



Climate change and the business school: Going beyond neoliberal ‘solutions’ with Hannah Arendt*

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abstract

Climate change is gaining growing attention in institutional politics and the business world. As businesses start widely embracing the turn to climate change, business schools are increasingly addressing sustainability-related topics in their educations. However, the difficulties meeting defined climate goals indicate that current responses to climate change are insufficient. To shed new light on the role of business and business education in addressing climate challenges, this article turns to Arendt’s political theory. Her critique of liberalism and the demise of politics helps elucidate the current domination of economically oriented approaches to climate change, which further aggravate humanity’s destructive relationship with nature. Through a reading of Arendt’s account of political action, I propose a two-pronged role for business schools addressing issues related to climate change. The first involves reflecting on the role of business in the commonly shared world and its embeddedness in a natural environment. Such reflection takes a certain humbleness about the role and position of business as well as an engagement with inter- and cross-disciplinary education aimed to acknowledge and interact with other actors in the common world. The second prong entails a commitment to fostering political

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moments, an objective enabled by the capacities of critical thinking and political action inherent in potentially all human beings. In this way business schools can encourage reflection on the role of business in the common world and on how neoliberalism intensifies humanity's devastating impact on nature, while also connecting critical thinking to action in the common world.

Introduction

Concentrations of greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere are growing, ice caps are melting, and the climate is changing. Members of the scientific community increasingly agree on the course these developments will take and the role humans have played in causing them (IPCC, 2018). Responses to this scientific consensus and the related questions of sustainability widely vary. At one extreme, Trump has given climate denialism a powerful voice, while at the other, climate activism is steadily gaining momentum, giving rise to international popular movements such as Fridays For Future and Extinction Rebellion. This polarisation is occurring against the backdrop of political institutions' increasing focus on climate change,¹ especially since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015 (United Nations, n.d.). The business world, too, has sought to address climate change: mounting numbers of businesses are adopting SDGs in their business strategies (Pedersen, 2018), social enterprises abound (Bersin, 2018), and the World Economic Forum (WEF) has argued in favour of more responsible forms of capitalism (Schwab, 2019). This drive on the part of business is also reflected at business schools, where sustainability is becoming a common topic covered in courses and through initiatives such as the UN Principles of

¹ Throughout the paper, I use the term climate change to designate the unusual changes in the environment in a broad sense and the questions and challenges stemming from this. Hence, I acknowledge that climate change is but one aspect of a changing environmental system with various boundaries (Steffen et al., 2015), interconnections and reinforcing tendencies. At the same time, climate change is the aspect that is obtaining more attention than some of the other factors, perhaps because changes in the climate are somewhat easier to perceive, despite the separation between cause and effect in terms of both space and time (Naustdalslid, 2011).

Responsible Management Education task force (PRME) (Hoffman, 2018; Hughes et al., 2018).

However, the UN (2020: 2) reports that even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 'we were not on track to meet the Goals by 2030'. This resonates with the World Resource Institute's conclusion (2020: 6) that 'commitments and action by countries, cities, and companies, as well as levels of climate finance, still fall woefully short of the ambition necessary to meet the Paris Agreement's goals'. This indicates that efforts to counter climate change so far have been ineffective, and that the problem has yet to be approached from a sufficiently critical perspective. Hughes et al. (2018) suggest that these shortfalls may partly stem from the way business schools seem shackled to neoclassical and neoliberal paradigms that discourage critical approaches to sustainability. Increasingly run like corporations, business schools also find themselves preoccupied with capital flows and the sale of intangible goods (Beverungen et al., 2008; Butler et al., 2017) and thus neglect the necessary critical perspective on current challenges. These issues urgently need to be rectified, for on the present trajectory, in just seven years, humankind will have blown its carbon budget for keeping global warming below 1.5 degrees Celsius.²

A more critical approach to these challenges compels certain questions about what role business should play in addressing them and how business schools can foster the necessary critical thinking about a sustainable future. To better understand how business and non-business actors should respond to the climate change conundrum, I turn to Hannah Arendt's political theory. Although organisation studies have seldom engaged with Arendt's work in the past (Bloom, 2019), her ideas are gaining prominence in organisational contexts. Bloom (*ibid.*), like Johnsen et al. (2018), engages with Arendt's distinction between labour, work and action to inform our understanding of organisational politics. Her thinking has also helped to address a wide range of other organisation studies topics, including freedom

² As of the beginning of 2021. Mercator Research Institute for Global Commons and Climate Change: <https://www.mcc-berlin.net/en/research/co2-budget.html>.

(Van Diest and Dankbaar, 2008), dignity (Ingman, 2017) and social movement organisation through online media (Gao, 2018).

Arendt's concepts of reflection, judgment and critical thinking have been discussed in the light of totalitarianism (Burø and De Cock, 2022) as well as storytelling and subjectivity in organisational contexts (Jørgensen, 2020). For Arendt, reflection, judgment and critical thinking enable action with an awareness of the future, which thereby paves the way for political action (Vino, 1996). This close connection she draws between critical thinking and action gives renewed hope that critical thinking at business schools can make a practical difference, while it enables an engagement in the radical politics needed to meet current challenges.

