

**Defying Capitalism Through a Reimagined World of School**

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### Abstract

This paper argues against the sense of inescapable reality engendered by capitalism and discusses how playing out a re-imagined reality at school could defy this world. I utilize the concept of “figured worlds” as a lens to understand how constructed perceptions of reality define the contours of our activity and what we deem possible. I then analyze the figured world of capitalism in relation to that of school and argue that the recent interest in promoting creativity at school is unlikely to challenge capitalism. Instead, I posit *playing out* re-imagined realities as a means that could transform our perception of what is possible by providing the opportunity to experience alternative spaces. I end my paper with my vision of a *designed* figured world of school that could expose the shortcomings of capitalism and provide students with alternative ways to think about realizing their lives.

*Key words:* space of activity; figured world; conceived, perceived and lived spaces; spatiality; third space; relational and positional identities; thinking in levels.

## Introduction

“Education... is concerned with the realization of aims that are considered worthwhile” (Eisner, 2002, p. 35). If one accepts this belief and ponders the status quo of educational institutions in capitalist societies, one would question if all of what is currently taught is worthwhile, who determines what is worthwhile schooling and to whom it is worthwhile.

It is hard to dispute the conjecture that education should contribute to the well-being of individuals and societies, including creatures of our natural world, and that this goal is worth pursuing. Preserving our “pale blue dot” has become ever more pressing and the challenge is to maintain *life* along with *a life worth living*. In an ideal situation, I imagine that educational systems would be primarily driven by the needs and aspirations of different societies in order to enhance the quality and meaningfulness of life for groups and individuals. Unfortunately, however, in capitalist societies the main motive behind education is preparing students to serve economies that are driven by an appetite to maximize surplus accumulation and not by human need (Bowles & Gintis, 2011, p. 53, 54). “What the worker produces under capitalist conditions is a product with a very specific property, the property of salability” (Perlman, 1969, p. 11), and when salability is the main criterion of production, human wellbeing is a matter of coincidence (Hill & Kumar, 2009, p. 2). Ecological degradation, wars motivated by economic ends, and uneven development have been characterizing attributes of the capitalism we know. When almost 45% of the global total wealth is owned by less than 1% of the global population while 71% of adults worldwide own less than 10,000 USD (Credit Suisse Research Institute, 2015), there is simply something “not right” with the capitalist system.

While surfing the website [capitalism.org](http://capitalism.org), which is the first entry that appears when I google the term “capitalism,” I was surprised to find that the website begins a virtual tour to explain capitalism by the phrase “Reality is Absolute.” The phrase is followed by the below:

Reality is that which exists. It is **absolute**. It is the **standard** of the true, the false, and the arbitrary. Things are what they are, independent of our or anyone else’s feelings, ideas, wishes, desires, and emotions. Or, in the immortal words of Aristotle: **A is A**. To be, is to be something: finite, limited, and non-contradictory ([Capitalism.org](http://Capitalism.org)).

Aside from the shortcomings that quantum physics could reveal about this sentence (Rovelli, 2016, p. 17), my paper argues precisely against this sense of reality which perpetuates capitalism. In what follows, I will explain how our actions are shaped by collective constructions of reality and the ways in which the “figured world” of school substantiates that of capitalism (Holland et al., 1998). I will then discuss the limits of fostering creativity at schools in challenging the figured world of capitalism and propose the design of a re-imagined figured world of school in which a desired reality is “played out” as a means to defy capitalism.

## Space of Activity

Newton had tried to explain why things fall and the planets turn. He had imagined the existence of a “force” that draws all material bodies toward one another and called it “the force of gravity.” How this force was exerted between things distant from each other, without there being anything between them, was unknown—and the great father of modern science was cautious of offering a hypothesis. Newton had also imagined that bodies moved through space and that space is a great empty container, a large box that enclosed the universe, an immense structure through which all objects run true until a force obliges their trajectory to curve. What this “space” was made of, this container of the world he invented, Newton could not say. But a few years before the birth of Einstein two great British physicists, Michael Faraday and James Maxwell, had added a key ingredient to Newton’s cold world: the electromagnetic field. This field is a real entity that, diffused everywhere, carries radio waves, fills space, can vibrate and oscillate like a surface of a lake, and “transports” the electrical force. Since his youth, Einstein had been fascinated by this electromagnetic field that turned the rotors in the power stations built by his father, and he soon came to understand that gravity, like electricity, must be conveyed by a field as well: a “gravitational field” analogous to the “electrical field” must exist. He aimed at understanding how this “gravitational field” worked and how it could be described with equations.

And it is at this point that an extraordinary idea occurred to him, a stroke of pure genius: the gravitational field is not *diffused through* space; the gravitational field *is that space* itself.

This is the idea of the general theory of relativity. Newton’s “space,” through which things move, and the “gravitational field” are one and the same thing.

It is a moment of enlightenment. A momentous simplification of the world: space is no longer something distinct from matter—it is one of the “material” components of the world. An entity that undulates, flexes, curves, twists. We are not contained within an invisible rigid infrastructure: we are immersed in a gigantic, flexible snail shell. The sun bends space around itself, and earth does not turn around it because of a mysterious force but because it is racing directly in a space that inclines, like a marble that rolls in a funnel.

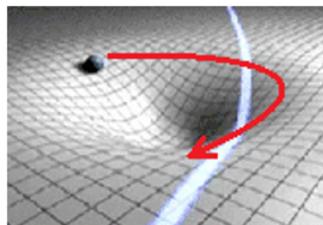


Figure 1: Illustration of a marble turning in a funnel-like curvature of space-time. The original GIF image could be found at: <http://bit.ly/2aKlyc0>

There are no mysterious forces generated at the center of the funnel; it is the curved nature of the walls that causes the marble to roll. Planets circle around the sun, and things fall, because space curves.

