

# Teacherly gestures as an ontological dimension of politics: On the need of commonising in an age of pervasive privatization<sup>1</sup>

## Gestos docentes como una dimensión ontológica de la política: sobre la necesidad de comunizar en una era de privatización generalizada

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### Abstract

In this article we argue that enacting a public sphere requires teacherly gestures. Starting from the thesis that politics and education are two separate but interrelated spheres of human life, we investigate the ways these two spheres relate with each other, beyond a functional or instrumental understanding of their relation. Performing teacherly gestures by those who are gathered around something is a necessary condition for making this particular matter into a common concern, i.e., making it public.

*Keywords:* commonising, teacherly gestures, democracy, public sphere.

### Resumen

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En este artículo argumentamos que la constitución de una esfera pública precisa de gestos docentes. Partiendo de la tesis de que la política y la educación son dos esferas separadas pero interrelacionadas de la vida humana, investigamos las formas en que estas dos esferas se relacionan entre sí, más allá de una comprensión funcional o instrumental de su relación. La realización de gestos docentes por parte de aquellos reunidos en torno a alguna cosa es una condición necesaria para convertir ese asunto particular en una inquietud común, es decir, hacerlo público.

*Palabras clave:* comunicar, gestos docentes, democracia, esfera pública.

## Education and politics: differences, relations, commonalities

In this paper we want to develop a new direction for thinking about the *public* role of the teacher and of teaching. This is an old discussion within the field of educational philosophy and theory, where the link between the public and teaching is predominantly considered in one of the two following ways: either from the traditionalist perspective that the teacher should introduce the new generation into an established world of culture (Feinberg 2016)<sup>2</sup> or from the critical-pedagogical view that the teacher should position herself as a critical intellectual (Cf. Giroux 1997, 2011 etc.). According to the last point of view, teachers are expected to help their students develop a consciousness of existing forms of oppression (and their role in it) as well as a strong critical and democratic attitude; moreover teachers have to behave in a critical, pluralistic and anti-discriminatory way– possibly engaging themselves and their students in political struggles pertaining to the most fundamental societal issues, such as intolerable forms of economic inequality, oppression of minorities and structural societal violence. As we have argued elsewhere (Vlieghe & Zamojski 2019), we regard both views as coming down to an undoubtedly well-meant, but *dangerous confusion of politics and education*.

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<sup>2</sup> As Feinberg (2016: 16) puts it: “The unique mission of a public education [...] is to reproduce a civic public”

Our point here is not to deny the political (or the economic, cultural, etc.) significance of education. Rather, we want to explore the idea that one cannot speak of a relation between education and politics without acknowledging that these are two different things. That this is the case seems obvious at the *ontic* level of practices (e.g., teaching is something different from running a political campaign) or processes (e.g., learning how to read is something different than making a decision by voting). However, education and politics differ also at the *ontological*<sup>3</sup> level, i.e., in the way they frame a different relation of humans with being. Following Arendt (1958; 1961) it can be argued that ontologically speaking, education and politics are two distinct spheres of human life. *Education* is a response to the fact of *natality*, i.e., the coming of new born children into an existing world to which they need to be introduced by the adult generation. Therefore, Arendt claims, education is a sphere of life where a representative of the existing generation introduces newcomers into the old world in such a way that this new generation could begin with this world anew, i.e., they can invent, design, and introduce their ideas for new beginnings, so that they potentially renew the world we all inhabit. *Politics*, on the other hand, answers to the fact of *plurality*, i.e., the uniqueness of every human being, who at the same time is always a member of a particular society. We are many, that all differ and still need to live together. Politics is therefore a sphere where the many that differ meet, confront their views, and make an effort to establish commonly acknowledged decisions about how to live well together.

