

Weaving Justice into the Fabric of Post-Critical Perspective on Education

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Abstract

This paper investigates the potential of integrating the concept of justice into the post-critical theory of education. Drawing on the resonance of Hannah Arendt's ideas within post-critical pedagogy, and acknowledging the communal dimension inherent in education, I propose the inclusion of justice as an essential element in post-critical educational discourse. The analysis critically engages with the ontological foundations of Arendt's reflections on education, assessing their implications for the status of justice from a post-critical perspective. While Arendt's strict delineation between the ontologies of politics and education presents a challenge to the straightforward application of justice within a post-critical perspective, this paper argues that justice remains vital for addressing the communal and ethical dimensions of education – as both a concern for the common world and an axiomatic affirmation of the subject's capabilities in terms of equality, with the latter framed through a Rancièrian lens. To this end, I draw on alternative philosophical perspectives, particularly that of Alain Badiou, whose ideas are already integrated into the post-critical perspective on education, to explore pathways for incorporating justice into post-critical framework.

Keywords: Justice; education; post-critical theory of education; the political; ontology of education; ethics.

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The emergence of a post-critical theory of education in recent years marks a clear shift towards a revival of the “pedagogy of positivity.” After decades

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dominated by a critical pedagogy focused on demystifying the dark sides of education and social conditions underlying it – particularly in its role in reproducing and perpetuating social inequalities – this new approach turns toward the affirmation of the world. From the perspective of post-critical pedagogy, education becomes an expression of love for the world. This positivity is reflected in the discovery, recognition, and celebration of the world and its values (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017).

Post-critical theory, following Latour (2004), rejects the negativism inherent in criticism that turns against the world and reinforces the belief that «Evil is our inevitable fate» (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020, p. 866). From the perspective of post-critical theorists, such criticism only fosters a sense of hatred towards the world. Despite this, proponents of post-critical theory do not entirely reject or negate the contributions of the critical tradition in education. In fact, they acknowledge and appreciate its accomplishments in the field of unmasking mechanisms of oppression and discrimination within education. Furthermore, they recognize certain shared elements between post-critical and critical perspectives, particularly the belief in education's transformative potential for renewing the world (Hodgson et al., 2017). However, Vlieghe and Zamojski (2020) describe these two theoretical approaches as mutually exclusive.

Within post-critical pedagogy itself, at least two positions emerge regarding the valuation of the critical pedagogy tradition. The first, a “strong” version, is articulated by Vlieghe and Zamojski (2020), while the second, a “weaker” stance, is expressed by scholars like Ergas (2017, p. 58) who claims that «Education certainly requires a response to relevant issues of inequality and oppression raised by critical theorists; nevertheless, there is also a need to introduce a balancing positivity (...)». The latter suggests that, while education must address issues of inequality and oppression raised by critical theorists, there is also a need to introduce a balancing element of positivity. This “weaker” version of post-criticism leans toward the idea that the two perspectives could complement each other.

A distinction can be made between the weak and strong versions of post-criticality, with this paper focusing on the strong variant of post-critical theory of education. This version is understood as being based on the reversal and negation of the assumptions of “critical critique” (see Stańczyk, 2021), as represented in the conception of North American critical pedagogy, particularly in the approach presented by Giroux and McLaren in the last two decades of the 20th century (Giroux, 1983; Giroux, 1988; Giroux, 2001; Giroux & McLaren, 1992; McLaren, 1995; McLaren, 1997).

A strong version of post-criticism not only denies the significance of critique, which, in Latour's view, has «run out of steam» (Latour, 2004, p.

225) and «found itself totally disarmed» (Latour, 2004, p. 232), but also detaches itself from the categories that constitute the ontological foundations of emancipatory critique. These categories – such as emancipation, equality or inequality, oppression, exclusion, and certainly justice – are viewed as belonging to the domain of politics that has nothing to do with education. In doing so, post-criticism draws inspiration from the philosophy of Jaques Rancière¹, who invokes Jacotot's ideas on universal teaching, which rest on the assumption of the equality of intelligence (Rancière, 1991). This raises yet another argument against critique: since education is founded on the axiomatic assumption of equality among its participants – an equality situated in the realm of educational ontology – emancipatory critique, when directed at the ontic locus of educational practices, becomes increasingly invalid. To quote the authors of *Manifesto for a Post-Critical Pedagogy*:

What is unique about education is the assumption of a radical equality that is indeed lacking in most other societal contexts and situations. This equality is guaranteed because teacher and student devote themselves to a subject matter to such a degree that both are under the authority of this thing (which makes them relate to one another as equals). Put otherwise: educational and sociological equality belong to different spheres of life (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017, p. 84).