In this paper, I engage with Arendt's thinking to understand business schools' role in addressing climate change. To this end, I interpret the current debate and its shortcomings through a reading of Arendt's analysis regarding the dominance of liberal values and the alienation spawned by the economy's invasion of the public sphere. Arendt's sharp distinction between the political and the economic urges us scholars to rethink where business is positioned in the climate change debate. Such a reading further enables a reflection on the role of business schools – the very institutions educating the business actors that will one day act in the common world. This role should revolve around humbleness, reflection and the fostering of political moments where they arise.

The article is structured as follows. In the following section, I outline the various responses to climate change currently observed. I then turn to Arendt's political theory and her critique of liberalism, emphasising in particular the social sphere's invasion of the public sphere and the dominance of a private notion of freedom. Arendt considers these developments to have caused the demise of political action, which is the only activity able to counter human alienation from the world. Next, I connect Arendt's critique to contemporary neoliberalism and the way this political project dominates the debate around climate change. Having situated Arendt's thinking in current times, I then explore her proposed solution to countering world alienation by conceptualising an Arendtian

approach to climate change and the role of business and business schools within this approach.

Responses to climate change

Although scientific consensus about the human influence on climate change has essentially been reached and public awareness of the issue is growing, the topic remains controversial. On the one hand, transnational social movements like Extinction Rebellion in the UK and Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg's Fridays For Future movement have drawn attention to climate change and related issues. On the other hand, fuelled by certain think tanks, scientific arenas and economic actors, climate denialism has been on the rise since the 2000s (Dunlap and McCright, 2011). By now, a substantial body of literature exists on how political and ideological polarisation (Smith and Mayer, 2019) and socio-political variables more generally (Poortinga et al., 2019) influence climate change perceptions.

This polarisation is occurring against the backdrop of an increasing institutional attention to the issue. Attempts at international collaboration have intensified since the UN Climate Change Conference (COP 15) was held in Copenhagen in 2009 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted in 2015 (United Nations, n.d.). The European Union has responded to the 2030 Agenda with a 'European Green Deal', which aims to implement the SDGs and make Europe 'the first climate-neutral continent by 2050' (European Commission, 2019), as well as with a detailed plan for a circular economy (European Commission, 2020). On the national level, more than 300 policies supporting sustainable production and consumption have been implemented in more than 70 countries (United Nations, 2019).

All of these approaches emphasise the private sector as an important agent of change. The 2030 Agenda largely relies on collaboration with a multitude of stakeholders, including large companies, whose revenues outstrip the GDP of some countries. Providing considerable economic rewards, the agenda presents not a burden but 'a gift to business' (Pedersen, 2018: 23). The EU envisions new forms of 'networked governance' that go beyond

central authority to bring government and market actors together (European Environment Agency, 2017: 88). At the same time, more and more companies are accounting for social and environmental sustainability in their strategy and business practices, considering ‘corporate sustainability ... the precondition for doing business’ (Dyllick and Hockerts, 2002: 130). The rising number of social enterprises means that the amount of companies which aim to play active societal or political roles is also growing (Bersin, 2018). This was clear even at the WEF in 2020, where the private sector considered itself a key player in the transition to a sustainable future and, in some cases, assumed an activist role (Wu, 2020). The CEO of the WEF, Klaus Schwab, published a manifesto calling for a more responsible form of capitalism (Schwab, 2019), while the forum also included more classical forms of civic activism, for example, Greta Thunberg’s entrance on the stage (The New York Times, 2020).

Thus, businesses are clearly moving away from Friedman’s (1970: 17) idea that ‘the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits’. Hoffman (2018: 34) stresses that both regulatory and market pressures have now made sustainability ‘a strategic concern driven by market forces’ – a development acknowledged by CEOs and business students alike. Indeed, the number of courses dedicated to social and environmental issues are rising, and over 600 business schools worldwide have committed to sustainability, signing a variety of agreements and conventions, the most notable of which is the UN international task force PRME (Principles of Responsible Management Education) (Hughes et al., 2018).

However, the actual efficacy of this corporate turn to climate change is dubious. Speaking at the UN Climate Summit in 2019, Greta Thunberg pointed out the manifest inadequacy of actions thus far and their continued reliance on economic growth and largely non-existent technologies (The Guardian, 2019). A look at companies’ generally superficial engagement with the SDGs exposes the fundamental weakness of corporate responses, whereby for all intents and purposes the SDGs become no more than a mere communication tool (Mhlanga et al., 2018). More broadly, businesses engaging with climate and sustainability matters tend to revert to a business-as-usual approach, therefore effecting only limited change (Wright

and Nyberg, 2017). The same goes for business schools. Although greater efforts are being made to introduce sustainability in business education, they fail to include a broader vision. Predominantly governed by neoclassical economics and neoliberalism, business education is struggling to undertake the major paradigm shift, needed to address sustainability (Hughes et al., 2018), and the prevailing neoliberal principles of governance forestall any more reflective or critical approaches to business education (Beverungen et al., 2009).

