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# Common education in schools. Gauging potentials for democratic transformation: a case study from Greece

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This article examines how educational commons, in which teaching and learning are shaped by the entire educational community on terms of equal freedom, contribute to democratic empowerment and renewal. Intervening in the critical debate over public formal education and the scope it allows for radical democratization, discussion draws on a case study conducted in the self-organized school *Solidarity School Mesopotamia* in Moschato, Athens, Greece.

The *Solidarity School* is an informal tutoring or supplementary tuition school which is attached to the formal high school curriculum. One of its main objectives is to support students for the courses they attend in public schools and to prepare them for public school and university entrance exams. This attachment foists constraints on education, however, the commons-based organization and the alter-political nature of the school put a crucial twist on educational practice. This generates considerable transformative effects which are reflected markedly in the ambiance of teaching and learning.

The *School* promotes socio-economic and political equality not only by providing free tuition to students whose families may not be able to afford private supplementary teaching and might not be able thus to enter university or to learn foreign languages. The *School* nourishes also a culture of equal freedom, solidarity and civic engagement which refashions the hegemonic habitus of consumerist individualism, passivity and submission to socio-political hierarchies.

The article argues thus that there is room for educational commons and democratic transformation even in structures which remain tailored to formal schooling but refigure educational hierarchies and modes of governance, infusing education with an alternative democratic ethos of solidarity, equal freedom and grassroots self-organization.

## KEYWORDS

education, commons, democratic transformation, alter-politics, ambiance, commoning-within-and-beyond, agonistic commons, pedagogical common

## 1. Introduction

Since the turn of the 21st century, several attempts to counter socio-political exclusion, the depletion of democracy and environmental degradation explore diverse patterns of commoning, that is, collaborative ways of living which enact democratic ideals (Bauwens et al., 2019; Bollier and Helfrich, 2019). For Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, among others, the “common” refers

to nature and products of social labor, such as codes, networks and information, when these are organized as shared resources “through the direct participation of citizens” (Hardt and Negri, 2012, p. 69–80). Staging a historical alternative to neoliberalism and state socialism, the common should guide the reconstruction of social goods and relations across a variety of fields (Hardt and Negri, 2012, p. 71).

Education assumes particular significance in this regard, as it can provide a catalyst for new social construction and subjective change. Indeed, there is now growing research in schools of “educational commons” in which teaching and learning are shaped by the educational community on terms of equal freedom and participation (De Lissoyoy, 2011; Means et al., 2017; Locatelli, 2019; Pecthelidis, 2020; Burton, 2022). From a critical perspective, educational commons advance struggles against inequalities and exclusions, confronting neoliberal logics which enforce two patterns of enclosure on education. They reduce education to a private commodity and a source of profit. Second, they turn education into a means of manufacturing docile, indebted and “entrepreneurial” subjects that pursue “lifelong learning” and the accumulation of credentials (Means et al., 2017, p. 3, 5; see also Lazzarato, 2011, p. 41–43).

In probing the potentials of contemporary initiatives to turn education into commons, the controversy over public formal education and the scope it allows for radical democratization has regained salience in recent years (Pecthelidis, 2020, p. 106–110). To illustrate, Tyson E. Lewis has located the “educational commonwealth” in an “exopedagogy” undertaken by “pirates” and migrants. This approach is aligned with Ivan Illich’s “deschooling” which dismissed the modern institution of public schools as hopeless for transformative action (Lewis, 2012). Taking up commons and education anew, Means et al. (2017) objected that

a central problem with exopedagogy, and with left analysis and politics based on horizontalism more broadly, is that it tends to view all forms of institutional structure and authority as necessarily oppressive and not as sites that can be harnessed and reconceived for achieving broadly progressive and emancipatory aims (Means et al., 2017, p. 12).

In response, Collet-Sabé and Ball (2022) seek to corroborate the thesis that the modern public school is totally unfit for commoning education:

It is paradoxical that advocates of commoning both propose a radical reshaping of the internet, culture and the environment, but remain committed to the modern (public) school as the ‘natural’ place for a commoning education...schools are intolerable institutions...and cannot be reclaimed if ‘real’ change to the ‘deep logic’ of contemporary education is to be achieved (Collet-Sabé and Ball, 2022, p. 9, 10).

The present article gauges the contribution of educational commons to democratic empowerment and renewal by intervening in this critical debate. A case study conducted in the informal school *Solidarity School Mesopotamia* in Moschato, Athens, Greece examines the extent to which logics of the commons in less-than-formal education can further democratic education and broader change. The *Solidarity School* lies on the border between formal and informal education. It is an informal tutoring or supplementary tuition school,

which has been established by the grassroots citizens’ movement *Mesopotamia* in the municipality Moschato-Tavros in south Athens. However, it is attached to the formal high school curriculum. One of its main objectives is to support students for the courses they attend in public schools and to prepare them for public school and university entrance exams. This attachment foists constraints on education, vesting the school with a hybrid character: typically informal, but substantially geared to formal public education, transmitting the knowledge contained in public school textbooks rather than undertaking an open exploration of different social and scientific fields.

Yet, and this is the thrust of the argument put forward here, the commons-based organization and the alter-political nature of the school put a crucial twist on educational practice. This generates considerable transformative effects which are reflected markedly in the ambiance of teaching and learning. The *School* promotes socio-economic and political equality by providing free tuition to students whose families may not be able to afford private supplementary teaching and might not be able thus to successfully attend high school, to enter university or to obtain foreign language certificates. Furthermore, the *School* nourishes a culture of equal freedom, solidarity and civic engagement which refashions the hegemonic habitus of consumerist individualism, passivity and submission to socio-political hierarchies.

The article argues thus that there is room for educational commons and democratic transformation even in structures which remain tailored to formal schooling but refigure educational hierarchies and modes of governance, infusing education with an alternative democratic ethos of solidarity and grassroots self-organization. This perspective highlights the scope that exists for commoning initiatives and for radical democratic education cultivating egalitarian subjectivities even within formal education institutions where most students from middle and lower strata are structurally positioned. The educational value of these effective possibilities and their broader political importance for progressive democratic change could hardly be underestimated.

