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Pedagogies of Discomfort: Teaching International Relations as *Humanitas* in Times of Brexit

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Introduction

At the beginning of October 2012, I lectured for the first time to a group of undergraduate students. Considering my anxiety prior and during the lecture, I do not think that my performance was particularly noteworthy, but the room I was teaching in bears significance for what I hope to achieve in my teaching. The lecture hall is situated on the fourth floor of a building, offering a beautiful vista over Coventry Cathedral. Today, the old cathedral only exists in ruins after Coventry was bombed by the German Air Force in November 1940, and a new brutalist one, designed by Basil Spence, was erected next to it during the late 1950s. In the aftermath of World War II, Coventry Cathedral quickly came to be recognized as an international symbol for reconciliation, epitomized in the *Cross of Nails* and Josefina de Vasconcellos' sculpture *Reconciliation*, copies of which are to be found for example in the Chapel of Reconciliation in Berlin and the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park.

Passing in between the two cathedrals on my way to work, these striking sacral buildings remind me that teaching International Relations (IR) is not only about communicating to our students the ins and outs of the discipline, but also about encouraging what Karl Jaspers (1959: 53) believed to be a 'spontaneous by-product' of higher education: *humanitas.* For Hannah Arendt (1958), this concept stands for the active and collaborative engagement in the public sphere. Public engagement is a venture (*Wagnis*) (Arendt 1958: 2) because, although people may not be fully aware of all the resulting potential discomforts, they know that being in the public sphere puts them in a vulnerable position. *Humanitas* therefore crystallizes in agonistic, yet responsible dealings with the other (Arendt 1958: 3). In the case of Coventry, *humanitas* meant to collectively rebuild the city after World War II and, instead of taking revenge, Coventry has built bridges to former enemies like Dresden for a peaceful cohabitation. This "by-product" is of particular importance for our discipline because, after all, we teach the horrors that international

politics can entail. In my classes, I ask students to think and talk about war, genocide, terrorism, slavery, and colonialism in order to help them imagine life-worlds differently. By identifying what unites people, rather than what differentiates them, differences (Inayatullah and Blaney 2004) can be experienced as creative sources for an agonistic, but more peaceful world.

While agreeing with Jaspers that *humanitas* cannot be the main purpose of studying any social science, aiming to induce spaces that facilitate it is indispensable at times. Particularly in the Anglophone world, the commodification of life no longer stops short of universities and we experience a degradation of degrees that Jaspers (1959: 123) was already concerned about more than half a century ago. As a consequence of this educational crisis, people often lack the criticality that *humanitas* sustains and that allows them to oppose the 'populist obstruction of reality' (Behr 2017: 73), such as the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union (Brexit). For such dehumanizing tendencies (Rösch 2015), IR teaching has to provide a counterbalance.

To highlight the importance of this by-product for IR teaching and show how I am to achieve such a counterbalance with my students, this chapter proceeds in two steps. First, Jaspers' *Idea of the University* (1958) and its connection to *humanitas* is further expounded. The aim of this section is to demonstrate that, despite recent concern (Schick 2016: 28) about the prospects of a Socratic education, as brought forward by many early twentieth century German intellectuals like Jaspers, this kind of pedagogy allows for a criticality that challenges dehumanizing 'dominant cultural values of self-sufficiency, self-achievement and mastery' (Schick 2016: 26). Second, echoing Brent Steele (2017: 211), it is demonstrated through the discussion of modern dance that particularly the aesthetic turn can be a 'productive and transformative' implementation of Socratic education, as it 'exposes instructors and students to a vulnerability' in collectivity that can instill *humanitas*.

Humanitas **and the Idea of the University**

During the Weimar Republic, higher education was fiercely debated, as many intellectuals thought is epitomized a much larger cultural crisis. Jaspers frequent pre-war interventions demonstrate that he was no stranger to this concern. Having been banned from academic work

during the Nazi period because his wife was Jewish (Östling 2014: 115), he returned to questions of tertiary education in Germany (Habermas 1987: 3), as evidenced in his extensive involvement in the reestablishment of Heidelberg University in 1945. During the early days of the Federal Republic of Germany, Jaspers reintensified his public engagement, promoting universities as key sites to democratize Germany. *Humanitas* was central for his ambitions.

