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SECTION: INTERVIEW

The Discipline of Agonistic Democratic Education in a Polarized World: an interview with Claudia W. Ruitenberg

A disciplina da educação democrática agonística em um mundo polarizado: uma entrevista com Claudia W. Ruitenberg

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Received: Jun 19th ,2024. Approved: Jun 24th,2024 Published: Sep 11th.2024. **Abstract:** This article presents an interview with Professor Claudia W. Ruitenberg on agonistic democratic education. Based on her seminar presented at the VI International Conference on Philosophy of Education and Critical Pedagogy, held in November 2023 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, her lecture entitled "The Discipline of Agonistic Democratic Education in a Polarized World" serves as the basis for an interview focused on the dimensions of agonistic discipline. A set of eight questions was presented with the aim of understanding in detail her contribution to agonistic models in times of social and political polarization.

Keywords: Agonistic Democratic Education; Political Polarization; Agonism; Formal Education.

Resumo: Este artigo apresenta uma entrevista com a Professora Claudia W. Ruitenberg sobre educação democrática agonística. Com base em seu seminário apresentado na VI Conferência Internacional de Filosofia da Educação e Pedagogia Crítica, realizada em novembro de 2023 em Porto Alegre, Brasil, sua palestra intitulada "A Disciplina da Educação Democrática Agonística em um Mundo Polarizado" serviu como base para uma entrevista que focaliza as dimensões da disciplina agonística. Um conjunto de oito perguntas foi apresentado com o objetivo de compreender em detalhes sua contribuição para modelos agonísticos em tempos de polarização social e política.

Palavras-chave: educação democrática agonística; polarização política; agonismo; educação formal.

Introduction

The decision to carry out this interview with Professor Claudia Ruitenberg is linked to the purpose of disseminating original content in reference to contemporary discourses on Education and Politics. The interview was carried out by members of the Education and Violence Research Group (GruPEV), which since 2016 has been producing studies and theoretical-practical research on education and violence, namely education as a form of violence and school violence. The interview was based on Ruitenberg's presentation at the VI International Conference on Philosophy of Education and Critical Pedagogy, which took place on November 29th 2023, at Pontificia Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS), in Porto Alegre (RS), Brazil.



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Since its first edition in 2014, the event, created in England, arrived in Brazil with the proposal to critically debate education, with the premise of sharing experiences and knowledge produced, as well as promoting integration and cooperation in the academic community. Under the coordination of Professor Alexandre Anselmo Guilherme (who is also one of the contributors to this publication), the sixth edition of the Conference was marked by debates concerning the concrete and theoretical challenges of the Philosophy of Education and Critical Pedagogy, with the aim of broadening the framework of knowledge, both in relation to the field of theories and the field of practices. In this edition, as a reference in the areas of Educational Theories, Ethics and Social and Political Philosophy, Claudia Ruitenberg gave a keynote lecture.

Professor of Philosophy of Education in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada, Claudia Ruitenberg has done an extensive work in philosophy of education, including the monograph *Unlocking the world:* Education in an Ethic of Hospitality (2015). As discussed in the author's own academic biography, her interests include the debate on agonistic (that is, conflict-oriented) conceptions of politics and democracy; ethics (including Jacques Derrida's ethics of hospitality); speech act theory and discursive performativity; philosophical research methods; and finally, aesthetics and art education.

Based on Ruitenberg's lecture, entitled *The Discipline of Agonistic Democratic Education in a Polarized World* (which also served as inspiration for the title of this publication), the interview focuses on agonistic conceptions, through eight questions which answers are transcribed in their entirety, all uncut and unedited by the authors.

Before proceeding with the interview, it is necessary to clarify the concept of agonism, which is present throughout this publication. Ruitenberg's writing on agonistic democratic education is based on the work of the political theorist Chantal Mouffe, who has advocated agonistic pluralism. The emphasis on deliberative reasonableness in democratic education suggests an effort to overcome

conflicts, which, according to the conception of political scientist Chantal Mouffe, represses the constitutive forces of democracy. Instead, the agonistic model prioritizes affect, political imaginaries, and working with political passions in education. According to the interviewee's conception, this model does not serve to suppress conflict and political disagreement, but to use them as "force to be channeled into political and democratic commitments" (Ruitenberg, 2009, p. 272).

