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Do we all have to be “leftists”?

A dialogue about antagonism and agonism in music education research

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Abstract

In this article, the tension between diversity and uniformity in our music education research communities is discussed as it relates to Thomas Piketty's research on elites and shifting political leanings, Francis Fukuyama's and Judith Butler's reflections on identity politics, and Chantal Mouffe's critical discussion of an *antagonistic* way of thinking, in which opponents are not defined politically but, rather, morally. We must establish an *agonistic* public sphere, Mouffe argues, a political sphere characterised by fights in which different political projects confront one another, accepting the fact that identity is relational. The article is the result of a series of ongoing dialogues between the authors and offered as an attempt at agonistic turn-taking that clearly identifies the two voices involved and their respective views.

Keywords: *music education, diversity, uniformity, antagonism, agonism, identity politics*

ØV & PD

Introduction

Dialogues are fundamental to our human lives, including our professional lives and collegial communities. In the tradition of philosophy, the dialogue genre is well-known – especially, of course, the dialogues of Plato, in which Socrates discusses philosophical questions with different people in Athens. As thinkers, we do not claim to be on such a level. However, in a number of conferences hosted by the Nordic Network for Research in Music Education

(NNRME), we have presented joint papers as dialogues. This article is based on a dialogue we performed at the online NNRME conference in 2021. The starting points for our dialogues have always been questions of a philosophical character, which we have both seen as interesting and important. Even though we may not always agree on everything and may represent different research interests and philosophical positions, we enjoy our common reflections, including the possibility to learn something new from a colleague and friend.

We have presented our dialogues as articles in different publications (see, for instance, Dyndahl and Varkøy (2017)). This is, however, the first time we present an article based on a dialogue in a scientific journal. The dialogue genre may, to a certain extent, challenge some of the criteria of traditional academic articles. It is quite natural that some parts of a dialogue are more academic, while other parts have a more conversational tone. It is, however, our conviction that the possibilities inherent in such a variety of levels of language use and discussion may open up certain patterns in the process which may enrich our thinking and argumentation. In fact, such a tension may even make the thinking and argumentation more transcendent than in traditional academic texts, which is certainly a good thing. In general, we think it is important to challenge fixed ideals of defined methods and methodologies, which sometimes put restrictions on our paths of thinking and writing. There are many reasons to challenge what may be seen as ‘frozen requests’, which make us, as academics, too afraid of allowing ourselves to be ‘simplistic’, so we end up confusing ideals of academic quality and seriousness with a ‘complicated’ and ‘exclusive’ level of language use. Thus, in this text we have chosen to maintain the tension between a conversational tone that is the nature of dialogue and those parts characterised by more academic and conceptual terms.

We would also like to stress the fact that this is a dialogue between two Nordic researchers in music education. Hence, our experiences and ways of thinking when it comes to political tendencies and music education communities may differ quite radically from, for example, North American (USA and Canadian) perspectives. Now, on to the dialogue.

ØV

Diversity – and uniformity

Our Western societies are often described as pluralistic and diverse, and proclaimed to be multicultural. A variety of values are said to have been freed from hierarchical models. People with different cultural and ethnic backgrounds are expected to coexist and respect one another. The general idea is that our time is dominated by a cultural mentality that values diversity. Simultaneously, however, it is quite easy to find some opposing tendencies in our societies, tendencies toward uniformity, which in a worst-case scenario, can lead to a simplified and naïve understanding of life, society, and culture. Thus, there seems to be

a tension between proclaimed pluralism and diversity on the one hand, and expressions and experiences of uniformity on the other (Varkøy, 2017). This paradoxical situation is expressed in what appears to be a dream of ‘consensus’, a longing for agreement and a common understanding regarding the value and function of music education in music education research.

An example

In a discussion with three younger colleagues around the breakfast table during an international music education research conference a few years ago, the following question was addressed: ‘Do we all have to be “leftists” to feel welcome at a conference like this?’ I think the question was brought up in connection with the perception that we were a seemingly homogeneous group of researchers regarding our political positions and ideas. Perhaps the question was based on the idea that researchers are open-minded people who are always asking for more critical reflection. My younger colleagues were surprised to find that the conference participants all seemed to agree on certain values and political ideas defined as being ‘politically correct’, specifically some sort of leftist political position and a political activism inspired by the atmosphere of polarisation in the North-American political culture (as we know, what is defined as a radical left position in a North American context may, in a Northern European context, be regarded as a mainstream social democratic position).

Thus, the question ‘Do we all have to be “leftists”?’ triggered an interesting discussion around the breakfast table concerning how to deal with political ideas we do not like in music pedagogy research. If a research community is characterised by political consensus, there may be a risk of people with other political opinions and positions perceiving themselves as marginalised. Any consensus-based community may have a tendency to suppress discussion and difference of opinion; that is, it may function in a relatively authoritarian manner. If we want to avoid such a situation, it becomes important that we ask ourselves the following questions: how should we deal with political ideas we do not like in music education research? How should we, for example, react if we meet a student who espouses right-wing populism or an identity-political right-wing position?