Carlo Rovelli,  
*Seven Brief Lessons on Physics* (2016, p. 6-8)

“We are not contained within an invisible rigid infrastructure: we are immersed in a gigantic flexible snail shell” (Rovelli, 2016, p. 8). Similar to how matter’s movement is determined by and takes place within the fabric of space described by Einstein, our actions are shaped by and occur within personal “spaces of activity.” These spaces of activity, like space, are far from formless. Nevertheless, they are flexible and continually subject to molding and re-formation.

A space of activity, as I define it, is shaped by imagined, felt and concrete landscapes in addition to the repertoire of knowledge and information available to a person at a particular time and place in history. Although the imagined, the felt and the known overlap, I use the term “imagined” here to refer to what Holland et al. (1998) define as “figured worlds” (about which I

will elaborate shortly), and “felt” to signify the different mood states, such as ecstasy or depression, that could change our perception of what is possible (Runco, 2014). Finally, by “concrete” landscapes I shall refer to environmental and physical barriers and societal forces and powers, whether individuals or institutions, that could impose physical constraints on the actions of a person (through inflicting pain or punishment for example).

### **Figured Worlds**

Holland et al. (1998) describe “figured worlds” that “rest upon people’s abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized “as if” realms” (p. 49). Unlike personal imagination, figured worlds are shared or collective imaginings by people.

[C]ulturally figured worlds or figured worlds [are] all those cultural realms peopled by characters from collective imaginings: academia, the factory, crime, romance, environmental activism... Figured worlds take shape within and grant shape to the coproduction of activities, discourses, performances and artifacts. A figured world is peopled by the figures, characters, and types who carry out its tasks and who also have styles of interacting within, distinguishable perspectives on, and orientations toward it... By “figured world”... we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation on which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others (p. 51, 52). [It] is a land of objectified (materially and perceptibly expressed) meanings, joint activities, and structures of privilege and influence—all partly contingent upon and partly independent of other figured worlds and larger societal and trans-societal forces (p. 60).

Figured worlds are probably the most transparent facet of our space of activity. Through social interaction, we come to understand different patterns of being, or certain ways to be in different circumstances. Although these patterns of being may feel as the natural ways to be, they

are not ordained by natural forces. Rather, they describe collective imaginings of people that have gained a shape and form through recurrent social practices and activities.

The ability to sense (see, hear, touch, taste, feel) the figured world becomes embodied over time, through continual participation. One can in the current state of technology, put on a bulky headset with connections to computers, television cameras and “data gloves,” and enter into a virtual reality. A figured world, too, is played out; a frame becomes a world – a space and time established imaginatively – that one can come to sense after a process of experiencing, acting by virtue of its rules. No technology, no headset is necessary. Players become ever more familiar with the happenings of the figured world...and learn to author their own and make them available to other participants. By means of such appropriation, objectification, and communication, the world itself is also reproduced, forming and reforming the practices of its participants (Holland et al., 1998, p. 52, 53).

We inhabit these figured worlds as much as they inhabit us. The discourses and practices that establish a figured world “are not simply the context but the content of inner life, albeit in some way transformed. The interpersonal becomes the intrapersonal in a literal way; the forms of speaking and interacting inhabit us to make the “inner” speech and “inner” action” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 253). Accordingly, we come to articulate the world and ourselves through an appropriation of our understanding of the ways people exist and act in different figured worlds. Each figured world offers different positional and relational identities and “peoples’ lives take shape among [these] identifications” (p. 235). The discourses and practices of figured worlds become “the mediating devices of our thinking, feeling and willing” (p. 253), and we witness ourselves unfolding as particular types of people in different figured worlds, as enactors and re-producers of these worlds.

People's activities and practices are mediated by cultural artifacts that add a dimension of concreteness and a sense of reality to figured worlds and contribute in their rebirth and perpetuation; artifacts "are both instrument and collective remembrance" (Holland et al. , 1998, p. 61). They serve as pivots that transport individuals to particular spaces of activity. "Artifacts "open up" figured worlds. They are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 61).

### **Capitalism as a Figured World**

Most of us live in a world where there is a certain prescription to go about living. We are born to a family; we then receive an education, usually at schools; after we graduate, we work and get a salary in return; we use this salary to satisfy our needs, the basic and non-basic; and the list goes on. These generalities that I describe are my abstractions of a facet of "the figured world of capitalism" that I will be discussing in what follows. They are my mental productions and reproductions of this figured world, and the templates that allow me to reproduce this world in and through practice.

The production and reproduction of figured worlds involves both abstraction of significant regularities from everyday life into expectations about how particular types of events unfold and interpretation of the everyday according to these distillations of past experiences. A figured world is formed and re-formed in relation to the everyday activities and events that ordain happenings within it. It is certainly not divorced from these happenings, but neither it is identical to the particulars of any one event (Holland et al., 1998, p. 53).

There are certainly several figured worlds that intersect and overlap when we speak of capitalism. There is the figured world of workplace, the figured world of school, the figured world of family

and so on. Nevertheless, capitalism here is an encompassing concept which sets a certain order to how one should live their life in the modern world and connects these different figured worlds together. If one imagines the figured worlds that I have just enumerated as vertical ones (although this is not always the case), the figured world of capitalism could be better visualized as a horizontal one that does not exist outside these other figured worlds, but rather cuts across all of them. It is the background of “the big picture” of a “modern” life. While the figured world of family could be best seen in homes and the figured world of school could be best seen in schools, capitalism requires that we zoom out further, spatially and temporally, when we look at society to be able to clearly see its actors and doings.