As such, economic actors and political institutions appear unable to take the necessary actions to critically address the current challenges, while business schools are failing to facilitate the necessary critical thinking. To shed new light on the role of the business school, I turn to Arendt's political theory, applying it to interpret the debate around climate change and the roles of various actors in it. Following Arendt in this context allows for reflection on the position and task of business schools in facilitating the critical thinking needed to confront the current challenges.

Arendt's analysis of the demise of politics

Aiming 'to think what we are doing', Arendt (1998/1958: 5) analyses how liberalism and the domination of the economy have degraded politics. This domination is the product of a fundamental confusion about the human condition on Earth and the three main human activities of which this condition consists – labour, work and action – as well as of liberalism's focus on private interests and its private notion of freedom.

It should be noted that Arendt's engagement with liberalism is ambiguous. On the one hand, terms like individual rights, freedom, the constitution and pluralism, often associated with liberalism, have an important place in her thinking (Gines, 2009).³ Like liberals, Arendt connects universal human rights with citizenship, and similarly rejects the traditional conception of human rights that appeals to national, religious or even ethnic community values (Wellmer, 1999). Arendt also echoes various liberals' concerns about

³ In 2017, Kathryn T. Gines changed her name to Kathryn Sophia Belle.

excessive individualism or the loss of civic virtue (Hiruta, 2019). However, her concern regarding the worldlessness of the superfluous masses and the demise of the public sphere that these concerns raise lead her to oppose liberal theory and politics (Villa, 1999).

One should consider her opposition with care, for she does not always do justice to the richness and nuance of the liberal tradition. She states, for example, that liberal notions ‘express the bourgeoisie’s instinctive distrust of and its innate hostility to public affairs’ (Arendt, 1973/1951: 146). With her selective reading of economic liberalism, Arendt seems to equate liberalism with the bourgeoisie, thereby overlooking the internal conflicts within liberalism and inhibiting an in-depth engagement with the liberal tradition as such. According to Villa (1999: 199), ‘she is at her weakest and most spare in her readings of liberal theorists’. Nevertheless, Arendt’s arguments concerning liberalism exemplify how she re-articulates ideas against the Western philosophical tradition, showing the continued relevance of her challenge to contemporary political thought (Wellmer, 1999). With this relevance in mind, I discuss Arendt’s main arguments against liberalism as well as her conception of politics.

Private interests and the social invading the political

Arendt (1998/1958) centres her critique of liberalism on two points. First, she maintains that the social invades the political because liberalism emphasises private interests. She traces this invasion back to John Locke, who theorised society as founded on private property as the product of one’s labour. This foundation implies a prioritisation of the private above the common, thus leading the worldly, collective character of property to be discounted. This development also sparked the glorification of labour, which Adam Smith and Karl Marx later intensified by considering labour as the source of wealth and of productivity, respectively. Arendt, however, identifies labour as the activity connected to biological cycles and necessary to sustain life. Directly connected to consumption, it is ‘the most natural

and least worldly of man's activities' (*ibid.*: 101).⁴ Still, as political economists like Smith and Marx glorified labour and its division increased, the sphere of labour ceased to be the household, rendering labour a public activity involving human interdependence instead. As a result, wealth could be freely appropriated, and self-interest became a central element of the public realm. With the once private economic matters of the household becoming public, the boundary between the private and public dissolved, and both became subsumed in what Arendt (*ibid.*: 47) considers the 'constantly growing social realm'. The invasion of this social realm into the public realm rendered political action impossible.

In a related development, economics became a science with statistics as its main tool. Considering humans as conforming beings that follow certain behavioural patterns, economics came to emphasise patterns and rules rather than exceptions or deviations. This thinking was also reflected in how the bureaucracy replaced the individual ability to act within the political agora and reduced politics to large-scale household administration. According to Arendt, these developments are connected to the escape of another human activity from its original sphere – work. Work is originally an activity in the realm of use products, that is, the objects that give human life durability. However, the strengthened focus on labour made work a mode of labouring and use products mere consumption products. Because the categories characteristic of work – means, ends and utility – do not apply to labour and necessities, means and ends became indistinguishable as work transformed into labour. It has become unclear 'whether men live and consume in order to have strength to labor or whether they labor in order to have the means of consumption' (*ibid.*: 145). This is still considered the case in contemporary society, whose intricate connection between work and consumption serves to drive capital accumulation (Chertkovskaya and Loacker, 2016). This not only obscures the realities of labour relations

⁴ In her writings, Arendt speaks of *man* and *men*. This can be explained by the fact that 'Arendt for the most part evaded the woman question, steadfastly refused to identify herself with the women's liberation movement, and relegated any discussion of women and their position in the *vita activa* to the footnotes of her monumental work, *The Human Condition*' (Allen, 1999: 98).

(Reddy, 2016), but also has far-reaching consequences for politics. According to Arendt (1998/1958), work has come to dominate the political realm of action, and this fixation on productivity and progress has made politics a mere means to an end and a simple matter of administration and bureaucracy.