We have suggested (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019, 2020) that both of these *spheres* operate according to their own specific *logics*. The logic of education starts with the recognition that there is something in the world that is worth of our attention and of the effort of study. Whether it's algebra, organic chemistry, music, cooking or woodcraft, education is necessarily predicated on the assumption that it is worthwhile to take interest and concern for this particular subject matter just for the sake of the thing itself: mathematics just for the sake of mathematics, for example, and not because society need engineers. In that sense, education always begins with the attitude of unconditional affirmation. Politics – on the other hand – starts with the attitude of indignation: it needs to point out

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<sup>3</sup> We follow the distinction between the ontic and the ontological as introduced by Martin Heidegger (1962).

the wrongs of the world that demand our (collective) action. The logic of politics begins with the assumption that there is something wrong that needs to be set straight. It basically demands a transformation of the world (and hence, if politics is also about affirmation, this is always conditioned upon this need of transformation). With reference to Max Scheler (1973) we identified the educational logic as one of *love*, and the political logic as one of *bate* (cf. Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019).

In line with this argument, we believe that it is hugely important to make this distinction, especially today. This is because education and politics get constantly confused. This confusion stems from the fact that although at the *ontic* level many different ideas exist about the desired orientation of educational practices (e.g. that they should focus on equality of opportunities, address the needs of the job market, or create conditions for a strong democracy, or individual wellbeing, or the patriotic devotion, etc.), when looking from an *ontological* perspective it becomes clear that – regardless of the ideological variety in all these cases – education is *fundamentally* positioned as a mere means for particular political (or economic) goals. This *instrumentalization* of education results in appropriation of its logic and makes us forget about its distinct specificity. This is why today – as noted by Biesta (2010; 2013) – we urgently need to talk again about *the educational in education*, i.e., about what makes education unique, about its essence. Taken from another perspective, this instrumentalization of education dovetails with the phenomenon of the educationalization of societal problems (cf. Smeyers, Depaepe 2008). In such a case, treating education as a means for implementing a particular policy redefines political issues in terms of problems with education (e.g., when unemployment is rendered in terms of inappropriate education of the unemployed, diverting the responsibility of the government for macroeconomic situation of a country to the individual for lacking the appropriate qualifications) (Simons and Masschelein, 2010).

We furthermore argue that this careful separation of these two spheres and their logics is important not only for education, but also for politics. This is because today this tendency to mix one with the other is also related to an increasing privatisation of our life. Next to being obsessed with individual (private) freedom, wealth, comfort and success in life – as promised again and again by the institutions of the consumer society – privatisation also issues from leading our lives increasingly on-line, i.e. confined to our social bubbles. For their inhabitants these silos may

give the impression of constituting a public sphere, whereas in reality they are construed via mechanisms that exclude meeting strangers with whom one has to peacefully live together (Zuboff, 2019). There are no 'civic strangers' (cf. Sennett 2002) there to encounter, just our tribe and other tribes, our opinions and their opinions, our standpoints and theirs. There are no things to explore with strangers, there are just positions we find acceptable and the ones we don't. There are no longer truths about the world to be commonly pursued by the public, and likewise no truths one is pursuing at school anymore: there are only the right answers at the high stakes exams that one has to learn in order to secure one's personal educational success which can be consumed on the job market.

Separating rigorously education and politics is a necessary conceptual step to take in order to better understand to what extent these spheres are deformed by a far going privatization. Moreover, it also allows for understanding the ways in which we can respect their autonomy and articulate their essence. Importantly, *this clear separation of education and politics does not imply their isolation*. On the contrary, only when education and politics are acknowledged to be different things one can start to investigate how they relate to each other, and what they have in common.

In our previous work (Vlieghe and Zamojski 2019) we have already discussed the most fundamental ways in which education and politics relate to one another. On the one hand the establishment of the *polis* precedes the existence of education. This is so, because if education essentially concerns introducing the new generation into the common world, then it requires us to recognize this common world. In other words, education cannot emerge when we are living only within the confines of our *oikos*.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, we argued (ibidem) that educational subjectification precedes political subjectification (but not the other way around): it is only the strong experience of educational potentiality that enables us to see that there is no necessity in the given order of things, and that we are able to transform ourselves and our lives. This second connection refers to an important commonality between education and politics. Both spheres and their logics assume the possibility of transformation. In politics we desire the transformation

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<sup>4</sup> Therefore the phenomenon of pervasive privatisation is a threat to both spheres: politics and education.

of a given status quo, whereas in education we are aiming at a very specific kind of transformation, based on the idea that an encounter with a particular thing may enable us to see the world with new eyes.

