Post-critical Pedagogy and Social Justice. Thing Avoidance or Trust in the World

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Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between education, democracy, and social justice, challenging the dominant view that education should serve as an instrument for achieving political goals, including equity and inclusion. Drawing on post-critical educational theories, particularly the works of Hannah Arendt and Jacques Rancière, the authors argue that education is an autonomous, intergenerational practice centered on introducing newcomers to the common world, fostering love and care for it, and enabling its renewal. The instrumentalization of education for social justice, they contend, undermines its essence by prioritizing critique over affirmation and imposing anti-educational practices like censorship and stultification. Similarly, the article criticizes the conflation of democracy with social justice, emphasizing that democracy is rooted in radical equality and collective deliberation around shared concerns, rather than the rectification of historical injustices. Ultimately, the authors advocate for a "thing-centered" approach to education and democracy, grounded in trust in the world and its shared durability.
Keywords: Education; Democracy; Social Justice; Post-critical pedagogy; Trust in the World.

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Introduction

In this article we aim to make a contribution to the question how we should conceive of the relationship between education, democracy and social justice. We do this against a double background. First, we want to position ourselves within a timely debate in which a particular way of looking at this issue has become dominant, if not self-evident. Currently, it is as if it goes without saying that the sphere of education is the pivotal actor in explaining why our current societies don't live up to the expectations of excelling in democratic ethos and in providing inclusion and equal opportunities to all. At the same time it is also often automatically assumed that it is education which holds the key to solve these thorny and urgent societal challenges (cf. Zajda et al., 2006; Applebaum, 2010; OECD 2023). In this article we want to defend the uncommon claim that the relations between education, democratic politics and social justice are more complex than this imaginary assumes, i.e. that education – although intrinsically connected with the democratic way of life – cannot be conceived of in terms of an instrument to achieve political ends, including the aim of social justice. This is to say, we run the risk of throwing overboard the most valuable dimensions of education when we turn it into a vehicle for named political aims. Of course, the point of view we defend is rooted in a particular understanding of what education is, and what it is not. This leads us to a second background to our argument that we want to set out right from the beginning of this article: we will adhere here to a post-critical understanding of education (Hodgson et al., 2017) that regards it as an autotelic human practice which takes place at the meeting point between the older generation, newcomers to the world, and the world itself. Education, then, is an intergenerational endeavour of making young people attentive to the world, so that they start caring for it in their own, ever new manner. What is at stake in education is, thus, in essence the introduction of the newcomers into the common world we all share, so as to warrant its continuation as well as it being renewed by the new generation (Arendt, 1961).

We will start our reflections with a most actual and crucial illustration, to which we will come back throughout our reasoning in this text. It regards a clear case of how in an educational context, out of the best political motives, the possibility of jointly studying the world, and hence of sharing one and the same world, is made impossible. More exactly, we want to discuss an illustration of a form of censorship that, in our view, very tellingly shows why education (but also democracy itself) cannot be regarded as essentially aimed at achieving social justice. This case also shows that a consequential application of such a political logic in the realm of education simply entails

the disappearance of education. After introducing and discussing this example, we then separately unpack our claims and go deeper, first, into the issue of social justice and, then, into the question of education and democracy, showing that at an ontological level both democracy and education assume a thing-centred orientation (*Umgang*), whereas social justice at an existential plane results in thing-avoidance.

Emptying out the museum as a questionable ontological operation

To start our argument, we refer to an event one of the authors witnessed when recently paying a visit to the Chicago History Museum. In the first section which details the period prior to the occupation of Illinois by the European conquerors, a showcase was to be found where clearly an object that had been there before was removed. Most probably, because it no longer stands the test of postcolonial sensitivities. To replace it a public notice was put in the empty showcase, signalling:

> As part of the ongoing redesign of this exhibition and ongoing collections research, we have discovered that some objects were not appropriate for display and [these] have been removed from view from further research and consultation with indigenous communities.

One might wonder why the museum curator has decided to put this message rather than just to take away whatever object was there to be seen in the showcase. One could speculate whether this is above all a case of virtue signalling and political correctness. The real meaning of what happened here is then that those responsible for the museum collection want to show to what extent they are in line with the current political order and that they seem to be proud of it. However, our point here is not to delve into the deeper intentions of the museum management. What we do want to point out is that what happened here is far from innocent and that it comes with profound ontological implications, i.e. with consequences for what we can and cannot experience as real and for what it means to have a world in common.