As a starting point in our dialogue, I ask the following question: what is your experience regarding the pluralism of political ideas and values in music pedagogy research, Petter?

PD

Let me approach your question by first referring to music educators in the general sense. Some time ago, our Norwegian colleague, Professor Catharina Christophersen, made a notable statement. To be honest, it kind of woke me up. She declared that music teachers are a more homogeneous group than those they are expected to teach. My further reflections

on this partially obvious observation – and this is where music education research comes in – rest on the premise that music educators, at least music education researchers and higher education staff members, as a group, belong to a kind of academic and thus cultural elite.

Thomas Piketty on elites and shifting political leanings

In that context, I would like to refer to the fact that, a few years ago, the French economist Thomas Piketty (2018) delivered a research report entitled ‘Brahmin Left versus Merchant Right’, which shows some dramatic political shifts among both the economic and cultural elites of Western countries based on data from France, the UK, and the US from 1948 to 2017. At the beginning of this period, the pattern was that the political left represented the poor and the right-wing parties represented the rich. Most of the highly educated, who Piketty calls *Brahmins* in this context, with reference to the traditional Indian upper class of priests, teachers, and other intellectuals, also voted to the right, thus forming a political alliance with the merchants. This means that the upper classes held together, while the left was dependent on votes from the working class. This is no longer the case, according to the report. Now, the presumably left-wing parties in France, the UK, and the US receive almost twice as many votes among the highly educated as the right-wing parties do. In other words, a new pattern has emerged, one in which the cultural and educational elites vote to the left, while the economic elites vote to the right. In addition, far more people with lower education and income levels vote for right-wing parties. We have gradually moved from a class-based party system to what Piketty calls a *multi-elite* system, a model he believes can help explain the increasing inequality of these societies, the lack of democratic reaction to the same development, and the break-through of populism. In 2021, an updated study was published (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, & Piketty, 2021) that contained similar data from all the 21 countries commonly referred to as Western democracies, including Norway and the other Nordic countries. The same patterns are confirmed in this report, with some modifications. For example, data from Norway, Sweden, and Finland show the following:

[...] the support of higher-educated voters for social democratic parties was lowest in Norway, Sweden, and Finland between the 1950s and 1970s, three democracies well known for having stronger historical class-based party systems than most Western democracies. The reversal of the education cleavage has not yet been fully completed in these countries, as social democratic parties have managed to keep a nonnegligible fraction of the low-income and lower-educated electorate. (Gethin, Martínez-Toledano, & Piketty, 2021, n.p.)

Notwithstanding this, regarding the international academic context you were referring to, middle-class music educators with an interest-related affiliation with the Brahmin left, will often advocate liberal values related to, for example, feminism, LGBTQ rights, environmentalism, cultural diversity, immigration, and globalisation, at the same time as they

(or should I say *we*?) do not have the same objective interest in economic re-distribution as the working class. Thus, in that sense, as academics, we are a more homogeneous group than those we are expected to serve, but if this is to be interpreted as a *leftist* position, I think it is crucial not to interpret it as an emerging alliance with the classes in society that have traditionally been underprivileged in the economic sense. Rather, we should see it as a type of *identity-political* positioning. What do you think, Øivind?

ØV

I find your way of arguing highly relevant and to the point. Thus, let us walk straight into the swamp of the ideological struggles of our time, into the ‘lion’s den’ so to speak: *identity politics*.

An example

Last year, at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts, 130 students signed a call for the need for greater anti-racist awareness at the institution. This act was clearly inspired by Black Lives Matter. Some of these demands were unproblematic, for example, the desire to map racism and include more non-Western perspectives in education. Others were more troubling, for example, demands for the compulsory anti-racist training of employees. What I find to be the most troubling aspect of this situation, however, was the way in which the students who were critical of this call were defined as racists, members of the alt-right, and incels. This kind of conflict reveals some problematic aspects of what we call ‘identity politics.’

In the call from the students at the Academy of the Arts, the work *vb.48 721* by Italian-born American artist Vanessa Beecroft that was hanging in a public space at the Academy was brought into focus (see <https://koro.no/kunstverk/vb-48-721/>). The students argued that this picture had racist and sexist connotations and that it had to be removed from the building. They argued that Beecroft is part of a long line of whites who exoticise people with skin colours different from their own. The picture was considered a work by a successful Western woman who used the coloured bodies of others in a navel-gazing identity project.