## 2. Educational commons in in/formal education: the solidarity school, *Mesopotamia*

### 2.1. Commons in education

As stated in the poster that celebrates the 10 years of its operation in 2022, the *Mesopotamia Solidarity School* explicitly construes education as a “common good” («κοινό αγαθό» in Greek) grounded in participation, creativity, collectivity, democracy and solidarity.<sup>1</sup>

In the relevant body of research, the “commons” or “common-pool resources” (Ostrom, 1990) or “commons-based peer production” (Benkler and Nissenbaum, 2006) designate goods that are collectively used and produced. There are many kinds of commons, from natural common-pool resources (fishing grounds, irrigation canals etc.) to common productive assets and digital goods, such as open-source

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/solidarityschoolmesopotamia/photos/a.1007638985924302/5732038316817655/>

software. These diverse common goods are shared and administered in participatory ways by the communities which generate or use them (see Ostrom, 1990, p. 90–102; Benkler, 2006). The collective terms of the “commons” eschew thus the logic of both private-corporate and state-public property (Bollier, 2008; Caffentzis, 2013; De Angelis, 2017). The commons consist of three main parts: (a) common resources, (b) institutions, and (c) the communities (called commoners) which manage collectively the common goods (Dellenbaugh et al., 2015, p. 13).

The commons in education could animate attempts to transform our relationship to teaching, learning and research (Means et al., 2017, p. 3). Education would be transfigured into a collective good which is created, governed and enjoyed in common by all parties of the educational community. The co-determination of learning would occur on a footing of equality, nurturing openness, fairness, equal freedom, creativity and ecological sustainability. The pedagogical common would break with the competitive ethos of the market and the top-down direction of the state, disrupting also the conventional divides between teachers and students. Students and teachers would communicate beyond these hierarchical orders in a process of common inquiry and learning which is inventive, continuous and critical (Bourassa, 2017, p. 81). Educational life as a whole, from dress codes to curricula and the daily program, would be co-determined by all its members in ways that seek to approximate equal power and equipotential participation (Allsup, 2013, p. 68, 69).

The “pedagogical common” assumes thus the equal potential of each and all to learn, to invent, to communicate, to govern and to develop themselves. However, it should also attend to actual hierarchies and exclusions which prevent this potential from being realized due to class, gender, racial and gender inequalities. Hence, the pedagogical common is an orientation and an objective for which educators should strive, critically and reflectively. As an always imperfect condition of fully free and equal co-activity of singularities, the common is now and ever *not-yet* there (Bourassa, 2017, p. 87, 88).

Educational commons can take on many different forms. For example, in small-scale independent communities, parents, teachers, and children construct a particular social setting which responds to their specific needs and interests (Pechtelidis and Kiouпкиolis, 2020). The “commoners” do not abide by official state standards, public or private, but lay down their own rules to regulate the everyday life of the community. On the other hand, the commons can also gain some ground inside public schools which must conform to the official curriculum and strict rules governing the arrangement of space and time, as imposed by the state. *Mesopotamia* and its *Solidarity School* is a borderline or hybrid case, being a grassroots self-organized community that binds learning to the official public-school curriculum and state exams.

## 2.2. Democratic alter-politics and educational commons in *Mesopotamia*

The following discussion will illuminate educational commons and alter-political agency in the *Mesopotamia Solidarity School*. It will set out from the self-presentation of the community itself but will draw mainly on the fieldwork carried out by the author on the premises of the *Solidarity School* (21 visits and participation in 5 on-line assemblies), from September 2022 till March 2023. The author

interviewed 16 members, held 2 focus group and carried out participant observation in 11 courses, 12 assemblies, 2 cultural events, and 1 seminar.

This is how *Mesopotamia* gives an account of itself:

The Citizens’ Movement ‘Mesopotamia’ was created in 2003, by a citizens’ group of Moschato. The political, ecological and social issues affecting the time and the district and the realization of the need for direct and collective mobilization prompted them to take action in common. Mesopotamia very soon established itself in the consciousness of the active citizens of the city and other citizens from neighbor areas and the broader region as a collective with many-sided action in the fields of social struggles and culture. Important landmarks in the trajectory of all these years were the fight against the privatization of the seafront from 2004 to-date, the immigrants’ and refugees’ school functioning for several years, the short films cinema club, the readers’ club etc. Since 2006, Mesopotamia is housed at Platonos 13 Street, in a building conceded by the Municipality of Moschato.<sup>2</sup>

The permanent activities of the collective comprise a *Solidarity Time Bank* (set up in 2011), the *Solidarity Basket* supplying families in need with foodstuffs (since 2014), the *Cinema Club* (since 2015), and the *Solidarity School* (since 2013). Throughout the year, *Mesopotamia* organizes a variety of cultural events and socio-political interventions, such as friendly basketball games against racism (23 December 2022), talks and open discussions on patriarchy, gender violence and LGBTQ rights (1 December 2019), book fairs, bazaars and music concerts (13 November 2022). For its resources, *Mesopotamia* relies exclusively on voluntary work and the donations of its friends.

As stated in its on-line self-presentation<sup>3</sup> and the information leaflet (2022), in *Mesopotamia* there are no permanent members and no board of directors. Decisions are taken consensually, without voting, in popular assemblies where people participate on equal terms. They consider all different positions in order to reach a decision which reflects the consensus of all people present in the assemblies. There are four regular assemblies. A weekly assembly on Tuesday, 9 p.m., in which weekly events are decided. A monthly assembly on the first Sunday of each month, 11 a.m., in which they collectively deliberate on proposals for actions, interventions and essays/press releases on local or current affairs. The *Solidarity School* assembly is held every 3 months. In it, teachers, parents and students evaluate the school and decide social and cultural actions. Last, the *Cinema Club* assembly takes place at the end of every month.

The *Solidarity School* is an action realized through the voluntary contributions of qualified teachers. It is addressed to young students and people of any age who seek to enhance their knowledge, to amplify their formal qualifications or to pursue “any other activity aiming at personal and social development.”<sup>4</sup> Its key objective is to “break the barriers in education, to support everybody to meet their educational needs by creating a community of learning” (information

2 <https://www.mesopotamia.gr/el/about/> (Accessed 14 February 2023), authors’ translation.

3 <https://www.mesopotamia.gr/el/about/> (Accessed 15 February 2023).