We take our cue here from the work of Jacques Rancière (2004), who would define such an operation as a particular *distribution* or, more to the point here, a *redistribution of the sensible*. For Rancière, in any existing society, there exists a *police order* which guarantees societal cohesion and prosperity by installing a particular regime of what people can say and what not, what they can see and hear and what not, etc. As such, societal order goes hand in hand with a definition of what counts as real and what is simply

inexistent. For instance, that what certain groups of excluded people have to say is – literally – sensed as noise – not real speech and hence to be disregarded (Rancière, 1999, p.22). Societal order is always dependent upon a basic division between what is perceivable and what is not. Social transformation, therefore, is always predicated upon shifts in this regime of the sensible, e.g. oppressed groups of people succeeding in having their voice heard. To a certain and not unimportant extent social change is only possible thanks to a reordering of the aesthetical realm. Moreover, what Rancière implies is that we have to understand the (re)distribution of the sensible in ontological terms (see Vlieghe and Zamojski, in press): this operation is all about the decision on what counts as real, and what not, and hence what belongs and what does not belong to the world.

In the context of museum education, Rancière's powerful framework is mostly used to reflect the emancipatory potential of amending existing collections and exhibitions according to new political sensitivities (e.g. Toria-Kelly, 2017). It is then argued that traditional museum settings have been for centuries a source of fierce exclusion and oppression *because* they are particular temporal, spatial and architectural constellations that govern the experience of reality of those who visit them. It is argued, for instance, that the items on display testify to an exclusionist euro- and phallocentric worldview or stories are told in such a way that only the views of the conquerors is present. Crucially, the visitors can't be blamed for their ignorance or for the way in which their visit contributes to existing oppression, precisely *because* the dominant distribution of the sensible is – understandably – taken for granted. Hence, we can only realize more social justice, inclusion and equity by redistributing the sensible in a more inclusive manner, so that new reality can see the light of day: as from then the excluded become part of our world too.

However, in the example we gave at the beginning of this text, Rancière's (2004) framework points in an altogether different direction. What is at stake here is not so much a widening of reality as a closing down. Seen from this perspective, the logical consequence of the operation of censorship in question would be that a museum that is completely endorsing social justice requirements is actually a museum where all the items on display have been removed – a completely empty museum. After all, it is easily imaginable that for every item in a museum someone can feel hurt, vexed or unsettled for good reasons and therefore that it needs to be regarded as "not appropriate for display", to use the words of the curator of the Chicago History Museum. Or even stronger: is there any innocent exhibit? Can one point to, or even imagine an artifact displayed in a museum that would not be in any way connected to the history of oppression, marginalisation, enslavement, war,

genocide, pollution of the natural environment, climate crisis, etc.? In that sense choosing to remove one item but leaving all the others is placing one form of suffering above the others – and hence not really a neutral operation. Censorship is not only not innocent, but also, when understood as an ontological operation of (re)distributing the sensible, comes essentially down to defining what our common world is. The risk here is that we end up with a very poor world (or no common world whatsoever), and one that is not desirable for both educational *and* political reasons. In what follows we want to substantiate why we believe this to be the case. In the next section we zoom in on the implications this ontological operation has for the sphere of education. It is evident that the removal of objects from display comes with the impossibility to study them together. The fundamental educational gesture of showing newcomers particular aspects of the world we share, so that they can make up their mind about it, and hence, can go on with it in their way, is seriously imperilled, if not threatened per se. When it is decided that certain things cannot be studied, this is an outright anti-educational gesture. And when precise limits are set to what counts as being part of our world, the possible directions in which our world could be renewed are heavily curtailed.

After this, we look at the political implications, and more exactly the jeopardizing effects this ontological operation has on democracy itself. Although, as will become clear, in our view education and politics should be neatly separated as profoundly different spheres of life, they have nevertheless in common that they both get seriously threatened when a social justice agenda starts to be imposed on them. By saying this we want to problematize the today very popular idea that both education and politics should be understood in terms of promoting – or not – more equity and inclusion.

Education for or about social justice?

