

IN WHICH SENSE, IF ANY, IS EDUCATIONAL THEORY ‘POLITICAL’? A PRAGMATIST PERSPECTIVE

¿En qué sentido, si lo hubiera, es la teoría educativa «política»? Una perspectiva pragmatista

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ABSTRACT

This paper tackles the question of in which sense, if any, educational theory should be considered as ‘political’. From a pragmatist perspective it evaluates three meanings of the term: first, the political as an exception, such as Rancière’s interruption of the existing order, and second, the political as something that is always already given, such as in Derrida’s concept of iteration. Third, the paper turns towards Rorty’s plea for understanding philosophy as cultural politics, i.e., as intervention into the ongoing public discourse. It is argued that this third meaning of the term is better suited for understanding the political of educational theory as it is realistically modest and enables

to analyze the political effectiveness of educational theory. These considerations are framed by both a reflection on the very possibility of drawing distinctions between theory and politics as well as an outlook on possible consequences following from an understanding of educational theory as cultural politics. In the outlook, the paper asks why we can hardly see any publicly relevant educational theory and provides suggestions for a “caring critique”, a careful attitude towards our own researching practices, situations, and assemblies.

Keywords: educational theory; the political; metatheory; pragmatism; Richard Rorty; Jacques Rancière; Jacques Derrida.

RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda la cuestión de en qué sentido, si lo hubiera, la teoría educativa debe considerarse como «política». Desde una perspectiva pragmatista, analiza tres significados del término: primero, lo político como una excepción, como la interrupción del orden existente de Rancière, y segundo, lo político como algo que de por sí viene dado, como en el concepto de iteración de Derrida. En tercer lugar, el artículo se orienta hacia el alegato de Rorty para la interpretación de la filosofía como política cultural, esto es, como intervención en el discurso público en curso. Se ha argumentado que este tercer significado del término es más apropiado para interpretar lo político de la teoría educativa, ya que es un término moderado de forma realista y permite analizar la eficacia política de la teoría educativa. Estas consideraciones se enmarcan tanto en una reflexión sobre la propia posibilidad de esbozar distinciones entre teoría y política, como en una perspectiva sobre las posibles consecuencias derivadas de una interpretación de la teoría educativa como política cultural. Ante este panorama, el artículo cuestiona por qué apenas podemos ver alguna teoría educativa relevante públicamente y ofrece propuestas para una «crítica amable», una actitud cuidadosa hacia nuestras propias prácticas de investigación, situaciones y grupos.

Palabras clave: teoría educativa; lo político; metateoría; pragmatismo; Richard Rorty; Jacques Rancière; Jacques Derrida.

I am dubious about the relevance of philosophy to education,
for the same reason that I am dubious about the relevance
of philosophy to politics. (Rorty, 1990, p. 41)

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper explores a double unease: On the one hand, towards an understanding of educational theory as purely *scientific and thus apolitical* reflection, on the other hand towards an understanding of educational theory as *always already political* and thus runs the risk of staging its own practice of theorising as political activism. In contrast, this paper seeks a more realistic attitude towards our own educational theoretical activities by both offering differences between educational theory and politics and describing the possibilities of their political relevance.¹

I will argue that political relevance of educational theory is only a possibility and thus not an automatism: Not every educational theory is political – even if it claims this about itself and certainly not *by* its mere assertion. In this way, the paper aims at self-reflexively questioning the *status of educational theory with regard to its political relevance*. It thus does not deal with the political *within* educational theory but asks about the *political quality of educational theory itself*.

Evidently, 'educational theory' here does not refer to a closed system of propositions but needs to be understood as practice: precisely as what we educational theorists do. Insofar as this includes highly diverse practices such as writing, reading, presenting, lecturing, teaching, and many others, 'educational theory' in singular is a problematic term. However, if we assume that these practices are not carried out completely unconnected to each other, we could speak of educational theory as the arrangement of practices into bundles or constellations of practices (Schatzki, 2002, 2012). In this vein, this paper aims at engaging with theory as an *activity* (Karcher, & Rödel, 2021).²

1. This paper is a heavily reworked version of my contribution in German (Wortmann 2022a). I want to thank Anna-Lynn Ridderbusch, Christian Grabau, Hannah Klein, Jakob Himmelmann, and Markus Rieger-Ladich for discussing earlier versions of this paper. All translations to English were made by the author.

2. It would be worthwhile to examine the extent to which *certain* practices of educational theory evade the modes of description proposed in this text, or whether actors resist them in their locally situated activities. Insofar as this paper works with a high generalisation of 'educational theory', on the one hand, strictly speaking, one cannot expect to be able to make accurate statements for the entire bundle of practices 'educational theory'. But on the other hand, in order to reach beyond a "self-sufficient situationism" (Schmidt, & Volbers, 2011, p. 26), in which there is a danger of shying away from generalisations, the text's claim is to offer adequate descriptions at least for a large part of what we do when we say we do 'educational theory'. In this respect, it would not be more appropriate to speak of educational theories in the plural, as this would run the risk of referring to theoretical systems instead of focusing on the practicalities of educational theorising.

