

# What may we hope for? Education in times of climate change

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

In “The Crisis in Education,” published in 1954, Hannah Arendt suggests that adults who refuse to take responsibility for the world should not be allowed to educate children or to have children of their own. Her text describes the “general crisis,” which, according to Arendt, “has overtaken the modern world everywhere and in almost every sphere of life,” including education (Arendt, 2006, p. 170). Written for another time and with different problems in mind, her words were not meant to describe our present situation. Indeed, in light of the evolving ecological crises where the very conditions for life on earth are in peril (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2018; Steffen et al., 2015), Arendt’s use of the term crisis seems quite overblown. Nevertheless, her warning can help us to explore some of the important dilemmas that face educators of today, in a time where a range of unfolding, interlocking crises (ecological, social, and political) are on the horizon.

Arendt’s concern was the child-centered pedagogy of modern mass society, which “insofar as it attempts to establish a world of children, destroys the necessary conditions for vital development and growth” (p. 186). At risk, for Arendt, is the preservation of a *common world*: a public realm where freedom and individuality is possible.<sup>1</sup> The continued existence of a common world depends, according to this remarkable analysis, on the basic asymmetry of the relationship between child and educator, described as follows:

*Insofar as the child is not yet acquainted with the world, he must be gradually introduced to it; insofar as he is new, care must be taken that this new thing comes to fruition in relation to the world as it is. In any case, however, the educators here stand in relation to the young as representatives of a world for which they must assume responsibility although they themselves did not make it, and even though they may, secretly or openly wish it were other than it is. This responsibility is not arbitrarily imposed upon educators; it is implicit in the fact that the young are introduced by adults into a continuously changing world. (Arendt, 2006, p. 186)*

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In this context, being an educator means to take a position of authority, which for Arendt means to assume responsibility for the world as it is. It means to stand before the child, “as though he [the educator] were a representative of all adult inhabitants, pointing out the details and saying to the child: This is our world” (p. 186). Accordingly, adults who resign from the authority that is theirs as parents and educators also refuse to take responsibility for the world—for the purpose of authority is not authority in itself, but setting free the child’s ability to act on its own, to create and to “set the world right anew” (p. 189). In other words, what is ultimately at stake in education are the conditions for political (re)creation. This is the basis for Arendt’s astonishing conclusion that “[a]nyone who refuses to assume joint responsibility for the world should not have children and must not be allowed to take part in educating them” (p. 186).

Arendt’s critique was set forth at a time when the Western type of society had undergone a period of transition into what has later been described as “post-traditional society” (Honneth, 1996). The societal forms in question differ with respect to their modes of social reproduction. Where a traditional society reproduces itself through educational practices (formal and informal) where the norms and values of one generation are transferred to the next in a similar or slightly adjusted form, the members of a post-traditional society cannot take for granted that the norms and values of one generation are valid for the next. Consequently, each new generation of parents needs to question the instituted norms and significations of their societies to find out whether they can justifiably serve as norms for education.<sup>2</sup>

If Arendt’s requirement for educators is demanding as a general principle, it is even more so in a post-traditional setting; but under current conditions the logic itself seems close to breaking down. For how can educators represent, in a responsible and authoritative manner, a life-form—globalized, resource-intensive capitalism—whose basic functions are depleting its own support systems? A precise framework to describe for our current situation is the nine “planetary boundaries” identified by the Stockholm Resilience Centre to define the limits for a “safe operating place for humanity” (Steffen et al., 2015; see also Randers et al., 2018). This framework identifies the different levels of emissions, depletion, diversity and so on that must not be overstepped if an inhabitable biosphere for humans on the planet is to be preserved. At the time of writing, two of these boundaries have been overstepped and two more are very close to being so (Stockholm Resilience Centre, 2019).<sup>3</sup> In May 2019 the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services found that one million species—25% of the total number of species when insects are excepted—are at risk of extinction.<sup>4</sup> Such are the conditions of the world that educators, according to Arendt, must assume responsibility “even though they may, secretly or openly wish it were other than it is” (2006, p. 186). However, in the geological epoch called Anthropocene where the earth system itself has been irreversibly changed by human activities, how can a parent be expected to stand before the child, “pointing out the details” of the world without invoking fear, guilt, despair or denial? And to what extent are the dominant social structures experienced as something worth defending—as *our world*—for the coming generations? In a time of anthropogenic climate change, mass extinction and possible ecological crises the question of what it means to take responsibility for our common world seems more pressing than ever before, yet almost impossible to grasp.