The pervasiveness of capitalism in multiple figured worlds and its broad spatial and temporal presence provide a sense of legitimacy to its existence as if it were the result of inevitable natural forces. Against this sense of reality, Perlman (1969) asserts that capitalism, just like the tribe and the slave system, “is neither the natural nor the final form of human society; like the earlier social forms, capitalism is a specific response to material and historical conditions” (p. 3). He also considers that the social practice of selling one’s labor reproduces identities of the actors in a culture of capitalism.

By selling their labor, by alienating their activity, people daily reproduce the personifications of the dominant forms of activity under capitalism; they reproduce the wage-laborer and the capitalist. They do not merely reproduce the individuals physically, but socially as well; they reproduce individuals who are sellers of labor-power, and individuals who are owners of means of production; they reproduce the individuals as well as the specific activities, the sale as well as the ownership (Perlman, 1969, p. 8).

In a similar vein, Bowles and Gintis (2011) consider that “the reproduction of the social relations of production [in a capitalist system] depends on the reproduction of consciousness... [and consciousness] develops through the individual’s direct perception of and participation in social life” (p. 127, 128).

### **Capitalism and Other Figured Worlds**

For any figured world to survive, it has to be enlivened and supported by the social practices of a group. In fact, not only does capitalism extend to and affect other figured worlds (by shaping people’s imaginings of family life or their expectations from school for instance), but as described in Holland et al.’s definition of figured worlds, it is also “contingent upon and partly independent of other figured worlds” (p. 60). The structure of hierarchy at the workplace, for instance, is accepted because it mirrors existing structures of privilege in society, such as patriarchy and sexism.

[W]ork must be organized so as to make the authority relationships on the firm appear at best just, or at least inevitable. That is relationships among superiors, subordinates, and peers must not violate the norms of the larger society. The right of the superior to direct as well as the duty of the subordinate to submit must draw on general cultural values. It is for this reason that a superior must always have a higher salary than a subordinate, whatever the conditions of relative supply of the two types of labor. It is also for this reason that in the United States, with its characteristic patterns of racial and sexual prejudices, blacks and women cannot, in general, be placed above whites or men in the line of hierarchical authority. Also employers ordinarily structure work roles so that young people will not boss older people. In terms of personal attributes, self-presentation is important: However well they function technically, individuals must act, speak and dress commensurate with their prerogatives and relative authority. Educational credentials enter here as well: employers find it desirable to vest hierarchical authority in well-educated workers, not only

because higher level of schooling may enable an employee to better do the work at hand...but also simply because educational achievement...legitimizes authority according to prevailing social values (Bowles & Gintis, 2011, p. 82).

Probably one of the most influential contributors to the figured world of capitalism is that of the current educational system. According to Eisner (1994), school teaches much more than the explicit curriculum. In fact, “the culture of both the classroom and the school specializes children to values that are a part of the structure of those places” (p. 88). Bowles and Gintis (2011) illustrate how school socializes students into the capitalist world by “facilitating a smooth integration of youth into the labor force” (p.11). The meritocratic reward system cultivated by schools based on selected criteria and approaches stratifies students along the hierarchy of labor and reinforces “patterns of social class, racial and sexual identification among students which allow them to relate “properly” to their eventual standing in the hierarchy of authority and status in the production process” (p. 12). Schools cultivate structures of hierarchy and dominance very similar to the ones present at the work place and reward personality traits that are needed for good performance of jobs. Moreover, they “create surpluses of skilled labor sufficiently extensive to render effective the prime weapon of the employer in disciplining labor – the power to hire and fire” (p. 12).

Bowles and Gintis (2011) emphasize how dramatic is the “statistically verifiable congruence between the personality traits conducive to proper work performance of the job and those which are rewarded with high grades in the classroom” (p. 9). Nevertheless, jobs with different positions along the hierarchy of production require different the personality traits and skills, and schools account for that by socializing students into cultures that correspond with their social class. In fact, children from different social classes attend different schools that disseminate

values and skills that are in accordance with the specific social class that the students belong to (Anyon, 1980; Bowles & Gintis, 2011; Carnoy & Levin, 1985), where students “in working-class schools [are] rewarded for rote learning and following the rules, while in the schools of professional/managerial families, students are rewarded for creativity and independent thought” (McCrate, 1996, p. 3). Consequently, school perpetuates inequality among social classes by nurturing behaviors, attitudes and skills consonant with those that are required from the labor force of each class. Contrary to the popular capitalist narrative “work hard and you will be rewarded” that makes upward mobility between social classes appear proportional to the individual’s hard work, researchers have shown that “the parental economic status is passed on to children, in part by means of unequal educational opportunity, but that the economic advantages of higher social status families go considerably beyond the superior education that they receive” (Bowles & Gintis, 2002; Hill et al., 2008). Bourdieu expressed a similar idea: arguing that the educational system contributes in the “reproduction of the social structure by sanctioning the hereditary transmission of cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986).

Recently, however, there has been an increasing interest among educational policymakers, business elites and government officials in promoting students’ creativity at schools (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Robinson & Aronica, 2015). This interest stems from the fact that economies are ever more unpredictable and the skills that are mostly needed in the “knowledge economy,” such as autonomy, flexibility and creativity, are rather hindered by standardized education (Banaji et al., 2010; Craft, 2011; Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 19). In the section that will follow, I will discuss the possible impact of fostering this skill at schools on equality among social classes and the figured world of capitalism.

