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Democracy, art and education: democratic learning in artistic contexts

Introduction
This paper constructs a network of philosophical connections amongst democracy, art and education to offer new suggestions for how artistic contexts can be approached as relevant sites for democratic education, both in terms of research and practice. It offers an alternative to the instrumentalist perspectives which have characterised discussions of democratic education as well as discussions of the contributions of art and art education to politics. Accordingly, the paper rejects not only a narrow understanding of citizenship education as a means of preparing young people for their future participation in a democracy (Advisory report on citizenship, 1998:16) but also the equally narrow characterisation of the arts – and their application in educational settings – as tools for achieving political ends such as social and economic cohesion (Kinder & Harland, 2004; Karkou & Glasman, 2004). Such instrumentalist understandings of citizenship have been criticised from a variety of perspectives (Osler & Starkey, 2004; Faulks, 2002; Biesta & Lawy, 2006) as have such approaches to art, education and politics (Buckingham & Jones, 2001; Hall & Thompson 2007; Brighton, 2003)

Aware of these critiques, and in a departure from instrumentalist approaches, this paper turns to philosophical discussions of democracy, art and education to explore an alternative understanding of the connections amongst them. The development of this alternative is based on Mouffe's political theory, the contributions of Ranciere to the philosophy of politics and aesthetics and Biesta's educational philosophy, specifically his concept of democratic learning. The paper is divided into four parts. Firstly, an examination of the political philosophy of Mouffe and Ranciere is used to reconstruct an understanding of democracy not as a form of government or society (as it is often conceived) but as an active and disruptive movement that is embodied in a specific understanding of political action. In the second section, Ranciere's discussions of politics and aesthetics are employed to establish a tentative link between art practice and this active and disruptive conception of democracy. The third section details Biesta's understanding of democratic learning as a reflective education based on the opportunities for democratic action encountered in people's everyday lives. The fourth section discusses the role of subjectivity in each of these arguments to offer an alternative understanding of the connections amongst democracy, art and
education. The paper concludes with some tentative suggestions as to how this understanding might impact on research and practice in art and democratic education. Specifically, I will argue that the contributions of Mouffe, Ranciere and Biesta offer a way of constructing the connections amongst democracy, art and education at the philosophical level via a performative or action based understanding of subjectivity. This alternative understanding of the connections amongst the three fields has implications for research and practice in that it allows us to conceive of democratic learning as a reflective process based on instances of political and democratic subjectivity, which, because they have an aesthetic dimension, may occur in interesting and significant ways within the arts.

Conflict and contingency at the heart of politics – democracy as an active movement

The argument for an alternative conception of the relationship amongst democracy, art and education advanced in this paper rests on an understanding of democracy as a fluid, dynamic movement, rather than a static form of society or government as it is often understood in mainstream political theory. Mouffe’s insistence on conflict and dissensus at the heart of politics allows us to begin to construct such an understanding by highlighting the contingency of the foundations upon which democracy rests. For Mouffe, the inevitability of conflict over very different projects for the government of a community necessitates its positive inclusion within a democratic framework. Indeed, she advocates, ‘the creation of a vibrant, “agonistic” public sphere of contestation, where different hegemonic political projects can be confronted’ (2005: 3). Mouffe stresses that this contestation should include dissensus over the interpretation of the very concepts of liberty and equality that are central to democracy (2005:121). However, Mouffe also insists that while the interpretations of liberty and equality are many and may vary legitimately from one cultural context to another (2005: 126), a commitment to these values remains essential to any practice of democratic politics. In her defence of a variety of conceptions of liberty and equality then, Mouffe hints at the contingency at the heart of democratic politics. But in her characterisation of these concepts as ‘ethico-political’ (2005:121), she retains for them a sense of universality and stability.