At the heart of *humanitas* stood for Jaspers (1959: 23) a commitment to honesty, knowing that 'science unmasks illusions with which I would like to make life more bearable.' Rather, 'science disperses half-truths which serve to hide realities I am unable to face.' As such, *humanitas* requires reflexivity and (self)criticality because only then, science 'will truly humanize' (Jaspers 1959: 32). Stressing the flexibility of reason highlights that *humanitas* for Jaspers does not prioritize assumptions of rationality based on the mere accumulation of knowledge in which the other is being objectified by the self, as Kate Schick (2016: 30) is concerned about with respect to contemporary cosmopolitan education. This is because *humanitas* does not happen in solitude, but evolves in a very specific spatio-temporal condition. The space 'in which our thought is at home', as Arendt (1958: 4) beautifully put it in her laudation for Jaspers on the occasion of his receiving of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in 1958, is 'never unpopulated', but consists of a 'community of thinking' (Jaspers 1959: 62; similar Rösch and Watanabe 2017).[1] Hence, central for *humanitas* is unrestricted relationality, meaning that these communities are not conditioned through their intellectual or ethnic background. Rather, they are conditioned through very hard work in the sense of intellectual modesty that encountering the other requires in order to avoid essentializations. This facilitates the acceptance of the other in her/his subjectivity by learning to understand other perspectives in their relational contextuality. However, it also means to make oneself aware of the potential vulnerability this stepping into the public entails. In what Fred Dallmayr (1993: 512) identifies as an 'agonistic dialogue,' people get a grasp of reality that, while being perspectivist, bears validity for their specific spatio-temporal context. In achieving this perspectivist objectivity, they are forced to investigate, expose, and renegotiate their identity foundations in collectivity. In this process, what the self considers to be her/his subjectivity – hence, what the self believes is objectively tangible – is

[1] All translations are by the author.

challenged (Arendt 1958: 3) because the other perceives the self in a way that has not been disclosed to the self before. As Schick (2016: 31) maintains, this can also imply having to acknowledge an involvement of the self in 'violent structures and norms' that one would have rather not concealed to oneself. This can be a deeply unsettling experience.

To alleviate this unsettledness, Jaspers (1959: 52) proposed a Socratic education to organize these dialogues. While this form of education cannot establish equality between scholars and students, as some form of hierarchy will persist between them, it still can inscribe 'respect' (Jaspers 1959: 51) for each other by taking seriously all contributions to the community of thinking as valid attempts to further truth, helping to avoid making the teacher the narcissist 'primary object of concern' (Schick 2016: 30). Jaspers (1959: 45) suggested that through asking questions students can be accompanied in learning about themselves, others, and their life-worlds. Stimulating this (self)reflexive process is not intended to arrive at convictions of ultimate truth, but the realization that one's identity and life-world are in constant flux. The other is then no longer experienced as a threat to oneself, but as someone whose different outlook on life can provide the stimulus to imagine different, potentially more peaceful life-worlds that one is currently living in.

Thinking in Movement: Pedagogical Prospects of Aesthetics

To further *humanitas* in my teaching, I have found the aesthetic turn in IR to be promising. The use of movies, comics, paintings, literature, and even music is now standard in many classrooms (Weber 2001; Hawn 2013; Lobasz and Valeriano 2015), but the pedagogic prospects of the aesthetic turn are yet to be explored in more detail, as recent scholarship maintains (Grayson, Davies, and Philpott 2009: 159-160; Steele 2017: 212). The purpose of this section is to demonstrate how the aesthetics of modern dance helped open up thinking space in a concerted effort with my students to sensibilize them for the prospects of vulnerability and ambiguity, helping to sustain the public sphere.