To answering the title question neither by saying that educational theory simply is *not* political, nor that it is *always already* political, this paper offers an alternative description of the relationship between educational theory and politics. The reason for the demand of conceptualizing educational theory not as always political is that otherwise we educational theorists should better become political theorists. The reason for the demand of conceptualizing educational theory not as never political is that otherwise we give up a great historical achievements of our discipline (Tröhler, 2003).

The question of in which sense our research activity is political becomes even more pressing if we consider, as Oelkers writes, that education is "the' politicised discipline par excellence. It participates in social debates, takes a position, and is therefore already entangled in political dualisms, so that it must decide where it stands and where it does not want to stand" (Oelkers, 2015, p. 37). Because of this political character of education, "a strategy is required to exert influence in *the public sphere, to determine the language* and not to let brain researchers or media philosophy get the better of it" (ibid., p. 43, emphasis added).

This paper raises the question of what can be understood by "political" if used as description for the activity of doing educational theory. It pursues the question with two distinctions. The first distinction (3) is between "politics" and the "political", which has become common in political theory. Here, the paper mainly focusses on the concepts of Jacques Rancière and Jacques Derrida. The second is Richard Rorty's distinction between "politics" and "cultural politics" (4). In both parts, I first introduce the distinction and then examine what calling educational theory political would mean in this sense. However, I begin with preliminary reflections on the status of these distinctions (2). Finally, I offer an outlook on possible consequences following from an understanding of educational theory as cultural politics (5).

2. THEORY AND POLITICS: ON THE STATUS OF DANGEROUS DISTINCTIONS

To introduce such a clear distinction between theory and politics implying theory not always being also political hardly seems en vogue at the moment. Therefore, I will start with a quote by Karl Mannheim, who in his seminal book "*Ideology and Utopia*" in 1929 wrote:

Political discussion possesses a character fundamentally different from academic discussion. It seeks not only to be in the right but also to demolish the basis of its opponent's social and intellectual existence. Political discussion, therefore, penetrates more profoundly into the existential foundation of thinking than the kind of discussion which thinks only in terms of a few selected "points of view" and considers only the "theoretical relevance" of an argument. (Mannheim, 1929/1972, p. 34)

At first, Mannheim's hierarchisation seems irritating. One might think that academic speech is more fundamental and deeper than mere political speech, but Mannheim conceives of the relationship the other way round: while political speech aims at the "existential foundation" and even "basis of existence" of the counterpart, academic speech "only" dwells on the surface of theory.

Furthermore, Mannheim's distinction is surprising in its strictness, since it is a "fundamental" difference. Fundamental differences - like fundamentalist argumentation in general - are alien to us today. "Anti-foundationalism" (Rorty, 2009) or "postfoundationalism" (Marchart, 2013) has become a broad consensus in the cultural and social sciences.³ The term 'postfoundationalism' expresses, on the one hand, that the rejection of any foundations can easily become fundamentalist itself, as well as, on the other hand, that foundations in the sense of foundational activities can hardly be dispensed with. When Butler, for example, speaks of "contingent foundations" (Butler, 1992) in this sense, she may well be tying in with Mannheim's concept of ideology. For it is only because, as Mannheim has shown, all knowledge and thinking, and thus also one's own, is necessarily conditioned by worldview and socialisation, that justification and foundation continue to be provided - it is just that the claims to ultimate justification of these operations have become untenable.

Reasons and distinctions must therefore be made plausible without resorting to conclusive foundations. The offensive affirmation of this contingency of one's own theorising also seems to me to be called for in political-democratic terms. After all, democracy could be defined as an attempt to institutionalise the groundlessness of its own political institutions. This critical self-reflexivity is already part of John Dewey's experimentalist pragmatism: in contrast to liberal positions such as those of John Stuart Mill or Hannah Arendt, which draw the distinction between the private and the public theoretically or even ontologically, Dewey emphasises that this "line of demarcation [...] has to be discovered experimentally" (Dewey, 1927/2016, p. 107). For Dewey, this demarcation would only be possible basing on clearly determinable properties of state and individual. However, insofar as these are always in the process of development, they elude a purely analytical differentiation or even determination of relations. For Dewey, the negotiation of the public-political's boundaries is therefore self-reflexively left to the political-experimental processes, which always have to be communal-public.

In this experimentalist sense, I would like to validate the plausibility why educational theory should not be understood as political activity per se. In doing so, I agree with those who do not identify a fundamental, i.e., essentially principled, difference between theory and politics; nevertheless I would like to argue for the

3. A striking exception here might be economics.

advantages emphasising such a difference could bring - especially in political terms - and why framing the difference could cause problems.