This ambiguity seems to stem from an institutional approach to democracy. Because Mouffe is attempting to provide a rationale for the practice of a pluralistic and ‘agonistic’ democratic politics, she needs to set some ground rules, to establish what is legitimate within such a politics and what is not. For Mouffe, these ground rules take the form of a commitment to the values of liberty and equality, however various their interpretations. Mouffe claims that such a commitment is qualitatively different from the commitment of liberals to these values, who see in them a universal, rational morality; ‘I claim that the drawing of a frontier between the legitimate and the illegitimate is always a political decision, and that it should therefore always remain open to contestation.’ (2005: 121).
For Mouffe then, liberty and equality are not the universal and unchanging foundations of
democracy that form the basis of liberal politics but are themselves subject to challenge and
reinterpretation. However, since Mouffe would exclude from her politics those who are not already
committed to liberty and equality in some form, it is difficult to see how (and where) those
foundations can ever be contested. Because she is looking from inside a certain understanding of
democracy as an institution she offers only a partial account of the instability at the heart of
democratic politics. One way of approaching this dilemma is to reject the understanding of
democracy as an institution or a form of government and it is here that Ranciere's philosophy is
useful.

Ranciere's philosophy escapes the static nature often implicitly attributed to democracy when we
speak of 'democratic nations', 'democratic societies' or even simply 'democracies', by offering
instead a view of democracy as a disruptive movement. As with Mouffe, conflict and dissensus are
central to Ranciere's understanding of democracy but he frames this dissensus in a way that
allows for a more radical interpretation of the contingency and instability of democracy. Ranciere's
*Hatred of Democracy* (2006) offers a critique of the hatred that democracy has inspired since its
inception in ancient Greece. Here, Ranciere describes democracy as the breaking of the link
between an entitlement to govern and the 'natural' differences present in society. In contrast to a
logic which bases a person's suitability to govern on the 'natural' attributes of birth, wealth or ability,
the logic of democracy insists upon the equal entitlement of anyone and everyone to share in the
government of a community. The hatred and fear that the appearance of this egalitarian logic
inspired is beautifully captured in a reference to Plato, who denounces democracy as the regime that,

'overturns all the relations that structure human society: its governors have the
demeanour of the governed and the governed the demeanour of governors; women
are the equals of men; fathers accustom themselves to treating their sons as equals;
the foreigner and the immigrant are the equals of citizens; the schoolmaster fears and
flatters the pupils who, in turn, make fun of him; the young are the equals of the old
and the old imitate the young; even the beasts are free and the horses and asses,
conscious of their dignity, knock over anyone who does not yield to them in the street.'
(Ranciere, 2006: 36)

Ranciere points out that by assimilating the relationship between animals and humans and sons
and fathers to the relationship between governors and governed, Plato is keen to represent the
governmental relation as natural and to reinforce the assumption that some are naturally destined
to rule while others are naturally destined to be ruled over (2006:38). It is this logic of a 'natural' government based on social differences that democracy disrupts. Ranciere claims that democracy continues to confront this logic of 'natural' government because the original democratic rupture opened up a public sphere, 'which is a sphere of encounters and conflicts between the two opposed logics of police and politics, of the natural government of social competences and the government of anyone and everyone.' (2006:55). Ranciere here writes of the conflict between democracy and the 'natural government of social competences' in a way that appears to use the terms synonymously with 'politics' and 'police' which feature both here and in his other works. Ranciere applies a very specific understanding of these words which is quite distinct from their general use in English. An analysis of these terms and their relationship to the concepts of democracy and the 'natural' government of social competences allows us to reconstruct some of the most important elements in Ranciere’s political philosophy.

One way of understanding the relationships amongst them would be to say that for Ranciere, democracy is the logic of equality embodied in the practice of politics and that the 'natural government of social competences' which democracy confronts is the logic of inequality embodied in the police order. The police order rests on the idea that there is only one, pure principle of government, i.e. the principle of inequality based on differences within society, which determine who is entitled to govern and who is not. In this way it denies and suppresses the existence of equality (2006: 48). The police order is therefore an all encompassing distribution of the places within a community based on a single, inegalitarian logic in which some are destined for participation in the public sphere of government while others are relegated to the private sphere of domesticity or reproduction. One obvious example of this is the exclusion of women from public life and their relegation to the private sphere based on a natural distinction between men and women (Ranciere, 2006: 56).