4 <https://www.mesopotamia.gr/el/bank-school/to-allhlegguo-sxoleio/> (Accessed 17 February 2023).

leaflet, 2022)—a “solidary, non-profit oriented community of learning” (see footnote 4).

The school was launched in 2013. Since then, it has offered courses to hundreds of students, many of whom have acquired foreign language certificates or entered university. The school was created in the “society of crisis,” driven by the need for “a continuous upgrading of people’s knowledge” and qualifications at a time when access to education is subject to intensifying class exclusions and the public educational system is dismantled. Hence, this structure forms an integral part of the *Mesopotamia Time Bank* and its broader solidarity network (see footnote 4).

Courses include supplementary tuition for high school students, preparation for the university entrance exams, foreign languages, courses of Greek language for migrants, occasional seminars and labs, such as a theater lab, and a comics course. Tuition covers almost all subjects of the public school curriculum, from ancient and modern Greek to maths, chemistry and biology. The school proclaims that it is committed to a socially sensitive, inclusionary education. It makes decisions collectively, without hierarchies. Its everyday operations rely on “work groups” (teaching, secretariat, house maintenance) in which parents and adult students are also involved. Next steps and extrovert activities are proposed and decided in the quarterly mixed assemblies by teachers, parents and students alike (information leaflet, 2022).

Tuition is free of charge. New members enroll on the premises of *Mesopotamia*. They register both with the school and the *Time Bank*, declaring the services (technical aid, education etc.) they can contribute. Adult students and parents select also the work group in which they can take part (information leaflet, 2022). According to the statistics provided by a core member (M., personal communication), in February 2023 the courses taught in *Mesopotamia* amounted to 60, involving 40 teachers and 282 students.

Taking it at face value, this self-description highlights both the alter-political practice of the “citizens’ movement” in the district of Moschato, and how this effectively constitutes a pedagogical common. “Alter-politics” is used here in the sense intended by the anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2015). It pertains to new modes of politics which have been pursued by grassroots movements and civic associations since the 1990s. Democratic “alter-politics” departs both from top-down, centralized logics of political activity and from typical patterns of activism that are bent on protest and demands from the state, or they are locked up in insularity, or they step forward as a vanguard. Democratic politics and contestation are refigured thus in ways that foster diversity, openness, assembly-based democracy, attention to process, horizontality, prefiguration, visionary pragmatism, work in everyday life to meet social needs, networking and action beyond closed identities (Dixon, 2014; Hage, 2015; Coles, 2016).

What marks off contemporary democratic alter-politics is the conjunction of new social construction with opposition to capitalism, patriarchy and all forms of domination (Dixon, 2014, p. 4–7, 73–74, 223–233). This is precisely the kind of politics practiced by *Mesopotamia*, which contests diverse forms of domination and exploitation, from racism to hetero-patriarchy, neoliberal enclosures and statist, top-down rule. Opposition is paired with a politics of proposition, configuring new social relations and assembly-based models of organization which are non-hierarchical and non-vanguardist (Dixon, 2014, p. 85–87). The modes of resistance and positive creation prefigure thus the egalitarian democratic world this alter-politics envisions. In the case of *Mesopotamia*, the politics of prefiguration constructs a political, cultural and educational space

which is governed by open general assemblies and an ethics of solidarity and inclusion.

Crucially, democratic “other politics” is informed by an alternative political logic and ethics which resist dogmatism and self-indulgent insularity from society, tarrying with complexity and contradiction by experimenting and by practicing open-ended reflection (Dixon, 2014, p. 60–61, 232). As indicated in the self-presentation above, the public discourse of *Mesopotamia* voices a critical disposition toward racism, inequalities and exclusions. But it is also pragmatic and reaches out to society at large, dispensing with dogmatic posture and the typical *langue du bois* of the anticapitalist left or anarchism.

Contemporary alter-politics enacts a “visionary pragmatism” (Coles, 2016) that straddles the divide “reform or revolution.” This visionary pragmatism couples (a) street politics and mobilization with (b) everyday action and engagement with institutions to meet actual needs, and (c) long-term visions and strategies of remaking society at large (Dixon, 2014, p. 117–121, 127–129; Coles, 2016). Importantly, alter-political actors tend to organize in grassroots and bottom-up ways which enable ordinary people to build skills for self-government. *Mesopotamia* is a paradigmatic instance of this. It regularly combines street mobilizations and protests with activities that cover educational and material needs. It is partly assisted by municipal institutions who have provided the space hosting *Mesopotamia* and the *School*. Crucially, the solidarity, assembly-based democracy and self-education marking *Mesopotamia* draw the outlines of a vision which is partly realized in everyday practice.

*Mesopotamia’s* alter-politics frames its educational commons. The *Solidarity School* consists of a voluntary community which engages in learning and teaching as a shared good. All parties involved students, guardians and teachers manage in common the educational process on terms of equality, freedom, openness, pluralism and solidarity. A quarterly general assembly of all community members oversees the workings of the school and makes essential decisions. The philosophy and the *modus operandi* of the school challenge both the profit-oriented logic of private tuition and the hierarchical governance of public education.

Yet, if we construe commons not merely as alternatives within neoliberal regimes but as innovative orientations which would profoundly reshape societies, the question raised about the *Solidarity School* is whether it helps to induce wider transformation (Means et al., 2017, p. 3, 5). Although, by its constitution, the *School* opposes enclosures along class, race, nation and gender lines, offering tuition as a common good open to all, learning is substantially defined by the public-school curriculum and state language exams. These are governed by neoliberal priorities and logics: the individual accumulation of qualifications, the training of flexible and competitive employees or “entrepreneurs” for neoliberal markets. Under these conditions, to what extent could an in/formal structure such as the *Solidarity School* effectively cultivate an ethos of commoning and a radical democratic subjectivity? A skeptic could counter that such educational commons contribute mainly to the free reproduction of labor for neoliberal societies.

### 2.3. Another democratic politics at the present: fieldwork

To fathom the actual impact of the hybrid or liminal commons enacted by the *Mesopotamia Solidarity School* research needs to delve



deeper in the everyday relations, the practices and the subjectivities configured in this social space. This was precisely the objective of the fieldwork carried out with the community of *Mesopotamia* -core members, teachers and students.

