difference-theoretical concept of the medium (Heider 1959; Luhmann 1990a) as it merely serves as a metaphor. We could also speak of dimensions. When there is more than one dimension, what is the dimension in which the other dimensions are located and which is itself not located in another dimension? This question is equivalent to the question of the 'first' medium: the aether.

The aether is a mythological and religious concept as well as a scientific, namely physical, one. Since the first Greek mythologies the aether has been understood as "the stuff that fills the whole universe" (Forrest 2012, 1) in one way or another. At the end of the 19th Century James Clerk Maxwell was highly skeptical of the aether hypothesis with regards to various physical fields, but still he was in "no doubt that the interplanetary and interstellar spaces are not empty, but are occupied by a material substance or body, which is certainly the largest, and probably the most uniform body

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[5] This is basically Albert Einstein's aether concept in his general theory of relativity (cf. Einstein 1920).

of which we have any knowledge" (Maxwell 1960, 775). Even Albert Einstein reserves a place for the aether in his general theory of relativity (cf. Einstein 1920) and there is still a discussion in physics whether or not a conception of the aether is epistemologically necessary today (cf. Kassung/Hug 2008, 126).

Though not all conceptions of the aether are *universalist*, there is both a potential and a tendency to apply them as an explanatory principle to all insufficiently explained problems or phenomena. Hence, the aether serves as a medium for light, gravity, spatiality, electricity, heat, magnetism, and matter. The aether is *irreducible* in the sense that it is not composed of elements. It can neither be traced back to anything other than itself nor can it be conceptually deduced. In Greek mythology, namely Hesiod's *Theogony*, Aether belongs to the primordial deities. As the *quinta essentia* it is not composed of the other elements; in modern physics, the aether does not even seem to follow basic laws of physics such as the ponderability of matter. According to Heinrich Hertz, the possibility that everything that exists is created out of the aether became thinkable in the physical sciences at the end of the 19th Century (cf. Hertz 1987 [1889], 203). The supposed *creative competence* of the aether has led thinkers from antiquity through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and beyond to equate the aether with the (Christian) God (cf. Eisler 1910, 119f). For Oken, everything has its origins in the aether as the divine primary substance (cf. Oken 1831, 35f).

Throughout the history of the aether concept, three epistemological positions can be discerned. The aether is conceived of as an *unavoidable hypothesis* (an axiom), as a *transcendental principle*, or as a *metaphysical idea*. To understand the aethereal conception of power we have to discern how power is constructed on this epistemological level.

a) axiomatic

From Aristotle through to Newton, Maxwell, Lord Kelvin, and Einstein, the aether has assumed the status of a necessary hypothesis. In their 1904 history of science Williams and Williams conclude: "Without exception, the authoritative physicists of our time accept this plenum as a verity" (Williams/Williams 1904, 283). Even if the aether hypothesis is conceived of as foundationally paradoxical – matter without gravity (Kelvin 1884), a medium without properties (Einstein 1920) – it is seen as theoretically unavoidable. In the same way as Aristotle had to introduce aether as the

fifth element (*quinta essentia*), the (re)introductions of the aether by the above-mentioned (and many more) modern physicists is clearly axiomatic, i.e., neither empirical nor even dependent on direct empirical validation. In this sense, the aether concept can be seen as an "explanatory principle" (Bateson 1972, 38). Axioms function independently from their intelligibility; they do not even have to be rationalized or integrated into logical frameworks (cf. Seiffert 1997, 35). As long as they selectively stop some and facilitate other questions, axioms are applied (and not discussed) as valid. The axiomatic function of the aethereal concept of power comes into play in the educational sciences when oppression, discrimination, and injustice as realization forms of power are exclusively taken as explanations for observable inequalities, e.g. in performance outcomes of schooling, in place of multivariate analyses. This axiomatic occupation of the power aether is the least sophisticated and the least influential in comparison to the transcendental and the metaphysical modes.