This article attempts to explore some of the challenges—as well as some openings—for educational and political theory that emerge with anthropogenic climate change. Inspired by Hannah Arendt’s call to educators, the article is loosely structured around the three basic questions that, according to Immanuel Kant, guide all philosophical investigations, namely: what can we know; what ought we to do, and what may we hope for? While none of these questions is easily settled in relation to climate change and ecological crises, hope is arguably the most crucial factor. Hope—the belief that there can be a future worth our while, for humans and other living beings—is a fundamental condition for being able to invest in the kind of psychological energy that leads from knowledge into action. As a political (and moral) category, hope seems to be especially important for children and young people; nevertheless, I would argue that hope can be productive in the long term only when based on realistic assumptions and truth knowledge. In this respect, I am critical of much of the wishful thinking on climate change communication which, at least in the wealthier parts of the world, include the assumption that climate change can be “solved” by some kind of hitherto unknown technological innovation or that we already have the means to combat climate change and all we need to do is to implement them. On the contrary, my starting point is that deep alterations of the earth system are already taken place and that some of these processes are irreversible and escalating toward their tipping points. Climate change and other ecological problems have

simply become part of the conditions for life on earth. Consequently, among the questions that should be discussed is whether it will be possible for the children of tomorrow to live reasonably well under these prospects, and not least, whether a common world is attainable in a future where great changes will be taking place not only in the physical environment but also in the social infrastructure (O'Brien & Selboe, 2015) and the geopolitical world order (Welzer, 2012).<sup>5</sup>

My aim in this article is not to settle or conclude these questions, but rather to elucidate some of their implications, especially on the relationship between politics and education. Like Arendt, I believe that politics, freedom, and a common world are worth defending and that education is key in this respect, although my emphasis and conclusion is different. Moreover, and in opposition to the OECD-dominated educational policies in many parts of the world today, I hold that the fostering of political agency (or, with Arendt, renewal of our common world) is a legitimate aim for educators, justified (a) by the premise that no education can be politically neutral or independent from power relations and (b) by the conviction that the current economic and political development is unsustainable. With this in mind, let us now turn to climate change as a topic in education and public discourse and look at some of the reasons why it has taken so long to integrate concerns for the climate in various educational settings.

## 2 | A TROUBLING SUBJECT

Anthropogenic climate change can be a challenging topic for various reasons. The science is complex, involving many disciplines and modes of knowledge and the expected consequences range from the serious to potentially devastating. As a topic for discussion—in schools, in public discourse, in politics, and everyday life—climate change may trigger reactions of guilt, denial, anger, and resentment. When these concerns are brought into an educational setting the consequences are far from straightforward. In the following paragraphs I concentrate mainly on the Kantian questions of what we can know and what we ought to do in relation to climate change. The question of hope will be considered in later sections.

The scope of the discussion is quite general, relating to both formal and informal education rather than specific institutions such as schools, which would require a more detailed and contextually specific analysis. However, my examples, in the form of studies, scientific reports, and tendencies in the public media are mainly drawn from Scandinavia, northern Europe and the UK.<sup>6</sup> This has contextual implications. In Scandinavia especially, the relationship between children and adults is relatively egalitarian and is governed by the central educational ideals of openness, inclusion, autonomy, and secularism. It is also a region with high standards of living, high levels of trust in authorities and small (albeit increasing) differences between social classes. All these attributes of a welfare society are currently under various forms of pressure, as in many other parts of the world. In view of this, the topic of climate change presents itself as something more than a neutral, geophysical fact.

### 2.1 | Knowing without implications

The first reason why climate change is a difficult topic is that extremely serious consequences can be expected from climate change—consequences that are still, for the most part, in the future.<sup>7</sup> Kari Marie Norgaard, an American sociologist who studied how climate change was not addressed in a small Norwegian town, noticed that whenever she tried to talk to her informants about climate change “it often killed the conversation” (Norgaard, 2011, p. 55). Even though the townspeople were in some respects environmentally aware, they actively tried to “avoid acknowledging disturbing information in order to avoid feelings of fear, guilt and helplessness” and to “maintain positive conceptions of individual and national identity” (Norgaard, 2018, p. 4). The problem was not so much that people were unaware of—or did not care about—climate change and its consequences, but that they did not want to have this knowledge and certainly not to relate to it in a way that would affect their own lives. This mind-set, which Norgaard labels as a “double reality,” indicates individual and collective denial—not of the facts themselves, but of their implications.<sup>8</sup> The doubling of reality

makes it possible both to know and not know at the same time and thus to avoid being affected by this knowledge in one's own daily life.<sup>9</sup>