However, is this work racist? What do we see? We see a group of women of colour with ribbons over their breasts and simple panties. According to the artist, the work reflects her experience with the paperless women of colour whom she had seen in the city streets. The fact that they are given a place usually reserved for people in positions of power can be regarded as rendering visible otherwise invisible persons. A crucial point of the work seems to be that the only woman who is *not* painted appears almost white.¹ Why? Perhaps it is to

1 According to the artist: ‘Urs Schoenebaum, the lighting designer, was told to imitate a Caravaggio type of illumination. And Hilde Reljin, the make up artist, was asked to paint the girls black matte, like a fresco; Dusan Reljin, the still photographer, was given similar references in order to realize pictures that could be reproduced in a life-size dimension like Renaissance or Baroque figures.’ (<https://flash---art.com/article/vanessa-beecroft/>)

highlight the problem of often having to include a white person's perspective in order to gain recognition or the fact that almost every form of power is associated with a laundering of beliefs, skin colours, and points of view that deviate from the white norm? Perhaps it is to create friction between who is usually seen and who is usually not? The artwork may be smarter than the artist and allow viewers to learn something about class, skin colour, gender, art, and power. If we reduce the work to racism, its potential artistic power may be diminished. We reduce it to ideology.

Whatever we think about Beecroft's work, I would argue that maintaining nuance in the interpretation of works of art is important (Barthes, 1977; Barrett, 1994; Sontag, 2009). My point is that this work, in itself, is not necessarily racist and can be interpreted in other ways, even as a counterpoint to sexism and racism. I am not saying that such a dissonance-oriented view is the only correct reading or even the best, but it is legitimate and does extend the space available for interpretation. Art can certainly be used as an oppressive tool. In spite of this, art should be a space in which the range of expressions and positions should be broad, not nailed to ideological positions or locked into a particular understanding. Interpretive diversity is important for the function of art in a broad public discourse because, without such diversity, the room for interpretation will reflect and contribute to a polarised public defined by 'us' and 'them' and 'right' and 'wrong' points of view. Røed (2020) for example argues that artists must be free to explore gray zones of an intellectual, emotional, historical, and aesthetic nature. Works of art are not always 'pleasant' or 'correct' with regard to the suffering of certain groups or the moral frameworks that apply in society at all times.

Seeing art from a minority perspective or updating how we think about both art space and art production is extremely important. The few students who were critical of the idea of removing Beecroft's picture, however, argued that they were at the Academy to receive an education in the arts, not in ideology. Thus, they argued that identity politics limits academic freedom and artistic integrity. The situation at the Academy of the Arts in Oslo triggered an intense debate for weeks in the Norwegian media and certainly revealed some problematic aspects of identity politics.

I am very well aware of the fact that my argumentation in regard to this example is, in itself, a way of ideological positioning. When I argue in favour of the freedom of artists, critical questions can certainly be raised. Even if works of art may be smarter than artists, art may fall short of its intentions. In such a case, is it not reasonable that it may be curtailed? My answer to such a question is, however, that I am, in general, very critical of any idea of censorship.

Francis Fukuyama on identity

A vast number of intellectuals have discussed identity politics over the past few years. One prominent voice in this context is Stuart Hall, who may be said to attempt to meld identity politics and Marxism, blaming the British Labour Party for its belief that political subjects

are one-dimensional actors whose motivations can be reduced to economic interests (Hall, 2017). Allow me, however, to begin in a more provocative way, by focusing on the American political theorist Francis Fukuyama.

Fukuyama may be said to belong to a group sometimes labelled ‘airport intellectuals’, doing their thinking and writing between flights to different destinations worldwide to present their latest books; academics who prefer a philosophical discussion to one based on empirical data. And, of course, he may be more controversial in some parts of the world than others. The level of ‘controversiality’ may, however, also be seen as a question of ideological character.

Fukuyama (2018) begins by claiming that modern societies have not fully solved the problem of *thymos*, a Greek term, with reference to Socrates in Plato’s dialogue *The Republic*, for the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity:

Ah, but anyone believes he is wronged, does not his temper boil and fume then because he suffers hunger and cold and so forth? Doesn’t it fight for what it thinks just? Doesn’t it hold out until it conquers, and never cease in noble persons before it succeeds ...
(Plato, 1999, p. 280)

Thus, Fukuyama (2018) offers the following definitions: *thymos* is ‘... the part of the soul that craves recognition of dignity; *isothymia* is the demand to be respected on an equal basis with other people; while *megalothymia* is the desire to be recognized as superior’ (p. xiii).

Demand for recognition of one’s identity is, according to Fukuyama, a master concept that unifies much of what is occurring in world politics today. Contemporary identity politics is, according to Fukuyama, certainly driven by a highly democratic and just quest for equal recognition for groups that have been marginalised by their societies (Fukuyama, 2018, p. 9). A desire for equal recognition can, however, easily slide into a demand for recognition of the group’s superiority. This is a large part of the story of nationalism and national identity, as well as certain forms of extremist religious politics today. There is a reduction, even a dehumanisation, of ‘the other’. The room for dialogue is drastically reduced. When opponents no longer are defined politically but, rather, morally, they are no longer ‘opponents’ but ‘enemies’. If we define ourselves as the bearer of ‘the good’, two things happen, Fukuyama argues: a) we immunise ourselves against objections (because how is it possible to be wrong when we are the embodiment of ‘goodness?’), and b) the opponent must necessarily represent ‘the evil’. Thus, Fukuyama argues that identity politics can become a threat to democracy. Even if he supports the #metoo campaign and the Black Lives Matter movement, he, for example, argues that the demands of minority groups cease being positive when identities are seen as essential.