Liberalism and its private notion of freedom

The liberal conception of freedom further intensified the decay of action, speech and politics that followed from the dominance of labour and work. Arendt considers liberals hostile to government, which is merely intended for ‘the defence of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all’ (Smith, quoted in Arendt, 1998/1958: 220). As such, a private notion of freedom, which is incompatible with politics, became central, in which freedom stems from inner willpower and is located in the private subject, and is thus identified with security and activities outside the political realm. Liberal politics is concerned with ‘the maintenance of life and the safeguarding of its interests’ (Arendt, 2006/1961: 155).

Arendt (1990/1963: 29) considers such a negative notion an instance of ‘liberty’, as distinguished from freedom. The latter should be understood in a positive sense as ‘the political way of life’ (*ibid.*: 33), enabled by the *polis*, a form of political organisation that brings humans that were born unequal together and makes them equal ‘by virtue of its [nomos]’ (*ibid.*: 30). However, Hiruta (2019: 39) notes that a strict dichotomy between liberty and freedom in Arendt’s thinking would be reductive. Although primarily understanding freedom as positive, Arendt *also* acknowledges the importance of certain negative aspects of freedom, namely the necessary absence of certain non-freedoms in the public sphere. Nonetheless, she rejects a merely negative approach to freedom, which, she argues, causes the demise of politics.

The demise of politics

As Arendt diagnoses the problem, the positive dimension of freedom disappeared from philosophical tradition after the *polis* of the ancient

Greeks. Labour and work escaped their original spheres, and action lost its importance. This loss is dangerous because action is the only activity grounded in the plurality of people, in their simultaneous equality and distinction. Speech and action make up the human activity *par excellence*, since ‘a life without speech and without action ... is literally dead to the world; it has ceased to be a human life because it is no longer lived among men’ (Arendt, 1998/1958: 176). When action deteriorates, a political community becomes harder to form, although such community is, for Arendt, the only way to counter violence, domination and, ultimately, totalitarianism (Kalyvas, 2008).

Action was confined because its relation to beginning anew and taking initiative makes it risky. Action gives human life meaning, but in acting, agents disclose themselves by speaking about the world they share with other agents. In speaking about this world, people connect with one another in a ‘web of human relationships’ (Arendt, 1998/1958: 183), which exists by virtue of the wills and intentions of the plurality of people. Through this web, every agent is always necessarily related to other agents, who are in turn able to act themselves. Every action thus necessarily elicits a reaction, which is a new action in itself. This relatedness of agents implies that action is unbounded, uncontrollable, and unpredictable. Putting instrumentality at the centre of political thought is an attempt to avoid the riskiness of action in plurality.

This attempt has failed, however. Arendt (*ibid.*: 231) argues that, instead of acting in plurality, humans started to ‘act into nature’ by altering and conditioning natural processes. This argument relates to the unmitigated human capacity to obliterate non-human objects as well as to how natural science experiments transformed nature into a ‘process’ in which ‘all particular natural things derived their significance and meaning solely from their functions in the over-all process’ (*ibid.*: 296). While the modern sciences enabled humans to know more about their surroundings as well as to have greater control over them, scientists’ conduct shifted from being grounded in their ‘love for the earth and the world’ (*ibid.*: 264) to revolve increasingly around mathematical expressions of sense data and experiments that positioned scientists outside of natural processes. As such,

the role of natural language diminished, and nature became increasingly subjected to the structures of the human mind. Arendt (*ibid.*: 262) describes how these scientific developments have led to ‘both despair and triumph’, as scientific progress has come with a form of nihilism that has alienated humans and robbed them of their sense of being at home in the world.

Political action and the world

Arendt thus draws a connection between human alienation from the world and the demise of politics. In her view, the only way to counter this alienation is by reviving the ‘experience of politics’ of the Greek *polis*, which emphasises the ‘phenomenality of political action’ and the public world as a space of appearances (Villa, 1996: 135). Political action is grounded in plurality, which is ‘specifically *the* condition of all political life’, according to Arendt (1998/1958: 7). A form of equality is established between people who come together in speech acts, in turn constituting the political. Kateb (1984: 15) emphasises that this is not equality as an ‘equality of condition’ but as ‘a condition that makes men equal’. All humans have a potential talent for a political life and the possibility to know others and be known by them, both of which constitute equality in the political.

This shared potential, then, focusses on the shared interests arising from that which is between humans, that which ‘*inter-est*’ (Arendt, 1998/1958: 182). This common world is made up of the human artifice that humans create through work and the plurality of innumerable, irreducible perspectives and opinions of humans inhabiting the world. Arendt thus clearly distinguishes the world from nature with ‘a form of nature–culture dualism’ (Ott, 2009: 2): Labour concerns nature and has no place in the world; work and action do have a place, albeit with different functions. Work creates the world; action ‘illuminates’ it (Villa, 1996: 164).

