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of the Journal Scuola Democratica**

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VOLUME II

**Learning with New Technologies,
Equality and Inclusion**

ASSOCIAZIONE "PER SCUOLA DEMOCRATICA"

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***Title* Proceedings of the Second International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” – Reinventing Education VOLUME II Learning with New Technologies, Equality and Inclusion**

This volume contains papers presented in the First International Conference of the Journal “Scuola Democratica” which took place at the University of Cagliari on 5-8 June 2019. The aim of the Conference was to bring together researchers, decision makers and educators from all around the world to investigate the concepts of “education” in a “post-democracy” era, the latter being a set of conditions under which scholars are called to face and counteract new forms of authoritarian democracy.

Populisms, racisms, discriminations and nationalisms have burst and spread on the international scene, translated and mobilized by sovereigntist political movements. Nourished by neo-liberalism and inflated by technocratic systems of governance these regressive forms of post-democracy are shaping historical challenges to the realms of education and culture: it is on this ground, and not only on the political and economic spheres, that decisive issues are at stake. These challenges are both tangible and intangible, and call into question the modern ideas of justice, equality and democracy, throughout four key dimensions of the educational function, all of which intersected by antinomies and uncertainties: ethical-political socialization, differences, inclusion, innovation.

The Conference has been an opportunity to present and discuss empirical and theoretical works from a variety of disciplines and fields covering education and thus promoting a trans- and inter-disciplinary discussion on urgent topics; to foster debates among experts and professionals; to diffuse research findings all over international scientific networks and practitioners’ mainstreams; to launch further strategies and networking alliances on local, national and international scale; to provide a new space for debate and evidences to educational policies. In this framework, more than 600 participants, including academics, educators, university students, had the opportunity to engage in a productive and fruitful dialogue based on researches, analyses and critics, most of which have been published in this volume in their full version.

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Premise

In recent years, an important debate has developed on the role that digital technologies are playing and can play in the transformation of education and its institutions. Digital platforms, distance learning, blended learning, online training technologies are part of a significant restructuring and reculturing of the educational worlds. Digital technologies have restructured learning practices, educational content and the forms of educational governance which are immersed in public spaces and global markets. On the one hand, the digital governance of education contributes to changing and reconfiguring educational practices and the management of education on a local, national, international and transnational scale. On the other hand, technologies make possible the interconnection of multiple modes and shapes of formal, informal and non-formal education and training, producing forms of re-spatialization of education, locating the classroom within a digital learning ecosystem and favouring the emergence of different models of blended or hybrid learning.

The pandemic scenario has accelerated these processes, making more visible the tensions between multiple worlds of education and the processes of digitalization, while triggering a complex restructuring of educational institutions whose directions are not yet easily predictable. Perhaps, we are entering a new era that will mark the end of education as we have known it so far. In such a scenario, it becomes more urgent to carry on and debate an informed educational research, that explores the realities of the relations between education and digital technologies. This is especially needed because technologies are far from neutral. They are a heterogeneous technical and social world in which possibilities to change education for the better and make education fairer can be encountered as well as risks can be run of reproducing social and educational inequalities. Therefore, key questions are: how and in what direction the processes of digitalization are changing education, its practices and its governance? What are forms of coordination between educational technology markets and the institutional and educational actors in the emerging transnational governance arenas? How do the professional and social actors (teachers, managers, students, families) that are involved in the digitalization of education react to and translate these transformations? How do digital technologies change the aims and the curriculum of contemporary educational institutions? How can the digital competencies learned by

students beyond the educational spaces (school and university) become a resource for learning processes and educational socialization in educational contexts? And above all, what are the possibilities that digital technologies offer us to reinvent education and its governance that are worth to be explored?

Papers collected in the Volume try to give preliminary answers to those issues. Furthermore, contributions from a range of experts, specialists and scholars cannot avoid facing educational inequalities which haven't by any means disappeared. They have rather changed and (re)combined into new forms that challenge the resilience of educational systems in terms of both effectiveness and equity. Several contributions published in the Volume aims to address these issues from a theoretical and empirical point of view, as well as their implications for educational policies. In this sense, proposals linked to educational inequalities in relation to social stratification as a factor affecting cognitive results, educational choices, the attainment of educational qualifications and working careers are of interest for the reader. Comparative research on different scale (comparisons between national, regional or local cases) is particularly relevant and much importance is attached to the analysis of institutional factors (tracking, comprehensive vs selective systems, accountability policies, private education, ability grouping) which can produce educational segregation dynamics affecting educational inequalities, intersecting extra-curricular factors, such as urban segregation, for example.