Alongside the emancipatory critique, in the perspective of post-critical theory of education, justice is embedded in the emancipatory order and is viewed as another manifestation of the politicization of education. Furthermore, the emancipatory dream, which embraces the ideal of justice, is seen as a form of pedagogical escapism, disengaging from the world as it is (and as it is deemed worthy of our unconditional affirmation). As Vlieghe and Zamojski put it:

The logic of emancipation entails a mode of relating to the world that consists of a double struggle. This struggle is at the same time with the existing structures of the world, and for the desired form of the world. The first stems from what emancipation logically assumes (i.e. that there is slavery, injustice, oppression and exploitation), whereas the second is the great promise that is implied (the current state of our world is not necessary: there can be freedom, justice and equality). This duality also has a

¹ Representatives of post-critical pedagogy, however, seem to have stripped Rancière's concept of its emancipatory and political connotations (see Rancière, 1991; Biesta & Bingham, 2010). For instance, Rancière argues: «We know, in fact, that explication is not only the stultifying weapon of pedagogues but the very bond of the social order. Whoever says order says distribution into ranks. Putting into ranks presupposes explication, the distributory, justificatory fiction of an inequality that has no other reason for being» (Rancière, 1991, p. 117).

temporal dimension, in that evil is part of the present, and that the promise of a better world to come is deferred to the future. The world as it is, *hic et nunc*, is therefore denounced in the name of the future (Vlieghe, Zamojski, 2019, pp. 82-83).

Emancipatory fixation on unattainable ideals is also criticized for being unproductive because, as Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski (2018, p. 10) state, «there will always be power relations, there will always be inequality, oppression, and injustice.» Furthermore, it paves the way to cynicism towards the world (Hodgson et al., 2018, pp. 10, 12). From the post-critical perspective, all “political” (in fact, power-related) contexts of education are perceived as undermining its proper essence, which, proponents argue, should be grounded in a disinterested love of the world (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020). This is the power of “disinterested love” that seems to alienate education from its sociopolitical and discursive contexts. It not only rejects the emancipatory endeavors of education², but also undermines its axiological foundations, for which the issue of justice (in its various theoretical or philosophical contexts) seems profound. Such axiological foundations are typical not only of critical pedagogy and its Marxist provenance, but also of pedagogical progressivism, which was nourished by the idea of education for democracy (see Dewey, 2011; 2020). In refusing to conceive of education in external, i.e., instrumental terms, post-critical pedagogy follows in the footsteps of Hannah Arendt, who opposes education to politics and advocates for the defense of education against politics (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 8; Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2020). An over-reliance, I would argue, on a rather literal reading of Arendt’s ideas on education, as articulated in her essay *The Crisis in Education* (Arendt, 1993), seems to ultimately obstruct the possibility of including the category of justice within the ontological field on which post-critical theory of education operates.

Ontological presuppositions and axiological implications resulting from Arendt’s vision of education, as distinct not only from politics but also excluded from the public realm, seem to profoundly demonstrate the impossibility of constructing any educational theory that would take into consideration the subjectivity, dignity, and rights of its participants. Arendt’s perspective, as expressed in *The Crisis in Education*, seems to represent a series of pedagogical fictions.

² It is important to note that the issue of emancipation does not need to be understood solely from the perspective promoted by critical pedagogy. In fact, within the philosophical frameworks of Rancière and Badiou, often referenced in post-critical theory of education, we also encounter emancipatory themes. However, these frameworks ascribe different meanings to emancipatory logic (cf. Hewlett, 2007; Biesta, 2010).

Firstly, for Arendt, education is addressed only to children. Adults do not need education – unlike children, who are not yet complete human beings (Arendt, 1993, p. 187). In politics, as Arendt argues, «we always have to deal with those who are already educated», adding that «whoever wants to educate adults really wants to act as their guardian and prevent them from political activity» (Arendt, 1993, p. 177). Therefore, it can be viewed that, for Arendt, education constitutes a form of disempowerment and exclusion of subjective agency in the public sphere.

Secondly, Arendt creates a naturalistic and infantilized portrait of the child and childhood, denying the possibility of attributing to childhood categories such as freedom, agency, and subjectivity – attributes that, in her view, refer only to adults who become subjectified in the realm of the political. Children, even if endowed with the potential of natality, are not yet capable of public participation. Furthermore, Arendt recognizes «that childhood is a temporary stage, a preparation for adulthood» (Arendt, 1993, p. 184), clearly highlighting the fundamental inequality at the heart of the pedagogical relationship: between the (competent) adult and the (incompetent) child. In this respect, Arendt commits what Rancière considers to be a pedagogical fiction – that is, «the representation of inequality as a retard in one's [a child's, A.M.-Ch.] development» (Rancière, 1991, p. 119).