There are two reasons why we hold to the, at first sight probably outlandish claim, that education and the desire for social justice should not be confused. One reason is provided by Hannah Arendt's (1961) conception of education in her seminal essay on the *Crisis in Education*, the other by Rancière's (1991) own account of education in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Both authors form the backbone of post-critical educational theories, since each developed a conceptual apparatus allowing for understanding education from within, i.e. as an autonomous sphere of human life, and not a set of psycho-social processes functional to politics. Hence, both Arendt and

Rancière offer us a powerful vocabulary for understanding why there are excellent educational reasons for not letting enter social justice agendas in the realms of educating the new generation.

Arendt is not in the first place an educational scholar, but a political theorist. Nevertheless, her interest in education is driven by her intuition that the spheres of education and the one of politics are two separate domains of living together, each predicated on a different logic of how to relate to ourselves, others and the world – which we will call here, using a Heideggerian (1962) phraseology, *Umgang*. Democratic *Umgang*, then, is the way in which adults gather to deal with issues that defy our life in common – aspects of the world that need to be ameliorated or rectified. Exclusion and inequity are examples that come to mind. This kind of (political) *Umgang* is an answer to what is wrong in the world, so as to set straight what we find undesirable as a collective. Therefore we need to come together (e.g. in parliament) around the part of the world that is put into question, so as to be able to have our say and to be informed and changed by what others have to say. The logic at work here is one of radical equality (everyone has a say and no voice is privileged over any other – everyone counts as one). The modus operandi of this logic is that we do more than just sharing opinions, rather: in democratic politics people literally gather around some-*thing*, so that they are constantly aware that what is at stake is not just individual opinions, desires, and private interests, but a world – and things within it – we share. Democratic *Umgang*, in this view, is always a question of 'commonizing' (Vlieghe and Zamojski 2022). The aim behind this particular form of *Umgang* is to change the world for the better.

If we think about it in these terms, it becomes clear why, for instance, the sphere of democratic politics is fundamentally different from the economical sphere, and moreover, why both spheres should be clearly shut off from one another (as economy makes private interests enter the scene which are antithetical to the political logic). The same, Arendt argues, applies to the spheres of politics and education: they are predicated on mutually exclusive logics and the borders between them should be defended in order to let politics be politics and education be education. This notwithstanding, there are important similarities between forms of *Umgang* at work in both spheres, i.e. practices and gestures they share. For instance, both are based on the firm believe that there is one world we share with each other and that there is no necessity in how things are. Therefore both involve gathering people around a shared thing (see Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2022). We will come back to this point in the next section. However, here we need to stress that there exists a typically *educational* way of commonizing that is markedly different from a political one. This is because in the educational sphere we deal with relations

not between equal political actors, but between the generations, who are by definition not equal. Not inequal in a political sense, but in the meaning that one generation has already been living in a world, has contributed to its continuation (or has refused to do so) and hence has a responsibility vis-à-vis it, whereas the other generation first arrives in this world as complete newcomers.

It is therefore the particularly *educational* responsibility of the old generation to welcome these newcomers (rather than leave them to their own devices), to organize infrastructural and temporal conditions where they can develop attention for, and interest in this world (arrangements we call schools), and most importantly, to try and show what we deem to be worthwhile in it (music, history, woodcraft, cooking, spelling and grammar, etc.) and why we believe this to be the case. Education is essentially a matter of showing and sharing love for the world. It is thus a matter of affirmation rather than critique (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019). Opposed to the logic constitutive of political *Umgang*, the starting point is not that there is something wrong with the world, but rather that there is something good and worth preserving. Without undertaking the effort of introducing newcomers to our world and of showing what is so interesting and fascinating about music, history, woodcraft, etc. the world would simply wither away. However, education is not only about the world's continuity, but also about its potential rejuvenation. Newcomers get to know the world not because of the attempt to freeze it in the way it currently is – which is as lethal as its sounds. Rather, knowing the world always poses a question: what would you do with it now? How would you continue? How will you go on with the world, care for it – always implying that every continuation is possible only through new beginnings? The world can only be renewed, and it is up to the new generation to invent their unique ways to begin anew with the world. The paradoxical challenge of educational *Umgang* is thus that we pass on an existing world, but in such a way that the next generation can start anew with it, maybe in directions that we cannot foresee and don't like.