In this paper we want to suggest that education and politics have one more important thing in common which relates them in a way we did not explore so far. As we will try to show, *both education and politics involve practices of commonising through performing teacherly gestures*. Connecting this to the question we started this paper with, these gestures could be called ‘public’ in a more profound sense than that traditional and critical-pedagogical approaches refer to, because it is through these gestures that a teacher gathers people around some part of the world, so as to make this some-*thing* into a matter of common interest. To express this idea, we will use a somehow unusual terminology and claim that a teacher makes things public through the specific gesture of *commonising*. In what follows we will argue that this commonising gesture is an indispensable *educational* aspect that is constitutive of politics. Therefore, we also hold that not every gesture performed ‘in public’ is a *public* gesture, as the latter involves – exactly – gathering of people around something that is shown to be truly *common* (and this applies both to the sphere of education and the sphere of politics). This is, one can perform a great variety of gestures in front of a public, viz.; exhibitionist gestures (“look at me!”), police gestures (“move away!”, “step back!”), or totemic gestures (“this is ours”). However, unless these don’t involve commonising, they are not public gestures in a strict sense.

## Commonising in the educational and in the political sphere

Let us first consider the commonising gesture that is constitutive of the logic of education. This is not easy, because more often than not in educational theory, the very need for a teacher is justified in terms of a particular anti-communal assumption behind the educational process. *Either*, the interaction between teacher and student is split up into a hierarchical interplay between the authority the teacher has thanks to her superior insight and the lack thereof in those entrusted to her care. *Or*, as it is the case in today more popular student-centered approaches, the teacher is made into an instrument for supporting individual students’ needs and facilitating the development of their talents. *In both*

*cases* of theorizing the teacher-student relation, there is an undesirable introduction of a *divide*. We would like to argue that we can only overcome this by drawing again attention to the third, often forgotten but probably most profound element characterizing the educational event, i.e., the dimension that transcends the sterile discussion between teacher- and student-centeredness and that turns all those involved into ‘commoners’: *the thing of study*.

It is because a teacher, out of her love for a particular aspect of the world (a subject matter), brings something to the attention of all present in a classroom and shows that it is important, that something first becomes a matter of interest. This only succeeds, most importantly, when the teacher doesn’t place herself in a position of authority, but when *both* teacher and students relate to the matter at hand *as studiers*. True teaching presupposes that the thing *itself* gets authority. The teacher’s love for the subject matter is then only a conduit for generating a shared interest, attention and care, and for commencing on a journey of thinking, investigating, imagining, experimenting and sustaining attachments *with* the matter at hand, i.e. *studying it*. Something is ‘put on the table’ (Masschelein and Simons 2013) and becomes the object of communal efforts of examination, but also of wanting to be in the presence of the thing, to care for it and to be changed by it (at an ontic level this might translate into affects such as passion, devotion, the desire to know everything about it, to keep investigating it up to the point of forgetting about all other life duties, but also to fierce discussion about it when it is difficult to come to a shared understanding of the thing in question).

The thing of study makes all involved *equal* (teacher and student, but also students among themselves, in spite of the many differences that divide them), because in relation to it even the most knowledgeable is still to some extent ignorant and will have to publicly test her assertions against the thing itself. Studying comes with a moment of de-identification and hence it could be called profoundly *commonising* (underlining the strong sense of this word being a verb: we don’t first have to share an identity which makes the event of study possible; instead it is the act of studying itself which renders us common). Surely, the teacher starts from a different situation (she knows more, or is less ignorant, and she has an interest students probably don’t have at the start). However, in genuine teaching she doesn’t take advantage of all this to position herself as someone superior. On the contrary, she just invites others to share



her love for a particular thing and to study it together. This, then, means that both teacher and students (as studiers) subject themselves to what the thing demands from them. It goes without saying that teaching in this sense is an act of generosity (and hence of vulnerability and risk [Cf. Biesta 2013]), meaning that students can easily display no interest, attention, care and love whatsoever. Teaching-as-commonising can end up awfully disappointing too.

