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Journal for Research and Debate

assembly & public sphere

Steffen Wittig

This article aims to grasp the social mode of Arendt's pedagogically relevant metaphor of an 'assembly around a table' as a specific way of thematizing the ambiguity of the public sphere from two different perspectives. From one perspective, I want to examine how 'assembly' can be grasped as a mode of being together. To do this, I will sketch 'assembly' with Juliane Rebentisch as a 'plurality event'. Here I encounter the problem that alteritarian, mutually elusive, and unfathomable approaches to self and world have to be permanently translated into each other. This in turn gives rise to the question of how to maintain plurality. From a second perspective, I will try to grasp this 'maintenance of plurality' performatively with Butler. Bodies assemble and claim their presence in a public space of appearance. But it is precisely through the indexicality resting in these bodily acts that a reference is made from a particular position to a universal – to making precarity, homosexuality, transgender, racism, etc. disappear.

Keywords: assembly, body, performativity, plurality, public sphere

1. Insufficient Introductory Words

The term 'public sphere' has been used in various contexts in the debate on educational science in recent years. But amid this heterogeneous discourse, a fundamental problem with the concept can be found: the public sphere is pedagogically riven.
Firstly, objects that are discursively described as pedagogical are articulated as objects of the public sphere. Thus, education appears to be a heterogeneous public task (Beck, Herrlitz & Klafki, 1988). On the one hand, collaboration is deemed to be a crucial element of a democratic education (Schroeter & Kohle, 2004) and the public education system should thus enable a "pluralism of views" (Oelkers, 2017, p. 729) by allowing subjects to take their own critical position on social phenomena. On the other hand, the public education system is articulated as an object of public control. This has been evident at various points in recent history such as in the 'Bildungskatastrophe' (educational catastrophe) noted by Georg Picht (1964) in the Federal Republic of Germany, or in the 'Sputnik crisis' observed throughout the Western world, from which the educational reform processes of the 1960s and 1970s followed. In the context of the 'PISA moment' identified in Germany, the hope of educational reform through processes of governance of public education (Kopp, 2008) was activated to 'innovate' the educational system. At the same time, such a 'controlling public sphere' limits what can appear as education and what cannot. Education is hegemonically uttered – through an approach to literacy (Messner, 2003, p. 401) – as a 'competence'. Education as a 'public task' thus comes close to political control, but it is "not identical […] with the interests and actions of the state" (Oelkers, 1988, p. 592). Public education also articulates itself as something that addresses a "living together in the community" in a specific way (Oelkers, 2017, p. 2).

Secondly, the public sphere is articulated within pedagogical discourses as something to which pedagogy must critically relate (Amos et al., 2011; Oelkers, 1992). This notion can be traced to the current public transformation processes of the social. Pedagogy is challenged to take a critical stance on the public discussion of the Covid-19 pandemic (Bengtsson & Van Poeck, 2021), right-wing populist narratives (Andresen, 2018) or sustainable development (Brandt, 2021). Pedagogy is interwoven with a dichotomy: On the one hand, having to position oneself critically in relation to the public, because any critical use of "public reason" is always a "thinking of several" against the background of a possible judgement of others about one's own positioning (Gelhard, 2012, p. 24). On the other hand one is confronted with a limitation of one's own relations to the public by the public. *But: It seems not clear through this outlined problem, what exactly one could understand under the public sphere in pedagogical terms* (Hofhues, 2010).

These differential approaches indicate an ill-defined conception of the public sphere. Hannah Arendt, however, concisely defines her concept of the public sphere in *Vita Activa* (1958; 2016): the public sphere is articulated as something that both marks and limits the space of the visible and the sayable. It produces itself as a space of appearance, as a sphere in which one appears to be positioning oneself in front of a 'general public' and one another. The public sphere is thus the effect of those positionings. However, the public sphere also becomes something that powerfully displaces positions in the realm of the invisible/unspeakable. A 'general' that articulates itself in this way judges what is recognized as worthy of being considered or heard by all, and "automatically" (1958, p. 64) excludes from the realm of the public that which appears irrelevant to this 'general'. The public sphere is thus both an effect of subjective positioning and a powerful limitation of the same.
To address this ambivalence, Arendt uses (at least) two polyphonic metaphors: first, she uses the *metaphor of light* to sketch her concept of the public sphere in 'Menschen in finsteren Zeiten' (People in Dark Times): "The light of the public sphere darkens everything" she writes, in a contradictory tone, modifying Heidegger (Arendt, 2017, p. 9; see also Golle & Wittig, 2022).
Secondly, she employs the *metaphor of the table* around which people *assemble* to discuss something as a means to describe the public sphere (Arendt, 1958, p. 53). *'Something'*, an object/topic/problem *lies on one side of the table* as a general point of reference. This point of reference *'gathers' subjects on the other side* of the table who *act heterogeneously in* a 'common world' that is articulated as relevant from their various perspectives (p. 53). Through this double metaphor, she draws the polysemic picture of ambivalence of the public, which seems relevant to the preceding pedagogical thematization of the problem of the public.
In the following, I would like to denote 'assembly' in this context as something that relates to this ambivalence in a specific way. Assemblies are events that can relate critically to the public sphere and its powerful effects because of their plural and performative mode of appearance. I would like to elaborate on these two attributes (of plurality and performativity) in the following. To address this 'mode', I want to ask two questions: First, how does assembly articulate itself? Here, I would like to refer to Juliane Rebentisch's (2022) deployment of a 'plurality event'. And second, how can 'assembly' be conceived as something that has 'performative effects'? I will approach this second issue via Judith Butler's positionings on it in 'Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly' (2015).