While the parents in Norgaard's study said they did not talk to their children about climate change as "they had it at school," the teachers were also reluctant to address the issue as it was "somehow too much" (Norgaard, 2011, p. 55). Under this constellation, neither parents nor teachers lived up to the educational authority called for by Arendt, saying: this is our world, for which we are responsible. One might say that, as role models for political agency, the adults in the study had failed their children.<sup>10</sup>

## 2.2 | Not a simple fact

When climate change is represented in public discourse it is rarely described as a physical fact or a condition for life that can be accepted as such. On the contrary, politicians, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the public media (at least in northern Europe and the UK) typically frame climate change as an intolerable problem that calls for remedial action, even a "solution." This narrative has normative implications, as this example from my own country shows. When a new report is released from the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change the Norwegian public media almost always accompany the presentation by asking why so little is being done to remedy the escalating changes. The alarming results of the reports are typically combined with national and comparative surveys of people's attitudes toward climate change, where the lack of remedial action is more or less directly related to citizens' lack of concern (see, e.g., Stoknes, 2014, 2015).

This particular framing suggests that the lack of adequate action is a result of individuals' psychological or moral predispositions such as their lack of belief in or fear of climate change (Shove, 2010; Straume, 2017).<sup>11</sup>

There is a growing academic field called climate communication, whose key disciplines are psychology, behavioral economics and media studies (Ytterstad, 2014). Interestingly, the primary target for this type of communication is not political parties or global actors, but individuals framed as consumers (who should alter their preferences) or citizens (who should vote differently). Again, this individualistic framing has depoliticizing consequences through the implication that the root of the problem is to be sought in people's beliefs or values rather than in the politico-economical system.

The narrative is problematic enough in the public sphere, where it generates the impression that people—neighbors, others—do not count as political subjects in these matters. When the same notion is applied in an educational setting, however, there are additional problems. For in so far as (or insofar as) the narrative of climate change implies that somebody has failed to act while referring to the faulty moral or psychological dispositions of ordinary people, these individuals are no other than the parents, neighbors and educators of children and young people themselves. At this point, the problem of authority pointed out by Arendt becomes acute; for how can a child develop a healthy psychological relationship with a role model who refuses to take responsibility for the world and continues to destroy it?

## 2.3 | Too much for the classroom

This leads to the question of who has the rightful, legitimate educational authority in case of conflicting opinions and values. In a Swedish study of teachers in eco-schools and eco-teacher education (Stagell, Almers, Askerlund, & Apelqvist, 2014), teachers were asked what kind of actions they would encourage their young students to undertake, and conversely, which types of actions were regarded as inappropriate according to their mandate as educators. The results were clear. Actions connected to the private sphere such as household, consumption, and recycling were considered as appropriate for the school context, while actions that could be considered as political were not. For example, most of the teachers did not endorse an encouragement to join NGOs, contact politicians or engage in party politics. In fact, even though the teachers might privately endorse these activities they considered them as inappropriate in the classroom (Stagell et al., 2014).<sup>12</sup> Teacher educators, on the other hand, were more willing to encourage students to

engage in political activities, and expressed surprise when learning that teachers stopped at the point where it would actually have become possible to influence the socio-political structures that frame the daily life activities of students.

There is a range of possible explanations for these teachers' reluctance.<sup>13</sup> One of the problems anticipated by the teachers in this study—and for Norgaard's informants who said that climate change was “somehow too much” for the classroom—could be that children who learn too much about anthropogenic climate change could become torn between what they learn at school and what they observe in their families and local communities. For the topic of climate change looks very different to various social groups, and some families will certainly have larger carbon footprints than others. Many conscientious teachers would probably be reluctant to sow seeds of conflict, guilt, or confusion into the alliance between children and their families and also to put the important relationship between the home and the school at risk. This brings us to the next question which concerns what Foucault (1981) would call knowledge-power: forms of knowledge connected to social class.<sup>14</sup>

## 2.4 | Whose problem?

The problems connected to climate change and environmental issues in general look rather different depending on one's position in the social web. In the history of Western modernity, environmentalism has traditionally been an interest of the upper and upper-middle class.<sup>15</sup> Similar differences can be observed in relation to climate change, where concerns about climate change typically increase with one's level of education. A study comparing attitudes to climate change vis-à-vis other environmental problems in 33 countries found that respondents who had higher education and politically liberal (centrist or leftist) sympathies are significantly more concerned about climate change than other groups (Smith, Kim, & Son, 2017). Indeed, in order to understand the complexities of climate change science a fairly advanced, broad education is needed in addition to time and opportunity—and even with a high level of education it is not clear what the correct approach to the problems should be.<sup>16</sup>