After ontologically identifying the commonising gesture in education we like to put forward the hypothesis *that a similar moment is constitutive of the logic of politics*. At least this is the case when politics is understood in a particular way. More specifically, we take sides with Arendt (1958) who takes politics in what we call a strong sense<sup>5</sup>. Politics is the sphere where we no longer appear as individuals (or groups of individuals) solely concerned about our private interests but expose ourselves to others in the risky undertaking of a discussion about the good life in common, also by literally leaving our *oikoi* (households) and going to the *agora*: the public sphere. Only there something truly new can begin as the confrontation with different perspectives might change what we think about the world and make us leave behind opinions we previously held dear. Importantly, the agency that arises here is not the sum of agencies (or the arithmetic mean of interests) that previously existed in individuals. No one can predict the outcome of the political discussion. That is exactly why we need to gather and speak with one another, so as to render capable the people of political ‘action’.

Now, Arendt also famously said that such a gathering can only be successful on the condition that something is ‘put on the table’ (which is not so different from our description above, and in the work of Masschelein and Simons (2013) this expression is actually used to capture the essence of school education, although Arendt never used this expression herself in her reflections on education). The table in-between the participants to the political discussion both divides and unites (and when the table would disappear this would lead to a very unpleasant and awkward situation). However, in her own account of politics, Arendt has neglected to develop this metaphor in a strong materialist sense, i.e., in terms of thing-centeredness, as she has mainly emphasized the agonistic

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<sup>5</sup> For the difference between *the strong* and *the wrong* sense of politics in Arendt, see Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019, pp. 157-158).



nature of the public sphere (Benhabib, 1992). Hence, she has missed out, we claim, on identifying the commonising moment of making something into a shared matter of study amongst equals as a constitutive dimension of politics, i.e., the very dimension that renders politics close to what education is all about. To do this, we have to delve once more into practices of deliberation in the Ancient Athenian polis.

## The studious public: political deliberation and teacherly gestures

In this section we want to draw attention to a further development of Athenian democracy that was not discussed by Arendt, but that makes an important difference. At a given moment it became obvious that it was no longer possible for the Assembly (*ekklesia*) to meet at the Agora, as the marketplace appeared to be a too crowded, too buzzy, and too loud place, where all just tried to pursue their own business - a place dominated by the individual economic interests of Athenians and of others involved in the trade. The bustle and shouting over there made it too difficult to focus on anything else but market affairs, and especially on the city itself, the *polis*. Hence, not long after the popular revolution, probably around the early 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, the Ancient Athenian citizens decided to move the gathering up to the hill of Pnyx (Thomson, 1982, pp. 136-137; Cf. Hansen, 2021; Ober, 2017; Canevaro, 2018). This location didn't only offer the required quietness and peace, but more importantly from up there one could literally see the 'thing' they gathered around: the city. It is interesting to note that, so as to enable the people to go beyond the sphere of the *oikos* (the home, the workshop) and to discuss matters that are different from private affairs, people went up to this hill and see with their own eyes and at a glance the *polis* as the backdrop for all their separate dwellings in and between *oikoi*<sup>6</sup>. We argue that the true political discussion (i.e., true public deliberation) exactly needs such a thing-centered arrangement, i.e. it could not happen anywhere.

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<sup>6</sup> Going up the hill and looking from above seems not only different than flying over or walking through (Cf. Masschelein, 2010), but somehow goes beyond this opposition. It does not involve mapping or exposing oneself to what the road commands (ibidem, cf. Masschelein, 2019), but it enables one to leave the *oikoi* and climb to another place where it is possible to notice what goes beyond one's home and workshop.