b) transcendental

When the aether is conceived of as a necessary condition for the possibility of experience, we speak of it as a transcendental concept. As opposed to the axiomatic principle, a transcendental principle is not just a functional hypothesis in the sense that it bridges an explanatory gap in a way that cannot be deduced from the theory but at least leaves the theory intact. Also, a transcendental principle does not just follow a pragmatic necessity but is deducible in an undeniable manner. Time and space, for example, can be transcendentally deduced as necessary conditions for the possibility of experience (cf. Kant 1998[1781]). Every denial of time and space is a spatial and temporal event itself so that time and space are deduced as undeniable transcendental principles. The same goes for meaning. Everything ever thematized, questioned, or denied is meaning meaningfully constituted (cf. Luhmann 1990b). The aether, as a transcendental principle, answers the question regarding the unity of the difference of transcendental principles: How do space, time, and meaning relate to each other? Spatial differences are not temporal and vice versa; meaning is neither spatial nor temporal. Where, in aethereal and thus space-metaphorical terms, do these differences converge? How can we operate in these distinct dimensions without presupposing a proto-dimension from or in which the other dimensions can be approached? This line of questioning can be conceived of as an indication of an explanatory gap that is

consequently bridged by the aether as an axiomatic principle, as outlined above. Alternatively, it can be seen as the revelation of something that cannot be denied, something that is the necessary condition for the possibility of denial, something that has the ontological status of an "a priori intuition" (Kant 1998[1781], 175). The mode of existence of such a transcendental principle is, thus, not objective; time, space, and meaning as transcendental principles are not something that could be empirically approached. However, their undeniability renders them as solid foundations for philosophical thinking. Of course, these universalist and foundationalist claims of Cartesian and transcendental philosophies have been attacked from positivist, analytical, and postmodernist or poststructuralist stances, and successfully so, considering their peripheral role in current epistemological discourse. Whenever aether concepts claim to be undeniable, it makes sense to speak of a transcendental aether concept, even if the transcendental argument is not explicated. Aethereal power itself is not manifest but latent, not directly observable but discernable in relation to its effects. The self-referential arguments for power as both an effect and a cause of power can thus be argued to be transcendental.

c) metaphysical

Neither the axiomatic nor the transcendental aether concepts are sufficiently potent to explain the functioning of the aethereal conception of power in the educational sciences. This functioning, and this is the overall thesis of this paper, depends on a metaphysical ontology. As opposed to the transcendental ontology, a metaphysical ontology makes assertions about reality as independent from constructions of an individual or non-individual subject (discourses, systems, institutions, history, and evolution could be seen as non-individual subjects). Power must be, of course paradoxically, constructed as not-constructed, in the same way as the concept of God does not function when it is employed as a construction. On the contrary: for postmodern, especially Foucauldian thinkers, constructions are situated in the medium of power and facilitated by power. Nothing can be before or independent from power, according to this aethereal notion. This clearly indicates a metaphysical framework. Metaphysics can be conceived of as *the inadequate attempt to*

answer legitimate religious questions philosophically.[6] Questions are originarily religious when they address the contingency problem (cf. Luhmann 1982, 130f) from a contingent, namely human, historical, personal, thus fallible, stance with the aim of necessary, i.e. contingency-surmounting, answers. It is necessarily implied that these answers cannot be provided by a contingent individual subject or contingent discourses. The realm of transcendence that is not affected by our 'worldly', i.e. immanent, fallacies and contingencies can only become intelligible when we are willing to understand this immanent reality as embedded in and as an effect of this transcendence.

The same goes for power according to the aethereal power concept: power in itself cannot be seen nor touched, neither proven nor denied; it remains strictly transcendent. However, all our seeing and touching and all our thinking and denying are produced (not to say: powered) by power. Subjectivity, intersubjectivity, identity, action, speech, practice, communication, language, discourse, community, social fields, institutions, and society as a whole, i.e. all the basic reference points for analyses in the social sciences, have to be analyzed both as products and (re)producers of power: "'Everything is power'" (Rømer 2011, 757). Claiming that there is a vacancy of power or even just a crack in the power continuum would have to be criticized as a powerful intervention (both as communication and as action) of a powerfully constituted subject and as an attempt at asymmetrization of oppression with a direct impact on marginalized identities, rendering this statement violence (i.e. a manifestation of power). That this logic of power is self-referentially closed is obvious.