For a long period there was a tendency in the Western public media to present climate change as an issue surrounded by doubt and uncertainty, conflating as it were the reality of climate change with the uncertainty of its consequences (Smith, Tyszczuk & Butler, 2014). Even though this tendency is now on the decline, many citizens find it hard to understand how leading politicians can speak about climate change as the greatest challenge of our time and still continue with business as usual.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, one may argue that it is unreasonable to expect that every ordinary person should know which actions will benefit or harm the climate. Just leading an ordinary Western type of life, doing what everybody else does, unavoidably leads to environmental damage. Nevertheless, as pointed out by journalist George Marshall (2014), climate change is typically framed as a “perfect crime” where everybody is guilty, yet no one has a motive. Against this background it is quite understandable if some groups and families feel alienated by a discourse that is both difficult to decipher and in addition demands that they should do something about the problem without a clear understanding of how and what should be done.

## 2.5 | A shift of perspective

In recent years many climate change researchers have argued that issues of climate change cannot be properly addressed through techno-scientific approaches alone. In addition, and more importantly, they argue, we need to turn the lens to study how we think and speak about ourselves in relation to climate change (Hulme, 2009; Norgaard, 2011). In this perspective, coping with climate change is most of all a question of what Cornelius Castoriadis (1987) calls social imaginary significations. The term refers to the ways a society institutes itself as meaningful to its members—that is, to itself. As it has proven so difficult to control emissions within the current socio-political order, many have argued that the social institution as a whole should be put into question, and not simply its elements, such as individuals' beliefs or attitudes (Klein, 2014; Vetlesen, 2015).

Along similar lines, a growing body of educational literature points out that it is not sufficient for students to learn about the environment and its problems: what is needed is “transformative learning” aimed at a shift of perspective

(Sterling, 2009a, 2009b). Importantly, Sterling argues, students should not only learn about sustainability but also experience what it is like to lead sustainable lives. Sustainability, according to Sterling, “is not just another issue to be added to an overcrowded curriculum, but it is a gateway to a different view of pedagogy, of organizational change, of policy and particularly of ethos” (Sterling, 2004, p. 50). Richard Kahn (2010) goes even further in his endorsement of a “radical ecopedagogy” where students progress from learning about problems in their local environment (mapping species, taking samples of pollution, etc.) to taking action by contacting the source of pollution, informing local authorities and the press, and exerting an influence where they can.

At this point, if not before, we have certainly transcended what Arendt (2006) implied in her appeal to the responsibility of educators; one of her principles being that politics is an activity for the public sphere where schools are not included. Nevertheless, the theories of radical educationists like Sterling and Kahn respond to a need expressed by many students of today; namely, the desire to learn about what they can do and how they can act in response to the problems of the environment; and not least, how to engage in politics (Flöttum, Dahl, & Rivenes, 2016; Selboe & Sæther, 2017). I return to this question shortly.

### 3 | APPROACHING THE EXTRAORDINARY

Up to this point we have seen how a range of dilemmas, controversies, and fundamental political questions are ready to be aroused when the topic of climate change is addressed in schools and in the public sphere. Many of the problems described in Sections 2.1–2.5 have a predominantly social basis connected to significations of knowledge-power, framing, and social positioning or, class. Thus, the first step toward answering the question of what we can know, and what we ought to do about climate change could be to acknowledge that the political apathy that is often noted in relation to these issues should not simply be explained in individual terms—such as citizens’ lack of belief in the science of climate change, or our insufficient fear of expected consequences—but should also be viewed in a socio-political perspective where the social institution as a whole is brought into relief question.

When we take into account the fact that different groups and social classes have very different experiences with the political-economic system, and that many climate policy measures (e.g., fees and taxes) tend to lack a social profile, it is not surprising that questions of justice, identification, and political disillusionment are stirred in the public debate about climate change, making it a major trigger for social conflict. Indeed, the combination of worry about the future and a perceived lack of political agency—in addition to the intricate and somewhat intimidating science of climate change—may explain why climate change is a topic that excites big groups of the population and makes it one of the main topics for conspiracy theories online.

However, even though many people do not know all the ins and outs of climate change, such as the difference between ozone depletion and the greenhouse effect, a large majority in most of countries *are* aware of, and concerned about, climate change, and among them young people are the most concerned (Pidgeon, 2012; Smith, 2014; Smith et al., 2017; Stokes, Wike, & Carle, 2015). At the same time, the established political system in many Western countries is suffering from a crisis of its own, with low participation at elections, especially from young voters, and with decreasing trust in the traditional parties, especially the social-democratic parties and those of the center (Amnå & Ekman, 2014). Indeed, there is an increasing political mismatch where the political system of the 20th century seems unable to channel young people’s worries about the future into adequate practice.