When looking downhill, the city appears as a matter of common concern, or – to be more precise – what comes into view is the site from where the matters that concern all *oikoi* emerge. What the gathered can see at a glance is the common, the *polis*. It is exactly here that the *public* sphere is enacted, viz. *vis-à-vis* this common thing. If there would be no city, but instead only a multiplicity of *oikoi*, then there would be no need to gather and discuss anything together. There would be no need for a public sphere. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine that in the absence of such a sphere trade would still go on, and in that sense the *agora* would still operate in its usual way. However, for a public sphere (i.e., for politics) to emerge, there has to be more than private interests, private opinions, private preferences and private worries, problems and challenges. Something needs to exist that exceeds individually experienced matters and that is of concern to each individual: something more than each *oikos* can handle alone, but also something that requires more than aggregating private opinions. This is: something that calls for a well informed decision taken by the many concerned and gathered around the thing in question.

At the *ontic* level, there is always a concrete political issue – for instance: a decision about a war, about the rules of law – to gather around. Seen from the ontic perspective this issue functions merely like an ‘object’ (see Heidegger, 2001), i.e., something that can be useful (or not) in view of one’s interests. However, for politics in a strong sense to take place this object needs to become a ‘thing’. This regards fundamentally an *ontological* operation, which comes close to what we explored in our previous work on teaching (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019). There we claim that what a teacher essentially does is showing that a subject matter is interesting and worthy of care and attention, thanks to displaying her love for it. Only then one can start studying it together, i.e., engaging with it attentively and carefully, and for its own sake. Analogously, in the case of public deliberation, people have to overcome their private position as individuals with a particular interest. They need to come and see that in each concrete issue that is being discussed some-*thing* is at stake that exceeds one’s private perspective: the issue they debate is not just a law (that might be beneficial for them or not) or a war (that they like or find horrific), but it is also *an issue of how to live well together in the city*. Ontologically speaking, a truly political discussion always involves this further orientation to a larger concern.

Furthermore, the issue discussed at the Pnyx is not only ‘bigger’ in terms of transcending the particular and insular interests of one’s own *oikos*, but also in terms of complexity. If the matter being discussed in public is as complex as the city itself, no private person is able to encompass its intricacy, and hence, this is another reason for gathering and thinking together. Very concretely, someone must *put something on the table* by sketching a preliminary account of the issue. This understanding is then deepened by others, when they introduce their accounts to the debate. The outcome of such an exercise is unforeseeable and may come as a surprise. As such, everyone will end up seeing more, or at least, they will be able to go beyond their own point of departure and experience the complexity of the discussed thing. In the course of such a debate there might occur long digressions and also distraction might happen, and hence there will be the need to refocus on the issue in question, i.e., to come back to the matter that is not yet grasped in all of its intricacy. Consecutive speakers turn the attention of the gathered people to various layers and dimensions of the problem, while displaying the ways in which it matters from them differently. Inevitably – even in the case of Athenian direct democracy – not all citizens could be present during the Assembly<sup>7</sup>. However, these practical limits should not be regarded as an argument against direct, deliberative democracy (and in favour of a representative model). Rather they involve the requirement that the views of those who are currently not present, and cannot speak for themselves, should be brought in and recollected in order to take them into account when making a decision. Moreover, it might appear that even after long and careful consideration of the issue, some insights might still be superficial or even contradictory, and hence even deeper elaboration might be mandatory.