### **Creativity and Capitalism**

### *Defining Creativity*

Creativity is famously defined as “the production of relevant and effective novelty” (Cromptley, 2011, p. 359). As a term, creativity can be used to describe a person, a process, a product or press (the environment) (Rhodes, 1961 as cited in Beghetto and Kaufman, 2014). Not all acts of creativity are appreciated to the same degree by communities. Usually, the more a creative act contributes to the larger society, the greater is its value. For that reason, creativity is differentiated into degrees or levels that range from what is labeled as “ordinary creativity,” “every day creativity” or “little c” and what is regarded as “sublime creativity” or “big C.” Irving Taylor points out that children often exhibit “expressive spontaneity” which “requires only the free production of ideas, without regard to their effectiveness or relevance” since they lack the knowledge and skills of specific fields that would allow them to display different types of creativity (although this is not a universal rule) (Cromptley, 2011, p. 360). In this sense, it is also possible to speak of creativity in children but usually in the form of expressive spontaneity. In this paper, I utilize the term creativity as a gradational concept that is broadly defined as “the production of relevant and effective novelty” and that may begin as “expressive spontaneity” in children (Cromptley, 2011). In this sense, creativity exists in degrees and is affected by age. Moreover, the lens utilized to evaluate creativity can be highly subjective in some cases or domains.

### *Creativity in Schools*

Nickerson (2010) emphasizes that fostering creativity in schools requires nurturing a set of attitudes and beliefs within the school culture that do not stifle creative and critical thinking. His recommendations along with those echoed by other researchers on creativity (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2014; Davies et al., 2013; Mishra et al., 2013) stand in striking contrast with the

traditional model of schooling described by Bowles and Gintis (2011) that perpetuates inequality among social classes and nurtures capitalism. The table below summarizes the two perspectives.

What Creativity Requires	What School Typically Fosters
Intrinsic motivation, a positive attitude towards incorrect answers and a view that they are opportunities for learning and potential signs of creativity.	An extrinsic reward system and a threat of failure.
A non-authoritarian relationship between teachers and students.	A hierarchical system between the management and teachers, teachers and students, and students and students.
A flexible curriculum that incorporates students' interests, fosters self-directedness and gives them some control over their learning.	A curriculum designed by people other than the students on whom it is eventually imposed.
A flexible use of time that allows students to experience immersion in a task.	A strict timetable for different subject matter designed irrespective of students' interests and needs.
A non-compartmentalized perspective on knowledge that promotes lateral thinking.	A compartmentalized view of knowledge.
A view that success and creativity are a function of persistence and hard work.	An understanding that students' achievements are based on their intrinsic capacities and attributes.
An engaging and rewarding learning experience.	A sense of alienation.

If one accepts that school has been a primary conditioner to a world of capitalism, then successfully fostering creativity at schools should present itself as a direct threat to socialization into capitalism. Nevertheless, it remains difficult to predict how a new figured world of schooling, one that is designed to spawn student creativity, would actually unfold or look like. For instance, a transformation in the structure of authority may not mean an absence of authority, and flexibility in the curriculum may not translate into subject matter that are dissonant with the needs of the economy. Moreover, the structure of the economy is not a fixed variable—it is in a continuous change. In truth, the recent fad for creativity has been a consequence of the changing needs of an evolving capitalist economy. This is clearly enunciated in the “21st century skills” that position capacities such as creativity and self-directedness as vital skills to thrive in a global economy (Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills, 2009). With the rise of “the knowledge economy”

and the shift towards more flexible ways of organizing work, greater reliance has been placed on workers' intellectual capacities, such as creativity, adaptability and autonomy, compared to physical inputs or natural resources. While some expected these changes to bring forward a more empowered workforce and a flatter hierarchy at the workplace, many studies have reported otherwise (Powel & Snellman; 2004).

Flexible work practices reinforce managerial control, erode informal work cultures, and reduce the existing power of labor unions. Increased autonomies shift responsibilities from supervisors to workers and results in more intensive and demanding work. The expansion of jobs creates another set of pressures for workers. As traditional job classifications blur, responsibilities of individual workers may grow without any commensurate increases in rewards. Job intensification does not constitute the remaking of work, according to critics [of the theory of workplace "reform"]. The purported system of work is just hyper-Fordism, obscured behind participatory language (Powel & Snellman; 2004; p. 210, 211).

Accordingly, changes in the figured world of school to support a new set of skills, including creativity, might actually be mirroring changes at the level of production and supporting an evolved form of capitalism, not defying it.