A comprehensive reading of *The Crisis in Education* gives the impression of a naive psychologization of the image of childhood, as noted by Gert Biesta, who observes that «Arendt fell prey to a mistake that is not uncommon when philosophers turn to education», where «the only available vocabulary for talking about education is a psychological one» (Biesta, 2014, pp. 103-104). Expanding on Biesta's argument, one may argue that Arendt shares Kant's view on the pre-intellectual and pre-moral status of childhood (Kant, 1900). Hence, children are not deemed to possess attributes such as subjectivity and freedom, which Arendt associates with members of the community – i.e., political subjects. Apart from the private sphere of family life, the only context in which these immature beings can engage without exerting a potentially destructive impact on the world is within an education system grounded in authority, which stands in contrast to public life. Thus, while «the meaning of politics is freedom» (Arendt, 2005, p. 108), the meaning of education is authority.

It is, however, difficult to fully agree with Biesta's claim that, in Arendt's perspective, both “childhood” and “adulthood” are inherently natural categories rather than products of social and political construction (Biesta, 2014, pp. 103-104). Arendt situates adults within a moral and political framework tied to the status of persona (citizen), while viewing children within a naturalistic context that aligns with the notion of humans “to be

born” (as related to her concept of “natality”). Thus, Arendt’s conception of childhood appears not to be primarily inspired by the “folk developmental psychologies” of her time, but rather to closely align with Kantian philosophy. Furthermore, consistent with Kant, she seems to assume that children, as pre-moral beings, lack the inherent dignity required to claim rights. Consequently, akin to her contention that dignity is denied to individuals without citizenship – since the latter is derived solely from the community (Arendt, 1971, p. 302; a viewpoint subject to debate, see: Benhabib, 2018, pp. 21, 186; Menke, 2014)³ – children, being detached from the public realm (and not yet capable of participating in it), cannot be considered subjects of dignity, nor can they claim justice, which derives from dignity. Thus, children cannot be regarded as holders of rights, despite – as Korsgaard (2018) argues – being entitled to care. From the perspective of contemporary cultural sensibilities, shaped not only by political correctness but also by a heightened sensitivity to human dignity, irrespective of age, nationality, or any other characteristic, Arendt’s stance on this issue seems rather problematic.

Thirdly, Arendt seems to fall into yet another pedagogical myth which, through Rancière’s lens, divides the world into two: the knowing and the ignorant, the mature and the unformed (Rancière, 1991). The central role of adult authority in children’s education tends to equate education with mere explication – a notion highlighted by Rancière to illustrate the nature of the pedagogical (and not only pedagogical) relationship, which is based on the submission of “the ignorant” to an authoritative interpretation of truth and unconditional obedience to “the knowing”. As for Simons and Masschelein, «to explain something to someone is, first of all, to show him he cannot understand it by himself (...). Explication is the myth of pedagogy, the parable of a world divided into knowing minds and ignorant ones (...) the intelligent and the stupid» (Simons & Masschelein, 2010, p. 510).

It is worth noting that a vision of education based on explicative practices is, as McCreary comments, «not simply a method of teaching, but a form of social organization» (McCreary, 2021, p. 745). Thus, incorporating Arendt’s concept of education, based on the authority of the teacher, into the domain of post-critical theory of education will inevitably remain entangled within

³ In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt expresses the above as follows: «The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general – without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself – and different in general, representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance» (Arendt, 1971, p. 302).

the mechanisms of social structuring that govern educational interactions and perpetuate dynamics of domination and subordination. The latter forms a field of intentional overshadowing, which aligns with the axiom of radical equality (concerning the capacity for thinking) that accompanies educational practices (Vlieghe & Zamojski, 2019, pp. 46-54).

Arendt's perspective on education can be characterized as grounded in an unconditional love for the world, yet simultaneously marked by an a priori disregard for the dignity of children. This stems from Arendt's belief that dignity, and by extension justice, forms the ontological foundation of the political realm⁴ and is thus not inherent to the domain of education. For Arendt, justice seems intimately tied to the capacity of individuals to act freely and responsibly in the public world, and it arises from the recognition of the dignity of all human beings – different, yet equal. It is worth noting, however, that for Arendt:

[w]e are not born equal; we become equal as members of a group on the strength of our decision to guarantee ourselves mutually equal rights. Our political life rests on the assumption that we can produce equality through organization, because man can act in and change and build a common world, together with his equals and only with his equals (Arendt, 1971, p. 301).