The findings illuminate and complicate the picture, without giving the lie to this initial account. What transpired from the interviews and participant observation is that democratic alter-politics imbues the educational activities of the *Solidarity School*, reshapes social interaction in the classroom by generating an ambiance of horizontal democracy and solidarity, and leaves an imprint on both teachers and students. While attachment to formal schooling diminishes the scope for experiment and undercuts the drive for collective participation, the alter-political orientation of the community brings about considerable subjective and relational displacements.

Pecthelidis (2020, p. 70–84) argues that the structure of formal school education is “triadic.” A disciplinary component of “rigid” enclosure, enforcing hierarchies, bureaucracy, and authoritarian adultism, is combined with “supple” neoliberal enclosures of competition and individualism, while a “smooth” institution of democratic commons partly unsettles this hegemonic order. In the following, we will make that case that the *Solidarity School* embodies a “smooth” institution not only by eroding rigid social divisions and hierarchies but also by triggering radical democratic transformation in subtle and discreet ways, which are non-doctrinaire and non-directive.

How does alter-political democracy play out in the everyday life of *Mesopotamia*? In our interview (3 October 2022, on site), Stamatis, a founding member of *Mesopotamia*, fleshed out its key components.<sup>5</sup> He recounted how their activism is rooted in local resistances to neoliberal enclosures and urgent social needs for food and education, while paving the way to another world of equal freedom, solidarity and direct democracy:

We are trying to do what we can do. One centimetre. Do the same, to make it two centimetres. Participation is the main thing, to bring people around to exit individualism, the TV...Morally, it is true that this makes you a better person. Since I don't like the way society is, what I can do today, I do it. *There is another way* [emphasis added].

In our interview (9 February 2023), Fontas, another core member and coordinator of *Mesopotamia* and the *School*, traced the direct influence of democratic alter-politics back to the 2011 civic mobilizations against austerity and deformed democracy. In the “Greek squares” from May 2011 till August, which pivoted around the central Syntagma Square in Athens, people assembled, protested and set up encampments, demanding and performing another, direct or “real,” democracy. They made decisions in open assemblies of the multitude and sought to address urgent social needs. Fontas partook in this experience and joined *Mesopotamia* in its aftermath. In his testimony, the growth of *Mesopotamia* from 2011 onwards was part of this “expansion and the experience of the time,” which “resignified politics” and introduced “unprecedented things, a terminology that

was very fresh, all this direct democracy.” *Mesopotamia*'s current alter-political activism, which couples everyday social activities in the space with broader political interventions, emerged out of this political ferment. It was stamped by the post-2010 multi-crisis period and its spirit of civic insurrection.

Adriana, who teaches physics at a public high school and the *Solidarity School*, added that the present “other way” of *Mesopotamia* is “the way of collectivity, of altruism, of solidarity, of vindication” (interview 5 December 2022).

Is this way political? In what sense? Yannis, who also belongs to the core group of *Mesopotamia*, responded:

Mesopotamia is a deeply political citizens' movement, we have a clear political stigma, but not party-political...It's about what kind of society we want and how we approximate it. A society of democracy, solidarity and responsibility (interview 3 October 2022).

In this late modern politics, grassroots self-organization is anchored in horizontal assemblies where all people can deliberate and decide in common, without leaders and hierarchies (Graeber, 2014; Lorey, 2014; Thorburn, 2017). Likewise, in *Mesopotamia*

We don't like presidents; decisions are taken by the general assembly. Whoever participates is also a member...This was how Mesopotamia operated from the outset: a list of democratic principles. A democratic operation is not ‘the opinion of the majority.’ The democratic process consists in respecting also the minority view. From the beginning we said, ‘no vote,’ whatever we do, will be done consensually (Stamatis, interview 3 October 2022).

The author attended 12 assemblies from September 2022 till February 2023, nearly half of them on site and the other half, on-line (most assemblies are hybrid). Apart from the quarterly general assembly of the *Solidarity School*, the regular assembly held every Tuesday, and the monthly *Mesopotamia* assembly had a turnout of 10–15 people on average. At least half of the attendees were the same “core” members of the collective. Coordination was carried out by the same person who appeared to play a protagonist role. The everyday reality of assembly politics could raise doubts over its inclusiveness and egalitarianism. However, this appearance was vocally refuted by several other informants who are active in the space but may not participate frequently in all assemblies.

Fennie and Vasiliki, interviewed on 7 September 2022, are both mothers, residents of Moschato and volunteers in the *Solidarity Basket* in recent years. They also stand for the kind of reciprocity realized in this collective, as their children had taken courses at the *Solidarity School*. Fennie comments that she joined because she liked particularly the fact that

decisions are taken through discussion. There is no ‘I want to be the leader’... It's like a neighbourhood...I feel at ease, well. I encounter no racism and distinctions...I feel free to speak unlike what is often the case, because they don't judge, e.g. for my spelling [she is an immigrant]...They don't exclude. Old members listen to you and discuss what you are saying...Here my opinion counts...

<sup>5</sup> All references to persons in interviews, classes and assemblies are pseudonymized.

Vasiliki concurs:

some people know more because of their experience, but if we want to say something different, about anything, any idea, including education, we speak... What we have conquered here is that everybody has a voice, a view, and it is right, respectable.

Bearing witness to the openness of the space, two newcomers from another Athenian neighborhood showed up at the weekly assembly of 24 January 2023. They had never been at *Mesopotamia* before, but they had learnt from others and the website about it. They were welcomed and invited to attend.

All-in-all, even if assemblies do not attain massive participation and a certain group of core members has a prominent presence, assemblies remain the ultimate source of political authority and the site of grassroots decision-making, which is open to all members of the community. This is again a widely diffused feature of contemporary democratic alter-politics, in which the body of citizens is not permanently and fully present in collective self-government. However, political governance becomes effectively a *common* affair: a public process that is accessible to all members of a community on a footing of equality. An alternating fraction of the community participates in the various sites of self-government, as they freely choose. But institutional devices such as rotation, increased accountability, real openness, transparency and consensual decision-making work against the consolidation of lasting divides between rulers and ruled, expert governors and lay people. Such a democratic regime contrasts markedly with representative democracies where the assembled *demos* is institutionally excluded from real participation in the everyday exercise of major political power (see Kioupiolis, 2017).