### **Escaping Capitalism**

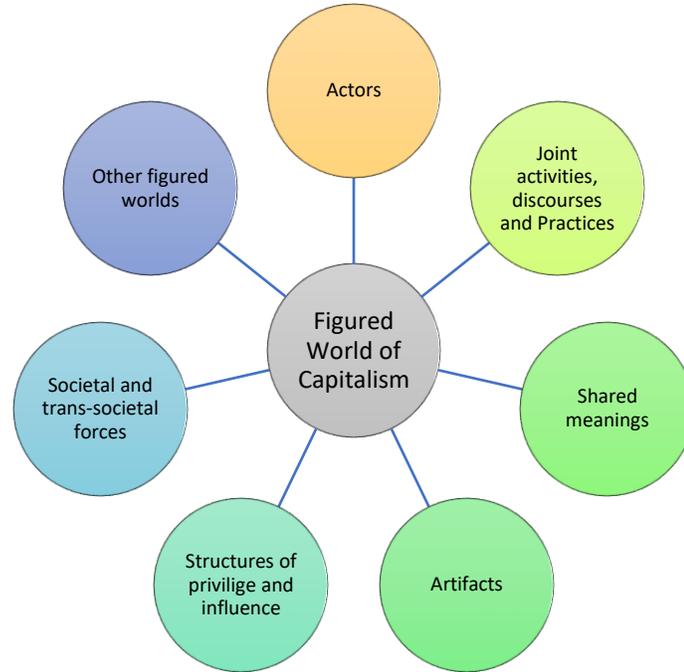
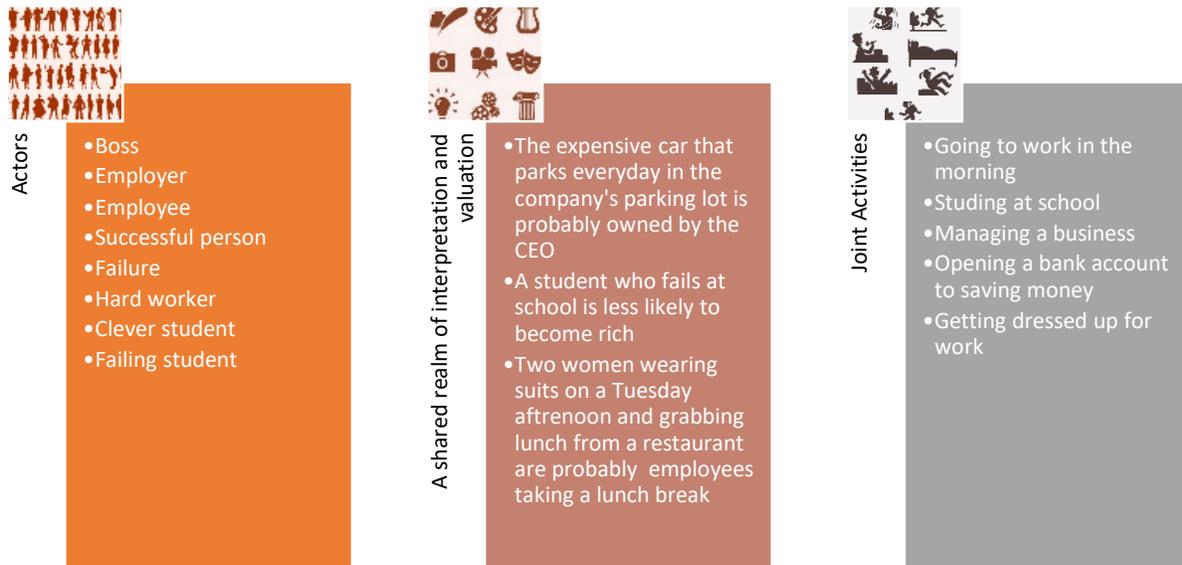


Figure 1: Abstraction of capitalism as a figured world and its constituent elements.



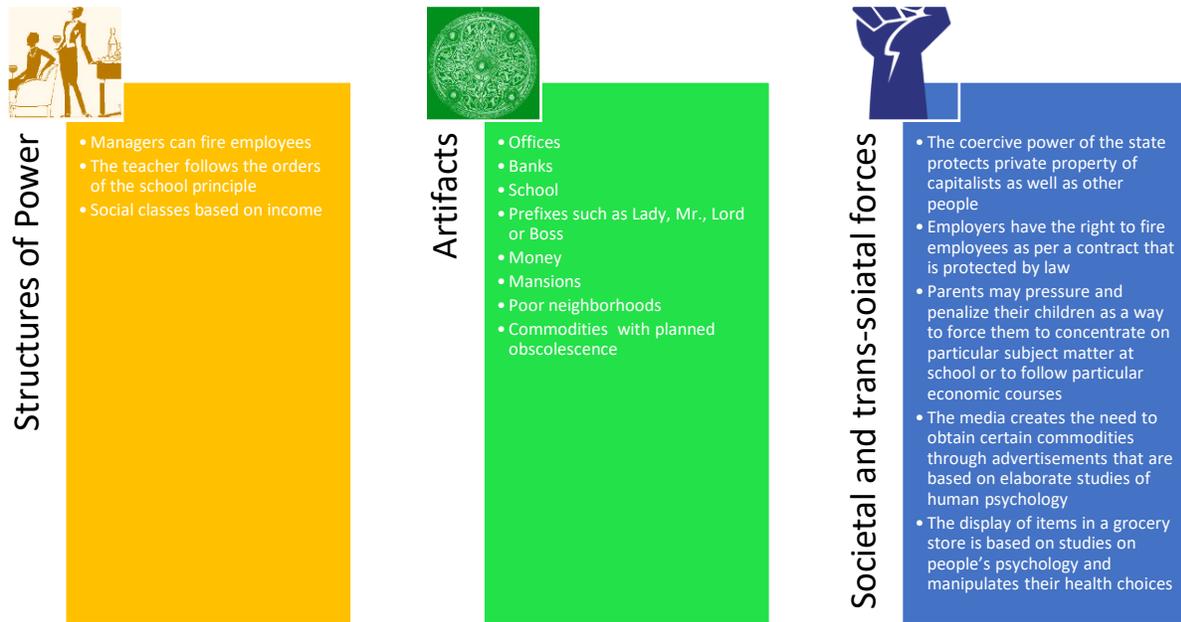


Figure 2: Concrete examples to illustrate the constituent elements of the figured world of capitalism.

Despite the merits of fostering creativity in school on the personal, social and economic levels, this change in the figured world of school does not seem to stand in contrast with a changing capitalism. In a figured world of capitalism, structures of power, artifacts, shared discourses and meanings, imaginings and valuation scripts, joint activities, societal forces as well as other interacting figured worlds all substantiate our courses in life and grant them a sense of legitimacy and naturalness (figures 1 and 2). And for any alternative reality to unfold and gain its legitimacy, its flare of sanity, it has to be concretized through new “collective” understandings expressed in social interactions. For instance, social interactions will need to substantiate alternative understandings and usages of existing artifacts, grant a new meaning to capitalist discourses, and create novel joint activities that engrave themselves as potential landscapes in people’s spaces of activity. While it seems unlikely that such a drastically transformed world will naturally unfold soon, it is possible to “design” this world. Based on the concept of figured

worlds, I will illustrate in what follows how the figured world of schooling could be redesigned so that it ceases to be a bedrock for capitalism. Although the figured world of school is but one dimension of that of capitalism, changes induced at school could be very impactful due to powerful role it plays in reproducing a world of capitalism in the consciousness of successive generations.