The differentiations and problematisations proposed in the following can themselves be understood as an application that takes the controversial nature of social legitimation and the antagonistic constitution of the social into account. This does not mean, however, that it presupposes this ontologically - as, for example, Mouffe does with recourse to Heidegger - and takes it as an unquestionable starting point, since otherwise it would be self-contradictory.

I would like to clarify this positioning with regard to the connection between experimentalism understood in pragmatist terms and antagonism understood in hegemony theory by means of two quotations from Mouffe and Brecht. When Mouffe writes: "Society is permeated by contingency and *any* order is of an hegemonic nature, i.e. it is always the expression of power relations" (Mouffe, 2013, p. XI, emphasis added), then the contingent status of *one's own* conception of hegemony seems precisely not to be considered. Accordingly, Mouffe and Laclau are also attested "a problematic essentialisation of a political ontology conceived as conflictual" (Martinsen, 2019). If one now follows Mannheim again, who understands the "political conflict" as a "rationalized form of the struggle for social predominance" (Mannheim, 1929/1972, p. 35), one could concede that such an essentialisation as undertaken by Mouffe and Laclau is not necessarily problematic for a *political theory* - insofar as it could be concerned with the political only -, but for a *pedagogical* one, insofar as one is not prepared to let it completely merge into a theory about the political.

In contrast to Mouffe, Brecht does not presuppose political thinking, but contrasts it with the kind of thinking that must be escaped when he writes that "in order to avoid pure argumentation, [...] one must always keep in mind that one is always thinking in a state of struggle" (Brecht, 1967, pp. 176–177). In this regard, this essay presumes that the self-description of thinking as "*always being* in struggle" in the sense of an inevitable fact - or even, as with Mouffe, precondition - would not be *conducive to the struggle itself*. In order to be able to represent this position without self-contradiction, I must presuppose a beyond of the struggle from which this consideration of conduciveness can be made at all - which, however, is not necessarily Brecht's "pure argumentation", but can very well understand itself as always socially situated and acknowledged - that "one [...] dwells in the company and dependence of other perceivers and counsellors" (Brecht, 1967, p. 177). Without this precondition of the possibility of a beyond of hegemonic struggle, the following considerations will not be convincing.

3. FIRST DISTINCTION: POLITICS AND THE POLITICAL

3.1. *The distinction*

The first distinction I would like to discuss in terms of it being useful to answer the question of in which sense, if any, educational theory can be considered as political is that between 'politics' and 'the political'. This distinction, common in political theory and also used in educational theory,⁴ distinguishes *politics* (la politique, die Politik) as acting within political institutions from the *political* (le politique, das Politische) as going beyond these institutions or interrupting, challenging, transforming them. While the field of politics can be defined relatively precisely - diplomacy, party work or trade unions, for example - the specificity of the political is conceived in a highly contradictory way by different authors.

Despite all the heterogeneity in the determinations of the political, two tendencies can be identified, which Martinsen summarises under "everything is political" on the one hand and the "withdrawal" of the political" on the other (Martinsen, 2019, pp. 586–587). One could say that the first tendency conceives of the political as always already given and prior, indeed quasi *prima philosophia*, since an iterative moment is inherent in every act (Derrida, 1982a, 1982b).⁵ Contrary, the second tendency

4. Buchstein calls the distinction obsessively dwelt on in political theory (Buchstein, 2020, no pagination). To my knowledge, however, this distinction has rarely been applied explicitly within educational theory, i.e., in the sense of the question to what extent educational theory as an activity is or should be politics or political itself. For example, Sattler and Schluß (2009) or Rieger-Ladich (2013) deal with the distinction between politics and the political exclusively with regard to the political education of the *educandus* and the *citizenry*, respectively. Lütke-Harmann (2016) examines the (lack of) *politicity* of certain social pedagogical theoretical concepts from a difference-theoretical perspective. Schäfer explores the unfathomability of pedagogy in order to state, from a perspective oriented towards Laclau and Mouffe, that the "dominance of pedagogical theoretical approaches [...] cannot be explained by the level of reflection or the plausibility of their explanations, but as an effect of disputes in which such theories (however) play a role" (Schäfer, 2009, p. 391). However, as will be shown below, this already presupposes the *politicity* of pedagogy, the extent of which is to be explored here, as given everywhere. From this perspective, of course, as I have tried to show with reference to Mouffe, the concern of the present text would therefore be incomprehensible.