As Tryggvason (2023) explains, there are a multitude of interpretations of the concept of agonism, and regarding this work, we will describe the concept used in the educational approach. In the educational approach, agonism has been highlighted in school environments as a resource for teachers to mediate issues related to political polarisation and conflicts related to it. In short, "agonistic education can be described as an approach that aims to support students' participation in political and democratic life" (Tryggvason, 2023, p. 2). Additionally, we bring the vision advocated by Ruitenberg, who over the years has investigated agonistic conceptions in the educational axis, namely education for radical democratic citizenship and the education of political adversaries (Ruitenberg, 2009, 2010).

Authors: At the conference, you said that we live in times when people seek to destroy the enemy, their ideas, and the right to cultivate them. Considering that the school can be a counterpoint to this tendency, what is the limit that separates conflicting situations of agonism from what already constitutes antagonism? What is the line between these two perspectives?

Ruitenberg: I am not sure we have ever lived in a time without people who have sought to destroy others they perceived as enemies, their ideas, and the right to cultivate them. Some people believe that all antagonism (that is, unbridled opposition) can be converted into democratic agonism (that is, the kind of opposition and contestation that respects the principles of equality and liberty that

underpin a democratic order). However, I agree with Mouffe (2014) that, while we should strive to channel as much antagonism into democratic agonism as possible, the category of the "enemy" is still needed. The events of January 6th, 2021 are one example that underscores this, as the attackers of the United States Capitol and the people in it showed no respect for democratic institutions and processes, and could appropriately be labeled "enemies." The German "Citizens of the Reich" movement, 27 members of which were arrested in December 2023 (Vock, 2023), is another example of a group that explicitly rejects democratic institutions and processes and for which the term "enemy" is needed.

The challenge is that this category of "enemy" cannot easily be translated into the school context. Yes, we can teach children the difference between "enemies" and "adversaries", and we can also teach children the range of appropriately adversarial activities that democratic movements have undertaken to contest a political order, which include voting, asking critical questions in parliament, and using the legal system, but also organizing strikes, petitions, and other forms of collective protest. However, we cannot just label children "enemies" if they express ideas that, were they expressed by adults, might sound like the ideas of enemies. At school, students are studying, learning, trying out, and practicing ideas, skills, and dispositions. If a student expresses some extremist idea, or criticizes the idea of democracy itself, this cannot be taken at face value as the kind of expression that should place them outside the sphere of legitimate political adversaries. This is not to say that such expressions cannot ever be cause for concern; if repeated and, especially, if coupled with violent action, they can even be grounds for expulsion from the school community. However, the primary response ought to be educational, not political.

Authors: Considering that the school is a place that contains rules and a space where security in relationships must be cultivated, according to your perception, are there non-negotiable values

that cannot be dispensed with in the debate when stimulating agonistic conflict?

Ruitenberg: The first thing I would say is that I am not so sure agonistic conflict should be "stimulated," except if you mean this as a way of channeling existing antagonistic conflict. Agonistic democracy is not a set of debate skills that need to be practiced, but a way of reading one's political world, of understanding where the key sites of struggle are in the political order in which one lives, and what is at stake in those struggles. Fostering that understanding is the task of political education.

I am uncomfortable with the idea that teachers should set up agonistic debate in classroom situations as a way of practicing agonistic contestation. One source of discomfort is that it is challenging to set up debates in which students are asked to take a side on real-life agonistic issues—meaning that, as Paulina Tambakaki (2014) has explained, the issues involve conflicts between political adversaries and pertain to left/right political distinctions—that do not affect students personally. Students living in poverty, students who are refugees, students whose parents have recently lost a job or who are struggling in an underfunded health care system are all vulnerable in debates about the current political order. Instead, I think our educational energy may be better spent on teaching students to understand the political order they are in and what the persistent disagreements are about this order.