For Arendt, political action can never be a means of attaining a desired state of this world, for such a predefined goal would undermine plurality. Once a goal is agreed upon, Arendt considers the rest of the debate to be necessarily non-political, a question of administration and management, which pertains to the realm of work. The value of political action lies in the activity itself,

the moment in which it is able to ‘gather [people] together, to relate and to separate them’ (Arendt, 1998/1958: 53). Hence, political action cannot be evaluated on the basis of morals or motives. It is infused by what Villa (1992: 276) calls ‘disinterestedness’, which enables humans to rise above the mere pursuit of interests.

Given that for Arendt politics cannot be based on certain interests, a specific end state of the world or a set of moral obligations, her account is a radical critique of the domination of economic and private interests in the public sphere as well as of institutionalised politics. According to her, the latter has transformed politics into ‘a profession and a career’ defined ‘according to standards and criteria which are themselves profoundly unpolitical’ (Arendt, 1990/1963: 277). Although Arendt’s political theory has been criticised for being elitist, utopian and too detached from other societal spheres (see for example Canovan, 1978; Wolin, 1983), Arendt’s (1998/1958: 9) emphasis on ‘natality’ urges one to consider the importance of new beginnings and responses to events. For Arendt the ‘most fundamental threat to democratic politics’ is ‘the loss of responsiveness to events: the erosion of the contexts in which action makes sense’ (Markell, 2010: 79). This makes Arendt’s framework of political action especially relevant to ‘extraordinary politics’, as distinguished from the ‘normal politics’ related to managing the national household (Canovan, 1978: 21). A public space is created, and a political community arises, when a small group of people care about public matters and courageously take action. Although replacing the existing institutions of normal politics and social administration with such action is unlikely or even undesirable, an important political potential lies in allowing for the new and unexpected – especially in light of the unprecedented challenges posed by climate change.

To understand the current relevance of Arendt’s critique, in the following section I trace its tenets – the centrality of private, economic interest in the public sphere and the private notion of freedom – in current neoliberalism.

Arendt's critique in light of contemporary neoliberalism

Neoliberalism should be approached with the same caution as Arendt's reading of liberalism, as it risks becoming an 'overblown notion' unless carefully described (Dean, 2014: 150). As such, I will focus on neoliberalism not in terms of its 'multiple and mutating forms' (Callison and Manfredi, 2020: 2) and empirical realities, but of its standing as a political project and an art of government, which is more pertinent in the context here. This focus enables me to consider how the underlying ideas of neoliberalism can be subjected to the critiques Arendt raises against liberalism. As a political project and an art of government, neoliberalism fundamentally aims to model political power on market principles. Like liberalism, neoliberalism conceives of the market as the 'site of truth' (Foucault, 2008: 30) or the 'information processor more powerful than any human brain' (Mirowski, 2013: 62). Unlike liberalism, however, it emphasises the role government plays in facilitating the market by actively constructing society and the market as well as the conditions for competition. Neoliberalism thus shifts from a labour and exchange model to entrepreneurship and competition. According to Foucault (2008: 147), society is transformed into 'an enterprise society' ordered by the market and mechanisms of competition, which makes the individual a *homo oeconomicus* and an entrepreneur of the self.

The centrality of private, economic interest in the public sphere

The neoliberal and the liberal understandings of private property and the position of labour differ substantially as neoliberals do not base the state's intervention in society and the market on the idea of labour as the foundation of private property. Instead, acting as entrepreneurs of the self, individuals in the enterprise society compete on the market as a means of both sustaining and defining their lives. Private property also takes on new meaning in neoliberalism. Departing from the classical liberal notion of property rights as a necessary protection from the state, neoliberals believe that (intellectual) property rights can be 'reengineered and changed to achieve specific political objectives' (Mirowski, 2013: 68). Thus, insofar as these political objectives centre on promoting the market, property rights are a means to such promotion.

Despite the aforementioned contrasts, Arendt's fundamental problem with liberalism still holds: The increasingly public manifestation of an economic mode of sustaining life – whether in the form of labour or entrepreneurship – allows wealth creation to go unchecked, and private, economic interests to generally dominate the public sphere. Because neoliberalism exports the model of the entrepreneur of the self to other societal spheres, the economic mode of sustaining and defining one's life pervades society. According to Brown (2019), this phenomenon can be directly observed in the political sphere. Being hostile to sovereignty and political power, leading neoliberals such as Hayek and Friedman emphasise the market and individual freedom, but this emphasis reduces the political sphere to one ruled by economic principles alone. Brown (2015) argues furthermore that neoliberalism has led democratic citizenship to be replaced by investments in human capital of the self, while the political has been transformed into a realm of administration and management. Public life, on the other hand, has ceased to be the realm of politics, conflicts and deliberation about values or objectives to become a problem-solving and benchmarking domain. Rather than liberating the citizen from the state, politics and social concerns, neoliberalism 'integrates both state and citizenship into serving the economy and morally fuses hyperbolic self-reliance with readiness to be sacrificed' (*ibid.*: 212). As a result, inequality becomes a natural phenomenon necessary for progress (Mirowski, 2013), and neoliberalism a model that engenders rather than checks runaway wealth accumulation.