5. Consequently, Derrida states that "philosophical activity does not *require* political practice, it is, in every respect, a political practice" (quoted in Hebekus, & Völker, 2012, p. 13, see also Butler, 1997, chapter 4). Even if this statement refers to the execution and not the content of philosophical activity, this positioning, which is surprisingly total by deconstructivist standards, runs the risk of unifying the practice of philosophical or pedagogical theorising. Similarly, Reichenbach states that the "notion of politically unambiguous readings of the pedagogical conceals the hypostatization of a diffuse understanding of morality in the guise of political significance" (Reichenbach, 2016, p. 42). Although Reichenbach is concerned with pedagogical practices and political content, while I focus here on scientific practices, his judgement can nevertheless be read as an apt warning. In this sense, it could be reformulated: The idea of *clearly political* readings of the educational theorising runs the risk of concealing the hypostasis of a diffuse understanding of morality in the guise of political significance.

conceives of the political as an exception and thus precisely as a deviation, negation or "interruption" (Rancière, 1999, p. 11) of the given. Wolin, for example, states that "the political is episodic, rare" (Wolin, 1994, p. 11) and Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy speak of the "re-trait du politique" (Lacoue-Labarthe, & Nancy, 1981, p. 18).

3.2. *In in which sense should educational theory be considered as 'political'?*

Strictly speaking, the distinction between politics and the political is thus twofold. If we relate these distinctions to the status of educational theory, it seems clear that educational theory can hardly be conceived as part of "politics".

But to what extent is it part of "the political" or can it at least be understood as "political" in this sense? In the following, I argue that *both concepts of the political are problematic for the self-understanding of educational theory*. In doing so, I do not want to claim that it is not possible to use the terms productively, but I would like to suggest that when using them in this way, the following problems should at least be considered and dealt with when it comes to one's own self-understanding.

Let us first consider the case in which the political is conceived as an exception, such as Rancière's interruption of the existing order.⁶ For Rancière, this interruption can occur when, in the name of equality, the "part of those who have no part" (Rancière, 1999, p. 11) is demanded, that is, the political consideration of those subjects who, according to the police, i.e. domineering order, are denied equality and thus the ability to speak. Such an interruption can hardly be attested to many activities of educational theory, because educational theory necessarily takes place largely in accordance with the police order, and is practised by subjects who, as a rule, must be attested to a virtually privileged position as speakers in this order. Educational theory - at least in its academic form, for example as what we do in this journal - could in this sense *bear witness to* political events and feed them into academic discourse, but it could hardly *be* political itself.⁷

Educational theory that bears witness to the political could learn from Rancière himself who repeatedly influenced social conceptions of literature, art, and film, but also pedagogy and politics, in highly diverse interventions (e.g., Rancière 1989, 1991, 1994, 1999, 2011). However, this form of educational theory would firstly have to be accompanied by a radical readjustment of its form (Grabau, & Rieger-Ladich, 2019). Secondly, the consistent implementation of such a self-understanding would

6. Following the suggestions of Bedorf (2010, pp. 23–26) and Marchart (2010, pp. 178–184), Rancière is read here as a representative of the "political difference" (Marchart, 2010) between politics (in Rancière: police) and the political (in Rancière: politics).

7. In this respect, it is consistent that Rancière does not see himself as a *political* philosopher (Rancière, 2004, p. 3) and has also "not written a single book on politics, but only those in which politics appears in a different guise: that of philosophy, that of history, that of aesthetics" (Hebekus, & Völker, 2012, pp. 129–130).

require educational theory to turn away from its demarcation to the empirical, as Rancière himself impressively does. In this sense, one could also speak of an *empirical philosophy of education*, following Dewey and Latour (Dewey 1938/1997, p. 25; Latour 1997, p. 52, see also Schildermans, Vlieghe, & Wortmann i.p.). Positively speaking, one could thus say that a theory of education that understands itself as bearing witness to a political interruption is still largely forthcoming and would thus offer a high potential for stimulating further development of educational theoretical practices. Such a self-understanding, however, needs to be distinguished from one that understands itself as political.

Let us now turn to the second understanding of the political as something that is always already given. First of all, it can be stated that with this assumption, valuable possibilities for differentiation are possibly lost. In this sense, Bedorf states, "if everything is political, it is nothing, and talk of the political loses its discriminatory power" (Bedorf, 2010, p. 33).⁸ If, for example, Horkheimer (1937/1982) was still able to build on the contrast between a mere analysis of existing conditions and their overcoming to make his famous comparison of traditional and critical theory, i.e. distinguish between different ways of behaving or not behaving towards the existing political order,⁹ a political theory of education in this sense would have retreated to the fact that overcoming - or at least a potential for overcoming - is always already in the theory itself.