Non-negotiable values for agonistic contestation are, obviously, that no physical violence is used, and that the fundamental values of equality and liberty are upheld. In addition, the adversaries in an agonistic political conflict must understand that some kinds of conflict are intractable, in the sense that no consensus or compromise is possible, so they must accept the emergence of these kinds of conflict as a necessary part of democracy. Third, the debate must play out in the political and not the moral register. This means that what one contests is the political order, or the vision of a political order, and not the moral

qualities or identities of the opponent (see the discussion in DesRoches & Ruitenberg, 2018).

Finally, if I add a non-negotiable value for political education, it would be that no elementary or secondary student should have their identity or rights questioned in a school classroom. Discussions that focus on some students' identities and concomitant rights should be off the table within school classrooms. Elementary and secondary students have limited political agency and limited or no choice about the classrooms they spend many hours per week in. For that reason, questions about any student's right to be in and feel welcomed in that space, if they are raised, belong in spaces outside the school.

Authors: Currently, due to political polarization in countries like Brazil, Argentina and United States of America, there is a strong tendency for classroom conflicts to spill over into situations of hostility between students' families or even between families and the school. How can we propose practices that make families aware that conflicts are not intractable, but must belong to education and political education?

Ruitenberg: As I mentioned, some conflicts in the political sphere are irresolvable, in the sense that whatever view gets to shape the political order inevitably provokes the contestation of the other side. The left/right distinction is a classic example of this, between those who favour a political order with a greater emphasis on equality and more state intervention and those who favour a political order with a greater emphasis on individual liberty and less state intervention. However, the school is not a context in which these kinds of irresolvable political conflicts can and should be pursued; rather, it is a context in which they can come to be understood.

The school is not a neutral institution; it is, itself, part of the institutions that make up the democratic political order, and it has certain ground rules of its own. Not all scenarios in which a classroom conflict spills over into hostility between students' families or even between families and the school involve political conflict in the agonistic sense, and there

are times when a school should take a clear side. I am thinking, for example, of conflicts between students and parents involving racism, homophobia, or transphobia. There (and I'm thinking of both the Canadian and Brazilian contexts), the school's job is to make it clear it works within the anti-discrimination protections for racialized, queer, and trans people. This means that all students, regardless of racial identity, gender identity, and sexual orientation deserve to be treated with respect in the school. The school is not neutral in this, and conflicts in which the identities and rights of students in the school are at stake are, in my view, not suitable topics for classroom debates.

Authors: The school's socialising function promotes relationships of otherness and tolerance, but it is at school that experiences of friendship and companionship are also developed. Because agonism can reveal the position of the other, sometimes more radical, it would not be strange if someone did not want to cultivate deeper ties with someone who is not democratic or who defends fascist positions, for example. How to mediate situations in which the revelation of radical positions causes more subtle forms of exclusion and hostility?

Ruitenberg: True friendship is a beautiful and rare phenomenon, and no one (including children) can be obliged to develop the deep ties of friendship with anyone else. I think what you're referring to is that, when we spend time together in a social context, such as a classroom, we do need some ground rules for interacting, the "shallower ties," if you will, of keeping the social space functional. For example, students need to listen to what someone says, and respond to what has been said; if they respond from their prejudice about who the other person is, rather to what this person has said, they need to be corrected.

However, your question also refers to students who espouse non-democratic and fascist positions. Here, I would like to reiterate that fascist and other non-democratic ideas should not be endorsed in or by the school. The distinction that Doret de Ruyter and Stijn Sieckelinck (2023) make

is helpful here. They write that, while students should have "the opportunity of expressing, and thereby encountering and exchanging with others, their ideals, i.e., exploring sources of significance and purpose for themselves and others" (p. 425), they should also be taught that "having the freedom to express ideas and ideals does not imply that everything that students are allowed to say in school can be accepted by the school" (p. 426). In particular, students cannot continue to express ideas that threaten other students or dispute other students' right to be in the classroom. Whether it is a student expressing misogynist ideas and disputing girls' right to pursue the education they want, or a student expressing racist ideas and disputing racialized classmates' right to pursue the education they want, or anything along those lines, it can and should be made clear that these ideas are not welcome in the school and the classroom, because these spaces operate on the basis of values of gender and racial equality.

