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Evolving Education

A Manifesto to Reimagine Higher Education

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When Manifestos Do Not Manifest:

On Voice, Critical Consciousness,
and the Pedagogical Journey

Roberto Rocco & Caroline Newton

Since 2020, the Manifesto for the Just City workshop has brought together students and educators from over one hundred universities worldwide in an act of collective reflection and hopeful projection. In its five editions to date, over 2,500 participants have engaged with the concept of spatial justice through public lectures, collaborative learning, and the writing of manifestos, a form that oscillates between declaration, critique, and desire.

The workshop is hosted by the **Centre for the Just City**¹ at TU Delft and co-organised with institutions in the Netherlands, the United States, South Africa, the UK, India, Bangladesh, Brazil, and beyond. It culminates in the co-authoring of short manifestos, each an attempt to name injustice and reimagine the city as a space of equality, inclusion, democracy, and care.

Why use the manifesto form? What happens when manifestos don't manifest anything? These are not idle questions. They touch on the pedagogical, ethical, and political heart of our project. In what follows, we offer a reflection on the role of manifestos in higher education and in the lives of students, drawing not only from the experience of the *Manifesto for the Just City* but also from broader engagements with participatory planning, spatial justice, and Freirean critical pedagogy.

¹ <https://just-city.org>

1. Why Do Manifestos Matter?

Manifestos are tools for making the implicit explicit. They are formats of urgent thinking, where intention meets collective authorship, and where critique must be rapidly followed by vision. For centuries, manifestos have been written at moments of rupture and disillusionment: by political movements, avant-garde artists, and anti-colonial thinkers. They matter not because they always succeed in their aims, but because they insist on the possibility of another way. In this sense, manifestos are closely entangled with acts of (spatial) imagination: they gesture toward (material) worlds not yet built, sketching out the ethical and political contours of spaces and places that could exist. As Beatriz Colomina has argued, even buildings can be manifestos, as structures that speak back to their time, encoding a political or ethical position (Colomina, 2014).

In the *Manifesto for the Just City* workshops, we invite students to write not just about problems, but about alternatives. We ask them to imagine cities where justice is expressed in the fair distribution of resources (distributive justice), in inclusive decision-making (procedural justice), and in the recognition of diverse experiences, trajectories and identities (recognitional justice) (Fraser, 2000, 2010; Soja, 2010). We want to foster not only critical thought, but also political imagination. And crucially, we do so in a collaborative environment where authorship is shared, negotiated, and often messy.

As a pedagogical tool, manifestos hold a special status: they are serious yet playful, structured yet open-ended. They demand clarity without finality. Writing a manifesto is not the same as writing an essay. It is a declaration of values and a projection of the self into public life. In this sense, it is formative. It helps students begin to understand themselves as civic actors, as people who can name and shape the urban worlds they inhabit. For many, it is the first time they are asked not only to analyse the city, but to envision what a just city could look like.

2. How Can Manifestos Materialise into Action?

The question of materialisation is not straightforward. Manifestos are not blueprints. They are not policy documents or strategic plans. But they can catalyse action by clarifying values, galvanising community, and orienting pedagogical practice. Their power often lies in this prefigurative dimension, in the capacity to make emerging collective imaginaries tangible, not only in language but through different practices and social relations they may set in motion. The *Manifesto for the Just City* is not a one-off writing exercise. It is a process. It begins with a four-week lecture series, where students engage with scholars and activists, people like Faranak Miraftab, Mona Fawaz, Mariana Fix, Vanesa Castán-Broto, and Suraj Yengde, who speak not only from theory, but from situated struggle.

After the lectures, students meet in groups to draft their manifestos. They share, revise, disagree. They argue about what justice means. They struggle to articulate collective positions across cultural and disciplinary differences. And in that struggle, they learn to inhabit the uncomfortable space between critique and proposition. The manifestos they produce are then published in Open Access (Rocco, 2023; Rocco & Newton, 2022; Rocco et al., 2021; Rocco et al., 2025).

Manifestos matter not only when they produce policy change, but when they transform the person writing them. Here we return to Paulo Freire's concept of **conscientização**, a process of becoming aware of the structures that shape our lives, and recognising ourselves as subjects capable of acting upon the world. For Freire, education must be liberatory: a dialogical process through which learners develop critical consciousness and agency (Freire, 2018).

The variety in educational traditions, backgrounds, nationalities, genders, and disciplinary standpoints yields a diverse collection of manifestos, some bold and radical, while others are cautious and searching. This plurality is not a flaw but a strength. It reflects the fact that students are at different stages in their intellectual and political journeys and have access to different material, educational and affective resources. Some are just beginning to name the world; others are already fluent in the languages of critique and proposition. What matters is that all have been invited to participate, to reflect, and to speak.

Writing a manifesto, in this sense, is not a performative gesture, but a pedagogical one. It is not a simulation of action, but a stage in the formation of a public subjectivity. It enables students, especially those still finding their voice, to *start somewhere*. And that starting point, even if clumsy or incomplete, can be transformative. This is why all manifestos submitted are published, after a few rounds of editing. Some students are still struggling to find their voices, while others are more seasoned. Those still struggling deserve a chance to have their voices heard.

3. What If Manifestos Do Not Manifest Anything?

Truth be told, many manifestos written by students are not always revolutionary or groundbreaking. They contain contradictions. They are sometimes vague, or accept tropes of 'development' and 'efficiency'. They express longing more than strategy. But perhaps that is precisely their value. They signal a willingness to speak, however tentatively, in a world that increasingly demands silence, compliance, or cynicism.