For this to be possible, newcomers must be allowed to study the things we offer them for their own sake: mathematics just for the sake of what mathematics demands of us, cooking techniques because they are engrossing, history because understanding the past is enchanting and thus worthwhile in and of itself. When education is made subservient to a political goal, no matter how commendable that goal would be, its essence gets destroyed. It is then no longer about studying the world together, but about installing particular qualities in children. In this case, what is at stake is not the common world and the possibility of a new future, but the realization of a dreamed better future in which for instance our children, when grown up,

behave according to set ideals of civility or save the planet from impending ecological disaster. This might, for instance, involve that we give up the study of long begone eras as no longer relevant in our day and age, or turning mathematics into an applied science for securing solutions to global warming. Typically, so Arendt (1962) would add, this instrumentalization of education regards political goals that the elder generation was not able to realize themselves, and in that sense the politicization of education testifies to political irresponsibility: issues which we couldn't resolve ourselves are passed on as tasks for the newcomers to fulfil, meanwhile robbing them of their own force of newness and their right to decide about the future (both their own future, and the future of the common world).

In that sense education and politics for social justice don't go together at all. Or at least not in the sense we usually think. When education is used as an instrument for realizing more equity and inclusion, we start from what is wrong with the world instead of first giving newcomers a chance to develop interest in and attention for the world and to start loving and caring this world. Critique takes over affirmation. We then simply force an ideal of a better world upon them in the hope that they will solve our unresolved political and societal issues. The possibility to study and renew the world is then completely closed off.

All this, however, is not to say that there is no possible relation between education and politics. The whole point is that one can also think of this relation from the point of view of educational logic itself. More exactly, we want to argue that the fact that education should not be a means for achieving social justice does not at all preclude the possibility that democracy and social justice could become themselves interesting things of study (keeping in mind that as studiers we can develop fascination and even love for politically undesirable phenomena, in the same way that we can love to study wars and coronaviruses while understanding that a world without these phenomena is, obviously, preferable). This is what sets apart *political education*, or rather: *politicized education*, from *education about politics*. That there exist various ways of organizing political *Umgang* (democracy being one of these) and how they work (by means of inclusion and exclusion for instance) can become the object of a joint inquiry of the older and the new generation when they meet around particular subject matters. It is then to students as newcomers to make up *their* mind about these after carefully studying them first. To return to the example of the emptied museum, we see the opposite happening here: instead of offering students visiting the museum the opportunity to actually investigate whatever was put in the showcase, someone closes them off from the world and refuses them the

opportunity to form their ideas about it, arguably out of the best, but highly anti-educational intentions.

Having said this, we want to move over to the second reason why we problematize the all too simple functionalist understanding of education as a bringer of equity and inclusion. Here we refer to Rancière's (1991) insight that equality can never be a goal to be achieved through education, but at most a starting point. With this he means that equality relates to a basic attitude teachers start from when dealing with the new generation. More than often are we inclined to assume that educators need to explain things for students who are not able to think for themselves and to study the world. Hence, we regard it as our pedagogical task to think in their place, i.e. to liberate them from their ignorance and bondage by systematically leading them towards the same level of intelligence we already have achieved. This attitude leads to, as Rancière shows, positioning equality as something we infinitely approximate but never achieve, and by doing this we reinstall *hic et nunc* inequality as it is always the one who is already emancipated who has to decide whether or not the gap between ignorance and enlightenment has been bridged. Over and against this, a truly educational form of *Umgang* with our students is to fully assume that there is only one intelligence, one capacity for making sense of the world, to investigate it and to express our ideas about it, and that we all share this capacity. This, of course, is not to say that everyone also spontaneously makes use of this capacity, as we might very easily not be attentive or interested in the thing of study. It is precisely for this reason that teachers are needed. It is their task to try and put students' intelligence at work, for instance by sharing their own love for things in the world. By showing why history matters or why woodcraft is so compelling – in the belief that others can begin finding these phenomena equally important. Only the teacher who acts under this belief is truly emancipating, whereas the one starting from the assumption of inequality (even out of the best of intentions and with a deserving pedagogical ideal in mind) is in fact stultifying.