The intertwining and interconnecting of differences (gender, socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, cognitive, and motivational factors) often generate inequalities both for their effects in themselves and in relation to the policies implemented to address them in their multidimensionality and intersectionality. Therefore, specific tracks on how education systems and educational institutions try to manage differences and end up producing inequalities are welcome.

The links between education and the labour market are another central aspect of research: the debate on the inflation of educational qualifications and over-education, the differential returns to education according to the type of diploma, degree program or type of tertiary program attended and, more generally, the relationship between education and social mobility represent a pivotal set of phenomena to understand production and reproduction of educational inequalities.

The applications of randomized controlled trials to the assessment of policies aimed at reducing inequalities and improving cognitive and career results as well as empirically driven reflections on how educational policies intersect the complex relationship between equity (equality and inclusion), quality and excellence are one of the main focuses researchers have dealt with in the collected papers.

Gender inequalities are a key topic to understand educational differences. Educational contexts are marked by a significant gender gap in staffing and in the formative experiences of children, teenagers and young students. These differences reflect and often reproduce gender stereotypes and asymmetries in societies at large. How are gender issues addressed in classrooms? Where are they encountered in training settings? What models do teachers convey, and what are the emotional responses from students of diverse gender? How do educational institutions practice and reproduce gender stereotypes and asymmetries? Can school and university provide contexts in which to acquire gender awareness and tackle gender issues? What are the responsibilities of educational contexts in the representation of gender in society? What experiences and good practices have been activated to promote greater gender equity? What cultural resistances? Several questions are addressed in the Volume and many are the answers discussed.

Many forms of educational segregation persist, yet today a growing presence of women – which are in some cases becoming a majority – is found even in fields that have historically been a male domain; this is the case, for example, of medicine and biology in higher education. International and national data show that many things have changed in recent decades, and gender equity is rising in all spheres of education and training. At the same time, several initiatives have been launched to promote greater awareness of gender stereotypes and prevent phenomena such as discrimination and gender-based violence. However, much remains to be done – not least to prevent backlashes and the emergence of new inequalities alongside established ones. This is the case, for example, of the asymmetries in accessing fields of knowledge that may become relevant for the future of work (e.g., digital skills), or the development of new practices of discrimination related to the use of new technologies (e.g., hate speech or revenge porn).

Younger generations have been challenging those constraints surviving from the past, but new challenges arise in a constantly evolving global environment, where the urgency of the climate

crisis in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic call for societal radical shifts while populism, unemployment, artificial intelligence, remote education and communication are affecting the ordinary daily life as we knew it.

Some analysts fear the pandemic will spur a new kind of backlash against the very basis of global society, from migration to cooperation and interdependence, while others worry about younger generations' abilities to overcome mass unemployment and economic vulnerability. Economic, political and environmental crisis are now fully part of the youth horizon: how are formal, informal and non-formal education going to support young people in moving forward positively and purposefully in their lives while simultaneously ensuring space for their autonomy, decision-making and voice?

Such general question contains intersected and multiple issues and applies across contexts as diverse as the role and relevance of democracy as educational content, the changing landscape of non-formal learning/education, the forging of future visions on politics, digital technologies and the media, youth educational transitions, youth experiences at work, the relation between consumerism and environmentalism, the widening of opportunities and constraints stemming out from cooperative learning and digital exchange tools.

Social research and youth studies have been producing a wide range of analyses on these relevant issues, with the (re) emergence of broader theories and empirical inquiries directed towards the recognition and validation of non-formal education, the promotion of youth participation, and the deeper rethinking of youth policies.