Moreover, what surges forth in *Mesopotamia's* quest for consensus is another logic and ethic which are again the hallmark of alter-political democracy.

It's not like 'I am leaving and will set up my own store' because my view did not prevail. This is the classic leftist logic. If you are in possession of an absolute truth and this is non-negotiable, then go and do it on your own... (Stamatis, interview 3 October 2022).

In the '90s, the insurgent Zapatistas in Mexico were among the first in the alter-globalization movement to press home the lesson that the tight embrace of a dogma or a model which transcend the decisions of present-day people constitutes a conservative politics which divides and disempowers (Dixon, 2014, p. 61). Openness, inclusivity and critical reflexivity are not, however, unbounded. Democratic communities set limits in order precisely to safeguard themselves against logics of closure. "The fascist is not welcome" in *Mesopotamia* (Stamatis, 3 October 2022).

This other mode of political reasoning is intertwined with another affectivity (Massumi, 2015, p. 113). To attain mutual empowerment under the depressing conditions of the present, a "new conception of militancy...is already stirring in many movements today...To be militant about joy means being attuned to situations or relationships and learning how to participate in and support the transformation rather than directing or controlling it" (Montgomery and Bergman, 2017, p. 48). This joyful spirit and conviviality inform the kind of political activism *Mesopotamia* stands for, giving rise to a distinct *ambiance* which pervades its educational commons.

Mesopotamia is cool. People have a nice time when they come to enjoy themselves in it... If you are not well psychologically, you come to a space with 5-10 people with whom you feel that you produce something, this is magic, psychotherapeutic... (Yannis, interview 3 October 2022).

## 2.4. The ambiance of educational commons

In attending different courses at the *Solidarity School*, from mathematics for the 1st grade lyceum class (high school, 15–16 years old) to ancient Greek, 3d grade lyceum (high school, 17–18 years old) and English proficiency classes, one typically witnesses a blend of rigorous teaching with a laidback, amicable and informal atmosphere. Despite the age gap and the differentiation of roles, there is no sense of strict hierarchy, disciplinarity, severity or pressure. Students and teachers appear to collaborate on friendly terms in a convivial, at times humorous and joyful mood.

To illustrate, take the case of Athina who teaches ancient Greek language for the 3d lyceum class. She starts the course (on 4 February 2023, at *Mesopotamia*, on-site observation) smiling and laughing. Four underage students and an adult are present in a small room. She asks one of them why there are no hand-written notes in his grammar book, and the student responds in a humorous mood: "I care for Oikonomou's [the author] grammar book in the same way religious people care for the Bible. I do not deface it in order to preserve the integrity of the book." The class, including the teacher, bursts into laughter. Later, they come across the active verb "αἰρῶ," and Athina asks the students about its meaning. One of them raises his hand but dithers as he may be wrong. Athina responds: "Say it, even if it is wrong, what's the big deal?" The grammar course continues in the same easy-going and amiable vein for almost an hour.

Teachers, parents and young students typically attest to the good vibes reverberating in the *Solidarity School*. In the quarterly general assembly of the *School*, held at a Saturday afternoon on 10 December 2022 at the Cultural Center of Moschato and attended by 50 to 60 members, Kostas takes the floor to state: "my daughter...comes back home happy and smiley [from *Mesopotamia*]. She comes back tired from the public school." Anna, a newcomer teaching mathematics and physics, adds: "I am also impressed at how kids...treat *Mesopotamia* as a company of friends, with a lot of love."

Fontas, in our interview (9 February 2023), sums up the overall feeling springing from the space.

I really enjoy the everyday dynamics of the space... The space is dynamic; we are not a model... It is unpredictable. Everyday processes are decisive, substantially... The transformations of the space and of people who participated are impressive.

According to Thibaud (2004), the *ambiance* of a situation or a place is the feeling, the affective tonality which colors a situation or a place by conferring on them a certain characteristic appearance and sense. It is indistinguishably a sense of the self and the world; a diffuse, non-localizable and infra-conscious sense which imprints its mark on our deeds and everyday gestures (Thibaud, 2004, p.146).

We make atmospheres by establishing the conditions which enable the appearance of an atmosphere or phenomenon (Böhme, 2013, p. 2, 3). Ambiances or atmospheres communicate then a particular feeling to participating subjects. “A solemn atmosphere has the tendency to make my mood serious, a cold atmosphere causes me to shudder” (Böhme, 2013, p. 2).

The feeling of reciprocity, the lack of rigid hierarchies and disciplines, the friendly, jokey or even cheerful intercourse between teachers and students, the concern with meaningful learning which infuses courses at the *Solidarity School* is thus an effect of conditions prevailing in the broader space of *Mesopotamia*: solidarity, acting together for the common good, collective decision-making in open assemblies, the absence of bosses and directors, citizens’ political activism in defense of democracy.

In her interview (11 February 2023), Athina affirmed the common feeling of joy and reciprocal communication stemming from the personal intercourse with her students, while also pointing out the importance of *Mesopotamia* as a context framing their class.

The two focus groups the author held with eight students in a class of Proficiency in English and a third-year lyceum class (final high-school class) shed more light on this effect. The first conversation took place on 10 February 2023 (students A-D), and the second on 4 March 2023 (students E-H). Seven of the students were underage; one was 19 years old. The collective interviews were a culmination of the fieldwork. The author had attended their classes several times to familiarize himself with them and had already spent 5 months carrying out participant observation. The first noticeable finding bears precisely on the particular ambience of the *School*.

Student A: They [teachers] are friendlier than at private tuition centres and the school.

Student C: They create a friendly environment, and they are more willing to assist us.

Digging further into relationships and their “sense” of the space, students highlighted democracy, freedom, feeling at ease, intimacy, collaboration, and understanding.

Student A: It is more democratic here, we don’t have the hierarchy that exists at school, the head of the school, professors at a higher position... With teachers, because at school we get grades, the head, if you say something that is not correct/proper...you should be careful. Here the style is looser...

Student B: It is more relaxed and freer.

Student C: They use other methods of teaching.

Student E: There is a more pleasant ambience, and this makes the class better. While we keep face, intimacy makes the class more efficient. Without breaking everything apart.