This description of what happens during the meeting at the Pnyx is meant to highlight two important points. First, it shows that one has to relate to the issue at hand as a thing around which people gather when

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<sup>7</sup> As noted by Thompson (1982) Pnyx (depending on the arrangement of the space on the hill in various periods of its history) could accommodate 5.000 to 10.000 citizens (with 6.000 being the quorum in certain matters) out of 30.000 to 50.000 citizens overall. Ober (2017, p. 19) comments on this in the following way: “Athen’s democracy was a direct form of government by citizens. The assembled citizens voted directly on policy; they did not elect representatives to make policy for them. (...) The Athenian demos (as the whole of the citizen body) was imagined as present in the persons of those citizens who chose to attend a given assembly. So the demos was conceptually represented, *pars pro toto*, by a fragment of the citizenry”.

forming a *studious* public. Again, the issue under discussion becomes a 'city' issue as it is no longer approached as an object that affects their own *oikos*, i.e., as an *object* they should *learn* about. Instead, what is at stake goes beyond all *oikoi* and always involves the very question of how to live well together. Hence, it could be called a *thing* of *study*. Going up the hill is not so much a question of elevating citizens present during the Assembly against all others, rather it is an exercise in humility. To look from there at the city comes down to seeing how complex it is, and to recognise that what they have in the front of their eyes is a reality much different from each of the *oikoi*. It becomes clear to what extent one is *ignorant* about the matter to be discussed if one would have remained within the confines of one's own household and if one would have solely pursued one's own interests. In that sense, the participants that gather on the hill are literally being *taught*, and possibly they also need to teach each other, i.e., when one is unaware how the matter under discussion plays out in the part of the city where others live. They help each other in getting to understand the nature of the matter they discuss, so as to start appreciating its complexity and to come and see its various sides and dimensions. Leaving this out, they would risk making a decision harmful to the city. The outcome of this exercise is always unforeseeable and may come as a surprise.

And so, a second and most important conclusion to draw, is that for all this to happen, *the commonising gesture of a teacher is essential*. Consider that the kind of gathering we just analyzed can be turned easily again into a mere market occupation, i.e., when the studious thing in common is substituted with mere competition between private opinions, interests and preferences. One can easily install a marketplace on a hill, instead of an Assembly. Arguably, this happens when one emphasises the role of conflict in how the gathering plays out. Then the common disappears from sight, the gathering is turned into just a decision making process, and the focus is on the different private orientations in view of reaching an agreement. In order to prevent this from happening, and more exactly to preserve the possibility of collective study of a matter of common concern, teacherly gestures are required. To be clear, such gestures are not necessarily performed by a particular person having the official position of a teacher. What is needed, rather, is what we have called elsewhere, the *figure* of the teacher, *ontologically* understood (cf. Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019): a figure who gathers people, points

at something and makes the gathered attentive, so that the issue under consideration can become a thing that appears as a common concern, as well as a thing that demands careful study. Sometimes it is a particular speaker who puts this thing on the table, but likewise it can be a group of people who while presenting the matter from their own perspectives, put on display their care and engagement for it. Or, a teacherly gesture might take place when someone brings to recollection to the assembly what has been said so far.

## The absence of teacherly gestures in political theory

The conclusions we draw from the example of the studious gathering at the Pnyx is also important because it addresses a problem we see in most contemporary political theory, where this teacherly dimension of politics remains remarkably absent from consideration. To show this, let's start with those views on the public sphere that conceive of it in terms of conflict and struggle. In this case political subjects are seen as originally and essentially antagonistic (Mouffe, 2013; Laclau, 2005). This is because societies are always structured in such a way that opposing interests are inevitable (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Hence, political subjects don't gather on the hill, but precisely meet on the market, as each and every participant to the discussion starts from a very clear picture of what their interest is, and based on this, which decision they want to arrive at. They know beforehand what is at stake and what will be their gain or loss. They are not ignorant. And so, politics appears to be all about sustaining the conflict in a way that could result in a strategic reshuffling of alliances on the political stage, and aggregating the votes to the advantage of a particular side of this conflict. Hence, there is no place for collective study of a thing of common concern. Instead, the public is the scene for inventing new rhetorical strategies that could be successful in extending *the chain of equivalence* of various political *demands of heterogenic groups* recognising their common political *enemy* and, hence, forming a new collective political subject (Laclau, 2005).