More than 15 years ago, Roland Bleiker (2009: 33, 87) popularized the aesthetic turn with the aim of transcending 'the narrow realities' of 'high politics'. It was meant to challenge the often Western-centric view of international politics as the dealings between two or more nation-

states, disregarding other actors in the international realm. Bleiker (2009: 2) argues in this respect that aesthetics 'is about the ability to step back, reflect and see political conflict and dilemmas in new ways.' In doing so, we gain 'a different dimension to our understanding of the political … since art is not the language of the habitual, since it searches for the new, the different, the neglected.' Art encourages people 'to reflect upon and rethink what has been taken for granted, to move beyond dogma and promote debate about issues that would have otherwise remain silenced or marginalized' (Bleiker 2009: 11). More recently, he was even more poignant, stressing that 'aesthetics offers us possibilities to re-think, re-view, re-hear and re-feel the political world we live in' (Bleiker 2017: 260).

As Aida Hozić (2017: 201) rightfully stresses, key to the aesthetic turn is the understanding that politics is to be found in the gap between representation and represented. Following Oliver Marchart (2004: 102), this gap exists due to the 'original lack' of democratic societies. People will always be represented by a smaller group who cannot transmit the will of the people in total. This lack constitutes the space where politics – embodied by different actors – is being staged (Marchart 2004: 101), making it ephemeral and contingent, as politics is subject to contestation. Politics therefore 'becomes a transient affair' (Marchart 2004: 107), exposing people to ambiguity and heightening their vulnerability. This is because on the political stage also power is being performed. Demagogues play with people's 'deeply rooted desire for security and invulnerability' (Schick 2016: 26) by distracting them from the unsettledness that 'no unequivocal take on the real' (Bleiker 2009: 9) can be offered. My students and I experienced this first-hand in the run-up to what ultimately led to Brexit, the UK government's decision to trigger Article 51 and leave the European Union. Since then, many British newspapers as well as politicians and public figures actively misled the public about the EU and stirred anti-European sentiments to influence the advisory referendum and later to conceal their promulgation of what in today's parlance would be called "alternative facts". One example is the claim on the now infamous red buses that the £ 350 million the UK spent each week on the EU could fund the National Health Service (NHS) instead. It was retracted the day after the referendum.

With aesthetics, I try to sensibilize my students for the gap between representation and represented, stressing ambiguity and vulnerability of life, but I also want to provide hope. The

Japanese-American conductor Kent Nagano recently confirmed in an interview (Komma-Pöllath 2013) that "hope manifests itself in art; it becomes visible and concrete, because it touches our innermost feelings." This hope is not to be understood in a naïve way, but as a 'critical hope' (Schick 2016: 41) in the sense that realizing this transience of politics can produce more just societies. Only when people start acting together, the public emerges in which people have the possibility to find compromises that allow them to canalize their antagonisms productively. Exposing oneself to vulnerability in collectivity helps them to accept the ambiguity of life and, by negotiating the fluidity of their own identities, putting power back into the collective action of people away from the reification of demagogues. Simply put, we may consider ourselves British, support Arsenal, Aston Villa, or Liverpool, and be engaged in many more groups or causes that make us as a person, but these belongings are constantly evolving and so are our identities. We might be British, but still appreciate the peace that the EU has brought to a conflict-ridden continent or feel appalled about the UK government's treatment of the "Windrush" generation. We might support Arsenal, Aston Villa, or Liverpool, but this support can decrease or increase over time, triggered by successes, defeats, memories, or catastrophes as the 1989 Hillsborough disaster in the case of Liverpool.

To accompany my students in realizing this fluidity and engage with it positively as part of our *humanitas*, I incorporate amongst others contact improvisation into my courses. This modern communal dance that evolved at institutes of higher education in the United States in the early 1970s, when a group of students under the supervision of professional dancer Steve Paxton started to question traditional forms of dance and their enshrined gender and power hierarchies (Cooper Albright 2013, 212-17), is notoriously difficult to define, as it is an evolutionary dance that resists more conclusive definitions. Still, Daniel Lepkoff (2008: 285) provides a useful approximation by suggesting the need to conceive contact improvisation as a 'duet dance form that creates a frame for observing the functioning of the body's reflexes and our innate abilities to respond to the unusual physical circumstances of the touch of a partner and the floor on any surface of the body.' In performing contact improvisation, my students can experience, with the support of Coventry University's Centre for Dance Research, the gap between representation and represented, learn to negotiate their ambiguity, and embrace

critical hope by taking ownership of their relations and the space they perform them (Rösch 2018). Students put themselves in vulnerable positions, as they have to deal with their emotions in public and to potentially face critique from their peers (Marchart 2014: 44). By performing dance movements together, students learn to understand the other while at the same time become willing to (re)negotiate their own positions in order to successfully perform these moves.