Student G: Teachers show more understanding. Moreover, things are freer here, students find it easier to express their difficulties...

Student H: Teamwork prevails, there is a dialogue between teacher and students, whereas often at school this is not the case.

Several interviews with *Mesopotamia* members and teachers elaborated on the socio-political intent which is reflected in this ambience. Sotiris is a professor at a public high school in the area and teaches chemistry at the *Solidarity School* (on-site interview, 15 November 2022). Expanding on the political agency of the *School*, he asserted, first, that this stands for a different conception of the public sector, informed by ampler democracy and driven by a commitment to public service which is on the wane. Furthermore, the *School* embodies a particular idea of volunteerism which is social class-oriented. It addresses people in need, calling on individuals to assume responsibility for society and seeking to activate the beneficiaries of solidarity. In the quarterly general assembly (10 December 2022), Sotiris noted in this vein: “We are volunteers, but... we should do our job as well as we can. What is at stake for all of us who participate is to give more than volunteers. We do not want just to offer “something” to the people. We want “something” that is well-rounded.”

The high standards of teaching and the tightly organized structure of the *School* were plain to see in all the random sample of 11 classes the author observed. They were underlined also in the quarterly December assembly by several participants, including two teachers.

Finally, according to Sotiris (interview, 15 November 2022), *Mesopotamia* and the *School* are bent on shifting dominant attitudes toward grassroots mobilization, solidarity and participatory democracy. Such a transformation is a cardinal aspect of counter-hegemonic politics. In this case, change is fostered through their multiple socio-political and cultural interventions, both inside their own space and outside, in the public sphere, and through the processes they follow in their assemblies and their collective actions. The *School* itself is pivotal to *Mesopotamia*’s counter-hegemonic agency aiming for profound social change.

Fontas, who played a key role in founding the *School*, spells out the political rationale underlying it:

I believe in education as a salient part of social transformation, if people come [to *Mesopotamia*] for education, this is much better than doing political theory, if we want to say that we intervene in society and we are open (interview, 9 February 2023).

## 2.5. Commoning in and out of this world

The “formal” dimension of education at the *Solidarity School* forces constraints on the kind of educational commons it realizes. Sotiris submits that, at the *School*, the educational process itself contributes little to social and subjective reform. In the many courses which prepare students for public school and university entrance exams, teachers are under pressure to cover the syllabus. “Covering the syllabus crushes us” (interview, 15 November 2022). Less dramatically, Aspasia remarks that

supplementary tuition [‘frontistirio’] consumes a considerable part of the energy of the space. This work is related to exams and formal qualifications for upward social mobility...It is legitimate

but comes with predefined frameworks (interview, 11 February 2023).

Sotiris suggests that the same pressure may account for the scant participation of young students in the assemblies, mainly the quarterly general assembly of the *School*. Dinos (interview, 3 September 2022) and Kostis (interview, 5 December 2022), both teachers at the *School*, also underscored the poor participation by students in anything else beyond classes.

The leveling effect of the formal curriculum was a commonplace remark in the interviews with teachers, and it crops up immediately in a casual observation of courses (Aspasia, interview, 11 February 2023; Dinos, interview, 3 September 2022; Sotiris, interview, 15 November 2022). Hence, teachers voice doubts over whether young students are conscious of the “difference” of *Mesopotamia* as an alternative socio-political space, or they just look on the *School* as an institution of supplementary tuition which is free of charge (Nikos, interview, 24 October 2022; Adriana, interview, 5 December 2022).

The educational commons staged by the *Solidarity School* remains thus at a remove from a full-fledged mode of commoning in which the entire community of learners, teachers and guardians would freely co-construct the learning subjects and practices by collectively managing the school on a basis of equality. At the *School*, education turns into a common good freely produced and shared among a community for the benefit of all. But the broader contents and objectives of schooling are predefined insofar as they conform to the formal curriculum, while the actual participation of young students and many teachers in the co-management of the school is low. The “predefined framework” may account for the weak motivation for political participation as it limits the ambit of collective decision-making, in a context where there is an overall satisfaction with the quality of tuition.

The formal aspect of education in *Mesopotamia* seems to curtail thus the scope of free, equal and transformative commoning in its midst. But this very limitation aims at reversing inequalities and exclusions in society as it is. By providing free and high-quality supplementary tuition for the public high school, for university entrance exams and foreign language certificates, the *School* effectively assists students from lower income classes and diverse national-cultural backgrounds in overcoming class barriers and gaining access to higher education, scientific learning, professional skills and formal qualifications.

Aspasia dwells on how the incumbent neoliberal government (2019–2023) pushes young students from lower strata to drop out of education and to turn to job training. Against such elitist policies which narrow mental horizons and professional prospects for working class youth, *Mesopotamia* sets out to defend general public education. It encourages youth to “dream freely” for their future (interview, 11 February 2023). Dismissing “deschooling” as an elitist affair in our present, Fontas also underscored this objective of the *School*: to remove barriers to upward social mobility in actually existing education, to equip young people with qualifications, to blame the “system” and face it up rather than internalize a sense of individual responsibility and guilt for their social status (interview, 9 February 2023).

Hence, the *Solidarity School* is committed to extending solidarity and fueling collective empowerment *in this world*. But, in the manner

of democratic alter-politics (Dixon, 2014, p.8), the *School* is in this world without being of this world, nurturing radical democratic values and visions of commoning *beyond* it. Challenging the hegemonic culture and the inequalities of neoliberal capitalism, *Mesopotamia* and the *School* cultivate solidarity, reciprocity, conviviality, equality across class, race, nation and gender lines, care for others and the world at large. Young students feel freer in the classroom itself, in their intercourse with each other and their teachers. The atmosphere of companionship, solidarity and conviviality bolsters youth from strained family backgrounds, who find a safe space at the *School*, feeling at ease and mutually supported (Athina, 11 February 2023, Dinos, 3 September 2022). Aspasia draws out this kind of empowerment in relation to gender and sexuality:

all these years that I have been here...I have met many students who have a gender identity or sexuality different from what society considers that most people do. They feel this is a safe space. And I think it is positive that they feel comfortable to talk to teachers at the *Solidarity School* more than elsewhere (interview, 11 February 2023).