4. *metaphysical thinking and societal dedifferentiation*

As shown above, the aethereal power concept functions as an axiom and as a transcendental principle in the scientific discourse. The metaphysical dimension of power is arguably the most influential as it is both established within the discourse of

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[6] This definition by the German philosopher Ulrich Wienbruch (1936-2019) has–to the best knowledge of the author–never been published. As an anonymous reviewer of this paper, to whom I am indebted for his or her knowledgeable comments, pointed out, this is admittedly quite a caricature of metaphysics. It rather refers to the adjective 'metaphysical' than to 'Metaphysics' as a complex branch of philosophy that distances itself from a notion of such simplicity as formulated by Wienbruch. However, the caricature fulfills its function to delineate just the core feature outlined above: "metaphysical ontology makes assertions about reality as independent from constructions of an individual or non-individual subject".

social sciences and crosses the boundaries of the academic sphere into political, religious, and mass media discourses. In other words: the metaphysics of power can help to explain how an aethereal concept establishes itself in a postmodern environment. As already said, metaphysical thinking as understood here addresses religious questions pseudo-scientifically. Whereas the contingency problems in modern societies had been attributed to and monopolized by the system of religion, thereby releasing all other systems (e.g. politics, science, economy, art) from dealing with existential questions (cf. Luhmann 1995, 454), the reemergence of metaphysical concepts hints at a large-scale societal transformation. Whereas functional differentiation has widely been seen as the key principle of modern society in sociology (cf. Taylor 2020), de-differentiation as "structural fusion of functions" (Rueschemeyer 1977) can be described as the "central theme of postmodernism" (Willmott 1992, 58). We have seen that the aethereal power concept is crucial in the dedifferentiation of pedagogy and politics. It is widely known also that the Foucauldian power concept – as the core of aethereal power concepts – dedifferentiates power and knowledge, resp. power and truth. Power can only override the differences between science, pedagogy, medicine, politics, the economy, and art, thereby denying any chance of autonomy of these social spheres by virtue of its metaphysical design, i.e. the dedifferentiation of science and religion.

The religious function of aethereal power is both to universalize sin on an apocalyptic scale and to lead the path to salvation: First, we have to acknowledge our original sin in the form of anthropogenic injustices so fundamental that we have to speak of "dimensions of (in)justice (environmental, social, cosmopolitan, etc.)" (Papastephanou/Zembylas/Bostad et al. 2020, 3). Then, we have to eradicate the core of this universal anthropological sin, even if that means eradicating ourselves: "We are stuck in the toxic 'Anthropocene,' while we need to embrace the curative 'Neganthropocene'" (Sturm 2020, 15). Only then, after repentance and self-abasement, can we hope for salvation through fighting – as allies (cf. Russell/Bohan 2016) – those who do not acknowledge the sin and show no signs of remorse and penance. Framing the aethereal power concept in religious terms is not meant to explain how and why these power concepts function inside of scientific discourses and institutions. Rather, it demonstrates how the power-critical social sciences managed to reshape religious

thinking in scientific language, thereby rendering them acceptable and even attractive for political and mass media discourses.

5. *post-critical pedagogy as a solution?*

Contrary to what might have been implied in the beginning paragraphs of this paper, politicization is not the only heteronomization process pedagogy faces. Of course, economization, managerialization, and psychologization processes also significantly endanger the autonomy of pedagogical practice and reflection. However, these processes are critically observed and analyzed in depth in the education theoretical discourses. Politicization, again, is either *invisible* in the social sciences, as "everything is political" (Deuber-Mankowsky 2008, 135), or *mandatory* in the face of universal and ubiquitous inequalities and oppression. Hence, the effects of the politicization of pedagogical practice are not reflected on by the critical educational sciences that do not accept the idea of the autonomy of pedagogy in general, let alone the desirability of it. The future issue for the educational sciences in this regard is whether or not they will find a way to affirm pedagogy as a field and form of practice, as a function of society, as a modality of being-in-the-world without being uncritical. How can pedagogy affirm its own function, its own mode of observation, communication, and interaction, and its specific mode of being-in-the-world in critical opposition to the society it is a functional part of? Questions of this kind are currently discussed under the term post-critical pedagogy (Hodgson/Vlieghe/Zamojski 2017). From within the power aether, these fundamental attempts are difficult to appreciate or even understand. For this reason, this paper aims to help to render the power aether visible and debatable. This seems to be a necessary precondition for the possibility of discussing autonomy-affirming stances towards pedagogy.

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