### *A Visit to a Carnavalesque World*

*In the texture of social life, role relations can undergo temporary transformations. This has been observed in the case of rituals, some of which can be subsumed under the label of carnival. Carnivals entail temporary reversals of power relations between social roles – during a carnival, the owner can play the role of a slave, and a slave that of owner. Bakhtin saw carnivals in social life as major places where tensions that have occurred in social power relations can be ‘ventilated out’. The crucial aspect of carnival is its rule-governed nature – the social role relations may be reversed, but the social rule system for how to act in the reverse social roles remains in place (Valsiner, 2005, p. 46).*

Escaping figured worlds requires setting oneself within a different space of activity with altered landscapes, rules, or constraints and affordances. One activity that is able to achieve this mental shift in perspective is play.

[Play] draws upon recognized genres of speech and activity, but it takes the player beyond the immediate setting. Play happens “through” the world in which it is observably set. Its real setting is imaginary; it answers only to a figured world... [Through play,] the social practices of “acting otherwise” become the grounds for our “thinking otherwise.” The mastery we gain over our play is mastery over our imagination... It is the opening out of thought within the activity of play, what we might call the cultural production of virtualities, that allows for the emergence of new figured worlds, of refigured worlds that come eventually to reshape selves and lives in all seriousness (Holland et al., 1998, p. 236).

One defining feature of play, as a behavior, is that it is guided by “rules” (Gray, 2015, p. 125). Through play, one suspends the rules of the figured world that they inhabit and adopt instead the rules of the played out world. Liberation from established figured worlds through play rests on the premise that through inhabiting a novel space of activity, people get the opportunity to figure new worlds – with new rules – and identities which they could carry back with them to their dominant world and transform their lived realities. In other words, experiencing the alternative “possible” through played out worlds expands and transforms people’s spaces of activity.

We unlearn bodily in the remove from dominant to emerging world, so that we return to the everyday, perhaps, with an altered subjectivity, an altered sense of who we are. The art of play has a spectrum of effects: new genres are created and recorded in the durable media, old ones are refigured, and new worlds and new identities are created. (Holland et al., 1998, p. 238, 239).

Play as a term is often used by biologists and psychologists to designate human actions that are not ‘serious’ or are not representative of ‘work.’ In this sense, a behavior would signify play if it appears to lack an immediate or useful goal (Bateson & Martin, 2013, p. 2, 12). Figured worlds, however, could be “played out” in a context that does not correspond to an activity that is viewed as less serious, meaningful or valuable than the dominant world. Although play offers liberation from a dominant figured world, it nevertheless is bounded by its own rules. It is as if people free themselves from the tyranny of one set of cultural forms by yielding to a different set with its own constraints and affordances (Holland et al., 1998, p. 65). Consequently, the viability of a figured world outside the play realm and the ability to stably reproduce it depends on the potential of supporting this world with social practices in the dominant world (p. 252), whether existing or new. Social practices, on the other hand, are highly intertwined to the spaces that

engender and reproduce them; where space in this sense, or spatiality, is regarded from its lived, perceived and conceived dimensions (Lefebvre as cited in Shields, 2011, p. 281). According to Soja (1998), “spatiality is simultaneously the medium and outcome, presupposition and embodiment, of social action and relationship” and the “spatio-temporal structuring of social life defines how social action and relationship (including class relations) are materially constituted, made concrete” (p. 129).

Capitalism is spawned by existing spatialities, which encompass space (viewed in its different dimensions) and social action. Whether the workplace, the school or the shopping mall, these spaces, which could be regarded as “artifacts,” engender different forms of social relationships and actions that nurture capitalism. In other words, the spaces in which we dwell define our social relationships and actions, and our social actions, in return, are organized in such a way that perpetuate and empower capitalism. The workplace, for instance, is organized around and reproduced by the relations of production which, in their turn, are contingent upon the existence of the workplace as a spatiality. School, as a figured world evoked through its space, defines the set of social relationships and behaviors that ought to take place within its premises. Similarly, we expect a particular form or pattern of social actions and interactions at a shopping mall, one through which consumerism is realized, and this pattern is highly dependent upon our presence in that space.

Consequently, designing for new realities that defy capitalism requires creating spaces in which desired social realities are enacted and devised worlds are “played out.” These “third spaces” (Soja, 1996) are re-imaginings of the social practices and meanings associated with relevant spaces and serve as making-spaces for new figured worlds. They are the spaces where transformative human agency is realized.

Gutiérrez (2008) describes a four-week summer residential program in which a new spatiality was created at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). In that played out figured world, a “particular social environment of development, a collective Third Space, [was designed such that students may] begin to reconceive who they are and what they might be able to accomplish academically and beyond” (p. 148). The program had “as specific internal logic organized around expanding the students’ sociohistorical and educational ecology through the collective imagining of a new educational and sociopolitical future” (p. 154). It utilized particular grammatical practices that fostered “collective hope” along with other tools, such as tutorials, *teatro* and student autobiographies, to assist students in accomplishing the educational objectives of the program and to develop a state of “social dreaming” whereby students collectively dream for a better future (p. 154, 158). An important aspect of the design was considering how practices “travel through different and even contradictory contexts and activities” (p. 150). For this end, the designers attempted to foster tools (particular student skills) that could be carried beyond the program’s spatiotemporal limits into students’ other settings, or what Gutiérrez described as “horizontal forms of expertise that develop within and across an individual’s practice” (p. 149).