Private notion of freedom

Arendt's (1998/1958) second major problem with liberalism is its conception of freedom as being private and negative instead of based on a plurality of people aiming for a common objective. However, while Arendt criticises the lack of positive freedom in liberalism, Vercelli (2016) notes that classical liberalism in fact includes an orientation to positive *and* negative freedom. For although classical liberalism stresses the absence of an authoritarian state that interferes with the individual's negative freedom, it also explicitly refers to autonomy, which is an aspect of the individual's positive freedom that the state can enhance. This focus on positive freedom, Vercelli argues, disappears in neoliberalism, which considers state interventions to impinge

on individual freedom. As Mirowski (2013) also underscores, neoliberalism aims to accommodate the market – a place in which individuals are considered fragmented selves, discontinuous collections of decisions and investments. This means that, in neoliberalism, political plurality can arguably be even less a basis for positive freedom than in liberalism. Neoliberalism is hostile to a political environment where citizens speak and deliberate with one another, instead viewing private interests as something to safeguard by facilitating and accommodating the market.

Neoliberalism can thus be said to prioritise private interests in the public sphere while relying on a private notion of freedom. This indicates that it decreases the possibility of political action to a similar, if not larger, extent than liberalism. The way climate change is addressed in the public sphere is a case in point. In the next section, I discuss how neoliberal approaches dominate the climate change debate and how this impedes approaches that would resonate with Arendt's idea of political action.

The neoliberal response to climate change

The neoliberal response to climate change reflects Arendt's description of how scientific developments have alienated humanity from the world. Mirowski (2013) identifies three steps in this response: science denialism, emissions trading and geoengineering. All three originate from neoliberal think tanks and academic units and, deployed in unison, constitute a completely market-based solution. The first, immediate step, Mirowski argues, is science denialism, which merely serves to deter wider responses to the perceived crisis as a means of buying time for commercial parties to offer up solutions in the second and third steps. The second step in the medium-long term is the instalment of carbon emission markets. These, Mirowski argues, are bound to fail because lobbying and financial innovation will ultimately neutralise the nominal caps put in place, thus leaving actual emission levels unaffected. By reinforcing oligopolistic power and steering investments from energy infrastructure innovation towards financial instruments, emission markets actually hamper the development of sustainable solutions. What is more, making carbon the universal unit of

measure neglects the complex relations existing in the environment, as well as implies technocracy and renders a democratic approach to the underlying structures of the problem difficult (Beck, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2011). Mirowski (2013) identifies a third, long-term step – geoengineering – based on the idea that entrepreneurs will address climate change through large-scale manipulations of the climate, such as weather modification, solar radiation management and CO₂ sequestration. However, geoengineering fails to deal with the root causes of the problems and reinforces the very market mechanisms likely to have caused the problems in the first place.

According to Mirowski, these three solutions combined hamper political action and leave the market as the only recourse to find solutions. Due to some ‘interim solutions’, people come to trust that the problem is being solved even when it is not (*ibid.*: 352). This reliance on the consensus that purely techno-managerial market solutions will resolve the crisis masks the underlying tensions between the plurality of voices that should be included in the debate. Consensual discourse that reduces environmental problems to CO₂ emission numbers, in turn portrayed as the enemy we need to fight, overlooks that these emissions are an integral part of the system rather than an excess of it (Kenis and Lievens, 2014; Swyngedouw, 2011, 2013).

This consensual, market-based approach focuses on questions of individual behaviour, thus rendering collective deliberation redundant and depoliticising the issue. This makes it difficult to question the underlying structures that have ultimately led to the human domination over nature and the unbridled build-up of greenhouse gases – which are at the heart of today’s climate change challenges (Hargis, 2016; Parr, 2014). According to Swyngedouw (2011: 77), this lack of fundamental questioning leads to a ‘post-political environmental consensus’ in which climate change is portrayed as a trajectory of opportunity and development with no internal tensions or conflicts. It also strengthens the hegemony of neoliberalism and promotes a form of what Mouffe (2005: 31–32) calls ‘win-win politics’ that neglects its conflictual dimension. Such forms of liberal environmentalism deny the trade-offs that ‘may be necessary among values of efficiency, economic growth, corporate freedom, and environmental protection’ (Bernstein, 2002: 14).

Hence, the neoliberal response to climate change is likely to exacerbate human alienation from the world as well as humanity's destructive impact on it. As such, the business sector is unlikely to be able to critically address the problem. To understand the resulting implications for the role of business and business education, in the next sections, I explore an Arendtian interpretation of climate change politics through which to counter such alienation. More specifically, I consider the configuration of the different societal spheres that Arendt's framework suggests, as well as the position and role that business and business schools can occupy within this.