2. How to Think of Assembly as a 'Plurality Event'

I would like to turn first to the concept of assembly as addressed by Juliane Rebentisch. She discusses this concept against the background of the phenomenon of *plurality* (Rebentisch, 2022, p. 29). Interestingly, according to her, Arendt articulates plurality not "as a condition, but as an

implication of human togetherness in speech and action"*1* (p. 29). "Plurality" is thus articulated as a "political phenomenon" (p. 29), and this seems crucial to me with regard to Rebentisch's implicit outline of a notion of assembly, of the meeting and interweaving of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. At this point, however, it is crucial to distinguish between Arendt's concepts of (subjective) 'distinctness' and (intersubjective) 'otherness'. Both combine to form the concept of uniqueness: In Arendt's words: "In man, otherness, which he shares with everything that is, and distinctness, which he shares with everything alive, becomes uniqueness and human plurality is the paradox plurality of unique beings" (Arendt, 1958, p. 176).

Rebentisch makes this differentiation clear with the use of Arendt's distinction between the first and second birth of the human being. Distinctness is shared with all living things. Every new biological life comes into the world "biologically pre-spurred" (Rebentisch, 2022, p. 30) and distinct. That is what one can call *'first birth'* (p. 30). For Arendt however, in this (material) 'arrival of the distinctively new' in the world, there is necessarily also the 'arrival of otherness' (Arendt 1958, p. 177). It is the "'fact' of being 'born'", according to Rebentisch (2022, p. 31) in her interpretation of Arendt, that the first birth brings about the possibility of new things entering the social world in action and speech. This refers to the *'second birth'* of the human being (Arendt 1958, p. 177), which is inseparable from the biological 'first birth': it is the involvement in a "web of relationships" (p. 181). This 'web' is articulated with reference to two activities: 'action' and 'speech'. For Arendt, both acquire explicit political significance in the context of human coexistence and the characterization of the public sphere.*2* But they also seem to be mutually dependent. Speech without action does not exist for Arendt (p. 178). Only "through the spoken word" does the deed fit into a context of meaning (p. 179).*3* is linguistically structured". Man is 'born into' this linguistic structuring of action in the world.]
It is this acting 'being born into' the 'web of relations' that, for Rebentisch, indicates the condition for an assembly in the sense of a plurality event. Natality, for Arendt, is called upon ambiguously here: on the one hand, the Greek verb *archein* or the Latin verb *agere* outlines a "to set into motion" (p. 189) in the sense of 'to begin' something new. To begin in this sense is to refer to "whatever may have happened before" (p. 178). Action, in the sense of archein/agere, is placing oneself in "the presence of others whose company we may wish to join" (p. 177). The materiality of the world and the acting references seem to inextricably interweave in actu here. Human beings have to relate to the past action of others and at the same time, their action initiates a new beginning. Interestingly, in her German translation of *The Human Condition* (*Vita Activa*), Arendt uses/adds the term 'thread'. One tries to weave one's thread "into an already pre-woven pattern [to] thus [change] the web" (Arendt, 2016, p. 226). In this respect, Arendt refers to the second side of the meaning of the word 'action', translated with the Greek *prattein* or the Latin *gerere*, which means 'bearing' or 'achieving' (Arendt, 1958, p. 189). By trying to start something new, one weaves one's thread into the existing 'web of relationships'.