Learning in this activity system cannot be reduced to the appropriation of tools that help enhance personal growth, develop voice, or build skills, although these are arguably important byproducts; instead, the object is the constitution of what Gee (1996) calls a “social semiotic toolkit that extends students’ repertoires of practice in ways that enable them to become designers of their own social futures (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 156).

In other words, the design attempted to create social practices that could spill to other dominant figured worlds and transcend the contours of the program’s spatiality; social practices that could unfold within other spatialities. Although the carried practices would be contingent upon the new spaces in which they are realized, it is critical to keep in mind that they would also describe

the transformed identities of their actors. By authoring new worlds, people author new selves (Holland et al., 1998, p. 269), and living the played-out worlds allows people to transform and return to other dominant figured worlds and spaces as altered versions of themselves.

### **Transforming Capitalism through School**

Transforming school as a figured world would imply transforming the social practices and identities evoked by its spatiality. Since people are authored through and by the worlds in which they dwell, we can expect new identities to emerge from a transformed world of schooling. The challenge is to design for a world that could indeed drive a wedge into capitalism, one that could expose the latter's shortcomings and its consequences on our wellbeing. Schools could fulfill this purpose by modeling a counter-world to capitalism, by projecting a better reality that is in contrast with the latter's ideals. Accordingly, this designed world would allow the emergence of identities and practices that are in conflict with those promoted by a capitalist system. As emphasized by Gutiérrez, the tools promoted at schools need to be designed such that they would survive the travel to other settings and spatialities. This could be best achieved when spaces outside school evoke the practices developed at school. Nevertheless, one could still expect that the new identities that emerge from this world will affect social practices outside school and spill to other figured worlds, since people would have been transformed in the process.

### ***School as a Space Where Self Discovery is Possible***

Schools, predominantly, support an instrumentalist view on life. According to this perspective, "the most important thing in life is meeting our basic needs" (Higgins, 2008, p. 10). Consequently, schools are mainly preoccupied with the transmission of the knowledge deemed useful for students' future life. Higgins points out that there is, however, another theory on the purpose of education, "one that sees education not as transmission but as transformation. In this

model, while skills and content have their place, the key question is: What experiences, relationships and environments help me become the kind of person I want to become?" (Higgins, 2008, p. 12). This view corresponds with the famous existential question posed by Socrates, "how should one live?" (Higgins, 2008, p. 11).

I regard the instrumentalist view of life supportive to capitalism and I believe it justifies the hierarchy assigned to the different subject matter at school. When securing a job at the workplace (and contributing to economic progress) is positioned as one of the most significant purposes of schooling, (and implicitly, of life), it is no wonder that math, languages and sciences are given the highest priority at school, followed by humanities and then arts and physical education. This hierarchy could be identified "by the amount of time and resources given to [the different subjects], and by whether they are compulsory or optional, or formally assessed" (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 134). By promoting a different structure at school that equally promotes different subject matter, not only are multiple intelligences supported, but also the view that people's interests and self-discovery matter. One guideline for how a similar curriculum could be designed is proposed by Robinson and Aronica in their book: *Creative Schools: The Grassroots Revolution That's Transforming Education* (2015, 128-157). By embracing people's different interests, such a system grants a new meaning to success and achievement. Students who are disadvantaged under the current system, who think that failing at school means that "they are failures," may now develop new empowering self-concepts. In a similar curriculum, it would be harder to stratify empowered self-concepts along a hierarchy of social classes that corresponds to an amalgam of economic power and self-worth, and students may very well realize how the "capitalist economy is failing them" instead.

The designed figured world of schooling could further defy the figured world of capitalism through new linguistic practices. As a matter of fact, instrumentalism is enlivened by our daily language which substantiates it in the form of reality rather than a perspective on life (Higgins, 2008, p. 10).

When we talk about “getting a living,” “real world experience,” or “growing up and facing facts,” we are speaking the language of instrumentalism. In the rhetoric of this language, living comes predefined as working at a job, and reality – that which the wise and courageous spend their whole lives trying to comprehend – is treated like a simple and basic fact that we must face (Higgins, 2008, p. 10).

For Bakhtin, “languages are...not only semiotic systems but inevitably and inextricably also ideological and lived perspectives on the world” (Holland et al., 1998, p. 170). Consequently, attending to the language and grammatical practices used at school plays a vital role in designing a new perspective on life. Similar to the linguistic practices that motivated hope and collective social dreaming in Gutiérrez’s study (2008), school could promote the usage of a language that reflects a non-instrumentalist view on life and that encourages self-discovery, fulfillment and transformation.

### *School as a Space Where Consumerism is Defied*

School cripples and incapacitates students to function outside the capitalist economy by preparing them for a single way of life. In fact, along with motivating an instrumentalist view, schools emphasize academic learning which is based on theory and analysis rather than vocational or practical skills (Robinson & Aronica, 2015, p. 134). Consequently, students are denied practical knowledge and are tamed to become actors and consumers in an economic system that creates needs for people and then offers the means to satisfy them.

Recently, however, and motivated by Papert's constructionism that "places embodied, production-based experiences at the heart of how people learn," (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014, p. 498), there has been an increased interest in incorporating "maker spaces" within the world of schooling. Such an action could contribute to disrupting the typical socialization that students undergo at school to fit within the hierarchy of the workplace and transform students' relationships with objects and consequently consumerism.