Under the large umbrella of an education to be re-invented, papers in the Volume are dedicated to new generations, transitions and the future of education, with a broad, multidisciplinary, and internationally set of contributions focusing on a variegated platform of topics on youth studies theories, critical analysis of relevant societal debates surrounding youth in and out education; in and out the labour market; on youth transitions throughout and across cultures, statuses, roles, responsibilities and institutions; on the impact of the various initiatives to promote and enhance youth participation; on the role of youth organisations as well as on the strengths and weaknesses of youth policies at both a national and supranational level.

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**The Academic Work in Neoliberal Times:
Exploring Gender, Precarity
and Emerging Forms of Solidarity**

PhD Researchers Engaging with Academia: Four Generative Metaphors

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ABSTRACT:

CECILIA: All right, the paper's done. We're almost finished now. All we need is the abstract.

LEONARDO: Yes. Thank goodness. Let's get to it. Just a few words – well-chosen, and bold. Let's not spoil the whole thing, okay?

CECILIA: Yeah. Let's make it as bizarre as the rest, though. After all, an abstract's like a movie trailer, isn't it?

LEONARDO: Indeed. Okay. Let's begin.

An awkward silence falls between CECILIA and LEONARDO.

CECILIA: Okay. Look, let's make it, like, standard, okay? I don't really feel like working today. I don't even have a proper job at the moment.

LEONARDO: You're right. I'm with you. Let's make it quick.

A few minutes later...

CECILIA: Okay, that was easy. Let's reread it for a second:

The doctorate is a critical stage in the lives of subjects and institutions. In this paper, a post-qualitative approach has been mobilized along with metaphorical thinking and 7 interviews with PhD researchers in order to explore this crucial threshold moment. In particular, four types of engagement have been singled out through which doctoral researchers engage academia: i) the 'worship', in which they describe themselves as 'chosen ones' accessing the sacred place of knowledge production; ii) the 'play', in which they learn to play the 'game' of academia; iii) the 'safe harbor', in which they engage academia as a warm and intimate haven; iv) the 'Doom', in which they feel trapped and crushed by an imponderable System. Finally, a further transformative and critical engagement of PhD students with academia has been envisioned based on reflexivity and participation as tools for transforming academia.

LEONARDO: Quite extraordinary. Let's submit it.

KEYWORDS: *Academia, Phd, Metaphors, Higher Education, Post-Qualitative*

CECILIA frowns. She is thoughtful.

CECILIA: Okay, I suppose the paper is almost finished. Not sure what to think about this, though.

LEONARDO: What do you mean?

CECILIA: By doing this, aren't we somehow re-producing what we are challenging?

LEONARDO: Uhm. Yes. I see.

A gloomy silence falls between CECILIA and LEONARDO. They stare at their computers. Their shoulders are hunched. They look distressed. CECILIA suddenly looks up. LEONARDO notices that. He is full of hope.

CECILIA: Wait. Maybe we can see this as something we did for *us*. Some kind of, you know, 'soul-searching' effort. Not only a 're-searching' one.

LEONARDO: Yes! In the end, this feels like going back over our life in recent years, isn't it? Except that it is not only *our* life, but those of many other colleagues.

CECILIA: Yeah (*typing on her computer*). Okay. I still find it weird how scarce literature has been produced on the doctorate and doctoral researchers. I mean, that's actually where academia is trained and socialized.

LEONARDO: There is that strand that we explored yesterday, in which the doctorate is addressed in terms of socialization and identity¹. And there is something on gender². But almost nothing on what interests us. Namely, the actual experience of PhD researchers, and how they engage with academia.

CECILIA: Yeah. Let's see what comes out from the interviews that we have made.

LEONARDO: They are only a few, unfortunately. And they all are with colleagues from SSH departments in Italy.

CECILIA: Indeed. They're just 7. But it is a starting point nevertheless, right?

LEONARDO: Sounds good. Let's begin with the metaphors, then. This is what we wrote yesterday:

Metaphors are 'world-making' devices (Gherardi et al., 2017; Goodman, 1978) inasmuch creativity and social imagination is developed by matching what is distant with what is close, similar features with dissimilar ones. Metaphors, therefore, emerge as invaluable tools for qualitative data analysis, since the elicitation of metaphors can bring new insights into the sensemaking processes of actors. Generative metaphors (Schön, 1979) are related to the act of reframing or discovering and creating new possibilities for actions that people had not previously considered. They are the means to generate new knowledge internally. They enable the reframing and discovery of knowledge and the creation of new horizons of insight.