Politics, by contrast, is the practice that reveals, by affirming the reality of equality, that there is never a single, pure principle of government (Ranciere, 2006:48). Politics achieves this by playing on the contradictions between public and private identities, between real equalities and real inequalities. In this way it generates, via a process of subjectification, supplementary, political subjects which exist in the interval between public and private identities. Politics therefore disrupts the police order by staging a dissensus over the very distribution of places between the public and the private sphere (Ranciere, 2006:61). Indeed these actions and the subjects they generate may be described as political because they bring into play a conflict over the distribution of places within a community upon which the logic of government rests and thus reveal the contingency of the police order. Ranciere refers to the example of Rosa Parks’ refusal to give up her seat on a bus and the boycott which followed it as part of the civil rights movement in the United States of
America to illustrate how this process occurs;

The young black woman of Montgomery, Alabama, who, one day in December 1955, decided to remain in her seat on the bus, which was not hers, in this way decided that she had, as a citizen of the United States, the rights she did not have as an inhabitant of a state that banned the use of such seats to individuals with one-sixteenth or more parts of 'non-Caucasian' blood. And the Blacks of Montgomery who, a propos of this conflict between a private person and a transportation company, decided to boycott the company, really acted politically, staging the double relation of exclusion and inclusion inscribed in the duality of the human being and the citizen.'

The crucial point here is that for Ranciere, the political subject cannot be reduced either to the equal citizen with rights enshrined in law, nor to the unequal human being stripped bare of those rights in daily experience. For Ranciere, it is not the case that a real inequality is concealed behind a façade of equality, as a Marxist reading might conclude (2006: 58). Rather, the political subject is supplementary to these two identities and only becomes subject through the political action of staging the contradiction between them. For Ranciere, politics is always about creating something new out of the tensions between two opposites, which can never be reduced to the real and the imaginary, the true and the false. Democracy for Ranciere is therefore not a simple revolution of equality over inequality but, by taking equality seriously, it stages the tensions and contradictions between the two in new and inventive ways (Ranciere, 2006: 61). Finally, politics, and its generation of new political subjects, leaves its trace in a reconfigured distribution of places between the public and the private sphere. In the case above, the trace of this political action can be seen in the inclusion of African Americans in the public sphere of American government. But, as political action demonstrates, the police order is contingent and its distribution of places will always be the subject of conflict between the disruptive, egalitarian logic of democracy and the stabilising, inegalitarian logic of a government based on social competences (Ranciere, 2006: 55).

Three important points about the nature of politics and democracy in Ranciere’s work need to be drawn here in order to see how they relate to art and education. The first is that for Ranciere, politics is the activity which generates political subjects and makes political subjectivity possible. Ranciere therefore holds a particular view of subjectivity that might be described as performative in that the political subject only exists, only becomes subject, through engaging in political action. Secondly, democracy is inseparable from this process, indeed we might say that the egalitarian logic of democracy is embodied in political action. For this reason democracy is a process of action and movement, or as Ranciere puts it, democracy has at its heart, 'the movement which
ceaselessly disrupts the distribution of the public and private, the political and the social' (2006:62). Finally, this disruptive movement is practiced through a political action which is playful, inventive and dramatic. Ranciere uses the metaphor of theatre, arguing that political action 'stages' the dissensus between two opposing logics and that 'the democratic process is a process of perpetual bringing into play, of invention of forms of subjectivities' (2006:62). The aesthetic dimension of political action that Ranciere hints at here provides one possible way of connecting this particular understanding of democracy to the arts. In the following section, the intimate relationship between politics and aesthetics in Ranciere’s work is explored further.

**Art and democracy**

In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Ranciere argues that there is an aesthetic configuration upon which the distribution of places within a community is founded. He describes this configuration as the 'distribution of the sensible' which is the 'aesthetics at the core of politics' (2004:12). He appears to be arguing that the disputed distribution of places between public and private upon which any logic of government rests and which is therefore the realm of politics itself has an aesthetic dimension. He explains the nature of this aesthetic dimension of the political perhaps most clearly when he states, 'Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of space and the possibilities of time.' (2004: 12). In terms of the connection between politics and art itself, Ranciere argues that the important thing is that the relationship is understood in this context of a distribution of the sensible in which forms of visibility and audibility are apportioned between people and practices, 'The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible' (2004:19).