Mark Hatch considers making as "fundamental to what it means to be human. We must make, create, and express ourselves to feel whole" (2014, p. 1). His sentence captures the empowering, potentiating and existentially-affirming aspects of the act of creation. Along the same lines, the figured world of "maker spaces" offers students the identity of "makers" of things, which stands in striking contrast to the identity of "perpetual consumers" imposed by most spaces in a capitalist culture – such as consumers of a pre-set curriculum at school, consumers of finished objects on a shopping website, and consumers of processed food at a supermarket. Some maker spaces have even proclaimed an explicit agenda to enable people to function, as much as possible, outside the yoke of the capitalist economy. Fablabs, for instance, which were created by Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Neil Gershenfeld, were envisioned "as pedagogical environments that would allow everyday people to solve their own problems by producing (rather than purchasing or outsourcing) the tools they need" (Halverson & Sheridan, 2014, p. 498, 499).

Despite the promising potential of the maker movement in transforming the figured world of capitalism, it is still positioned as a means to support the progress of a capitalist economy (Anderson, 2012; Peppler & Bender, 2013) rather than empower people to operate outside the constraints of "modern life" and set balance to consumerism. Bean and Rosner (2014) have even

posited that the “maker movement” is better understood as a “brand” rather than a “social movement.” They pointed out to the gendered appeal of this movement and the fact that making will promote a new type of consumption, that of the raw materials necessary for “making” (such as a 3D printers), suggesting that it is more likely to “extend the transformations of capitalism” rather than challenge it.

“Making” as a practice carries the potential to travel across settings. Maker spaces, if incorporated within a school curriculum, would also be supported by the maker spaces which have already been established as a social practice outside school. Although maker spaces may be positioned by some as tools for a different type of consumerism, schools could play a vital role in shaping how “maker spaces” are approached. By emphasizing the need to consider the consequences of our actions on our lives and the environment—such as using an eco-friendly raw material for “making” instead of another harmful one, schools may help in directing the course of “making” away from blind consumerism. This takes us to the last topic in my paper where I will discuss this issue in more detail.

### *School as a Space Where Wellbeing is Emphasized*

The figured world of school needs to be one where individual actions are situated, when possible, within the context of the larger society and evaluated accordingly. Blurring the lines between disciplines is primary for promoting an in depth understanding of how topics are interconnected in life. It is also as important to blur the lines between what happens within institutional spaces, such as school, home, or the workplace, and the outside world. One approach that could fulfill both of these purposes is “thinking in levels.”

Wilensky and Resnick (1999) describe how computational literacy could be utilized to understand how complex phenomena, or what they term as “emergent levels,” can “arise from

simple components and simple interactions” (p. 5). Fostering “thinking in levels” at schools could help students develop an interdisciplinary understanding of scientific concepts and explain complex phenomena that might be inconceivable otherwise. As importantly, it could be utilized to assess how individual choices and actions reflect on the wellbeing of the larger society. For instance, students could develop models to predict how particular consumer choices would affect the ecosystem, or, conversely, be able to explain lived macro-changes in the ecosystem in terms of choices taken on the individual level. Knowing that economic growth is often framed positively (by the news for example) regardless of its costs on the environment and global health (Lewis, 2014), helping students develop these skills could get them engaged in policy debates and choices that are being taken by economic and political elites on behalf of humanity. Interestingly, and on a different note, thinking in levels may also help students develop organizational models based on non-hierarchical relationships among individuals and defy systems of privilege at the workplace and in the larger society (Wilensky & Resnick, 1999, p. 9).

Finally, the figured world of school could further emphasize the importance of evaluating the consequences of one’s choices on the larger society by changing (or adding on) the criteria of the grading system. As a matter of fact, what is “evaluated” at school largely reflects what is “valued.” The current grading system evaluates students’ performance based on how much it complies with a “right” answer or a particular “process of thinking” irrespective of how students’ approach may in some cases reflect on their class, society or larger environment. Adding, when applicable, a different component to grading that evaluates the possible consequences of certain choices, actions or projects on the well-being of the class or larger society might be a very important deed in changing how students think about their actions. Another, as important, change is evaluating how much particular student choices, subject matter, or class strategies

reflect on the internal wellbeing of students. Prompting students to evaluate how they feel about particular subjects may help students discover their interests and build a deeper understanding of themselves. This could also help teachers understand the impact of their strategies on the health and progress of students. In addition, emphasizing an introspective approach and valuing students' wellbeing could help students become more aware of unjust and exploitive systems that they may encounter at the workplace or elsewhere. It would be very interesting to expand these ideas and study the consequences of similar changes in the grading system on students' behavior and wellbeing.

### **Finale: Reimagining Other Spaces**

The techniques that I have set forth are far from comprehensive or prescriptive. They are suggestions to how things could be done differently and remain open to further imagination, study and design. As a matter of fact, my main purpose for the paper was to reveal the "substance of reality," or what reality is made of, from the lens of figured worlds and theories on space and hopefully unveil the potential of re-imagination and thoughtful design in transforming our realities. It is quite astounding when we start to look at the world while remembering that we dwell in "spaces of activity." A world that might have seemed so flat and innocent before now reveals itself as an invisible landscape that determines our movement and action in subtle yet powerful ways. Although such a realization exposes the limits of "free will" (which many of us hold so dearly to), it leaves a "third space" for agency; by understanding how figured worlds and spatialities affect our social existence, we may realize that our agency is put in best use when we transform the contexts which will in their turn transform us.

Designing a new figured world at school would definitely be met by resistance. Existing social practices at school, as well as spatialities in the online and offline world and the social

practices they encompass will all compete with those of the designed world. Being supported by social practices and spaces outside school has an effect on the sustainability and durability of the “played out” world. Consequently, a critical goal for such a designed place is to prompt students to also *reimagine spaces inside and outside school* and suggest ways of how things could be done differently. Although physical spaces are highly subject to societal powers and coercive laws, students could find much more flexibility in designing online spaces that support their views of reimagined realities. Inspiring re-imagination and revealing the flexibility of reality are probably two of the most valuable gifts such a world could offer.

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