Authors: Antagonism, in contexts of political radicalisation has been experienced as something that hinders a debate based on rationality and reasonableness. In polarised school environments, how can school principals and others in school leadership guide those involved in the educational process, who may consider themselves enemies - and not adversaries - in an era of divisions that are experienced so intensely?

Ruitenberg: Political polarization undoubtedly affects the school and classroom environment. I imagine, for example, that, leading up to the 2022 presidential election in Brazil, there may have been tensions between parents or even students who were strong Bolsonaro and Lula supporters. The main thing to remember, I would say, is that no one benefits educationally if classroom discussions devolve into shouting matches between those defending different positions. The school should remain focused on the educational process, and this means teaching about the political order rather than seeking to replicate it. What I mean is that there is a lot of room to teach and learn about why the political order in a particu-

lar context is the way it is, and what the history is of repeated democratic contestations in that context. I am no expert on Brazilian politics but, from the little I know, I would say there is a lot to understand about the particular configuration of political parties in Brazil, how they have changed over time, and how they have been shaped by economic, social, and religious beliefs.

I want to reiterate that enemies are those who reject the democratic order and its basic principles of liberty and equality. Their values should not be endorsed by the school, or receive equal air time in the classroom. The school is not a space that should give room to unfiltered antagonistic conflict. When you refer to those who may consider themselves enemies in the school context, I wonder if you are referring to enemies as I have referred to them, namely as those who oppose the democratic order and the fundamental values of liberty and equality themselves. I suspect it is more likely that there are strongly felt oppositions between people who do all they want to remain within a democratic order, but whose political views are so divided that they can barely stand the sight of each other. This is where I emphasize that agonistic democracy takes tremendous discipline and commitment, namely the discipline to subjugate antagonism to the limitations imposed on it by democracy, and the commitment to democracy even when it would be less frustrating and more expedient to eliminate one's enemy.

Allow me to make a final comment about your description of "divisions that are experienced so intensely." There does need to be room for the affective side of politics and political education, for the political passions that guide our attachments. This is not to say, by the way, that all emotions and emotional expressions about any experience should be welcome. Political passions are not individual emotions but collective forms of attachment, which, as Mouffe (2014) puts it, "are mobilized in the political domain in the formation of the we/they forms of identification" (p. 155). So, while agonistic democratic education requires the discipline I have described above,

it does not rely only on reason and reasonable debate. Political passions play an important role in building political movements, for example.

Authors: Based on the assumption that human beings seek to avoid exposure to information that is discrepant from their traditional beliefs, it can be seen that stable perceptions of Donald Trump or Jair Bolsonaro denote that even scandals, dehumanising positions or those that generate intense controversy on the part of these leaders can lead us to the image of "Teflon", in which strong leadership is impervious to events that could discredit it. How can agonistic conflict help to overcome this "Teflon" that makes each individual's perceptions immutable and closed to new information?

Ruitenberg: We need to look not just at the epistemic content of ideas broadcasted by political figures or of the information others distribute to support or discredit them, but also at the other reasons for attachment to particular political figures. I had the pleasure of working with a Yuya Takeda, who finished his PhD dissertation in 2023. He analyzes attachments to conspiracy thinking, and takes the position, which I agree with, that we have to take seriously that associating with conspiracy beliefs and belonging to groups that promote them also offers people meaning (Takeda, 2023). We cannot understand or respond effectively to conspiracy beliefs if we consider them just an epistemic problem that can be remedied by more or better information alone. I would say the same is the case for populist political figures such as Trump or Bolsonaro. When Trump publicly suggested that research should be done on injecting disinfectants to kill the virus, or when Bolsonaro repeatedly promoted hydroxychloroquine as a COVID-19 treatment, this didn't negatively affect their popularity at all (McCoy, 2020). I understand it can be tempting to suggest that their supporters just don't understand science and that better information (and/or better science education) can remedy this, but I think this ignores other, non-epistemic reasons for people's attachment to these figures. Some

people are looking for a place where they feel respected or validated in spite of lower levels of formal education, others are looking a community that recognizes their disgruntlement at discovering that being male or white no longer brings the automatic social advantages it once did.