This understanding of the connection between politics and aesthetics at a fundamental level, along with the aesthetic quality of political action alluded to earlier allows us to construct an argument for the possibility of political action and thus political subjectivity occurring within artistic practices. Zizek has developed a similar argument from Ranciere's work, arguing that Ranciere's specific understanding of politics and aesthetics leads to a view of aesthetic practices as 'not just secondary illustrations of an underlying ideological struggle, but the very terrain of this struggle' (Zizek, 2004: 77). Accordingly, he suggests that 'aesthetic phenomena' such as body piercing and performance art form part of a 'postmodern politics of resistance'. (Zizek, 2004: 79). Ranciere's discussions of politics and aesthetics and arguments that have been developed from them appear to lend support to the idea of an aesthetic dimension to political action and the possibility that the political subjectification in which democracy is embodied can take place in significant ways within the arts. In order to see how these tentative connections between democracy and art are relevant
to education, the following section discusses Biesta’s concept of democratic learning in educational philosophy.

**Democracy and education – democratic learning**

In *Beyond Learning*, Biesta argues that the question of human subjectivity has been central to education but in a new approach to democratic learning moves away from the instrumentalist and individualist conceptions of democracy and subjectivity that have dominated the modern educational project. Instead he proposes a democratic education founded on an action-based understanding of subjectivity. Biesta argues that the instrumentalist and individualist approaches to subjectivity found in modern education result from the influence of Kant's philosophy. Particularly influential has been Kant's identification of education as the only means through which to produce rational individuals capable of exercising independent judgement within democratic states. On such a view, subjectivity and the way in which the human subject is conceived becomes an integral part of our understanding of the aims and processes of education. Moreover, it presents education as a deeply individualistic and instrumentalist endeavour (Biesta, 2006: 33-6).

Biesta acknowledges a turn towards more social understandings of human subjectivity in the twentieth century through the work of philosophers and sociologists such as Dewey, Mead, Wittgenstein and Habermas. In such work, the approach to subjectivity might be described as inter subjective in that social interaction came to be seen as integral to the way in which human subjects develop. However, Biesta argues that such approaches remain concerned with the attempt to qualify the essence of humanity and with the question of how human subjects are produced (Biesta, 2006: 34-7). He finds in Dewey's more inter subjective understanding of democracy and education an approach that remains instrumentalist and somewhat individualist in its focus on the production of democratic subjects, albeit through social and experiential means (Biesta, 2006: 127-32). What Biesta suggests in order to overcome this instrumentalist and individualism is an entirely new approach to subjectivity, support for which he finds particularly in the work of Arendt.

Rejecting essentialist approaches to subjectivity, Biesta suggests that democratic education should focus not on what a human subject is, but on where individual human beings 'come into presence' and thus become subject (Biesta, 2006: 42-3). In terms of democratic subjectivity, he finds an answer to the question of where people come into presence in Arendt’s political understanding of the democratic subject. Biesta finds in her philosophy a new approach which conceives of subjectivity not as an attribute of individuals but rather as a quality of interaction. Crucially, this quality is only present in interaction when people are able to act authentically and have their actions acted upon in unexpected ways by others who are not like them. The quality of interaction
therefore is essential for the possibility of democratic subjectivity occurring. Because this is the case, some spaces and situations are more conducive to the possibility of democratic subjectivity than others (Biesta, 2006: 132-5). In terms of the potential of such an understanding of subjectivity to education, Biesta sees this in a democratic education which instead of attempting to produce democratic subjects, concerns itself with supporting the opportunities for democratic subjectivity that students experience in all aspects of their life. Allowing people to reflect on and learn from those opportunities - as well as from the times when such subjectivity has not been possible - becomes an important role for this new understanding of democratic education (Biesta, 2006: 137-45).

Discussion – the role of subjectivity in connecting democracy, art and education

Subjectivity plays a crucial role in the understanding of democracy presented in this paper. It is also significant in the connections between both politics and aesthetics and democracy and education that have been outlined. For this reason, subjectivity can provide the philosophical framework on which to construct a view of the relationship between democracy, art and education, which does not rely on the instrumentalist approach that has often been the lens through which the three are viewed together. The network of connections I outline below is a tentative effort to construct such a relationship.