Thus, for Arendt, justice is predominantly related to human equality: «we link equality with the concept of justice» (Arendt, 2005, p. 118). She believed that the only possible domain of justice is the public realm, where individuals engage in dialogue, debate, and collective decision-making, and where the plurality of human perspectives intersects, fostering the conditions for meaningful engagement in political processes. Such a notion of justice, however, does not pertain to education, which, in her view, has nothing to do with the political or the public. Yet, a significant connection emerges within Arendt's philosophy, linking both politics and education: *Amor Mundi*, the love of the world.

In her letter to Karl Jaspers, written on August 6, 1955, Arendt wrote: «I've begun so late, really only in recent years, to truly love the world that I shall be able to do that now. I want to call my book on political theories *Amor Mundi*» (Arendt & Jaspers, 1992, p. 264) – love for the world. For Arendt, love to the world means love to the public realm; as she puts it:

⁴ It is worth mentioning that Arendt does not develop a systematic theory of justice; however, the concept seems to be silently scattered throughout her writings. In the context of Arendt's work, the ideal of justice is linked to concepts such as human plurality and equality, freedom, action in the public sphere, and, most importantly, responsibility and love for the common world.

[T]he term “public” signifies the world itself, in so far as it is common to all of us and distinguished for our privately owned place in it. This world, however, is not identical with the earth or with nature, as the limited space for the movement of men and the general condition of organic life. It is related, rather, to the human artifact, the fabrication of human hands, as well as to affairs which go on among those who inhabit the man-made world together. To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time (Arendt 1958, p. 52).

A paradoxical dualism seems to arise from the dissonance between Arendt’s political writing and her, rather incidental, thoughts on education. In a literal reading of *The Crisis in Education*, education, as an expression of love for the public world, is positioned outside of it; participants in education are not part of the public realm and therefore do not share the powers or attributes of political actors. Yet, paradoxically, by isolating itself from the public sphere and distancing itself from all forms of public participation, education is simultaneously tasked with preparing individuals to take part in it⁵.

But does this kind of conceptualization fully align with the assumptions of post-critical pedagogy? Can an educational situation, where we gather as equals around a table in shared wonder of things, truly be excluded from the public sphere while also – following Arendt – being excluded from the communal aspect of life? Perhaps, within the post-critical perspective, the communal aspect of education is not only possible but also necessary – especially when considering the following declaration: «Here, we start from the assumption that we can speak and act – together» (Hodgson et al., 2017, p. 16)? Doesn’t the principle of love for the world, as proclaimed in post-critical pedagogy, demand a break with Arendt’s equation of the communal, the public, and the political, as well as her positioning of children as “non-political” subjects belonging to the realm of things? If so, recognizing the communal dimension in education within post-critical theory seems to call for exploring the possibility of incorporating the category of justice into post-critical theoretical discourse.

In line with a post-critical orientation, however, it is not a matter of understanding justice in terms of a social ideal of equality. Instead, the very idea of love for the world, with its emphasis on its public nature, requires

⁵ By the same token, this raises the question of the teacher’s own public participation. Does being a teacher – an ‘equal among equals’, according to the axiom of radical equality – who sits alongside the children at the table, gathered in appreciation of things, exclude the teacher from public participation?

education to be deontologically oriented toward “doing justice to the world” – which refers to care, respect, and ethical engagement. The concept of justice that seems relevant here is the Aristotelian ideal of universal justice (Aristotle, 1926), where justice concerns *What We Owe to Each Other* (see Scanlon, 1988) as the domain of morality dealing with our duties to other people. It involves not only a desire to act fairly toward others. Considering the Aristotelian idea of universal justice, the concept of justice may be interpreted as an ethical relation to others and, at the same time, to the common world.

Aristotle distinguishes between universal (or “general”) justice and particular (or “partial”) forms of justice, where the latter produces or secures happiness for the political community. Justice, understood this way, is a virtue exhibited in relation to others, while promoting the good life and happiness of community members: «[I]t involves relationship with someone else, accounts for the view that Justice alone of the virtues is ‘the good of others,’ because it does what is for the advantage of another, either a ruler or an associate» (Aristotle, 1926, p. 261). Aristotle conceives of justice in terms of its relationship to virtue, viewing it as the highest form of moral excellence manifested through our attitude towards others: «Justice, then, is perfect Virtue, though with a qualification, namely that it is displayed towards others. This is why justice is often thought to be the chief of the virtues, or more sublime than the evening or the morning star» (Aristotle, 1926, p. 259). As Aristotle emphasizes, it is important to note that justice does not constitute a virtue *per se* but is rather a form of its expression: «[T]he distinction between Virtue and Justice becomes clear from what has been said: they are the same quality of mind, but their essence is different; what is displayed in relation to others is Justice, while simply being a disposition of a certain kind is Virtue» (Aristotle, 1926, p. 261)⁶.