Fukuyama underlines that the identity politics of the political right wing are very dangerous. At the same time, he argues that this right-wing way of thinking about identity has been stimulated by political correctness (not least concerning identity politics) on the

American left. Within the left, there sometimes occurs an unhealthy patrolling of debates on the part of activists representing a narrow-minded fundamentalism and totalitarian way of thinking who have given themselves a mandate to sanction the opinions of others. In such a cultural situation, it is a challenge *not* to belong to the group of people who have given themselves a mandate to sanction the opinions of others, i.e. *not* to be a part of the group who has taken the power to define. Opinion majorities and opinion minorities position themselves in relation to one another, and conservatives are promptly defined as 'far right'.

According to Fukuyama, the extension of the public debate to digital arenas has certainly led to democratisation because people can participate. At the same time, however, this development threatens democracy because certain forms of exchange of opinion dominate. We are so used to the media outlining a conflict between two opposites that we struggle to reason and argue outside a mindset rooted in opposites. This is despite the fact that most people are aware that, in all complex cases, there are parallel processes and dynamics that simultaneously affect one another. Bullying from loud Facebook profiles has become the rule rather than the exception in debates around art and ideology. This strategy succeeds surprisingly well; there are few people who can handle a great deal of mudslinging and rumourmongering. Thus, we may ultimately have an academic and art field afraid of testing arguments and trying out new perspectives.

What do you think about such a proclamation regarding the ongoing political polarisation?

PD

Well, polarisation is undoubtedly a problem if it locks contradictions into destructive positions, as in the United States. Although I agree with Fukuyama's reasoning in principle, as well as his critique of the insistence on moral superiority, and the tendency to import cancel culture and a propensity for de-platforming from both the right and the left, I have begun to doubt whether the concept of identity politics really has the analytical power required or whether it is too burdened with mutually defining dichotomous, power-laden concepts.

Critique of Fukuyama

To begin with the latter option, one of the controversies regarding Fukuyama's perspective is that he has always been a staunch defender of liberal capitalism and that he sees this mode of production as the only viable path toward human development and global modernisation (see Fukuyama, 1992). It is, therefore, liberal capitalist democracy that he considers threatened by identity politics. Truly, as you mentioned, it is first and foremost the emergence of reactionary and exclusionary identity politics that Fukuyama criticizes. When he

describes identity politics as a struggle for recognition and a manifestation of resentment over lost dignity, he blames, directly and indirectly, much of the current state of affairs in identity politics on minorities and leftists, as well as on the failure of left and center-left politics to address the problem of social and economic inequality over the past 30 years. Describing the reactions to the left’s alleged political correctness, ineptitude, and failure in terms of lost recognition and subsequent resentment among those affected, Fukuyama believes this is reflected in and imitated by many right-wing extremist groups who demand that their own supremacist identities be recognised, acknowledged, and confirmed. Tarik Kochi (2021) argues, within such a perspective, that ‘Fukuyama’s account of identity is dangerous in the way that it legitimises a right-wing nationalist discourse of blame targeted at the mischaracterisation of minority and left-wing “identity” politics’ (Kochi, 2021, s.p.). I see Kochi’s point, but I also think Fukuyama’s critique of the essentialisation of both identity and morality points to a necessary reflection. Thus, it becomes reasonable to turn to a philosopher who has greatly contributed to deconstructing taken-for-granted assumptions, such as identity.

Judith Butler on identity politics

In a recent interview given by Judith Butler in connection with their participation in the annual Holberg debate organised around the Norwegian Holberg Prize, which is awarded to scholars who have made outstanding contributions to research in the humanities, social sciences, law, or theology, they state that movements such as Black Lives Matter are not about identity politics as such, but first and foremost, about justice and freedom, freedom to move freely and to have access to health services and housing (Larsen, 2021). In opposition to Fukuyama’s description of the demand for recognition, Butler states that, while identity politics is caricatured in the form of ‘this is who I am, recognize me’, in reality, very few behave this way. Those who do so are mainly white men, and the largest and most influential identity-political movement in the world today is white supremacy and forms of nationalism that support it, they claim. Butler is not exactly known for underestimating the significance of identity or having naïve, essentialist notions of its features. However, in this particular context, they emphasise that, in addition to operating with philosophical, sociological, or historical definitions of identity, one important question is how the term is used in political and public debate, in other words, what ‘work’ identity does in our lives right now (Larsen, 2021).