Arendtian climate change politics and the role of business schools

Arendt's description of humans acting into nature and losing a sense of being in the world resonates with Latour's (2018: 13) call for us to acknowledge the climate problem by 'seeking a territory that we and our children can inhabit', stressing that we should 'look for a place to land'. However, a neoliberal approach to climate change yields 'solutions' that rely on assumptions of technological development and reduce human beings to politically passive, self-interest-pursuing beings. Business schools reflect this approach, addressing sustainability primarily through old paradigms. Such approaches reinforce the image of what Villa (1996: 201) calls the 'technologized "national household"' in which political action is neither possible nor necessary. However, the climate crisis might be just the crisis that Arendt would consider the supreme political moment in which previously unquestioned bonds of human interconnectedness are put at stake and threatened. If so, this crisis should be seen not as 'a synonym for disaster, but [as] the moment in which we are forced to become political beings' (Norberg, 2011: 132). Only by addressing the crisis politically and involving the plurality of people in the debate can we avoid falling for 'the obvious short-range advantages of tyranny, the advantages of stability, security, and productivity, [which] pave the way to an inevitable loss of power, even though the actual disaster may occur in a relatively distant future' (Arendt, 1998/1958: 222).

To see the climate change debate through the lens of Arendt's political theory, one must be aware of the various societal spheres and how they occupy the public sphere. Arendt's analysis stresses how a particular configuration of human activities burdens the natural world and helps us understand, how we have come to live on what Tsing et al. (2017) call 'a damaged planet'. As these activities continue to constitute the human condition on this planet, we can change our relationship to nature if we find a better configuration (Ott, 2009). Considered in light of Arendt's distinct conception of politics and her critique of the social sphere as well as institutional politics, responses to climate change that originate in businesses or high-level political organisations are non-political and therefore potentially exacerbate both humans' alienation from nature and their devastating impact on it. For Arendt, a political approach to climate change would emphasise plurality and the human capacity to act politically and to perceive, connect to and participate in the world that is shared with others.

Where, then, does this strict and narrow conception of politics leave business and business schools? In Arendt's framework, the latter play a crucial role in the work that constitutes the human artifice and the material conditions of the world, in which we act politically. Although Arendt's distinction between the economy – or the social – and the political seems sharp, Villa emphasises that for Arendt:

Action concerns the world originally disclosed through work, the "subjective in-between" of words and deeds not taking leave of the world, but "overlying" it. This confirms the suggestion ... that the relation between action and work, or what we would call the political and the social, is somewhat more permeable than it first appears. (1996: 165)

Hence, the economy organises the world in which we act politically, and although this economic organisation is not political in itself, a better configuration of human activities depends on greater political action as well as a more modest role for labour and work.

Accordingly, economic institutions' presence in the public sphere, and the (lacking) political character of the institutions designing climate policies,

should be the subject of critical political discussions. The role of business in the transition to sustainability in the common world should also be addressed with the organisation of the economy in mind. In this, the economy should be recognised as the sphere, not where freedom can be attained and identities formed through work and consumption, but where labour and work provide the stable basis for the common world in ways that respects the other spheres of human and natural life. In the context of the climate change debate, this has two implications for the configuration of human activities and the role of business. First, political action should supersede labour and work, which implies a more modest role for business. Second, work and economic organising impact how the common world is configured, which makes it important to understand and reflect on these impacts. As such, business schools' role should revolve around reflection, humbleness, and the fostering of political moments where possible, all of which I discuss in the next section.

Reflection, humbleness and fostering political moments at business schools

A critical approach to climate change and sustainability at business schools concerns the common world, which is partly made up of decisions taken by business. This implies that business schools have a two-pronged role involving reflection and humbleness, on the one hand, and the fostering of political moments on the other. With regard to the first prong, business education must therefore enable this reflection on how business impacts the common world, an objective that can be achieved through courses that engage with the economic system as such and question how business is organised and organises the common world. This aim resonates with Holt's (2020: 585) call for business schools to embrace conscience, which is 'that aspect of an action that recalls and critically examines itself in relation to the self-understanding of those experiencing the action'. Through courses that critically engage with the economic system and the role of business in creating the common world, business schools might 'stimulate wonder, curiosity and openness to inquiry for its own sake rather than on instrumental "in order to ..." grounds' (*ibid.*: 586).

The attainability of such change is exemplified in the recent, ‘immensely popular’ course on the re-examination of capitalism at Harvard Business School (Hoffman, 2018: 38) and the rise of business education initiatives such as PRME. The latter shows that students can be stimulated in various ways to engage in questions about business’ place in the common world and relation to a natural environment. Underlying these initiatives is the aim to integrate economic, social, and natural systems in business teaching, through inter- and cross-disciplinary education. Given the ‘wicked problem’ that climate change constitutes (Lehtonen et al., 2019: 339), any single discipline is unlikely to provide the needed ‘solutions’ and different disciplines will have to interact and exchange knowledge.