The alternative dominant approach in political theory today consists of defining the public as dependent on primal consent, meaning that the public emerges as an effect of excluding differences and finding an *overlapping consensus* within *reasonable comprehensive doctrines*

(Rawls 1993), i.e., views we all agree on, regardless of the differences in the ways in which we depict and understand all aspects of the world. This consensus functions as a point of reference for all possible debates regarding all possible issues, thanks to which we can always calculate (i.e., deduce) what should be the best decision on a particular matter, assuming that we agree on a fundamental understanding of justice (Rawls 1999). Within such a frame, there is no place for collectively studying something that gathers us, because the public debate solely consists of logical calculation that leads from the agreed consensus on the principles of justice to the decision about the matter at hand. When Rawls introduces the notion of the *veil of ignorance*, his aim is not to bring about cognitive humility regarding the matter of common concern. Instead, it is an attempt at forgetting about oneself, erasing one's own habitus and purifying one's reason, in order to be able to deduce the principles of justice from a position of no position (Rawls, 1993, pp. 22-28).

To conclude, *in both cases* (the agonistic and the consensual model) reflection and imaginativeness are involved, but studious practices and teacherly gestures are not considered as vital to the public sphere. This stands in contrast to another, viz. the deliberative model in political theory, which not only acknowledges, but exactly hinges upon learning processes that happen within public deliberation (Habermas, 1990; Benhabib, 1996). In this case, those who are gathered to discuss are not concerned with aggregating allies against a repressive regime, nor do they deduce their decision based on an overlapping consensus. Instead they learn from each other's views on the discussed matter. Nevertheless, even in this case, what Habermas (1996) calls *the democratic opinion- and will-formation* is not about collective practices of studying the common thing, but – indeed – about learning from each other. It seems thus that political subjects are more focused here on other interlocutors and their insights than on the matter that gathers them.

However, the critique we raise here doesn't imply that we want to give up on the deliberative model of democracy. In order to grasp the commonising dimension of the public debate, this model still seems to us as an appropriate point of reference, but we also think that it should be complemented by taking into account that democratic politics needs teacherly gestures.

To be clear, this is *not* to suggest that education functions as a means for obtaining political goals or that it should be subordinated to a political logic. Rather, we argue that there is a vital place for educational practices in the democratic political process, where these practices still function with respect to their own logic. Our claim is, to be clear, that acknowledging the commonising dimension of the public debate implies that politics requires subjects performing teacherly gestures. This is not to say, again, that teaching should be conceived of as a means to cure our political impotence (and that we should put the responsibility for making things right in the world on the shoulders of today's teachers and their pupils). Nor does it mean that we are advocating for a democracy ruled by teachers (yet another incarnation of Plato's idea of the philosopher king). Once more, we make a claim at an *ontological* level. In order for politics, taken in a strong deliberative and transformative sense, to happen, 'someone' must put some-*thing* on the table and gather people around it. Something becomes public and diverse people become one studious public. Only then it can become clear that there is an issue of importance and common concern that transcends private interests and personal positions. This demands particular scholastic arrangements (e.g., climbing up the hill), which ensure equality among the participants to the discussion (in view of their shared ignorance vis-à-vis the issue of concern) and which allow for sustaining the conditions for sharing knowledge (i.e., making knowledge public) and for exploring together the matter at hand<sup>8</sup>. So, to sum up, for politics in a strong sense to happen a public must perform collective study practices and hence commonising gestures by a teacher are necessary. But again, as our understanding of 'the teacher' is an ontological one, we do not necessarily refer to a single person, as it may concern different people.