¹ See, for example, Tinto, 1993; Viernes Turner, Thompson, 1993; Golde, 1998; Weidman, Stein, 2003; Gardner, 2008; Jazvac-Martek, 2009; Gardner, Holley, 2011; Montalvo-Javé et al., 2016.

² See, for example, Brown, Watson, 2010.

LEONARDO: Wonderful. Let's just say that we are going to use four generative metaphors and a post-qualitative approach³ to explore through both unstable backstories and inscribed disciplinary textualities how PhD researchers engage with the world of academia, and how each metaphor brings to light different dimensions of the PhD experience.

CECILIA: Okay. Let's begin by jotting down the metaphors, then.

1. The Worship: Pursuing a Sacred Quest

In the first type of engagement that we propose, scientific research is addressed as a sacred, pure, and heroic quest. We have chosen the metaphor of 'worship' to describe that.

Often, doctoral researchers develop this engagement already as students, as a sort of anticipatory socialization to the academic profession. They develop a strong attachment towards both knowledge and their mentor:

There was something about my research field that no one could explain to me. My supervisor could. They opened up perspectives for me – and I jumped right in. (PhD Researcher D)

My master's thesis supervisor told me I was very good. That's why I decided to continue this path. (PhD Researcher F)

When I took my dissertation supervisor's class, I fell in love with Sociology and realized I was actually passionate – that there are authors and theories through which I can see reality differently. (PhD Researcher E)

Therefore, soon-to-be doctoral researchers get passionate about some research topics, often with the support and encouragement of their mentor. They therefore feel like 'chosen' subjects that have undergone a form of initiation. That is because they can benefit from the possibility – and the privilege – of feeding themselves with knowledge directly from the source of its production, i.e. academia. This is an idyllic, ideal, and peaceful endeavor, in which PhD researchers, as contemplative and romantic heroes, can pursue the common good (Thévenot, 2001):

I was like, «Wow, I'm applying for a conference! So cool! It must be so hard to get accepted!». And then, «Oh God, they chose me! I'm the best and coolest researcher in the world!» (PhD Researcher D)

³ Post-qualitative methods provide a set of questions to challenge some of the limitations and assumptions of conventional humanistic qualitative methodologies (Lather, Pierre, 2013; Benozzo, 2021). In general, the aspiration of post-qualitative methodologies is to «produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently» (Pierre, Adams, 1997, 175).

I dreamed of leaving my town and renting a small house. During the day, living from fishing. By night, writing my dissertation, like some kind of Hemingway. (PhD Researcher F)

I had a very romantic idea of the doctorate... *À la* Fellini – looking out the window would mean working. (PhD Researcher G)

In this sense, this engagement coincides with a kind of illumination and unfolding of the research field. It seems to be very widespread in the early stages of the doctoral journey, even though it is unlikely to remain in the rest of the path. In fact, it often leaves room to a different and less enchanted engagement that takes on the features of a 'play'.

2. The Play: Staging a Drama

A different way to engage with academia is what we define 'the play'. In this type of engagement, academia is experienced as a constant drama, a collective performance, a shared fiction in which the aim of things is in their form.

Doctoral researchers thus learn how to work and perform as academics, i.e., they learn the rules of the academic play. This engagement arises often through a double movement. First, the old fiction, which was based on the idea of academia as a sacred thing, is cut off. Then, a new fiction is introduced, wherein practicing academia means staging a drama.

Not all the interviewees react to this play in the same manner. Some comply with the rules of this game, and take advantage of them for professional growth and career advancements. Others are reflexive about these rules – to the point of mocking them – but do not challenge them as they wish to remain in academia. Lastly, some might even refuse to play, and practice rejection by counter-acting the academic drama. Subjective experience may therefore be different:

The PhD allowed me to wear many hats – at least one for every project I did. (PhD Researcher G)

Sometimes I don't understand what I'm writing myself. These are difficult topics – and no one reads this stuff anyway. Certainly, I write with polished, high-level language so that I can sound smarter than people think I am. (PhD Researcher G)

You have to be good not only at doing research, but also at building relationships and being in power dynamics, and having soft skills. You have to accept that and be comfortable with it. (PhD Researcher E)

When I go to conferences, I know that they don't really care that much about me. I know that I'm an extra fee for them, and that they need me. (PhD Researcher A)

In this continuous pretense, which can be differently engaged by doctoral researchers and other actors, academic practices and institutions are continuously produced and reproduced.

