

Brain war

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Extracted from: Garcés, M. (2020), *Escuela de aprendices / Escola d'aprenents*, Galaxia Gutenberg.
[Translated by the editor: Marcel Ruiz Mejías]

An underage youth grabs his head and says, “We don’t have brains.” His face is pixelated and addresses the cameras from a reeducation center for minors on an island in southern Italy.* This boy, like his peers, has grown up amid drugs, poverty and the mafia. The State uses a combination of penitentiary and educational action to straighten his path. But the boy’s words touch on the weak point of this operation: they have no brains. That is to say, the devastation has already taken place where the current system focuses all its promises and expectations: the brain. It grabs the head, because it refers to the physical, organic brain, already affected by a degraded childhood. But he has understood perfectly well that the brain is not only an organ. It is a potential that, in his case, is already out of place. He speaks knowing he is a waste. A wasted life conscious of itself.

At the other end of this testimony, cognitive marketing floods networks, schools and universities with proposals to train, program and improve the capacities of one’s own brain. “I decided to change my brain”. This is the starting point of Barbara Oakley, author of one of the most watched courses in history on the MOOCs platform Coursera. It has been replicated in the form of TED Talks and books. TED Talks and books. In her books and courses she explains a personal testimony of effort and success based on changing learning patterns, from a childhood without access to a good education, the military education, going through the military, and finally training in science and technology at the highest level. It is an individual’s story based on the development of learning techniques that any other individual could apply in other contexts, irrespective of social, cultural or content factors. It is about modifying behaviors and, in this way, reprogramming the brain. Barbara Oakley is not an isolated case. She is just one popular voice, among others, of what is an academic and media wave of the learning sciences and their ramifications in psychology, pedagogy, neuroscience and technology. Organic, silicon, neural or algorithmic brains, are the new human, posthuman and transhuman fantasy about a new potential. The fact that there is part fantasy does not mean that there is no will of power. It is only necessary to keep track of the economic investments that are devoted to it.

* Testimony of the report *Baby Boss: Italy's New Face of Terror* (2018) by Raphaël Tresanini and Nicolas Dumond (broadcast by the 30 Minuts space of TV3 on Sunday, July 7, 2019).

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We can ask ourselves: which of the two is more capable of thinking for himself, the pixelated boy on an island in southern Italy or the brain reprogrammer? The question could open a debate that the written page does not allow but that I leave it open and in the hands of the readers. I advance, however, my reflection, which I will argue throughout this chapter. For me, it is clear that the one who thinks for himself is the boy who is able to say “we have no brain”. He does not stick to results. He does not have the endorsement of success, like Barbara Oakley or so many others like her. His consciousness is clear, regarding the messages he receives from the institutional system, both penal and educational. Regarding his own existence, he cannot be more so. His almost forensic realization establishes a limit beyond which everything is to be rethought: what can someone do whose brain has already been devastated?

Throughout the book we have defined emancipation as the capacity to think for oneself in relation to others. In this sense, we could say that it is he who, despite the devastation and confinement, is most emancipated. The idea that the pixelated boy can be seen as an emancipated man may seem absurd. He is a loser from square one. Nietzsche says in the *Genealogy of Morals* that the man of the free will, the one who believes he has come to have power over his destiny, is the one who, internalizing the norm, believes himself sovereign of his conscience. Evidently, this sovereignty is an illusion built on much pain. The straitjacket of the soul applies to both the victors and the vanquished of this project of civilization that confuses autonomy with dominion. Today, this dangerous confusion is presented as a promising cognitive and emotional brain enhancement program, based on the idea of self-regulation and reinvention. Consciousness is something else. Thinking for oneself has nothing to do with mastering one’s own destiny, or even one’s own vital or personal project. It consists in being able to elaborate an awareness of the world through one’s own existence, whatever the departure point or arrival.

Neuroscientists maintain that consciousness is the last frontier of science, the mystery that the great advances in neuroscience of the last decade of the 20th century have not yet managed to decipher. Perhaps it is because many of them still apply the gaze of explorers and scrutinizers of the universe, who seek the ultimate truth and its secret place. But this neurological Grail is nothing more than the uncertain effect through which a *who* emerges. That is to say, a self that can say I, that can show the face with more or less shame and that can learn to live with others, with more or less fortune. If to exist is to “be outside,” consciousness is a folding, an open set of sensations, perceptions and relations that folds back to give an account of itself and of the world.