Moreover, young students enjoy real opportunities for participation in decision-making, mainly in the quarterly general assembly of the school, which are typically scant or absent at most public and private schools alike. Without forcing its participatory politics on young students, the *School* supplies this actual space for their participation. It also strives to amplify the real input of youth in other, subtler and “light” ways. Among others, teachers distribute questionnaires in which students give their feedback on the educational process and other potential issues by responding to both structured and open questions. The *School* invests time and energy in extracting this feedback by carefully constructing the questionnaires, discussing them in assemblies and taking pains to process their results.

Finally, teachers endeavor to transform teaching into a participatory process even when the subject matter is predetermined by the public-school curriculum (Dinos, 3 September 2022). Kostis’ essay-writing class for the 3d grade of lyceum (final year of high school) illuminates this. He proposes different topics of discussion to the students who pick out one or two. They engage then in a free, open and collective discussion before putting their thoughts on a paper (observation on-site, 5 December 2022).

The extra-curricular courses offered at the *Solidarity School* make ampler room for a participatory co-construction of learning and teaching, which commons the educational practice itself. Teachers seize on this opportunity, and *Mesopotamia* members insist on the importance of teaching free courses outside the public-school syllabus (general assembly of the *School*, 10 December 2022). Akis, a young teacher of freehand drawing at the *School*, explains how this free commoning can unfold in the classroom:

I try to build a relationship with students, so that we don’t have this kind of thing -I am the teacher, you are the students. They are at liberty to voice their views; art does not need pressure, it needs a serenity of the soul. We proceed as a team. I also learn through the students. To improve myself, in the course, at art, to listen to other views, how the human operates, since we construct a story with social content (interview, 18 March 2023).



Significantly, the good of educational commons—learning and teaching—is upheld and enhanced insofar as it is valued for its intrinsic worth. Teachers and students alike foreground the deep and ongoing concern with proper learning and understanding in the different courses. Knowledge is valued in itself rather than being instrumentalized in terms of passing exams. Students' responses in the focus groups (see below) speak volumes on this score. Concern for education as a good-in-itself is also reflected in the fact that students do not get any marks for their performance. Instead, teachers discuss regularly with guardians about the progress of young students (Fontas, interview, 9 February 2023).

## 2.6. Smooth commons and transformation

Last, but not least, the transformative effect of free democratic education is also marked at the *Solidarity School*, despite the burdens of formal schooling. Solidarity, reciprocity, equal freedom beyond fixed hierarchies, learning as an intrinsic value are instilled in young students through the atmosphere of the space, their awareness of its difference, and the interventions of teachers in the “fractures” of the courses. These interventions sensitize students to issues of racism, exclusion, gender inequality, new enclosures, environmental degradation, and the crisis of democracy.

Sotiris fleshes out the political effect of the ambience, which is hard to quantify.

Q: How do you promote solidarity here?

Sotiris: Through the multiple interventions...The processes contribute: assemblies, actions, the rallies outside.

Q: Does the educational process contribute, as well?

Sotiris: To a small extent.... I teach courses for students to sit exams. I give hints, but I need to cover the syllabus. In other, looser courses, such as drawing, there is discussion (interview, 15 November 2022).

“*I give hints...*” Political education in the classroom is light and “interstitial,” avoiding catechism of any sort. Teachers use “fractures” in the curriculum, by commenting for instance on the texts of ancient Greek literature, to raise consciousness about inequalities and exclusions. Fontas stresses also the fact that they never put pressure on young students to participate in the socio-political activities of the space. “We have never tampered with the free will of any individual. The framework, not I, the framework is like that” (Fontas, interview, 9 February 2023). Still, he is adamant about the life-changing impact of the *School*.

The influence of *Mesopotamia* is dynamic, constant ... And those who cannot [express it] ... their experience shows the substance of our endeavour, they may lack the arguments but ... their life has changed.

Q: Are there cases like this?

Infinite!... I have seen miracles (interview, 9 February 2023).

As a result, the *smooth* character of educational commons is heightened at the *Solidarity School*—“smooth” not only in the sense that it lowers barriers, combatting exclusions and diluting rigid disciplines. The deeper educational influence on subjectivity, inclining young people toward a radical democratic habitus, is also brought about in a smooth, inobtrusive manner, respectful of individual autonomy. This cultural shift is induced through the ambience of the *School*, the democratic and solitary relations between students, teachers and parents/guardians, and the teachers' socio-political interventions in the “fractures” noted by Sotiris and Fontas, and illuminated in the focus groups (see below).

The type of educational commons staged by the *Solidarity School* is likewise *agonistic* in two respects. It militates against inequalities in existing education and society at large. But it is also aware of its own imperfections as a commoning practice. Hence, it strives to reduce the gap between the current state of the *School* and free democratic education organized as a commons. This is attested, among others, by the initiative taken by the *School* since November 2022 to collaborate with the civic action organization *Inter Alia*<sup>6</sup> in order to reconstruct teaching and learning in the *School's* courses along more creative and participatory tracks. In the same vein, in the December 2022 general Assembly, Sotiris raised the issue of young students' low participation and how it needs to be tackled in ways which facilitate their expression, through “children's assemblies.” Aspasia noted their endeavor to enrich the curriculum with courses that are not related to formal qualifications (interview, 9 February 2023). The “comics” course which began anew in February 2023, nurturing artistic creation and expression, is a telling instance of such classes.

Alter-political praxis and reflective agonism offer another window into the meaning of *Mesopotamia* which denotes a place located between two rivers (in Greek). Indeed, this space is situated between the two main rivers of Athens, Kifissos and Ilissos, which are mostly submerged but rise again to surface in the nearby area. But it is also positioned between the actual world, its inequalities, exclusions and constraints, and another society and education-to-come that would be egalitarian, inclusive, pluralist, solitary, more creative and freer. The *School* engages in a kind of joyful militancy in the first world which also partly approximates the second world, building bridges and seeking to facilitate the transition.

The focus groups with the students (10 February 2023, students A-D, 4 March 2023, students E-H) spotlighted the political efficacy of such smooth and hybrid commons. The groups disclosed how their attendance at the *School* has left an imprint on them, even if they do not regularly take part in assemblies or other events at *Mesopotamia*.

Q: Is there any difference from private supplementary tuition ('frontistirio')?