3. The Safe Haven: Entangling with the *Alma Mater*

Another metaphor that we would like to explore is that of the 'safe haven'. As shown, academia is sometimes experienced as a collective fiction enacted by stone-cold actors on multiple yet shared stages. However, there's more to academia than just that. In fact, it is sometimes experienced as a safe harbor providing comfort, serenity and ease to its hosts: a warm fireplace in the face of a hostile world which is filled to the brim with obscure dangers that lie in ambush.

In this type of engagement, the academic world is felt as something personal and intimate. It rests on «an accustomed dependency with a neighbourhood of things and people» (Thévenot, 2001, 16) while the sought good appears as a personalized 'feeling at ease'.

A communitarian dimension (Bauman, 2001) here exerts a powerful conservative and centripetal force that makes academic practitioners stick to the known, and keep away from the unknown. This happens, for example, on the temporal level, which is particularly relevant in this type of engagement. Time, here, is that of an infinite present, in which to linger indefinitely – forever, possibly. It is more convenient to stay on the marked path: the future, and any change, are too scary, full as they are of ambiguity and confusion. This is a sort of Peter Pan syndrome in which removing the future, surviving in the present, and (compulsively) repeating the past happen through the entanglement with one's safe haven:

You never know if you are a grown-up, or if you are still a kid. This leaves you in a marginal position – kind of on the edge. (PhD Researcher A)

I chose the PhD because I wasn't ready to 'cut the cord' with the university. (PhD Researcher F)

The emotional sphere seems extremely important in this type of engagement, which is based on multiple attachments to people, places, and affects (Gherardi, 2017). A key role is apparently played by the relationship of mentees/PhD researchers with mentors/supervisors. Often, the most subjectively important issue for mentees is to be truly seen by their mentors, i.e. to be recognized as subjects worthy of love and care. The emotional order of values, in this sense, appears more meaningful than the professional one. In fact, rather than mere

professional interactions, these relationships often become very intense and powerful entanglements onto which mentees (and their supervisors) seemingly project biographical and familial narratives:

I was taken care of for a while, then abandoned when I most needed it. (PhD Researcher F).

When I told my supervisor that I might not want to continue with academia, they reacted like a hurt mother – almost as if I had told them that I didn't love them. (PhD Researcher A)

I would rival my colleague for my supervisor's attention and appreciation. We would try to be smarter and do things sooner and better. (PhD Researcher C)

Just like with my mother, my supervisor wouldn't tell me why I was doing it wrong. They was like, «You must not do that – because I say so» (PhD Researcher D)

Complex and sometimes tragic interweavings of love and abandonment, expectations and delusion emerge thereby.

4. The Doom: Fighting a Losing Battle

We have used the metaphor of the Doom to describe a further type of engagement. In this engagement, academia is experienced as a mechanism in which individual agency is overpowered by unidentified and imponderable forces.

A superior entity – a System, which acquires almost magical traits – determines the rules for competition in the academic field and thereby governs the fates of academics, i.e., their (temporary) permanence or (permanent) exclusion from such field. There is no actual way to influence (fight, resist, work around, etc.) this entity, and the rules of the game it determines. The only possible response is compliance, i.e. playing the game, and by the rules.