This seems problematic to me in at least two respects. The first has already been hinted at: If we regard every educational theoretical utterance, every text produced, as an engagement in civil society's "class struggle" (Gramsci), we risk losing track of the question of actual political relevance. Distinguishing between texts that had a

8. Foucault's "everything is political" (Foucault, 1996, p. 211) is interpreted by Marchart as a Heideggerian statement along the lines of Laclau/Mouffe: For Marchart, Foucault was able to make this statement "because everything, namely, *is* permeated by power and force relations" (Marchart, 2013, p. 431, emphasis added). Marchart considers the problematic identified here by Bedorf to be "in the end, none] [...] but only commonsense, sold in the form of bad dialectics", since it overlooks "the ontological status of the concept of the political (with Foucault: the concept of power)" (ibid., pp. 431–432). According to Marchart, for Foucault there is "no social relation that is not at the same time a relation of conflict and power" (ibid., p. 432). However, this "is" and "would be", understood ontologically by Marchart, could also be read "nominalistically" following Foucault's self-description (Foucault, 2011, p. 5): Then Foucault would consistently try to take this consideration to its end without ever reaching it - which, contra Marchart ("Foucault's [...] myth [...] of the eternal battle [...] ultimately led him nowhere", Marchart, 2013, p. 433), would only be welcome from a *educational* point of view. The statement that everything *is* political could then be understood as an experimental arrangement that could be reconciled with my pragmatist, non-Heideggerian considerations presented in the second part of this text.

9. Although some passages in Horkheimer's essay certainly sound as if traditional theory supports the prevailing political order - which would contradict my argument, because then it would also assume an inevitability of the political in any theory - in my reading this is only a possibility, not an automatism. Rather, it is ultimately just as possible the other way round to use the results of traditional science for the purposes of critical theory.

high inspirational power and others that were hardly ever even read would hardly be possible - both would be *equally* political. A structurally similar problem is stated by Butler regarding Derrida's understanding of iterability: while in Butler's reading Bourdieu "fails to take account of the way in which performatives can break with existing contexts", Derrida "appears to install the break as a structurally *necessary* feature of *every* utterance [...] thus paralyzing the social analysis of *forceful utterance*" (Butler, 1997, p. 150, emphasis added).

Furthermore, to conceive of educational theory as political per se seems dangerous since the expectations of educational theory created by this view are too high, can hardly ever be fulfilled, or at least in rare exceptional cases only. This is because it is hardly ever possible to demonstrate that educational theory has contributed to concrete political progress - whether defined as reform or revolution.¹⁰ Therefore, the view of educational theory is always already political runs the risk of producing disappointments in educational theory and politics alike, which can lead to a turning away from or even excessive separation and isolation of both.

However, the political is theoretically conceived in detail and linked back to empirical evidence, in my opinion many theorists latently devaluate mere politics (Jörke, 2006). This devaluation is expressed, for example, by Hebekus and Völker restricting politics to the "governmental, technical exercise of power" (Hebekus, & Völker, 2012, p. 15) or Bedorf reconstructing politics as consisting in an "order of the empirical that is *caught up in the feasible*" (Bedorf, 2010, p. 14, emphasis added), while the political is assigned the venerable task of its own "*remeasurement*" (ibid., emphasis in original).¹¹ Arendt, for example, sees the political serving as a norm for politics, Rancière sees the political (in Rancière's terminology: politics) positioned as an interruption of the political order (in Rancière: police), or Lefort and Nancy - each in a different way - see the political presupposed as a necessary foundation of politics, so there is room for assuming that *theorising the political* is implicitly prioritised over *acting in politics*.

10. Many of the theories reviewed do not claim this at all, but this does not invalidate the argument. This only asserts that *if* one makes the claim to contribute to political progress in one's own theoretical work on education - and this seems to me to implicitly be the case most of the time - this claim can easily be disappointed. This is true regardless of whether the theories one refers to also make this claim for *themselves*. Nor does it imply that one *should* make this claim for political progress in educational theory.

11. One could even say that this *devaluation of politics disguises* itself in ostensible restraint and modesty regarding the (political) potentials of (political) theory. Thus, Bedorf writes - with reference to Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy (1981), but certainly also applicable to Rancière's position - that "the philosopher should not raise himself to the status of an observer who pretends to know how politics should be ordered or where it should develop" (Bedorf, 2010, p. 14). As will be shown below, Rorty could also be found in *such* modesty (see Schulenberg, 2017 on extensive metatheoretical similarities between Rancière and Rorty), although in his case modesty with regard to the political possibilities of theory in the narrower sense goes hand in hand with a *devaluation of theory*. In this sense, he describes "politics, at least in democratic countries, as something to be conducted in as plain, blunt, public, easy-to-handle language as possible" (Rorty, 1996, p. 47).

In this section, starting from the distinction between 'politics' and 'the political', I have tried to show that educational theory, firstly, is not political in the sense of belonging to politics. Secondly, at least in its present condition, educational theory can hardly be understood as political in the sense of interrupting or suspending the existing order, and thirdly, educational theory conceived as always already political entails several consequential problems, both political and educational. In this respect, the distinction between politics and the political could be of little help in describing the political character of educational theory. Therefore, a further distinction will be considered in the following.