At my own expense, I will argue for the importance of combining both theoretical and political levels of analysis. I must admit that, since we began this dialogical discussion several months ago, I have more than once had to confront myself and adjust or change my position on identity politics. For example, I have realised that, by being critical of what may be perceived of as self-righteous cultural posing, superficial demands for recognition, and nothing else, I may involuntarily enter into a political alliance with right-wing forces that

ultimately want to undermine democratic institutions and practices in fundamental ways. I assume that this is something quite different from respecting views opposite to my own as legitimate in an open exchange of opinions. However, it confirms Butler's call to ask what the functions of identity in public and political debate are, in addition to seeing the concept as a theoretical one.

Seemingly parallel to but also different from Fukuyama, Butler is also most critical of right-wing identity politics. However, their critique of left-wing politics has a slightly different approach; they argue that leftists in general (or Marxists in particular?) have the simplistic belief that any political issue can be traced back to or subordinated to a critique of capitalism. Again, I can feel targeted in this regard, but nonetheless, I believe that, if we move from academic institutions and discussions to actual political contexts, there is a reason to return to the dynamic right-left axis, as I described above. In my opinion, a real critique of capitalism is almost absent from today's political left in North America, Western Europe, or the social democratic Nordic countries, and this has a great deal to do with the recent socio-cultural and socio-economic basis of interests and electoral patterns in terms of voting for Western left-wing parties.

Brahmin leftist music education

Thus, in order to bring music education more explicitly into the discussion, I would argue that, as long as this is a field and profession predominantly managed by the Brahmin left, music education and its institutions will be likely to confirm rather than to criticise or challenge the basic capitalist socio-economic order of things. Of course, such a pointed argument rests on several premises.

Firstly, it requires that the fields of culture and education can be interpreted and analysed in some sort of symbolic economic terms which interact with the material economy in dynamic ways that contribute to constituting and reconstituting power and political structures in society, as Piketty implies. In this respect, Piketty's reasoning rests largely on Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) social theory and the recognition that there is a cultural economy with specific forms of capital. Both economic and cultural capital are unequally distributed between the social classes, which are thus defined by both forms of capital (e.g., Bourdieu, 1984, [1986] 2011).

Secondly, the argument is based on the assumption that music is of great importance for negotiations and renegotiations of social and cultural position and status, something Bourdieu (1984) clearly states in his main work, *Distinction*: 'music represents the most radical and most absolute form of the negotiation of the world, and especially the social world' (p. 19), an argument that has been reinforced by a more recent, large-scale cultural sociology study conducted by Bennett et al. (2009) in the UK. The latter study indicates that 'music is the most clearly separated of all our cultural fields (...). It is the most divided, contentious, cultural field of any that we examine and is central to our concern with probing

contemporary cultural dynamics and tensions’ (p. 75). Somehow, this condition must necessarily also constitute a framework for music education.

Thirdly, the above claim assumes that Western music education is truly dominated by the Brahmin left. Of course, there is a wealth of anecdotal evidence to the contrary, and this will obviously also vary in time and space and across situation and context; however, based on findings from the research groups around Piketty and several large-scale international studies of political trends among Western societies’ educated classes, it is a reasonable assumption that this is, nonetheless, the case at the macro level. In the fields of culture and music, this assumption is supported by the fact that there have been significant changes in recent decades when it comes to what music genres seem to function as socio-aesthetic markers for today’s privileged classes’ self-perception as open, tolerant, and liberal people – in contrast to Bourdieu’s (1984) description of the rather rigid hierarchy of high and low culture in the 1960s and 1970s in France. Research publications in both cultural sociology and music education that support this view are, among others, Peterson (1992), Peterson and Kern (1996), Regev (2013), Dyndahl, Karlsen, Skårberg, and Nielsen (2014), Dyndahl, Karlsen, Nielsen, and Skårberg (2017), Dyndahl (2019), and Dyndahl, Karlsen, and Wright (2021).

Against this background, I still venture to claim that while people with higher education tend to take a leftist stance on issues of culture and what, in the Bourdieuan sense, could be called the symbolic or cultural economy, they (*we!*) are often less willing to share the burdens that global capitalism places on the working classes, both in terms of material and cultural conditions. When this set of circumstances also tends to be followed by the moralism, disdain, and distaste for so-called low culture described by Bourdieu (1984) and others (although nowadays interpreted on a far more subtle level; see, for example, Dyndahl, Karlsen, and Wright (2021)), it is often met with contempt for the elite and a perception that education has little relevance to ordinary people.

I consider these to be crucial issues in today’s music education: to what extent is music education prepared to deal with the compound and complex roles music plays in different social, cultural, and aesthetic fields? To what extent has higher music education and teacher education taken responsibility for preparing students for the society in which they will work?