Even though there are no guarantees that more radical, inclusive forms of democracy will produce social arrangements that are ecologically sound, there is some evidence that citizens’ involvement in agenda-setting and decision-making could lead to more sustainable policy-making than what is the case in a neoliberal world order where environmental regulations are considered impediments to free trade, and are actively undermined.<sup>18</sup> Citizens’ panels in the preparation for climate summit meetings is one example of how deliberation between participants with diverse viewpoints can produce deeper understanding and the will to push for more radical political measures (Pidgeon, 2012; see also Klein, 2014).

Certainly, under the current circumstances, where many citizens in Western democracies are distrustful of government policies, there are good reasons to expect that environmental reforms from above are likely to generate protests, as we have seen with the Yellow Vest movement in France and similar initiatives in other countries.<sup>19</sup> To overcome these conflicts, whose roots are due to hierarchies and injustices, I would argue that it is necessary to posit a new ground for political action, and along with this, a new mandate for education. In sum, then, I argue that the topic of climate change is most of all a question of politics—even “extraordinary politics” (Kalyvas, 2008)—related to young people’s agency in the world as it is today.

## 4 | SOMETHING TO HOPE FOR

Arendt’s concern, as we have seen, relates to introducing newcomers to a common world and allowing them to take part in its renewal (Arendt, 2006, pp. 186–189). In this respect, it seems important to point out that in order to create something good for the future we need to believe that there is a future worthy of our psychological investment. In short, we need something to hope for. Children in particular need to believe that there is a future existence for humans and other animals on earth. They need this in order to develop healthy selves and to stay creative in more than a private sense, as future political citizens. Adults, on the other hand, may have difficulties finding reasons for hope in an extremely challenging situation, environmentally as well as politically—a situation where placing one’s hope for the environment in the normal political procedures could be seen as a recipe for disappointment and disillusionment. These final sections, then, explore the question of what we may hope for in the domain of education in times of climate change. Once again, I start out with some general considerations related to climate change and the political—this time connected to notions of agency and the production of new meaning/significations—before turning to some contemporary examples of what I see as extraordinary political agency that will have consequences for how we see the notion of authority in education.

With rapidly rising temperatures, especially in the arctic regions, ocean acidification, changes in the weather system, and species extinction, it has become increasingly clear that climate change is not a problem that can be solved, and the natural world cannot be saved—climate change is already a fact that will continue to develop even if all emissions of climate gases should stop today (Masson-Delmotte et al., 2018). This means that the existing social structures will also be transformed; as pointed out by geographers O’Brien and Selboe (2015). The question is no longer whether societies will change, but whether they will do so consciously and deliberately, or eventually be forced to adapt, with added costs and consequences. Notwithstanding more than 25 years of international negotiations in the UN, however, nation-states have so far been reluctant to respond to the need for self-limitation, not least in terms of their economic dependence on oil and gas (Klein, 2014).

Consequently, many climate activists place their hope in social movements, which are more flexible and dynamic than political parties. Their modus operandi is not implementation, as with government policies, but what Arendt (1998) called action, where transformations are set in motion in the social fabric, often in uncontrollable ways. The action put in motion by social movements is often concerned with altering meaning and producing new significations. However, their effects, as pointed out by Norwegian media researcher Andreas Ytterstad (2014), cannot be fully understood when analyzed in terms of manifest, established meaning, as they formulate new ideas whose meaning is mostly latent. Ytterstad’s Gramscian perspective elucidates what it means to create and posit new meaning that challenges the existing social order. The new is not there, in its fully formulated form, but in order to become itself it needs a space in which to give itself shape. Accordingly, social movements—or with a concept from Alain Touraine (2001), societal movements whose object of transformation is society as a whole—are able to generate social critique and political questions that sometimes force their way into the workings of ordinary political channels.<sup>20</sup>

Another domain where new political imaginaries may be explored is of course education—especially in universities—where beliefs and imaginaries that are taken for granted in everyday life can be elucidated, analyzed and put into question. As far as primary and secondary education is concerned, there is a large and growing body of literature on



education for sustainable development, environmental education, and ecopedagogy (Hume & Barry, 2015), but for higher education the field is considerably less developed. This is understandable on the one hand, as universities are autonomous and their students are not children—but on the other it could be argued that the responsibility for the common world applies even more strongly here. In fact, if university departments fail to produce the kind of knowledge that is needed in today's situation, it is hard to see how schools could do it. Indeed, most if not all, university disciplines contain perspectives and approaches with practical relevance for today's ecological crises e.g., the life sciences, theory of science and various forms of systems theory, to mention of few examples.