The 'plurality of human beings' is thus characterized – as a condition of assembly – as an intersection of 'biologically preordained' distinctness and intersubjective 'otherness'. According to Rebentisch (2022, p. 35), the "who of the person" can only be experienced in togetherness. This distinctness becomes subsequently tangible at most in 'narratable stories' from the 'web of relationships'. Identity therefore proves to be unfixable, unpredictable, and contingent. With each individual's speaking and acting, an assembly thus becomes a meeting of many such intangible and fleeting approaches to the world, i.e. of "perspectives from which the world of the individual appears" (p. 34). It becomes a 'plurality event'. So, the perspectives of the individuals meet and assert themselves in their distinctness, without being able to fully take on the perspective of the

other. Distinctness seems to be interwoven with the otherness of the other. “Plurality is, therefore, a plurality of perspectives, of being able to access the world”, without being able to dispose of the possibility to “take the place of the other without losing either oneself or the other in the process. What constitutes the otherness of the other is that there is an abyss between his stream of consciousness and mine” (Loidolt, 2012, p. 387).

Assembly, invoked as a ‘plurality event’ via Rebentisch’s interpretation of Arendt qua Loidolt is “not something that is by itself (like mere ‘diversity’), but something that we do. It is an intersubjective process that does not take place automatically or necessarily, that is subject to certain conditions and that is always endangered if it is not maintained” (Loidolt, 2018, p. 2). An assembly around a ‘thing on the table in front of us’ can thus be invoked as an event in which alteritarian, mutually elusive, and unfathomable accesses to self and world must be permanently translated into each other, fail at each other, and thus shift accesses to self and world. At this point, however, it is questionable whether it can be meaningful *to maintain plurality*. For this, I will draw on Butler’s perspective and her ‘performative theory of assembly’. Butler, however, also uses an approach to Arendt which shifts the perspective on assembly once again.

3. Assembly as ‘Performative Event’

Against this background, the question arises: how can plurality be maintained? If one continues to follow Rebentisch (2022, p. 242sq.), this problem focuses on the idea of a dispute that shows the limits of the Arendtian perspective. If one follows Straßenberger (2015, p. 92), Arendt’s concept of public-political space is articulated along ‘two complementary distinctions’: on the one hand, there is the described reference to the concept of action as the difference between agere/gerere; on the other hand, there is the separation of privacy and the public sphere. In a nutshell, the realm of the private constitutes for Arendt, in her reference to the Aristotelian differentiation between *oikos* and *polis*, a “pre-political phenomenon” (p. 41). The privacy of the oikos exists only to satisfy the needs of life support. The demarcation of the oikos from the realm of the political makes the (free) sphere of the public-political possible. Free citizens (i.e. non-enslaved men) could exert their distinctness/otherness qua political positioning amidst the public-political because in the ancient polis slaves and women provided for human needs. It is thus quite plausible to follow Lefort’s (1988) critique of Arendt’s position on the public-political when he says Arendt “is convinced, on the one hand, that speech is the sole medium of persuasion and, on the other – which is equally naive – that the exchange of words is in itself egalitarian, that it cannot transmit any inequality of powers” (p. 53sq.). It is precisely this linguistic reproduction of the “inequality of existing power relations” (Rebentisch, 2022, p. 249) in Arendt’s perspective that is Butler’s starting point for her positioning on the question of ‘how plurality can be maintained’.

Butler (2015, p. 44) responds to the Arendtian differentiation between the private and the public with the following question: “How are we to think about the passage from the private to the public, and do any of us leave the sphere of dependency ‘behind’ even as we appear as self-standing actors within established public spheres?” For Butler, reflection on the powerful involvement of subjective action in a ‘web of relations’ becomes a condition of public agency (cf. p. 45). She criticizes Arendt’s position, in particular her opinion that unique actors publicly exchange their positions in free speech acts. ‘Agency’ for Arendt is “a specific power of speech, and […] the speech act is the model of the political”. Butler’s criticism of Arendt is therefore that “the body does not enter into the speech act” (p. 45). But she also points out that for Arendt this position shifts in *On Revolution*. There, Arendt emphasizes “that the revolution is embodied” (p. 46).

For Butler, making actions public is primarily about subjects performatively assembling in a "concerted bodily action" (p. 48). Assemblies appear in their "embodied character of plural human action" (p. 48). This embodiment of plural action in the assembly is characterized by the fact that it refers to something that "signifies in excess of what is said" (p. 8). The individual (performative bodily) act refers to a general one, which in turn is only brought into being through the collective relation of bodies to one another. At the same time, this 'general act' seems to constitute the 'concerted bodily action' as an embodied assembly. Thus, Butler summarizes this problem as follows: "This parking of my body in the middle of another's action, is neither my act nor yours, but something that happens by virtue of the relation between us" (p. 9). The individual body indexically points to a problem beyond the individual body. Formulated in terms of #blacklivesmatter, precarity, or Occupy Wallstreet: "it is *this* body, and *these* bodies, that require employment, shelter, health care, and food, as well as a sense of a future that is not the future of unpayable debt; it is *this* body, or *these* bodies, or bodies *like* this body or these bodies, that live the condition of an imperiled livelihood, decimated infrastructure, accelerating precarity" (emphasis in original, p. 10).