In educational spaces, we must allow for unfinished thoughts, for partial visions. Not all manifestos will move mountains. But they move the students who write them. They allow students from all over the world to say: *I see injustice, and I want to say something about it*. That moment of articulation, of refusing to remain neutral or indifferent, is politically meaningful.

Moreover, manifestos expose us, the educators, to what students see and feel. They reveal their desires, frustrations, hopes and sometimes their limitations and biases. They hold up a mirror to our pedagogies, our institutions, and the worlds we prepare students for. In this sense, even a 'failed' manifesto, one that does not 'manifest' in the conventional sense, is a vital political object.

We might even ask: what do we mean by *manifestation*? Do we expect impact to be measurable in conventional terms? Or do we allow for slow impact, for the kind of intellectual fermentation that might not bear fruit for years?

According to Faranak Miraftab (2022), we face a **crisis of imagination**, where our minds are colonised by the epistemologies and rationalities of neoliberal modernity, particularly those rooted in the logic of market, technocratic governance, and Western-centric developmental paradigms. That mental colonisation narrows our capacity to envision alternative futures grounded in solidarity, care, and collective emancipation.

To the crisis of imagination, we can add a **crisis of hope**, in which the structural violence of neoliberalism, systemic inequality, ecological breakdown and now mindless war and genocide erode people's belief in the possibility of transformative change, replacing political agency with resignation, cynicism, or retreat into individualised survival strategies. This loss of hope undermines the affective and moral foundations necessary for collective action and democratic renewal. Again, Faranak Miraftab reminds us of hope as a political practice, not as naïve optimism, but as a disciplined, daily act of resistance rooted in collective care and a refusal to surrender to despair. Drawing on the praxis of abolitionist thinkers such as Mariame Kaba, Miraftab reframes hope not as an emotion, but as a conscious, situated choice to believe in the capacity of ordinary people to build emancipatory alternatives, even in the midst of devastation (Miraftab, 2022). This conception of hope resists both fatalism and utopianism. It insists that change is always possible when people organise, care, and imagine together. In this sense, the writing of manifestos, even when uncertain or partial, is not a frivolous act, but a necessary practice in the cultivation of political agency and the restoration of collective horizons.

To those two crises, we add a **crisis of recognition**: a failure to see the epistemic and political value of marginalised voices and alternative imaginaries (Gonçalves, 2025; Gonçalves, 2026). Manifestos, especially those authored by students from the Global South, by women, by queer and racialised students, force us to pay attention. They do not only reconfigure discourse; but can unsettle and reimagine the social and spatial order itself, signalling other ways of organising and inhabiting the world. They challenge the norms of who is allowed to speak and in what ways. And they do so within a pedagogical structure that affirms pluralism, contestation, and care.

4. The Role of Educators: Making Space for Voice

If manifestos are to matter, they must be supported by pedagogies that make space for voice, doubt, and growth. This is a challenge. In an academic system increasingly governed by instrumental logics, assessment rubrics, learning outcomes, and employability metrics, there is little room for ambiguity. But ambiguity is where learning happens.

In the *Manifesto for the Just City*, we deliberately avoid ranking or grading the manifestos. We affirm that every attempt to articulate a vision of justice is valuable, even when imperfect. This is a radical gesture rooted in our refusal of meritocracy in favour of **recognition**. It aligns with the idea of the university as a space not only of knowledge transmission, but of ethical and political formation.

Freire teaches us that consciousness is not something educators 'give' to students. It emerges through dialogical encounters. Manifestos, in this sense, are tools for encounter. They bring students into relation with each other, with the city, with the idea of justice.

5. Conclusion: On Soup and Slow Cooking

The *Manifesto for the Just City* brings together voices from across the world and asks them to sit together and share words, ideas, frustrations, and visions. Some of these words may be forgotten. Some may ferment quietly. Others may spark movements. But all contribute to the long, unfinished process of imagining and building more just cities and more just forms of education.

As we confront climate breakdown, democratic backsliding, and social fragmentation, we need not only new policies but new *possibilities*. And manifestos (modest, plural, imperfect as they are) can help us rehearse them.

Writing a manifesto is an act of engagement. It allows students to externalise their values, test their assumptions, and project themselves into public life. Even when the visions remain tentative, they signal a refusal to accept the world as it is. They affirm that imagining just futures is a political act in itself, one that demands courage, clarity, and care.

In this sense, the *Manifesto for the Just City* is not only a pedagogical exercise. It is a form of practice: a small rehearsal for democratic life, a method of civic engagement, and an invitation to collective transformation. The manifestos may not always lead directly to action. But they offer a beginning. They cultivate the capacity to dream beyond the present, to question what is, and to ask what could be. And that is, in itself, a form of justice.

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Roberto Rocco is trained as an architect and spatial planner with a master's in planning by the University of São Paulo, a specialisation in urban management tools by the Ecole d'Urbanisme de Paris (former Institut Français d'Urbanisme) and a PhD by TU Delft. He is committed to understanding the relationships between society and the production and governance of the built environment. This means that he investigates how actors and institutions from the public sector, the private sector and civic society interact in planning, designing, governing and inhabiting the built environment, both formally and informally. These basic but foundational ideas explain much of his actions as an educator and researcher.

Caroline Newton is an urban planner, an architect, and a political scientist. Her work and research focus on the social and political dimensions of design. She is the Van Eesteren Fellow at TU Delft's Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment's Department of Urbanism.

She advocates for revitalised urban professional participation and the reintroduction of advocacy to the forefront of planning and spatial practices. She advances a critical and engaged approach to strategic planning, presenting planning techniques as acts of resistance, as enablers of alternative spatial possibilities and imaginations.