Agonistic democratic theory is helpful in this context because it calls attention to the importance of viable channels and platforms for properly political conflict. People will always find a group to identify with, and if they don't see a group focusing on political demands with which they can identify and where they can belong to, they will find some other kind of group identification – such as religious or racial identification – that offers a home. Political groups can include political parties as well as political movements, such as the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra in Brazil* or the Sunrise Movement in the United States.

Authors: According to your experience, there are successful experiences of training teachers to implement agonistic experiences in schools. Could you describe the pillars that you believe are important for this type of teacher training so that agonistic conflict can occur and be beneficial in school institutions?

Ruitenberg: As I have mentioned earlier, I don't advocate the implementation of agonistic experiences, if you mean by that the active staging of agonistic conflicts as a way for students to practice such conflict. Agonistic democratic conflict is what happens in the political sphere and what matters most is that students come to understand this. Therefore, I believe teachers need to have a thorough understanding of the political context in which they live and work, including how it came to be that way, that is, the political history of their context (and key moments in the global context), including the movements that played a role in social and political change over the years. Teachers cannot intervene in, guide, and redirect discussions about political topics in the classroom if they cannot teach students about what preceded today's political order, how political change has happened in the past, or what

traces of past political discourse are being taken up today. For example, in the United States today, if a student brings up Donald Trump's statement (December 2023) about undocumented migrants that, "They're poisoning the blood of our country," a teacher should not organize a classroom debate between those who defend and oppose this claim. On the contrary, the teacher's job is to teach the students about the history of this claim, which very clearly repeats the "blood poisoning" trope used by Adolf Hitler. Whether students do or don't come into the class with the personal opinion that Trump is "like Hitler" is not what matters; what matters is that students are taught about the texts that circulated certain ideas, as well as about other examples of politicians explicitly bringing back historical statements and tropes.

Authors: The path of agonism is complex, as it requires a commitment to democracy that doesn't seek to see the other as an enemy, but rather seeks to maintain the conflict. Antagonism, however, is easily fuelled on social media, skewed by algorithms, and fed back into families themselves. Can the school, by opting for the agonistic matrix, have the strength to fight against the radical political passions that are strongly sustained in environments outside it?

Ruitenberg: This is a great but very challenging question! My first comment is that we should not expect schools to solve all the ills of a society. I don't know if it's the same in Brazil, but in the countries which I am more familiar with, there has been an unreasonable expectation that schools can fix things in society more broadly. Have a racism problem? Tell schools to teach kids not to be racist. Have an environmental problem? Tell schools to teach kids to recycle and care for the planet. I'm being facetious, but the pattern of instrumentalizing education as a policy tool is serious. So, while I believe solid political education is needed, and I advocate an agonistic understanding of politics and democracy in doing so, schools are only one of the social institutions where change is needed if we want to fight unbridled antagonism; we will also need change in, for example, the media and institutions of government itself.

I touched on the concept of political passions earlier, and hopefully I have clarified that I don't think political passions are the problem, if we understand them as passionate attachments to properly political views that are part of the democratic agon. I do think there is a problem with some individuals and organizations deliberately fomenting and amplifying antagonistic feelings of hatred and disdain for others - immigrant others, Indigenous others, racialized others, queer and trans others, those who live at the intersection of various axes of marginalization - but those antagonistic feelings are precisely not political passions. Agonistic politics suggests "taming" them so that they become political passions that can be channeled in non-violent ways into democratic contestation.

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