I think that, sometimes, we, as music educators, confuse the legitimation of our own professional identity with an almost religious belief in the seemingly undivided good and positive qualities attributed to music and music education in order to overcome sexism, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia (to mention a few). In this respect, music education has a long history of harmonising the functions of music because we have been taught over and over again to nourish an unconditional optimistic belief in the power of our art form to overcome even economic exploitation and classism, either by simply believing that art makes us equal or by recognising that aesthetic education can be instrumental for social

mobility. Educational sociologist Diane Reay, however, argues, in her important but highly disturbing book *Miseducation. Inequality, education and the working classes* (2017), that social mobility, even if it provides a degree of success for a small number of working-class individuals, is far from being a solution. With reference to Basil Bernstein's (1970) statement that 'education cannot compensate for society,' Reay describes the problems of social mobility for the working class by saying that:

[...] in contrast to the rose-tinted view of social mobility in both political and popular understandings, at the collective level it constitutes a form of asset stripping of the working-classes, while at the individual level it often results in ambivalence, dislocation and a sense of belonging to neither the class one has come from nor the class one has nominally joined. (Reay, 2017, p. 129)

Like Bourdieu, Reay sees culture, as well as education, as social fields in which one struggles to accumulate cultural capital within a system that fundamentally presupposes inequality. Accordingly, music education also helps to maintain a fundamentally unjust social system. Thus, in my opinion, any music education that embraces the political interests of the working class, as well as its cultural perspectives, should reveal that music is as much the problem as the solution, but this is unfortunately far beyond the reach of the harmonious union found at music academic conferences or, for that matter, in middle-to-upper-class identity politics, simply because it is not in the class interest of the Brahmin left. If that were to happen, it would require both a much more thorough political analysis and a more active political stance.

Are there any theoretical approaches that could contribute to such considerations?

ØV

Yes, I think there are. I will turn our attention to some aspects of Chantal Mouffé's thinking that I find to be most stimulating in this context.

Let me, however, first make a short comment on your reference to Butler's claim that there are only a few who represent an identity political position in the form of 'this is who I am, recognize me' and that these few are mainly right-wing white men. I think the tension between them (as well as Kochi) and Fukuyama must be seen in light of their different political positionings. They may be seen as political activists who are articulating different political projects that oppose one another. When you spotlight the danger of involuntarily ending up in a political alliance with right-wing forces because you are critical of some trends in left-wing identity politics, I very much agree, even though I do not want to enter into a political alliance with illiberal left-wing forces either. Thus, the need for a profound awareness of the complexity of this situation seems to be clear.

Chantal Mouffe on ‘consensus’

Now, it is time to turn our attention to Chantal Mouffe and her discussion on what she calls the post-political vision of a globalised and universalised world, one characterised by liberal democracy, peace, welfare, and human rights in a society without enemies (Mouffe, 2005, 2013).

To deliberate democracy in the light of consensus and reconciliation is politically dangerous, Mouffe argues. The hope that every distinction between ‘we’ and ‘them’ can be transcended is based on false premises. However, Mouffe warns against an *antagonistic* way of thinking, which includes the dehumanisation of ‘the other’ and in which opponents no longer are defined politically but, rather, morally. They are no longer ‘opponents’ but ‘enemies’ representing ‘the evil’. Thus, instead of *antagonism*, we must establish an *agonistic* public sphere, Mouffe argues, a political sphere in which different political projects confront one another, accepting the fact that identity is relational.

An important aspect of *agonism* as a political theory is that, unlike *antagonism*, it implies a respect and concern for the other. Antagonism is a we/them-relation in which the two parts are enemies without a common fundament, while agonism is a we/them-relation in which the conflicting partners realise that there is no solution to the conflict while also acknowledging the opponent as legitimate. Thus, according to Mouffe, the task of democracy is to transform antagonism into agonism. The conflicts are still real, but they exist under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by both parts. In a democratic society, a number of interests and demands exist that should be seen as legitimate, even when they are in conflict with one another and no consensus can be reached. Mouffe, however, argues that we must make a distinction between legitimate demands within an agonistic discourse and demands that must be refused. A democratic society, for example, cannot treat those who call basic democratic institutions into question as legitimate opponents.

From this point of view, Fukuyama and Butler represent different political projects confronting one another within the frames of democracy. We must relate to these differences in an *agonistic* and not an *antagonistic* way. When Kochi accuses Fukuyama’s discussion of identity politics of being ‘dangerous’, claiming that it ‘legitimises a right-wing nationalist discourse’ (Kochi, 2021, n.p.), this may represent an antagonistic attitude rather than an agonistic one. As I see it, Kochi’s rhetoric of polarisation seems to articulate a moral judgement rather than a political statement.

Perhaps Mouffe’s discussion of antagonism versus agonism is a theoretical path to transcending consensus-driven academic communities and polarisation?