Student B: In a private 'frontistirio' they take the money and it's fine, they are not interested in whether you attain the objective, or you really learn...

Q: Do you attend assemblies?

<sup>6</sup> see <https://interaliaproject.com/what-we-stand-for/>

Student B: I haven't been to any.

Student C: I have been to one, I did not take the floor, but I did not feel unsafe... [I did not feel] that I could not, if I wanted to.

Q: When you leave this space will it leave an imprint on you....?

Student A: I want to become a volunteer teacher, too.

Student C: It will help me to do more things as a volunteer.

Student F: For sure we will be nostalgic, we had a nice time, and a proper class ... We have developed certain moral values... Respect...

Student D: Humanity.

Student H: Team spirit.

Student F: Collaboration, freedom of speech.

Student E: Critical thought.

Student G: Diligence, organization.

Student H: We expand our horizons... I mean that, many times, during courses we get further information that helps us, it is up-to-date and relevant for our career...

Student E: That will give us a more rounded picture of life out there.

Q: What about gender relations?

They start fighting jokingly. Student F (female name) chips in: "Humour brings us together."

### 3. Conclusion

The alter-politics of this school of educational commons is captured in the style of a manifesto in the quarterly newspaper supplement "Solidarity desks." This comes out regularly since March 2021 in the major left-leaning newspaper *Efimerida ton Syntakton* ["The Journalists' Newspaper"] and is authored collectively by the national *Network of Solidarity Schools*, currently made up of eight schools, from Thessaloniki in the north to *Mesopotamia* and the island Chios, in the south.

In their "identity" piece in the supplement, the schools of the network associate themselves with new social movements which constitute self-organized communities independent from the state, crafting tentatively their own institutions and procedures. Solidarity schools present themselves as institutions of the commons in all three dimensions of communing, which bear on the common good, the common action of the community and decision-making in common. First, the objectives are common to the actors. Second, in their activities, they operate in an open and reciprocal manner. They actively involve participants in all steps and functions, nourishing relations of trust and mutual empowerment. Third, information about

decision-making, funds and problems is accessible to all participants, who can intervene in decision-making at all stages (*Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 4 February 2023, p. 23).

They are explicit about their democratic alter-political spirit as they note how, while engaging in social policy, they couple opposition with proposition and a transformative vision. They stand opposed to inequality, social injustice and centralizing state logics. They aspire to a more democratic and just world in accord with their own democratic communities (*Efimerida ton Syntakton*, 4 February 2023, p. 23).

From this slant, the *Solidarity School* embodies a liminal or hybrid mode of commoning education which contrasts with the logics of expedagogy or deschooling. While the latter discard the modern public school as a disciplinary institution that is "irredeemable" for real change, the liminal position of *Mesopotamia* is located both within and beyond formal public schooling.

The formal soul of the *School* restricts the room for free commoning through which all members of the educational community would collectively and openly form the contents and methods of learning. The "informal" or grassroots militant soul operates through open assemblies, fomenting an ambiance of conviviality, solidarity, freedom and equality which gets diffused in the classrooms and triggers smooth subjective shifts. It promotes participatory learning, it works for change through "fractures" while covering the syllabus, it upholds education as an end-in-itself. It aims for inclusion, social justice and democratic public schools. The formal constraints on free commoning derive from *Mesopotamia's* strategic logic which combines social empowerment here and now, for people laboring in present societies, with grassroots egalitarian democracy, moral and intellectual reform, resistance and visionary aspiration.

This is a transformative strategy which is anchored in the present, in actual needs and conditions, but lays the groundwork for another world. The offshoot is a distinct, alter-political commoning within and beyond the present world which is, by the same token, an agonistic commoning internally, reflecting on its imperfections and striving to reduce them, and externally, militating against the status quo that enforces inequalities and exclusions.

The strategic logic informing *Mesopotamia's* commoning is a typical instance of the composite alter-political strategy advocated by radical political thought (Dixon, 2014; De Angelis, 2017; Hardt and Negri, 2017) and adopted by contemporary social movements, from the Zapatistas to the 2011 "squares movements." In this strategic synthesis, covering social needs and empowering people in the present is wedded to the politics of opposition to neoliberal capitalism and to the visionary politics of creating, here and now, the institutions of a new world. It is the conjunction of commoning with this three-pronged strategy of visionary pragmatism which begets a distinctive figure of commoning within-and-beyond the present.

In contrast, deschooling embodies a strategy of "exodus" (Hardt and Negri, 2017). Groups and individuals taking this route seek to exit from dominant institutions in order to contrive in miniature new ways of living, of sharing, of learning and teaching. Intentional "utopian" communities, which set foot in remote places, and "prefigurative" politics unfolding in present-day activism are two key practices of exodus. Usually, such utopian communities command little power to make an impact on ruling institutions and to draw forth large-scale social reconstruction. They tend to stay at a remove from wider social milieus, or their members remain dependent on ruling social structures for their reproduction. More crucially, they lack the means

and the will to grapple with ruling institutions and to reorder broader social constellations (Hardt and Negri, 2017, p. 274–276).

The type of commoning within-and-beyond enacted by the *Solidarity School* displays a dual concern with achieving a space of grassroots democratic solidarity and acting as a vehicle for change outside the space itself. Hence the limitations and the counter-hegemonic force of this mode of educational commons. In the move from inside to outside the space, we have highlighted the importance of the ambience—a widespread feel of solidarity, the democracy of any and all, the flattening of hierarchies, freedom, conviviality, humor—which is engendered by the community constructing the space but is transmitted outside the space by making an effective imprint on subjectivities. Through the ambience, subjective shifts are brought about in subtle, inobtrusive ways which are the outcome of personal exposure to the positive vibes of a space rather than of discipline or indoctrination.

Research in educational commons as a new perspective on emancipatory pedagogy has not yet delved into the logics of agonistic commoning within-and-beyond, and the transformative potentials of the ambiances imbuing actually-existing commons. The example of the *Solidarity School* in *Mesopotamia* sheds light on the significance of both, not only for future inquiries but also for democratic transformations in our times.

## Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the Ethics Committee, Aristotle University,

Thessaloniki, Greece. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants' legal guardian/next of kin. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s), and minor(s)' legal guardian/next of kin, for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

## Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

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