From the discussion of Ranciere's political philosophy in this paper, we can conclude that politics in his view is a process of subjectification in which political subjects come into being through acting politically. I have argued that, based on Ranciere's work, democracy can be seen as the active, disruptive movement that is embodied in the practice of politics and that for Ranciere, this political action has a creative, playful and dramatic dimension which can be expressed in artistic metaphors. Furthermore, in Ranciere's view, politics and aesthetics enjoy an intimate relationship and Ranciere is able to write of a 'distribution of the sensible' which delineates the possibilities for a variety of practices within a community. Zizek has argued that Ranciere's view of the relationship between politics and aesthetics allows us to see artistic practices as important elements in contemporary political actions. In summary, Ranciere's view of politics (and therefore democracy) as the playful staging of contradictions that is also a process of subjectification creates a potential link between art and democracy that appears to be supported by his claim that politics has an aesthetics at its core. I have also suggested that if politics has an important aesthetic dimension then it is possible that the political subjectification in which democracy is embodied is likely to take place through practices that are also artistic. This suggestion is supported by Zizek's interpretation of Ranciere's work.
Ranciere’s understanding of political action as a process of subjectification may be described as a performative or action based view of subjectivity in that the subject of the action is constituted in, and only in, the action itself. A similar view of subjectivity is also central to Biesta's view of democratic subjectivity and therefore of democratic learning. Biesta has commented on the relevance of this specific understanding of subjectivity in Ranciere’s work to his own educational philosophy (Biesta, 2007). So Biesta's view of democratic subjectivity as a quality of interaction experienced (or not experienced) in everyday contexts and of democratic learning as a reflection on such opportunities (or the lack of them) is supported by Ranciere's understanding of democracy and politics. Finally, if democracy is embodied in the action that generates political subjectivity and if reflection upon opportunities for such subjectivity is seen as a crucial part of democratic learning, then the aesthetic dimension of this process of political subjectification means that the arts can be taken seriously as a site in which opportunities for democratic learning may occur. It is in this way that I want to suggest the three fields of democracy, art and education can be connected at a philosophical level.

Conclusion – implications for practice and research

While I have shown that it is possible to consider the arts as an important site of democratic learning based on very specific understanding of the relationship between democracy, art and education, it cannot be assumed that the arts are necessarily a generator of opportunities for democratic or political subjectivity and that such opportunities are happening in the arts all the time. Indeed, Ranciere argues that politics, by its very nature, only happens rarely or sporadically leaving its trace behind in the reconfigured police order it disrupts (Biesta, 2007). With these cautions in mind, I want to suggest some possible ways in which the perspective constructed in this paper could be relevant to practice in the arts and in democratic education as well as to research approaches in these areas.

In the area of art practice, it is possible to suggest that engaging in art practice can involve the kinds of opportunities for political and democratic subjectivity that support democratic learning. Through experimenting in the arts, young people may encounter opportunities to become politically and democratically subject through artistic practice. While the occurrence of such a process must be seen as unusual, it is nevertheless a possibility. Much more common might be the experience of engaging as an audience with art work in which the traces of political subjectivity might be perceived. Responding to and reflecting on such work could be a significant experience of becoming aware of democratic and political subjectivity. A third possibility is that through working with artists in an artistic environment, young people witness and experience first hand the kinds of experimental artistic activities and approaches to work that could lead to political action and thus generate political subjectivity. In terms of education, reflection on experiences of engaging in
artistic practices and working in artistic contexts could form an important part of democratic learning.

Viewing the connections between art, democracy and education in this light also has implications for research. Investigation into the democratic learning that follows from the everyday experiences of young people could involve a close look at the experiences of people engaging with art and the kinds of possibilities for democratic subjectivity that may occur in such a context. Exploring the role that such experiences play in the overall learning about democracy and one's place in the political fabric would be an important aspect of research into democratic learning based on the kind of understanding of the relationship between art, democracy and education advanced in this paper. To put it in terms taken from the philosophers whose work this paper employs, given the centrality of subjectivity to democratic learning, the experiences of young people engaging with art may be seen as a significant part of their education within a distribution of the sensible that is both given and yet always open to the creative and reconstitutive disruption of the political action that embodies democracy. Such processes merit investigation in the context of research into democratic learning.

References


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