In the following, I give a short overview of movements typically conducted during the workshop (adapted from Rösch 2018: 76-7). First, students can familiarize themselves with the dance studio and their peers within it. Exercises include sensing the space of the studio while walking through it with closed eyes. For most of the workshop, however, students do exercises in duets with changing partners, such as *escort down*. This move helps students manage the force of their own weight in relation to the weight of their peers. *Escort down* asks them to stand back to back to each other with the intention to move their bodies simultaneously down to the floor and back up again. It helps build trust among students, and they gain a first indication of alternative modes of power, as *escort down* can only be conducted successfully if both partners develop a sense of their own weight and that of others. At the end of the workshop, students engage in a collective exercise in order to further stimulate their questioning of common conceptualizations of power and to incite their imagination to consider different realities through alternative forms of power. Such movements include, for example, a variation of the *round robin* exercise, in which students form a circle, looking at each other's backs. They then put their arms on the shoulder of the person in front of them, while having their eyes closed. This is followed by simultaneously going down to their knees and sitting on the lap of the person behind them, with the aim of standing up again. Only when students sense the intention to move of the person in front and behind them, while having an awareness of the distance to these other two students, and having the trust that the person behind them will support them in sitting on his/her lap, can this movement be completed successfully.

Certainly, modern dancing may be unsettling at first. It is not what you would normally expect from an IR course. Moving away from the security that a static understanding of the self and the other seemingly provides, they have to accept the imaginativeness of ambiguity. However, to alleviate concerns, I introduce my students to the intended learning outcome prior

to the workshop and my dance colleagues explain contact improvisation further, focusing on its specific movements and the wider socio-political and historical context. Following the workshop, a feedback session takes place during which students can share their experiences. I learned from these feedback sessions that it helps that 'acting is fun', as Arendt contended (Marchart 2014: 43) because it takes away some fears and helps my students to act together, eventually finding compromises and give them the power to create. It is in this way that 'thinking in movement' (Sheets-Johnstone 2017: 1) takes place.

Conclusion

Trying to teach IR aesthetically to foster *humanitas* is not without its risks, as Steele (2017: 213) highlights, and I certainly encountered some of them ever since I entered this lecture hall on the fourth floor in October 2012.

By dancing with my students, I try to make international politics not only visually and affectively experiencable, but also tangible for students. I do this, knowing that some students find it too estranged from what they perceive to be the very heart of the discipline: nation-states, diplomacy, and foreign policy. The Westphalian system of nation-states is still a commonly accepted reality (Carvalho, Leira, and Hobson 2011) and international politics is presented as a realm of anarchy in which nation-states as black boxes prevail, making some students struggle with alternative narratives in which they are supposed to engage with their own emotions and those of others. For this reason, I have decided against incorporating the dance workshop within the first year. Some might find opening up to oneself and others problematic, as vulnerability is not perceived as something positive. It certainly helps that dancing is fun and that it is part of most if not all cultures regardless of religious or socio-political constellations, but one cannot rule out the possibility and has to consider ways to avoid students feeling emotionally or intellectually overwhelmed (Holland 2014: 269), Finally, we also have more and more students affected by the neoliberal colonization of higher education (Steele 2017: 213) in which grades and degree classification matter, but they matter less if students have been educated to foster the critical hope of *humanitas*. However, if all that matters are grades, there can be resistance in engaging with an exercise that deliberately challenges students emotionally and intellectually.

Still, IR scholarship should not shy away from getting engaged with the "humanistic endeavor" (Hajo Holborn) in its teaching – and doing it aesthetically is just one way. After all, it is ever more needed in a world in which the neoliberalization of private and public life is only accumulating and fanaticism is making a return to world politics, as evidenced in Brexit.

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