We know more and more about how the brain organ works. The last decade of the 20th century was declared the “decade of the brain”. This was proclaimed by politicians, scientists and national and global institutions, specifically on July 17, 1990 by George W. Bush, at that time the President of the United States. However, the decade of the brain was short-lived and has given way to the century of the brain, because the brain is expected to be the new unknown and where both science

and the technological and political projects of the immediate future will discover new territories and build their domains. Neuroscience is becoming the invisible matrix of other sciences and social practices, from the most speculative to such practical fields as technological innovation or marketing. Obviously, pedagogy occupies a central place in this vision in which neuroscience becomes the paradigm from which to explain everything. Once again, the totalizing temptation and the proliferation of myths that serve to construct a new world envisions. Therefore, the borderline between neurosciences (it is better to refer to them in the plural) and neurocentrism, as a form of ideology that explains everything through its supposed neural basis, is very thin. And the temptation is very strong, because neurosciences seem to be able to offer precisely what we lack most in the contemporary experience of the world: evidence and authority. Scientific evidence and authority, which if not treated critically, become political evidence and authority.

Plasticity and flexibility

We are our brain: this is the fundamental assumption of contemporary neurosciences. The brain is characterized by plasticity, they add. Brain and plasticity are the two keywords of this new paradigm. Put this way, the statement may seem transparent, almost obvious. However, what is my brain and whose brain is it? How do we define and delimit it? Where does it begin and where does it end? Perhaps we could say, paraphrasing the old liberal dogma, that my brain ends where someone else's brain begins. Or more precisely: where it enters into competition with someone else's.

The decade of the brain has not only expanded our knowledge of the brain organ, it has put brains in competition and combat with each other. In the decade of the brain, human brains and their non-human extensions have gone to war: with each other, with each other and with machines, and between research projects that today draw a whole geopolitics of the science of power. Military and sporting language, which have always been in continuity, have colonized neuro-territories. The competitions between humans and machines when playing chess, for example, are one of the parodic stagings of this war, which takes place daily among us, between one and the other. Training, performance, efficiency, effectiveness, frontier, overcoming, power... are parameters of a conception of intelligence that is measured according to its objectives and results. Objectives and results: two more terms that organize, today too, all pedagogical practice. Achieved? Not achieved? The pins on the military map are the little lights on the neuronal map. And like any military or sports war, the war of brains also has its elites, its winners and its victims. "We do not have brains".

The brain war has two main objectives: to increase intelligence and to capture attention. In this war, intelligence is the power and attention is the resource. The combination of the two is measured in efficiency and performance indices. The parameters of this playing field are very evident in the field of pedagogy today. According to this neurocentric ideology, intelligence is understood as the ability to solve problems in a changing environment. To solve problems adequately is to adapt successfully to the requirements of the environment, effectively and even creatively. From this con-

ception of intelligence, any learning acquires an adaptive, solutionist and optimizing sense. Its ultimate goal is to master uncertainty as much as possible. Similarly, attention is seen as a scarce resource to be exploited, expanded and exploited to its fullest potential. From this economic and extractive approach, attention is a limit to the fantasies of superintelligence. The fantasy of indefinitely increasing the efficiency of intelligent processes clashes with the human factor: for the moment, humans still have a limited capacity for attention, both in quality and quantity. Since the brain war, I am my brain means, implicitly, I am what my brain can and is worth. If Spinoza made famous the expression that we do not know what a body can do, much of the efforts of neuroscience and its derivatives such as neuromarketing are focused on trying to know what a brain can do and how far the limits of intelligence (human and non-human) and attention can be shifted. From this neural and computational metric, the main virtue of the brain, which is its plasticity, is subjected to a single criterion of value: how far can it be extended?

As French philosopher Catherine Malabou analyzes, the brain's plasticity is thus reduced to its flexibility, which is a central concept of neoliberal capitalism. "Flexibility is the ideological avatar of plasticity."^{*} While flexibility is defined solely as the ability to receive a form, plasticity also includes that of creating, modifying and even destroying any acquired form. This is why, as Malabou says, any vision about the brain is necessarily political. It is not defined by the question: what can my brain do, but, as the title of one of his books says: what do we have to do with our brains? From this perspective, we are not only what our brains can and are worth, but we are everything our brains can and are worth. Beyond flexibility, plasticity is creative relationship and possibility of destruction.

The war of brains is a commercial, technological and social war focused on the conquest of a finite and increasingly abused land. We experience it daily and in all walks of life, night and day. We also experience the damage it produces, under the feeling that it is increasingly difficult to pay attention to something or someone. We teachers know this very well, but it is not exclusive to educational practice. It infiltrates and colonizes the day-to-day of any interaction. We could say, without being just a metaphor, that cognitive capitalism is dedicated to the fracking of attention: it extracts from our brains every last drop of attention available, even if it has to squeeze them, intoxicate them and make them sick. In this sense, the war on brains is also a war on the brain.

^{*} Malabou, C., *What should we do with our brain*, Fordham University Press, 2008, p.12.