The last thing clearly happens in the case we started from: the visitors to the museum are not allowed to study all of the history of Chicago because someone else has decided for them that it is not 'appropriate' to do so. In the name of social justice they are protected from the harm that might come to them. The assumption behind this operation is a deep (paternalistic) split: between, on the one hand those who have superior insight and who understand what is harmful and what not and, on the other hand, those who are not ready to deal with the study material and who must be saved by other and more intelligent people than they themselves. In that sense a logic of stultification is at work, which makes study for the sake of study, and hence

a genuinely educational relation to the world impossible. Again, what might happen in the future is narrowed down and strictly controlled by a set police order in the name of social justice.

On a more general level, we want to stress, once more, that there is a significant difference between *social justice education* on the one hand and *education about social justice* on the other hand. The first implies that we conceive of education as an instrument for fostering (more) social justice. What we have argued for with Rancière is that in this case instrumentalization inevitably comes with the antipedagogical division between those with superior reasoning power and those who (momentarily) lack it. It is only when we make social justice itself into an object of study that we can work on the basis of an assumption of equality of intelligences. Only then we educate on the basis of the assumption that all are able to investigate the matter and to form and to express coherently their own ideas about said matter. To be clear, social (in)justice is an important part of our shared world, and more exactly a phenomenon that could be interesting, if not fascinating, and that deserves to be the object of study. Contrary to this, as we argued, removing the item from the exhibition for the sake of social justice (i.e. so as not to offend someone and not to reproduce evil and suffering) is an antieducational gesture of stultification.

Thing avoidance or social justice against democracy (and education)

So far we argued that acting in the name of social justice is completely different from the logic constitutive of the sphere of education. Educational *Umgang*, i.e. the way we go about with the world and ourselves in the sphere of education, is threatened when social justice is imposed on it. This does not mean that education and social justice are absolutely isolated phenomena: in the political sphere, for instance, the (universal) right to have access to education is a matter of social justice and, as we have just shown, within the sphere of education social justice matters can become the subject of study. What we want to problematize, however, is the growing tendency of the political sphere to impose social justice aims on education, introducing antieducational practices of censorship and stultification.

In what follows we want to argue that the matter is actually even more complex and much more worrisome, because we will show that, opposed to what many would spontaneously believe, also democracy as such is a specific political arrangement that in essence is radically different from the ideal of striving for social justice.

Let us start by saying that there is no democracy without the axiom of equality, and that democratic deliberation can, and often does concern matters of social justice. However, we argue, democracy refers to a completely different constellation of ideas and ideals than social justice. As it will become clear, democracy was never about justice in terms of setting all the wrongs of the world straight again, but originated from the minimal and risky idea of justice derived from the logic of chance (cf. Rancière, 2001).

To start with, it should be acknowledged with Badiou (2005) that democracy is based on a particular idea of arithmetic equality, where everyone is *counted as one*, regardless of their identities, biography, status, race, gender, etc. Democracy fundamentally cuts off or suspends the existing power relations, oppression, marginalisation, status games, etc., as well as the past events that have led to the current status quo. All this does not matter when it comes to a vote: regardless of who you are, the ordeals you went through, what kind of sorrows, injustices, oppression and enslavement you experienced, or what immense power and richness you gathered – every vote counts exactly as one. This arithmetic principle regards a very modest, but at the same time most radical form of equality. There is nothing in democracy itself that holds the promise that there will be no more oppression or marginalisation, or that one day power relations and socio-economic inequalities would disappear. Instead, democracy is a very minimal and formal arrangement that nevertheless comes with a radical cut, which consists of systematically or institutionally (and legally) making distinctions in societal positions inoperative.

That democracy is fundamentally about suspending social identity markers is also clear when we consider its very historical origins, i.e. when we look at the way the ancient Athenian polis was organised. It is usually overlooked that Athenians did not know representative democracy and that they did not elect their officials, but that they organised a lottery to decide who temporarily held political power (Hansen, 2021; Ober, 2017). Although we intuitively tend to assume that democracy and elections go hand in hand, to the Athenians elections were completely foreign. This is – arguably – because for them it was obvious that the more erudite, rich, or influential in any other sense would have a bigger chance to be elected, and this would (in turn) again reinstall aristocracy (i.e. inequality) (cf. Van Reybrouck, 2016). Drawing names out of a hat is obviously more risky (in that someone completely incompetent could become co-responsible for the polis), but by doing this one simultaneously installs radical equality, suspends all the differences between citizens, and counts everyone as one (again). Also, one puts emphasis on the legal order, the procedures, and the citizenship of many,

rather than on particular persons' extraordinary qualities. Hence, in its incipient form democracy is not fair – it is a matter of organizing pure chance.