4. SECOND DISTINCTION: POLITICS VS. CULTURAL POLITICS

4.1. *The distinction*

As a second possibility, I propose Richard Rorty's distinction between *politics* and *cultural politics*. His concept of 'politics' is similar to the one already presented in the first distinction, which describes politics as action within existing political institutions. Insofar as Rorty promotes decidedly left-wing politics, he understands political acts as communal action to protect the weaker members in society from the stronger.¹² He sees redistribution of wealth in the form of, e.g., tax policy, high minimum wages, as well as workers' and women's rights as the tools of choice. These requires legislative initiatives, which in turn require majorities in parliaments. Therefore, politics for Rorty is especially a question of strategy how to attempt hegemony, which within a representative democracy is expressed especially in the act of voting. Accordingly, for Rorty, heroes of politics are collectives that stand up for their interests against the powerful and wealthy: workers' movements and trade unions, the Civil Rights Movement, feminists, or left parties.

12. In this, Rorty's and Mouffe's positions are very similar (e.g., Mouffe, 2018, pp. 16–17). In contrast, both Mouffe (2008, pp. 88–89) and Laclau (1996) sharply criticise Rorty for being too limited to "only those strategic moves that are possible within the discursive universe of American liberalism" (Laclau, 1996, p. 70). In this regard, one can argue that Rorty celebrates the achievements of liberal democracy – e.g., freedom of speech and of the press, parliaments, universities - but never defends liberal democracy in principle; on the contrary, he always "conceives of democracy as keeping itself open to reform and institutional change" (Selk, 2019, p. 409), which must always be pluralistic in terms of breaking through the "crusts of convention" (Dewey). Therefore, Mouffe's criticism that Rorty "wants to retain the vision of a consensus that would not imply any form of exclusion and the availability of some form of realization of universality" (Mouffe, 2008, p. 89) is not accurate. Apart from the fact that Rorty has explicitly contradicted these insinuations several times (e.g. in Rorty, 2001a, even explicitly referring to Mouffe, or in Rorty, 2001b, p. 262, where he simply states that one "cannot realise a democratic society without expelling the fascist stirrers"), he could counter such criticism by saying that it is not particularly important *politically*, as long as one just agrees on the concrete political goals - which, in my opinion, would be a position that would make achieving the left hegemony Laclau and Mouffe are striving for easier.

In contrast, by *cultural politics* Rorty refers to the influence on the way we speak – and thus also how we perceive ourselves, our fellow human beings, and our environment. Rorty develops this understanding in his book "Philosophy as Cultural Politics" (Rorty, 2007, which clearly differs from earlier writings in this respect. In his earlier writings, Rorty used 'cultural politics' synonymously with 'identity politics', which he critically rejected because it divided the American left and made necessary coalitions, such as those of black civil rights movements and trade unions, more difficult (see Rorty, 1999 for this earlier usage, as well as for the differences with the later Wortmann 2022c). In "Philosophy as Cultural Politics", on the other hand, he writes: "The term "cultural politics" covers, among other things, arguments about what words to use" (Rorty, 2007, p. 3), to "suggest[ing] changes in the use of words" and to "put[ting] new words in circulation" to "enlarge[ing] our repertoire of individual and cultural self-descriptions" (ibid., p. 124). In addition, he also captures radical-negative "projects that involve eradicating entire subject areas" (ibid., p. 15), such as his own project of making talk of 'the truth' seem less attractive.¹³ Heroes of cultural politics have managed to make certain terms common or to leave a lasting mark on their meaning, as for Rorty, for example, Freud and Dewey or, I would add, Butler.¹⁴

4.2. *In in which sense should educational theory be considered as 'political'?*

For Rorty, it is clear that philosophy's possibility of contribution to politics is marginal, whereas it can and should strive to become cultural politics. Following Rorty, I will parallelize this conviction with the view that *educational theory is not political* in the strict sense - as part of politics - but that it *can be understood as cultural politics*.

In a short text with the telling title "The Dangers of Over-Philosophication", which responds to attempts by educational theorists to use Rorty's philosophy for educational issues, Rorty explicitly writes that he is "dubious about the relevance of philosophy to education, for the same reason that I am dubious about the relevance of philosophy to politics" (Rorty, 1990, p. 41). Philosophy cannot make the

13. Here it becomes clear that Rorty's concern with *cultural politics* is primarily *linguistic* change, whereas for him *politics* is primarily aimed at *material* conditions. In contrast, Gilcher-Holtey describes the Brechtian concept of intervening thinking as "the change of attitudes, behavioural dispositions, and political action through the change of interpretive, perceptual, and classification schemes of the social world" (Gilcher-Holtey, 2007, p. 10), with which Rorty would hardly agree caused in being a too psychologising way of describing both politics and cultural politics.