It is essential to note that the focus and the meaning of these gestures are different in the classroom as compared to what happens during the assembly (i.e. in the sphere of education and in the sphere of politics). The teacher in her classroom displays her teacherly gestures as expressions of the love for the world, pure affirmation of the subject matter, inviting the students present in the classroom to make the effort of studying this matter together with her. In the assembly, on the contrary, the display of teacherly gestures transforms a particular issue into a matter of common

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<sup>8</sup> For a more elaborated account of teacherly gestures see: Vlieghe and Zamojski (2019).



concern for the citizens gathered there, i.e., into a thing to be studied in view of the question about the good way of living together in the *polis*. That there is still a crucial difference between teacherly gestures in the classroom and in the assembly, consider the difference between educating about politics and having a political discussion about education. In the first instance, what matters is that something (viz. politics) is studied out of love and care for this particular subject matter (i.e., study *as such*), whereas in the last case what matters is that studying together will lead to making a decision about something we consider wrong with the topic under discussion (viz. education).

## Concluding remarks

Today, in a time of pervasive privatisation such an understanding of politics and the public debate is not obvious (to say the least), and – to some extent – it may even be that it is no longer possible at all. This is because we are increasingly living within the confines of our echo-chambers geared by the mechanisms of ‘social media’ (Kosiński *et al.*, 2013). As the digital is the medium through which we are connected with the world, it frames our experience of the world and the ways we establish our relation with the world. It is today rather common sense knowledge that the digital works by aggregating and accelerating our clicks, i.e. that it needs our activity in order to perpetuate. As we click, the algorithms of the digital learn how to feed us, they learn how to provide the kind of “news” that will make us more active in clicking. And hence it is no longer we who learn from the public debate or from the world, but inversely the machine that learns from us. This way, our view of the world, as selected by our own personalized newsfeed is increasingly narrowing down. However, we are not conscious of this, as we just search for the news, and the search engine noiselessly works out a selection that comes with the disguise of being ‘the’ official one. Hence, we no longer are exposed to a public agenda, instead we are fed with news prepared just for us. This situation cannot be interpreted in terms of the plurality of public spheres (Cf. Frazer 1992), because it consists of the opposite movement of the privatisation of the public, i.e., of creation of many separated, homogenous, and antagonistic bubbles where particular groups of people ‘feel at home’ with their idiosyncrasies

and personal beliefs. These beliefs are not challenged but become ever more radicalised. Moreover, one is unable to go beyond one's bubble, because the walls of the echo chamber one is trapped in are too high, and there is no hill one could climb to see the common. Hence, the political process as it stands today is reduced to a demonstration of differences: it functions as a totemic practice of showcasing these new kind of tribes (Maffesoli, 1996). There is no commonising momentum in this sort of politics, and hence, no teacherly gestures are displayed<sup>9</sup>.

But then there is the threat that such a critical understanding of our current situation severely restricts our political agency and leaves us with a purely fatalistic attitude. In spite of this, we believe that politics in the strong sense – as we have sketched it out in this article – can happen, and arguably is happening from time to time. One way to deal with this tension consists of looking for historic examples of the emergence of studious public.<sup>10</sup> Another could consist of making determined attempts to perform teacherly gestures and enact the studious public, precisely in spite of the critical knowledge we have and that suggests that achieving this today seems impossible.

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<sup>9</sup> To a certain extent, the proliferation and omnipresence of digital technologies, which in the wake of the corona-crisis risks to become a permanent condition, might threaten occasions for truly commonising for another reason. According to the thesis put forward by Harold Innis in *Empires and Communication* (Innis 2007), it could be argued that there are means of knowledge dissemination that are intrinsically privatizing and intrinsically communizing. Where Innis had in mind the shift from pre-alphabetic culture (where access and dissemination used to be a privilege for an elite that protected this privilege from the masses and where the creation of new knowledge was almost non-existent) to alphabetic culture (where knowledge is publicly available, open for contestation and study, and hence subject to constant revision and innovation), a similar but reverse argument could be made in relation to the proliferation of particular digital technologies that come with privatizing tendencies. Unfortunately, there is no opportunity here to develop this argument.

<sup>10</sup> We believe that the Polish Solidarity (Solidarność) movement of 1980-1981 could function as such an example (cf. Skórzyński 2014; Machcewicz 2015).

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