Building on the earlier discussion, the Aristotelian concept of universal justice can be connected to the idea of “gathering at the table over a thing” as an expression of concern for the common world. It can also relate to the assumption of radical equality regarding the capacity for thinking, which serves as a core element of post-critical educational theory. “What we owe to each other”, then, becomes a recognition of individuals’ potentials and capabilities that enable the unconstrained freedom to study, initiate actions, inquire, and explore. Justice, in this sense, might be acknowledged as a

⁶ In contrast, partial justice concerns the share of benefits individuals should receive and the burdens they should bear – such as honor, material goods, and security. Common interpretations of Aristotle’s theory of justice often emphasize partial justice, particularly in relation to the concepts of justice and reciprocity, as well as Aristotle’s views on distributive and corrective justice (see Johnston, 2011, pp. 63-89).

precondition for purely educational efforts to gather people around a common thing – «that is, something appearing in the world that is made available to a new generation» (Masschelein & Simons, 2013, p. 10). This egalitarian aspect of the axiomatic recognition of the equality of participants' capabilities in an educational situation, along with the conviction that disinterested ethical engagement forms the precondition of education, can be linked to the conceptualization of justice by Alain Badiou». According to Badiou, «justice, which is the theoretical name for an axiom of equality, necessarily refers to a wholly disinterested subjectivity (Badiou, 2006, p. 100). Nevertheless, this philosopher – an inspiring figure for the proponents of post-critical theory of education – relates his concept of justice to the ethical dimension of politics. For Badiou «politics worthy of being interrogated by philosophy under the idea of justice is one whose unique general axiom is: people think, people are capable of truth, adding that «it is the strictly egalitarian recognition of the capacity for truth» (Badiou, 2006, p.98)⁷. As with the concept of equality – in both Badiou's philosophy and post-critical pedagogy – justice is not treated as an empirical or sociological reality. Justice is not an empirical concept. The plane of reference for this concept is neither social structure nor phenomena relating to the distribution of power, the production of hierarchy, or domination. Nor is it tied to a political agenda or emancipatory aspiration. As Badiou asserts, «moreover, it has nothing to do with the social» (Badiou, 2006, p. 99). Like equality, justice has no objective meaning here and cannot be defined (Badiou, 2006, p. 99).

What seems to most strongly link Badiou's concept of justice, as it relates to his notion of politics that deals with truth, to post-critical perspective on education is the potential to view justice as an affirmation of the subject's capabilities. For Badiou this becomes especially relevant in situations of uncertainty, confrontation with the unknown, dissensus, and inconsistency. Such experiences often accompany young people as they navigate their way into the world. Within Badiou's perspective, justice refers specifically to situations where claims of truth within institutional discourses are suspended, where finalist strategies and intentional pedagogical aims are invalidated; where both the subject of politics, and a student confronting the mystery of the world as an object of love, discovers that «reality is not simply there, it does not simply exist: it must be sought out and won»⁸. This

⁷ I am referring here to "the political" in opposition to what Rancière describes as "police." What is at stake, then, is not state-driven politics and its agendas, but rather a «politics that touches on truths» (Badiou, 2006, p. 100).

⁸ This quote is commonly attributed to Paul Celan in popular online sources. However, despite thorough searching, I have not been able to pinpoint its exact origin. I was led to Paul Celan

imperative: «reality must be sought out and won» – leads us back to Hannah Arendt and her vision of education.

While many of the ideas or claims expressed in *The Crisis of Education* are open to debate, the notion of “seeking out and winning the world,” which I find already present within Arendt’s perspective, can be understood not only as an educational endeavor but also as an expression of justice. This justice emerges through the recognition of young people’s potential to contribute to the renewal of a shared world, but it also relates to the world as an object of love and care. As Arendt reminds us: «[education] should not strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world» (Arendt, 1993, p. 177).

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by Badiou himself, who wrote that this poet «provides us with the most precise image of ‘justice’ in the following poem» (Badiou, 2006, pp. 106-107), an excerpt of which reads: «Support yourself by inconsistencies (...); a world rushes up, this depends on you» (Celan, 1976, as cited in Badiou, 2006, pp. 106-107).

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