14. Butler herself, in her discussion of Austin, Derrida, and Bourdieu, arrives at a version of political speech acts as a possibility of (re)appropriation that is extremely similar to Rorty's cultural politics. For instance, she writes: "A term like "freedom" may come to signify what it never signified before, may come to embrace interests and subjects who have been excluded from its jurisdiction" (Butler, 1997, p. 160, for Rorty's conception of "justice as a larger loyalty" see Rorty, 2007, chapter 3). Beyond Rorty, however, Butler strongly addresses the bodily dimension of linguistic subjectivation (Butler, 1997).

concrete proposals that are needed in pedagogy, for example a "good new way of setting college entrance exams or of licensing teachers" (ibid.) or practical "experiments with collaborative teaching, interdisciplinary studies, integration of recent scholarship on race and gender into the curriculum" (ibid., p. 44, for an overview of Rorty's thought in educational theory see Wortmann, 2022b).

The public relevance of educational theory cannot therefore be to justify educational practices. In response to an interview question about his position on the educational method of small group work, Rorty replied that theory and practice

play back and forth, but in as concrete a case as this it seems to me that you can just see whether a pedagogic experiment succeeds; if it doesn't, that may leave the theory intact or it may not, but the thing to do is find out whether it actually works (Rorty in Olson, 1989, p. 4).

Too much philosophy could even stand in the way of concrete reforms and experiments in education, namely if these were replaced by theoretical debates. Academics who merely engage in elitist theoretical battles "are [...] needlessly separating themselves from the people whom they are trying to help, the fellow-citizens with whom they share a country and a tradition" (Rorty, 1990, p. 44).¹⁵

The proposal to conceptualise educational theory as cultural politics enables the *distinction* from politics. Or, to put it more sharply: *The distinction between politics and cultural policy can bring into view what educational theory can and cannot do*. The conceptions of both distinctions – between politics and the political and between politics and cultural politics – agree on what educational theory *cannot do*: engage in politics. However, what educational theory can do can be captured particularly well by Rorty's concept of cultural politics: making discursive interventions, "contribute[ing] to humanity's ongoing conversation" which "has engendered new social practices, and changes in the vocabularies deployed in moral and political deliberation" (Rorty, 2007, p. ix). In short, educational theory has the potential of initiating cultural-political change.

5. EDUCATIONAL THEORY AS CULTURAL POLITICS

Rorty argues "that cultural politics should replace ontology, and also that whether it should or not is *itself* a matter of cultural politics" (Rorty, 2007, p. 5). If educational theory were to be understood as cultural politics, it could therefore not be about "find[ing] out what anything is "really" like, but to help us grow up – to make us happier, freer and more flexible" (ibid., p. 124).

15. Following Rorty, Jörke argues against both rationalist-output-oriented positions and those formulated following Derrida as "theory of democracy without democracy" (Jörke, 2006, p. 260).

I would like to propose this shift as an "offensive turn in [educational] theorising" (Bünger, 2021). With the arguments elaborated so far, an offensive turn of educational theory could be problematised in two respects and only fully supported in another one. Such a "turn" would be delicate if it either analytically stated that theory formation *is always already* offensive or normatively demanded that all theory formation *should become* offensive. But if an offensive turn in theorising leads to a turn in what we are doing – educational theory – to a more offensive cultural-political intervention, two questions follow. The first question is why educational theory is rarely of public relevance despite the ongoing emphasis on its own political character.¹⁶ The second question follows from this: It asks about the possibilities and forms of becoming relevant. As a conclusion, then, I would like to propose two "offensive turns" of educational theory: firstly, a turn against itself – and thus possibly against ourselves who do educational theory – and secondly one into the public sphere.

First, then, the question of why we can hardly see any publicly relevant educational theory at present. I would like to provide a first answer with the "rather brute, but nevertheless enlightening" (Sonderegger in Bembeza, & Sonderegger, 2020, no pagination) – I would say: helpful precisely *because* it is brute – distinction between "existential critique" and "excellence critique" by Kaloianov (2014). Following this distinction, a reason for the low public relevance of educational theory could be that it has retreated too much from existential critique to excellence critique. While the critique of excellence struggles for *academic* accuracy, the existential critique is directed at and against the *day-to-day* problems of the weak, marginalised, and oppressed by starting from their existential situations.¹⁷

So, when I problematise that educational theory has neglected existential critique, I do not want to plea for a dilution of academic quality standards and certainly not for anti-intellectualism. The most important reason for this is that I view existential critique and excellence critique as mutually dependent. If we follow Rorty's concept of cultural politics, it becomes clear that excellence critique cannot become superfluous but remains necessary for sophisticated existential critique. Conversely, truly excellent critique perhaps comes about precisely *through* existential critique, if one connects Kaloianov's (2014, pp. 68–70) observation that existential critique has migrated from critical theory within philosophy to the various "studies" (cultural,

16. Whether this assessment is correct or not, I must leave to the reader's judgement. For this, in the sense of the conception of cultural politics described above, the guiding question would be: When did we educational theorists manage to shape the use and meaning of terms – what is the same for Rorty following the late Wittgenstein – in such a way that they became common beyond purely professional-scientific discussions?