In this metaphor, the academic profession thus becomes a constant race not to be expelled from the academic field. In order to stay above the 'minimum thresholds' decreed by the System, academics must continuously and relentlessly produce knowledge. In fact, often they don't even really know what these thresholds are: they are covered by complex bureaucratic layers, and they seem to move constantly, and self-regulate, if they want to. As far as they know, practitioners may well have already exceeded these thresholds; but they may also be far below. To be safe, it's best to keep running:

The system must filter, like fishing nets. Only a few shall pass through – those who have a certain 'gauge'. And you can only partially influence your gauge. It's not your fault, though. None of us really know what it is the mesh of the net they must try to pass through. Because that mesh

is adjusted by the system. If it wants to exclude you, it tightens; if it wants to pull you in, it widens. What you do is not inherently enough. (PhD Researcher G)

Academics feel crushed by the weight of this Doom which is so much stronger than they are. Their past is made of indelible metrics that are constantly (re)produced in a never-ending trial that is held against them – as in a Kafkaesque limbo, «No file is ever lost, and the court never forgets» (1937, 82). They cannot live in their present, as they live by a future that will determine if they will be allowed to remain within the field, or they will be expelled from it. It is an eternal loop between scientific production and reproduction of the System:

On the one hand, you are lucidly aware that your efforts are essentially useless in such an ineluctable and deeply competitive system. On the other hand, you continue to strive, and thus reproduce the system. (PhD Researcher B)

Perhaps, it is depressed people who seek academia, and, conversely, it is academia that makes people depressed. (PhD Researcher A)

This is a losing battle that engaged researchers cannot help but fight.

Towards New Metaphors

CECILIA looks away from her computer. She glances at LEONARDO with a hesitant look.

CECILIA: Anyway, sometimes I feel like I'm just sick of writing.

LEONARDO: Yeah. I know. I do, too. That's actually where we started from when we first talked about this research, right? The fact that sometimes this all seems a bit, you know, meaningless.

CECILIA: Meaningless. Distant from reality. From people. Sure, you can always talk about 'public sociology'⁴, applied sociology, intervening in society, changing the world through academic practice. But, at the end of the day, you will find yourself playing with some weird concept that only your scholarly community can understand.

LEONARDO: Maybe this research has put us down a bit.

CECILIA: You mean, more so than before?

LEONARDO: Is there really a limit to that?

CECILIA: Ugh. Anyway – maybe that is why we can't find a conclusion. That is why we can't get beyond these four gloomy metaphors.

LEONARDO: Yeah. I don't ever want to write what I don't really enjoy writing. And which doesn't give me a little hope. Do you know what I mean?

⁴ See Burawoy, 2004.

CECILIA: Yes. I agree. And, you know, maybe we can use just that to close the paper.

LEONARDO: You mean, a bit of hope?

CECILIA: Yes. Like, we propose a fifth metaphor about the engagement of doctoral students in academia. But, this time, something different. Something that might not be there yet, but could – and should – be.

In this paper, through metaphorical thinking and interviews with PhD researchers we have attempted to show some ways through which doctoral students engage academia. On the one hand, these types of engagement are not mutually exclusive. Competing rationalities and orders of worth coexist and clash within the same subjects who must continually compromise with these different parts of themselves. On the other hand, other types of engagement certainly exist that we could not observe with our investigation.

The doctorate is a critical stage in the lives of subjects and institutions. From the subjects' perspective, it is a fundamental threshold in which they grow from undergraduate students into academics through multiple processes of socialization (including anticipatory socialization) and engagement. From the institutional perspective, it is a moment of (re)production of the academic profession and class that is perpetuated (and possibly transformed) through the intertwining of training by supervisors, organizational dynamics, and student subjectivity.

These processes are not neutral or automatic but rather influenced by socio-cultural aspects that characterize how teaching, learning, and everyday organizational life happen in the university. Certainly, the impact of the new public management in global and Italian universities has been strong as its logics of efficiency, accountability and quality hardly fit with the idea of a public and inclusive education (Gunter et al., 2016).

In this sense, there is room for improvement in higher education and academia, and this transformation can begin by liberating different engagements for PhD researchers with academia. No longer then – or not only – fictitious or bleak ideas of worship, play, safe haven, or Doom. Rather, it seems possible to construct new engagement in academia as transformative experiences based on subjectivity, criticality, freedom, and participation (Barnett, 1997).