However, there is always the tendency that 'education' is reduced to social reproduction and heteronomy. In many university departments of today, there are obstacles that need to be addressed in order to elicit the kind of questioning that Sterling (2009a) refers to as "second order learning" where education becomes "transformative." One example is the individualist ontology that prevails in many of the social sciences and political theory, which sets limitations for how the problems of climate change are conceptualized in public discourse, as we have already seen (see section 2.2). In the tradition of political liberalism, agency is mainly seen as a property of individuals (and individuals acting as groups), while collective agency is ignored.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, the agency of institutions and social movements is undertheorized while that of the individual is overburdened, in theory as well as in practice. This mechanism comes into play when, for example, politicians justify their lack of action vis-à-vis climate change by referring to individuals' lack of concern in daily life, and when consumers are told that they can "save the world" by their household activities (Marshall, 2007; Straume, 2005). As I have argued, this overburdening of individuals—and the misplaced attribution of responsibility—is likely to lead to denial or political apathy. A second, related point concerns the weakened conditions for what in the Germanic languages is called *Systemkritik*: intellectual dissidence and critique of the social power structures. Universities still have a special responsibility to educate citizens that are able to identify and criticize structures of power, and ontological individualism makes this very difficult.

An important component in education for sustainable development, and especially in radical ecopedagogy, is learning to question existing institutions and their power structures (Kahn, 2010). While students of today certainly need to learn to question, experience, and create new modes of living together, they also deserve to learn that the responsibility for problems such as climate change and mass extinction is not something young people should have to face alone. Hope is nurtured by community; thus knowing about the vast array of organizations working to improve the future for the planet and all who live on it, including organizations initiated by children, could be both empowering and comforting. The school strikes for climate action that are currently spreading across the globe are a powerful reminder that children and other individuals are not alone in their concerns, and that public action is available to all. The dilemma for teachers who would like to bring this impulse into the classroom is of course that the strikes are directed against school attendance, as one of the few arenas where the participation of young people is requested and valued.

How could schools and teachers help in channeling children's concerns for the future in constructive ways? In order to mobilize political energy and hope for the future I would argue that teachers in schools and universities need to acknowledge notions of collective agency in the social sciences, history, and even biology. Socio-historical studies in particular can be a gateway to realizing that every collective holds the capacity to create new institutions and significations other than those belonging to the existing order (Castoriadis, 1991). When this insight is reached by a new generation, political creativity may be nurtured on the basis of realism, and not simply idealism or despair. For the very realization that the social order—instituted society—has taken very different shapes at various points in history provides a rational basis for believing in a future different from today's forecasts. Hannah Arendt captures this insight very well when she says that education is

*where we decide whether we love our children enough not to expel them from our world and leave them to their own devices, nor to strike from their hands their chance of undertaking something new, something unforeseen by us, but to prepare them in advance for the task of renewing a common world. (Arendt, 2006, p. 193)*



Her conclusion, however, was that education in its nature must be conservative. Arendt was critical of mixing politics in education and making schools into a miniature of society, as the progressivist philosopher John Dewey (1916/1997) wanted. However, in light of the current circumstances and the planetary boundaries it could also be argued that to deprive young people of knowledge about political agency will close down more opportunities than open them up. Several studies show that young people would like to learn more—at school—about how to organize themselves and engage in politics with respect to environmental issues (see, e.g., Flöttum et al., 2016; Selboe & Sæther, 2017). This suggests that educational responsibility in a contemporary context includes showing students how they themselves can become responsible and politically active. Taking responsibility for the world as it is could in this case mean responding to the students' demand for political skills and knowledge. In short, if we are to take climate change seriously we also need to take politics seriously, and this might affect how we view the role of politics in education.

Some added benefits to this more or less openly political approach seem to be worth mentioning. One is that the shared experience of engaging in environmentalism, political ecology, and more sustainable modes of living may provide a sense of meaning to young people's lives; not only in the obvious sense as feeling useful, but also in a deeper sense as a feeling of belonging or "commoning" (Fisher, 2013; Vetlesen, 2015). Learning how to live more sustainable lives and to participate in meaningful and effective political activities responds to the many of the problems described as political passivity. The term "standby-citizens"—a term invented by Amnå and Ekman (2014)—is relevant here. Standby citizens are people—in this case, young people—who are not uninterested in politics yet they do not engage actively in it at the moment. However, they are ready to do so when necessary. The findings of Amnå and Ekman suggest that young people *will* engage in politics when engagement is seen to be meaningful. For many young people of today, climate change and other environmental concerns have turned out to be issue that is too important not to act on it. In fact, a wave of child activists can be observed across the world today, from Indonesia to Sweden, Belgium, Germany, South America, and the USA.