17. Kaloianov (2014) associates excellence critique with the Frankfurt School since Habermas and the names Honneth, Forst, and Jaeggi, whereas he sees existential critique represented by Benjamin, Horkheimer, and Adorno. I have strong doubts about this classification and do not follow it, but nevertheless consider the distinction between the two forms of critique as helpful.

woman, gender, queer, postcolonial, etc.), with Butler's observation that in recent times philosophical innovations rarely took place in academic philosophy, but mostly in other disciplines with strong theoretical research (Butler, 2004).

Existential critique and excellence critique being mutually dependent is even the cause why it seems problematic if one of the two forms of critique is pursued disproportionately more than the other in educational theory.¹⁸ In short, the cultural-political potentials of educational theory are not reached when only or predominantly excellence critique is practiced.

A second answer to the question of why educational theory has only little public relevance follows the assumption that existential critique also represents only a part of what is possible in educational theory, insofar as it remains critical and as such primarily negative: It is directed – correctly and importantly – against the existing (educational) conditions (Wortmann, 2020).¹⁹ While it provides a sophisticated vocabulary to describe what is problematic or wrong about them or what should be changed,²⁰ it lacks a similarly complex, nuanced, and theoretically sophisticated vocabulary to describe what is good or right and could therefore be worth continuing to be done. Practicing educational theory exclusively or predominantly as a critical theory cannot provide such "knowledge for orientation and interpretation" (Reichenbach, 2017, p. 19), which the public expects from it, and justifiably so (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017; Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2019; Wortmann, 2019). I thus see the second problem of educational theory in its limited ability to speak positively about its subject matter.²¹

To be sure: Public relevance cannot be intentionally produced or fabricated. However, we can – and indeed, as argued here, should – strive to unfold a public relevance of educational theory. The political relevance of educational theory cannot

18. I cannot provide any evidence for this empirical observation here. Whether this is true or not must therefore, until there is such evidence, again be left to the reader's judgement.

19. I am on the side of critical theory, e.g., as defined by Horkheimer, when it comes to raising the possibility that (educational) theory can and should initiate cultural-political change. However, I also follow Latour (2004) and Hodgson, Vlieghe, and Zamojski (2017) in that some of the established tools of critical theory largely lost their transformative potential. Therefore, I am concerned with developing a post-critical approach to educational theory and research (Wortmann, 2019, 2020).

20. Bünger (2019, p. 161) argues that the term 'critique' is challenging not only because of its high complexity in the history of philosophy, but even more so because of its everyday use. Bittner (2009, p. 136) points out that this everyday use is almost exclusively negative and normative: to say something *critically* is to say how something *should not* be.

21. From a critical perspective, it could be objected that this second point (lack of positive vocabulary) contradicts the first (too little existential critique) because we could find little that is positive in the existing if we start from the lives of the oppressed. However, this seems to me to be less of a contradiction than it points to the limits of existential critique. Even if, from a cultural-political perspective, I suggest being existentially critical more often, I do not think of it as being sufficient for a higher public relevance of educational theory when regarded as the only instrument.

be secured by speaking about its own political relevance. Although cultural change takes place very slowly one can strive for it and, according to Rorty, "see to it":

On the view of culture I am suggesting, intellectual and moral progress is achieved by making claims that seem absurd to one generation into the common sense of the later generations. The role of the intellectuals is to effect this change by explaining how the new ideas might, if tried out, solve, or dissolve, problems created by the old ones (Rorty, 2007, p. 85).

Following this non-technical understanding of "bringing about change", I think it all comes down to what it means to *provide* for it. It is to this that I would like to conclude, as an outlook, on what it might mean for educational theory if it were to be described modally as publicly relevant. In this regard, I suggest that educational theory could be about a "caring critique" (Laner, 2020), which is always also a *careful* one, about researching practices, situations and assemblies that require an attitude of "care and caution" (Latour, 2004, p. 246), perhaps even "love for the world" (Hodgson, Vlieghe, & Zamojski, 2017, p. 18) – for the objects researched and their cultural-political effects.

The objects of educational theory could then be treated "like one would approach an animal that shies away, with hesitation and care, and not with big and brutal concepts and theories, for which the practice would just be an illustration" (Schildermans, 2020, no pagination). A possible careful gesture in educational theory could lie in an affirmation of the existing, with Whitehead "a realization of worth [...]. Its basic expression is - Have a *care*, here is something that *matters!*" (Whitehead, 1938/1968, p. 116, emphasis added). Whitehead requests us to care about our abstractions: What effects do they have? What kind of thinking do they evoke? How do they affect our pool of possible self-descriptions? "Be careful, here is a matter of concern!" – How would educational theory look like following such an appeal?

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