PD

Certainly, along with Mouffe, I am more willing to accept open polarisation than obscure consensus, at least when it is situated in a Nordic context. I find her concept of agonism

very interesting and believe it can work productively. It is especially interesting in relation to what I – despite Butler’s rejection – consider to be the most profound and basic structural inequality and injustice under capitalism, namely class issues. As indicated above, I think these are systematically underestimated for reasons related to the fact that seemingly left-wing perspectives are predominantly held by Brahmins these days.

Issues concerning social class and music education

In an article from 2019, Vincent Bates makes the following claim: ‘All in all, music education academics tend to elide social class concerns. Furthermore, this imbalance appears to be somewhat unique to class; intersections with gender, sexuality, and dis/ability are accorded relatively more attention’ (Bates, 2019, p. 120f). Perhaps, we can interpret such an imbalance in the light of a specifically American historical context. Bates maintains that, in contrast to racism and sexism, ‘classism is still an acceptable framework for overt deficit thinking even in liberal and academic settings’ (2019, p. 134). In today’s polarised climate, contempt for the lower classes is expressed at all levels of society; it has even been uttered from the very highest rostrums. I recall the condescending way in which President Emmanuel Macron described the French Yellow Vests, and Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton infamously calling Trump voters ‘a basket of deplorables,’ utterances which had serious repercussions.

But how on earth can we, as music educators and academics, cope with such a situation, which must be described as antagonistic rather than agonistic? Because a great deal of education research has established that the middle classes are the ideal normative class within education, schooling, and parenting, it may be easy to agree with the demand, inspired by Reay, that ‘[w]e need a sea-change in the ways we think about, value, recognize and respect all cultures – including working-class culture’ (Reay, 2017, p. 191), not least in music education, I would add.

But what does this mean? Obviously, there are class-related patterns of music genre tastes and distastes, but these are dynamic and shifting with respect to time and place. Ultimately, the most solid pattern is what Bourdieu (1984) describes as the relational organisation of society: what the lower classes like is disliked by the upper classes, and vice versa. A class society may always be undermined by an antagonistic premise, but in order to cope with this fact within democratic frameworks and according to democratic procedures, it is crucial to strive for the agonistic ideal Mouffe sets out for us. In that case, if music education can recognise that the subject of music is a battleground over cultural capital, social status, and class distinction, this would, on the one hand, entail an important reality check. On the other hand, it may represent a prerequisite for agonistics.

In addition, if one recognises that there are structural mechanisms of oppression in our society, from a sociological point of view, concepts such as ‘structural,’ ‘systematic,’ and ‘systemic’ must be further situated and defined. Are we talking about, for example,

cognitive, linguistic, cultural, socio-economic, material, hegemonic, and/or other power-laden structures and systems? Which of these structures and systems have consequences in terms of how they can be perceived and challenged? Likewise, from a philosophical perspective (for example, as Fukuyama has promoted in liberalist terms), I believe that the tendency to essentialise certain experiences and identities and, in that sense, make them untouchable by critical discussion hinders efforts to arrive at an agonistic condition.

Against this background, my main objection to today’s identity politics is not that it triggers right-wing extremism, as Fukuyama points out. I lean more toward Butler, who claims that it overshadows legitimate struggles for social and cultural justice, but I differ from them in that I, like Bates, believe that it is precisely class issues that easily become invisible in contexts where sexism and racism are indeed rightfully illuminated. Nonetheless, while I may be annoyed that the noise of some of the imported identity-political antagonisms is drowning out what I sincerely perceive as misrecognised socio-economic injustice, it is crucial to try to keep all the inhumane components of the capitalist system together in a joint, preferably intersectional (see Crenshaw, 2020), critique. It is in this very context that I believe that the Nordic countries, as compared to the entrenched *culture war* that has characterised US society during and beyond Trumpism, have conditions that will help in reaching a state of agonism in both public debate and music education. Maybe it is time to raise our voices against the massive North American colonisation to which we are constantly exposed?

ØV

I think so. Let us begin by taking a closer look at the consensus concept once again, this time dealing with the concept in a more positive way than Chantal Mouffe does.

In a discussion on how politics in Norway seem to be heavily influenced by theories and perspectives created in an American reality, the Norwegian social scientist and former politician for our Socialist Left Party, Kjetil Raknes (2020), makes a key distinction between so-called ‘consensus democracies’ and ‘majority democracies’.

Consensus democracies (and in this context ‘consensus’ does not have the same negative connotations as in Mouffe’s thinking) use proportional representation, which results in many political parties, while majority democracies often result in two-party systems. Majority democracies are characterised by a large concentration of power in the hands of those who win elections. In consensus democracies, broad coalitions and cooperation are necessary. Typical consensus democracies include the Nordic countries. The United States is an example of a majority democracy. In consensus democracies, people are more satisfied with democracy, more people vote in elections, fewer people are in prison, gender equality is greater, inequality is less, and the welfare state is more generous. Consensus

democracies also cope much better with high levels of conflict. In Mouffe's terms, they may be said to be agonistic cultures, while majority democracies may seem more like antagonistic cultures.