This is not to say that in Athenian democracy voting was inexistent. However, and crucially, voting was not about – as it is in our democratic societies – a matter of electing representatives to form legislative power that votes in our place. Instead, voting was a matter of the gathered people on the agora, to collectively decide on the laws that keep the Athenian city together, as we already pointed out with the help of the work of Hannah Arendt (1958). Voting was not about appointing officials, but about coming to concerted decisions regarding a particular issue being under deliberation. Therefore, democratic politics, the way it existed at its origins, is to be seen as a particular arrangement that enables people to deal with the world collectively, a form of *Umgang*, where people gather around some-*thing* they consider important for all, i.e. a matter that goes beyond their private interests (like whether to declare a war, or to build a new gate to the city). They gather around it and try to come to terms with the matter at hand together, i.e. they try to gain possibly the most exhaustive understanding of it, in order to arrive at a decision on living well together in relation to this thing, i.e. to arrive at a decision about the polis. As we argued elsewhere (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2022) this is precisely why democratic *Umgang* requires teacherly gestures and involves the emergence of a studious public, connecting the spheres of education and politics in a non-instrumental way at an ontological plane.

Adding to this, Adrianna Cavarero (2021), in her insightful study on Arendt's thought, notes that participating in this collective effort comes with 'happiness' (pp. 31-41). Democratic deliberation, which always entails that we study together *a thing that gathers and divides us* (Latour 2005) and work out a joint decision about it, is the origin of joy and fulfilment, even though the acts of deliberation may involve agonism, pain and frustration (cf. Cavarero, 2021, pp. 12-14). Democratic deliberation brings public happiness, also because it requires that people are free to speak out and challenge their own convictions, that people are open to have their experiences (sometimes painfully) challenged by other's people insights, etc. Only then, gathering and discussing the matter at hand, something can change about how we understand the deliberated matter, and is it possible that our capabilities to make a right decision about it are improved. In other words, democratic deliberation makes no sense if interlocutors do not acknowledge and expose themselves to the possibility of a genuine transformation. Engaging in such a deliberation involves a risk of being changed and requires us to accept that we all can be changed, that our convictions (regardless of how much we are attached to them) are by nature

particular (not-absolute, not-universal), i.e. in need of other particular insights that put light on the side of the matter that is still hidden from our own sight.

Hence, taming this transformative potentiality of democratic deliberation by taking a particular issue out of public sight for the sake of social justice is – not only antieducational (as we argued above) – but also essentially antidemocratic. This is because it is then *a priori* assumed that some insights count more than others, and that, therefore, some people are allowed to decide for others which issues will not be considered as suitable for public deliberation. All this dovetails with the currently dominant political discourse which holds that suspending social identity markers is either impossible and/or undesirable (as it is believed that we have the obligation to point out how these markers are at the basis of the unfair and oppressive social status quo).

Therefore, according to this dominant view, the radical arithmetic equality that, as we argued, lies at the heart of democracy, should be refuted. This means that people are not counted as one. Out of the best of intentions, a new form of inequality is introduced – this time (it is claimed) a just inequality: some people count more than others, precisely because they are (or were) marginalised, oppressed, enslaved, and we need to hear their voices more than others, i.e. we need to take care of their feelings more than others, in order to make the balance even again. To be clear, we don't want to discuss here whether this ideal is a justified or a wrong one – we just want to make the observation that this dominant view is lethal to democracy, as much as it is for education.

