

# “I prefer not to accept it”: Curriculum and resistance

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Bartleby, the character of Herman Melville, and his famous pronouncement - I prefer not to - are important to understand the political power of unwillingness without violent confrontation. In his Wall Street story, Melville recounts the life of this man who contemplates the world. Bartleby, in his work as scrivener, is a good employee, but always responds to the demands of his boss with the expression "I would prefer not to." In the words of the narrator - a Master in Chancery in the State of New York - created by Melville (2015, loc 13), "Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and in his case those are very small."

It may be interesting to think, as does Agamben (2015), that Bartleby opens a zone of indiscernibility between the yes and the no, the preferable and the non preferable. He never says that he does not want to do something or that he cannot do something, but he does not accept it, he prefers not to do it; he never confronts, but he also does not do what is asked of him. Agamben understands this action of those who do not act and, at the same time, claim to prefer another option as the indiscernibility between the power of being (or doing) and the power of not being (or not doing). In the words of Agamben (2015), Melville elaborates in his literary text an experiment that can be connected to Wittgenstein's propositions, such as "I am safe whatever happens." That is, there are experiments and propositions that cannot be submitted to the conditions of truth. They can be true and false at the same time, they refer to the power of being and not being simultaneous: to the contingency. Through contingency, it is possible to think that there is no potential essence that determines a result in life or politics. Multiple possibilities of being and doing compete for the power to be precipitated into actions or identities. There is no necessary or compulsory reason able to define a way of being or doing something.

It is impossible to discuss Bartleby's politics in this small presentation. This kind of refusal or resistance can be read in different ways, including as a problematic and weak nihilism (and I do not agree with this because nothing is so simple). Then, I just want to connect this political possibility of resistance to curriculum policy. Or maybe I just want to stress another understanding of resistance in the contingency.

Most curriculum guides in different countries - whether or not produced by government institutions - are currently trying to tell teachers what to do, how to be a good teacher. At the same time, they try to tell students how to be or what they have to desire for their future. One can remember of Bartleby. Thus, in certain contexts or historical moments, against the powers that try to draw such actions and identities, it would be worth saying that we prefer not to implement this curricular proposal, we prefer not to construct that identity, we prefer not to be in that way, we prefer not want that future. Or just answering: "We would prefer not to", "We prefer no to".

In the case of the scrivener created by Melville, such preference leads to increasing immobility and isolation. But even this immobility and isolation do not cease to produce changes in those around him. This idea may lead us to think with Derrida that many political actions as deconstruction may seem paralyzing if the notion of politics with which one works refers only to



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the confrontation of pre-war (*apud* Elam, 1994). In this case, it is better to change the understanding of politics, accepting the possibility of deconstruction.

I propose that the articles of this issue 15 of the *Transnational Curriculum Inquiry* were read in view of such reflections on the curriculum. As usual, the papers come from different research groups, different universities and countries, with different approaches, perhaps connected only through the perspective of thinking about the curriculum in a non-prescriptive way, open to defer.

Perhaps what also connects these articles is the political option to say, in the face of any authoritarianism and any violence against the identity of the other, "We prefer not to accept it".

## Notes

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## References

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