## 5 | "WHEN I WAS EIGHT YEARS OLD, I REALIZED THAT I COULD NOT DELAY IN TAKING ACTION"<sup>22</sup>

Arendt's imperative for educators was to assume responsibility for the world such as it is, and protect children from a burden that is not theirs to bear. Parents especially are obliged to take responsibility for the world into which they have brought children. But what if this premise fails, and educators are unable to fulfill their duties toward the next generations and the world? At the time of writing, child activists all over the world have diagnosed such a deficit on the part of adults and have taken it upon themselves to act without waiting for the generation in power. Felix Finkbeiner, who at the age of 9 years founded the children's organization Plant-for-the-Planet, is a case in point.<sup>23</sup> In one of his interviews Finkbeiner points out that the purpose of the organization is to act while adults are talking, as they cannot be trusted to take care of their children's future:

*If you let a monkey choose if he wants one banana now or six bananas later, the monkey will always chose the one banana now. . . . From this, we children understood we cannot trust that adults alone will save our future. . . . We're going to be the victims of climate change. It is in our own self-interest to get children to act . . . At the same time, I don't think we can give up on this generation of adults and wait 20 or 30 years for our generation to come to power. We don't have that time. All we can do is push them in the right direction. (National Geographic, 2017)*

Although the comparison of adults with monkeys fails to target the systemic drivers of, e.g., capitalism and the political system, Finkbeiner's plead for agency is clear enough. Another well-known example is Greta Thunberg, the Swedish activist who, at the age of 15 years, started a school strike and spoke at the climate summit in 2018, in Katowice, Poland.<sup>24</sup> Her school strike for the climate has inspired other protests and sympathy strikes from Belgium to Australia

and beyond. These young activists, Lea, Finkbeiner, and Thunberg, report having learned about climate change at school, and having observed the large-scale cognitive dissonance surrounding the phenomena they have drawn the conclusion that they need to act, as children, thus breaking with the traditional generation pattern. In many ways, when children take it upon themselves to show the way in grave political matters, Arendt's traditional concept of educational authority—which resonates with the politically withdrawn *Bildung* discourse of 19th century Germany (Horlacher, 2016)—is turned on its head. According to these children, adults have failed to take the responsibility that is theirs as educators, and they have therefore explicitly taken it upon themselves.

Similarly, over the past few years children and young adults have addressed the judiciary to demand that politicians respect the laws that protect the environment for future generations, notably in the USA, but also in Norway, the Netherlands and many other parts of the world. In 2018 a ruling was passed by the highest court in Colombia ordering the government to stop the deforestation of the Amazon and protect the environment for the future.<sup>25</sup> The plaintiffs were 25 young people aged from 7 to 26 years. At the time of writing, more than 900 similar cases are in process across the world, where parliamentary politicians are charged by NGOs for their environmentally irresponsible politics; many of which are filed by children and young adults.<sup>26</sup>

With these developments it seems that education itself is taking on an extraordinary quality. If children as newcomers to the world discover that the world must be set aright, and take it upon themselves to motivate or charge adults, who have failed in their responsibility, the traditional notion of authority in education is certainly lost—but at the same time there is a renewed reason for hope in politics. For children are less than likely to accept the argumentation that multinational companies and shareholders' interest must be protected at the cost of species and future generations. The appeal by children to adults to take action for a future that is really theirs is a deeply moral, but also, in my view, a rational appeal that could prove hard to ignore. When children, who are the rightful owners of the future, demand that there is a future for them to care for, the question of responsibility for the common world is put into the sharpest relief possible. For in order for the children of the future to be able to express and create some meaning of their own there must be a canvas to write it upon. And perhaps this is the best that educators of today can do: not to abandon hope, although we ourselves may not have it.

Let me round off, then, with an excerpt from the speech by Greta Thunberg (aged 15 years) to UN Secretary General António Guterres at COP24, in Katowice, Poland:

*For 25 years countless of people have stood in front of the United Nations climate conferences, asking our nations' leaders to stop the emissions. But, clearly this has not worked since the emissions just continue to rise. So I will not ask them anything....*

*We can't save the world by playing by the rules. Because the rules have to be changed. So we have not come here to beg the world leaders to care for our future. They have ignored us in the past and they will ignore us again. We have come here to let them know that change is coming whether they like it or not. The people will rise to the challenge. And since our leaders are behaving like children, we will have to take the responsibility they should have taken long ago.<sup>27</sup>*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Arendt's concept of a common world depends on the existence of a public realm where people can form relationships where they are connected as unique and different. In her own terms: "To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time" (Arendt, 1998, p. 52).

<sup>2</sup> Castoriadis (1997) describes this question as the difference between validity *de facto* (instituted norms) and *de jure* (morally justified norms).