Following the debate with Laclau and Žižek (2000) on the social production of a universal, and emphasizing her positioning here, Butler makes a strong argument for the performative gesture of the assembly: whether Occupy Wallstreet, #blacklivesmatter, or #metoo – in the physical creation of a presence in public space lies an indexical reference to a subject confronted with a specific problematic. Or, as one could denote with Laclau, it is the confrontation of an "alliance" (Butler, 2015, p. 27) that emerges precisely in confrontation with the articulation of a 'general crime' that 'borrows' its name "from the particularity of the oppressive regime" (Laclau, 2000, p. 55). Such an 'alliance' thus procures the right to appear in public: through demonstrations, actions, vigils, or the like. All these physical actions articulate themselves indexically in this context: "We might say that there is a group, if not an alliance, walking there, too, whether or not they are anywhere to be seen" (Butler, 2015, p. 51).

However, this 'indexicality' is not necessarily performativity in the sense of a "vocal or written" performativity. The body "speaks" politically by the "virtue of occupying and persisting in that space without protection, posing its challenge in corporeal terms" (p. 83). This "persistence of the body in its exposure[d]" situation of not being allowed to appear in an appearance space "calls that legitimacy into question and does so precisely through a specific performativity of the body" (p. 83). It is this critical bodily questioning of a specific order that marks a second perspective on what can be called 'assembly'.

4. Assembly

In this article I have tried to bring together two different perspectives. Firstly, I wanted to examine how 'assembly' can be understood as a mode of being together. To do this, I sketched 'assembly' with Rebentisch as a 'plurality event'. Here I have been confronted with the problem that the alteritarian, mutually elusive, and unfathomable approaches to self and world have to be permanently translated into each other. This in turn has given rise to the problem of how to maintain plurality with Loidolt.

From a second perspective, I have tried to understand this 'maintenance of plurality' performatively with Butler. Bodies assemble and claim their presence in a public space of appearance. But it is through the indexicality resting in these bodily acts specifically that a reference is made from a particular position to a universal – to making precarity, homosexuality, transgender, racism, etc.

disappear.

The pedagogical relevance of this discussion of 'assembly' exists, therefore, on a variety of levels. In my opinion, the intersection of both perspectives is particularly interesting from at least two pedagogical points of view. Firstly, in both perspectives, a subjectivizing effect of 'assembly' seems to be observable. In the topology of a "plurality of approaches to the world" (Rebentisch, 2022, p. 44), untranslatable perspectives come together, but they only develop their significance from the fact that they are seen and heard by others. This necessitates the need to permanently translate the self and the others into each other in an attempt to master plurality. This permanent translating into each other nevertheless produces a difference between 'I' and a possible 'We' as a possible consensual perspective (Butler, 2015, p. 52). An assembly thus becomes a permanent stimulus for education through precisely those failed attempts at translation. Secondly, 'assembly' becomes a "common doing" in the mode of an "affective connectedness of the participants" (Thonhauser, 2018, p. 254). At the same time, however, it remains questionable how such a mode of 'affective connectedness' can be described. Does one simply become so involved in what Arendt calls 'the world', which has not been considered here? Does it not also require learning how to relate to the world and to those things that one articulates as problems? Is there a need for 'learning to articulate' (Ruitenberg, 2010)? In any case, a closer look at the object of the assembly is required, which is seen neither as a political "practice of ritualized self-purification" (Harten, 1992, p. 151) nor as a "principle" of producing "consensus" (p. 151), but rather as a manifestation space of difference in the social.

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Recommended Citation

Wittig, S. (2022). Assembly & public sphere. *On Education. Journal for Research and Debate*, *5*(14).
https://doi.org/10.17899/on_ed.2022.14.3

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1. Translations in the following – especially of Rebentisch's 'Streit um Pluralität' – S.W.
2. They are the ones that set themselves apart from the purpose-bound activities of working and producing and situate themselves beyond any necessity (Arendt, 2016, p. 35).
3. Benhabib (2006, p. 311) points out, however, that this does not mean that speaking, similar to Searle or Austin, is itself to be understood as action. Arendt only goes so far as to say that "human action […