Focusing exclusively on social justice, universalising its logic, and elevating this discourse to a hegemonic ideal that comes to rule every sphere of our lives is dangerous. Well-meant as it might be, this attitude makes us avoid matters that carry with them the suffering of the oppressed and marginalised. As such, we are no longer exposed to certain things (such as the museum piece that was removed), and this means in ontological terms that we are locked away in a limited world ordered by what makes sense to the current police order in the name of social justice.[1]

[1] It is no coincidence to us that this view has received so much traction in a time of pervasive digitization, e.g. *in the form of* personalized *news-feeds* that only show us things tailored to our already existing and well recognized interests and preferences, or AI algorithms generating texts with in-built political correctness so that nobody gets hurt, shocked, or – for that matter – challenged in their worldview. In other words, the logic of social justice seems more aligned with the digital sphere than with democracy or education (see Vlieghe and Zamojski, in press).

Conclusion: a matter of trust in the world

What we said so far boils down to the fact that a view that puts social justice in the centre comes with thing-avoidance and focuses all attention on the social markers of our (supposedly) indisposable identities (i.e. identities we cannot get rid of). This view replaces the world for personal opinions we have about the world. Wherever we go, whatever we do, we always take these markers with us, and they determine who we are, what we are able to, what we are allowed to do and to say, and how much our voice counts. In order to bring back justice we now need to value more voices of people that are and/or were marginalised, oppressed and enslaved in the past – their voices have to count for more than the voices of people with markers of identity recognized as privileged. There is no longer a sphere in human life where our identities can be suspended and radical arithmetical equality can be established. Therefore, there are certain things, issues and matters that can no longer become *public* things: as they cause harm, suffering and the oppression, they should be taken out of our sight.

Our claim is that at an ontological level this view opposes the logics of education and of democracy. Despite the fundamental differences between both, education and democratic politics have in common that they are essentially thing-centred, as they involve practices of gathering around a matter that is collectively studied. In other words, there is a thing, both in democracy and education, that is recognized as important and in that sense: potentially interesting to all gathered people (regardless of who they are). And exactly, what is of importance is the thing itself and not the gathered people. This is to say that all are invited to study this thing together and to contribute to its widening understanding. In the case of democracy, within this deliberation no voice can be privileged a priori, since all are rendered as essentially particular. Hence, everyone counts as one: radical arithmetic equality is installed. In the case of education, this equality is of a different nature, and stems from the fact that over and against a thing we are all rendered students (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019).

Given that education and democracy share practices of gathering a public around a thing to study it collectively as the backbone of their otherwise different *Umgänge*, these practices bring about a particular confidence in the world. This is what Martin Wagenschein (1956) remarkably grasped with the German term *Weltvertrauen*. The logic of thing-avoidance starts from and reproduces a fundamental distrust in the world as dangerous, evil, unjust and potentially harmful.

A specifically post-critical way of dealing with democracy, social justice and education consists of overcoming distrust for the world and hence paying collectively attention to things so that we have a world held in common. As Mario Di Paolantonio notes:

> At issue [in democracy] is a thinking sparked from what calls us to *sense together* the worth of *sustaining something temporally durable* [...] that, in turn, offers possibilities for enduring and even defeating the senseless brutality of *kratos* [i.e. the possibility inherent in democracy to degenerate into mere governance and violence – added by authors]. Such a thinking concerns itself with tending to those worldly things that with forethought we *pledge* to cherish and sustain in common, and which have sense and worth because, in outlasting one's own brief turn on earth, they offer something more than those surges of violence [i.e. kratos, blind governance – added by authors] meant to confirm our meaninglessness, fleetingness and destituteness. Because democracy invites us to appear and to count ourselves as accountable in *a world made durable with others* (a world built so that we may in turn make sense together, and not just fleeting noises) it necessitates thinking of ourselves as being temporarily bound to one another, as being capable of *making and keeping promises* amid the uncertainty of what is 'to come' [a-venir]. (28-29, italics in original)

For democracy to flourish "the possibility of receiving and 'passing on' to one another" (29) is a crucial condition. Democracy has a temporal dimension which is structured by passing on and being collectively concerned about some-thing. The common concern for *things* over the generations (i.e. public *heritage*) makes politics into *democratic* politics. Therefore, both education and democracy refer to the durability of the world which in itself is something one can rely on. In that sense, engaging in educational practices and practices of democratic politics builds *trust in the world*, a sense of being at home in the world - a home we all care about. As we have shown in this article, the dominant understanding of social justice departs from distrust in the world involving thing-avoidance and leading towards world destruction, not to the world's durability. That is why the choice between thing-avoidance and *trust in the world* is today crucial.

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