<sup>3</sup> Climate change is not the most advanced problem: biogeochemical flows, biosphere integrity and land-system change are already subject to irreversible changes. Retrieved from <https://www.stockholmresilience.org/research/planetary-boundaries/planetary-boundaries/about-the-research/the-nine-planetary-boundaries.html>

- <sup>4</sup> The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.ipbes.net/how-did-ipbes-estimate-1-million-species-risk-extinction-globalassessment-report>
- <sup>5</sup> Another domain where significant transformation are taking place is human cognition, with artificial intelligence and genetic engineering. This subject is too large to be dealt with here, but is nevertheless a premise.
- <sup>6</sup> A more detailed presentation of the research basis for this study can be found in Straume (2017).
- <sup>7</sup> Emissions of climate gases today will lead to global warming in the future, and changes in one part of the natural environment may lead to other changes, some of which are uncontrollable Masson-Delmotte et al., (2018).
- <sup>8</sup> Norgaard uses the term implicatory denial borrowed from social psychologist Stanley Cohen's studies on genocide.
- <sup>9</sup> The same point has frequently been made by Slavoj Žižek (under various terms) and Peter Sloterdijk as cynical identification. In contrast to psychological dissociation, a double reality allows a person to be affected and to care in certain settings such as when watching a movie or attending public talks etc., while it is unaffected in others.
- <sup>10</sup> Norgaard's study dates to 2001, which means that the situation has probably changed somewhat.
- <sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Shove (2010) refers to the ABC model for public policy, where individuals' attitudes (A) are supposed to influence behavior (B) which in turn may lead to political change (C). In this scenario, the perceived agency of authorities depends on "climate communication" where authorities try to influence individuals' attitudes in order to gain the political mandate to act.
- <sup>12</sup> Other studies show that many young Scandinavian students would like to be taught how to become politically engaged (Flöt-tum, Dahl, & Rivenes, 2016; Selboe & Sæther, 2017).
- <sup>13</sup> The researchers did not pursue the teachers' reasons at any depth.
- <sup>14</sup> The French term is *le savoir-pouvoir*.
- <sup>15</sup> Richard Kahn (2010) describes how environmental protection in the USA has traditionally been concerned with creating green enclaves for those who could afford to go away and enjoy them.
- <sup>16</sup> See, e.g., George Marshall's critique of the tendency of the British media to thwart proportions by offering "pint size solutions" to problems that exist on a global scale, e.g., reducing the amount of water in one's kettle to "save the planet" (Marshall, 2007). Other examples are presented in Straume (2017).
- <sup>17</sup> A blatant example is the Norwegian prime minister from 2007 to 2014, Jens Stoltenberg, who was in charge of two UN commissions on the consequences of climate change but at no point in his career was willing to slow down the Norwegian extraction of oil and gas. See L. C. Jensen's well-named article, "Drilling for the environment" (Jensen, 2006).
- <sup>18</sup> Indeed, I believe the burden of evidence should be on those who doubt that ordinary people with power to decide in their own life's affairs would favor a healthy world and a sustainable environment.
- <sup>19</sup> In the fall of 2018 there were major demonstrations in France that started as protests against fuel taxes to reduce emissions and escalated into demands that President Emmanuel Macron resign.
- <sup>20</sup> Recent examples include the #metoo-campaign, which was started in the social media and which made irreversible impacts on representative political bodies in a range of countries.
- <sup>21</sup> There is, in political liberalism, a mistaken suspicion that collective agency somehow indicates totalitarianism or the loss of individual freedom (Straume, 2008; see also Wolin, 2003).
- <sup>22</sup> Penelope Lea (14 years old), winner of a Norwegian prize for NGOs, Frivillighetsprisen (the volunteers' prize) in 2018. Frivillighetensdag.no (2019). Retrieved from <https://frivillighetensdag.no/frivillighetsprisen/>
- <sup>23</sup> Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix\\_Finkbeiner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Finkbeiner)
- <sup>24</sup> Grist.org (2019). Greta Thunberg at the Katowice summit. Retrieved from <https://grist.org/article/greta-thunberg-activist-cop24-katowice/>
- <sup>25</sup> Reuters (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-colombia-deforestation-amazon/colombias-top-court-orders-government-to-protect-amazon-forest-in-landmark-case-idUSKCN1HD21Y>
- <sup>26</sup> Globalcitizen.org (2019). Retrieved from <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/climate-change-legal-cases-in-2018/>
- <sup>27</sup> Medium.com (2019). Retrieved from <https://medium.com/wedonthavetime/greta-thunberg-speech-to-un-secretary-general-ant%C3%B3nio-guterres-362175826548>

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