According to Raknes, a new form of critical theory produced on American campuses has become a major cultural export, flowing across the Atlantic over the last few years – with the full force of mass-produced popular culture. Raknes, however, argues that polarised American debates about identity politics do not add anything more than superficial noise to Nordic politics. Nordic countries do not need any emergency assistance from the United States to understand the development of our own democracies.

Today, we live in a cultural and political situation in which authorities and politicians, even in Western European countries, warn against political correctness, censorship, and what they experience as left-wing political activism among academics, especially regarding gender theory, critical racialism, and postcolonialism. The French warn against 'Islamogauschism', that is, a situation in which one takes on Islamists with silk gloves and imports ideas and cancellation culture from the United States. Researchers are accused of being 'woke', provocatively aware of and preoccupied with everything that can be defined as an injustice, and always concerned with pointing out enemies. In Great Britain the 'ombudsman' for freedom of expression will ban universities and student associations that do not protect free speech against, for example, stage denial for unpopular voices. The former Norwegian Minister of Higher Education, representing the Conservative party, was equally worried about a polarised climate within Norwegian universities and academia and organised a group of experts to take a closer look at the situation of academic freedom. According to him, it is a fact, confirmed by both right-wing and left-wing academics, that conservative academics are being punished and excluded because of their political opinions.

Does this, however, mean that conservatives are as concerned with diversity of opinion as they seem to be? Or is this a question of creating and defending a particular story about existing societies? In an interview with a Norwegian newspaper, Noam Chomsky, an institution on the American left, sheds light on such questions. He claims that 'cancel culture' is nothing new. The only difference is that, today, it is the left that represents such a practice (an interesting statement in view of Butler's argumentation above). In the US, writers, journalists, actors, and other media personalities lose their jobs because of statements that some find offensive. In fact, this is a practice that reactionary forces throughout history have used to silence activists and writers who fought for social progress, Chomsky claims. Now, the same approach has emerged among some leftists, including those in American universities, where activist students are fighting to create 'safe areas' – areas in which abusive behaviors or statements are not allowed. It was wrong before, and it is wrong today, Chomsky points out. If you do not like what a certain person is doing, then you can just stay away, he says (Chomsky, in Giessing, 2021).

Concluding remarks

Is there more polarisation than before? Maybe. Is every instance of polarisation harmful? Seen from a Nordic point of view, maybe not. As long as social differences and conflicts exist, we should not fear, but accept polarisation. It clarifies important tensions. If ‘polarisation’ sounds too scary, we can replace the term with ‘disagreement’ and ‘conflicts’ – embracing an agonistic culture.

What about the tension between diversity and uniformity within music education research communities? Do we all have to be ‘leftists’? By embracing the ideals of an agonistic culture, we can be *anything*: radicals, liberals, or conservatives. We proclaim that our societies and communities are pluralistic and diverse. Do we really want our research communities to be characterised by diversity? If the answer is ‘yes,’ we have a problem if our communities are perceived of as longing for consensus, agreement, and common understanding.

Even when we support the ideals of anti-racism, feminism, LGBTQ rights, and decolonisation, we must realise that when we attempt to create pluralism, we sometimes construct uniformity. When we want to create diversity, we may create uniformity and conformity. In such a paradoxical situation, we must endure the fact that our views, attitudes, and values, as well as our status, position, and power, are constantly being criticised and challenged.

Our cultural institutions seem to face a moment of trial. Powerful protests for racial and social justice are leading to overdue demands for policy reform, along with wider calls for greater equality and inclusion across our society, not least in higher education and the arts. However, these *needed* calls have also intensified a new set of moral attitudes and political commitments that tend to weaken our norms of open debate and toleration of differences, in favor of ideological conformity. As we applaud the first development, we must raise our voices against the second. The democratic inclusion we desire can be achieved only if we speak out against the intolerant climate that has set in on all sides. We must fight against the demand for the ‘purity’ of ideas and practices. When critical 68’ers, as well as some of their students, make their way into retirement, opportunities will open up for younger generations to redefine their role as critical intellectuals. What we need as academic communities is to accept differences, disagreements, and conflicts within the frames of an agonistic democracy.

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Petter Dyndahl is a professor of musicology, music education and general education at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences. He has published research results in a wide range of disciplines, including music education, sociology of education and culture, cultural studies, popular music studies, music technology and media pedagogy. In recent years, Professor Dyndahl has been project manager for the research projects *Musical gentrification and socio-cultural diversities* (2013–2017), and *DYNAMUS – The social dynamics of musical upbringing and schooling in the Norwegian welfare state* (2018–2022). Both projects have been funded by The Research Council of Norway.

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