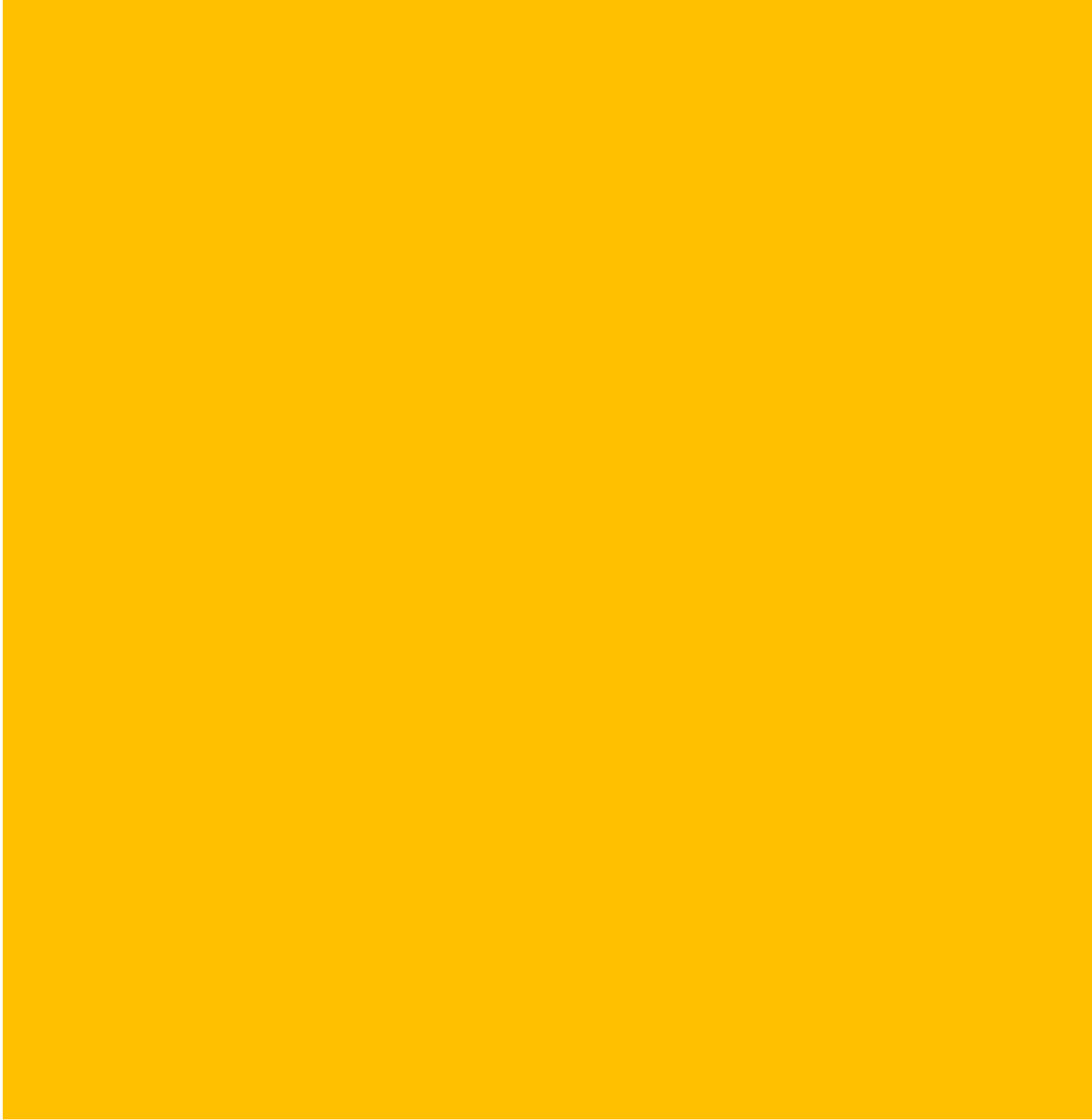
This means enabling a reflexivity effort within academia about its own practices. Moreover, this is about challenging the marketization and neoliberalization of higher education and academia (Gunter et al., 2016; Normand, 2016), towards a vision and practice of higher education as a common good (Marginson, 2016).

This emancipatory engagement in academia can happen through high-level policy. Not only that, however. All practitioners in academia can work toward its realization, by putting it into practice as a daily and caring work: from teachers training, to efforts toward scholarly integrity, to organizational design, to curricular planning in doctoral programs.

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