The human artifice is constructed through many forms of work, and many considerations must come into play for the debate to be political and the plurality of voices to be heard. Business schools should therefore maintain a certain humbleness when it comes to their role in addressing climate change. They should acknowledge that the economy only makes up *a part* of the common world and be humble about their role in shaping it. This requires them to acknowledge uncertainty as distinguished from risk, as Knight (2006/1921) proposes. Whereas risk entails measurable distributions of possible outcomes, uncertainty is unmeasurable and unquantifiable. These so-called ‘unknown unknowns’ (Jasanoff, 2021: 851) become apparent when one deals with climate change, especially when considering the unpredictable course of events after so-called ‘tipping points’ (Steffen et al., 2015). Such radical uncertainty resonates with Arendt’s emphasis on natality and the unboundedness and unpredictability of the actions that co-constitute the common world. Thus, climate change should not be approached as a management problem of calculable risk and clear-cut solutions, but as an inherently complex and uncertain phenomenon, the responses to which require new reflections and initiatives.

This proposed humbleness also involves learning from and understanding other actors in the common world. Business schools should consider different forms of work, including those more difficult to relate to a business context, such as artisanal forms of work, interest organisations and NGOs. According to Lehtonen et al. (2019), teaching methods that include arts,

dialogues and reflection are needed to create the learning spaces and encounters in which pathways to a sustainable future can be imagined and constructed. Such inclusion of different actors and methods would reflect Arendt's (1998/1958: 222) emphasis on equal political participation and the need to resist the temptation of 'the obvious short-range advantages of tyranny'.

The second prong of business schools' role entails fostering political moments where they might arise. Although Arendt's demanding and narrow conception of politics seems to render activities in institutional politics and the economy non-political, her focus on action, on every human's capacity to *act* politically, implies a potential that can be found and cultivated throughout the common world. Arendt's account of political action opens up for an attentiveness to political moments, for the spirit of civic engagement existing at all levels of society and for critical thinking inherently connected to action.

Accordingly, efforts around sustainable development – such as the SDGs, activists at WEF, or sustainability discussions in a business course – might not automatically be political in an Arendtian sense. However, they do carry a political potential in that they concern and affect the common world. Moreover, they might lead to instances of political action elsewhere, inspiring actors to come together and discuss the world's future in a space of equality and at a distance from direct economic or private interests. In other words, as long as efforts regarding climate change are not readily adopted mainly for economic purposes, but engaged with critically by a wide variety of political actors, such efforts will engender a sphere conducive to discussing concerns about the world and climate change.

The business school also holds this political potential. Business students are not merely future business leaders, nor are business schools merely intended to teach the principles of business. The students are *also* actors with the capacity to act politically, and business schools are *also* the institutions with the capacity to educate students broadly for a life in the common world. Indeed, anything students learn about the common world can mobilise their political capacity. Arendt's distinction between the political and the social

might seem sharp, but her action-based understanding of politics makes it difficult to pin down exactly where and how politics takes place. This difficulty makes it more important to foster the political potential inherent in all human beings and to continuously strive to enable this ideal conception of politics.

Business schools thus have the potential to transcend neoclassical approaches as well as the standard economics and statistics education they offer, each of which Arendt would consider a catalyst for world alienation. In fact, business schools can and should play an important role in the response to climate change. To the extent that climate change results from human activities needed to provide the goods and services that sustain human life and make up the common world – what Arendt would call labour and work – climate change is an economic problem that should be addressed as such. This requires reflecting on and critically engaging with how business impacts the common world, while also remaining both humble about the position and role of business and open to political moments. To this end, business schools need to move away from the prevailing ‘extreme neoliberalism’, which fails to sufficiently acknowledge students’ reflective and critical capacities (Beverungen et al., 2009: 266). Although complicated and demanding, only such a radical move can meet the magnitude of and uncertainty surrounding climate challenges, which ‘call for a different response, one more attuned to the purposes than the results of inquiry’ (Jasanoff, 2021: 851). A shift from means-end thinking towards reflection may help to critically reconfigure the human activities comprising the human condition.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed the growing attention that climate change is gaining in institutional politics and the business world at large. As businesses start widely embracing the turn to climate change, business schools are increasingly addressing sustainability-related topics in their educations. However, the difficulties in meeting the defined climate goals indicate that the current responses to climate change are insufficient. To

shed new light on the role of business and business education in addressing climate change, I have turned to Arendt's political theory. Her critique of liberalism and the demise of politics can be applied to neoliberalism and its domination of the climate change debate. The non-political 'solutions' currently proposed neglect the plurality of human beings inhabiting the common world and hamper political action. Hence, rather than 'solving' climate change, these approaches are more likely to further alienate people from the common world that binds and situates them in nature. The only way to counter this alienation and humanity's devastating effect on nature is to reconfigure human activities.

Such a reconfiguration would expand the space for political action at the expense of labour and work, implying a more modest role for business. It would also spur a need to understand and reflect on how economic organising – or work in Arendt's framework – impacts the configuration of the common world. This is where business schools come in. Their approach should have two prongs, one involving reflection and humbleness, and the other a commitment to fostering political moments. Business schools should enable reflection on the role business and the economy play in the commonly shared world, and on their embeddedness in a natural environment. Such reflection takes a certain humbleness as to the role and position of business, as well as an engagement in inter- and cross-disciplinary education aimed to acknowledge and interact with other actors in the common world.

Business schools should also foster political moments. Arendt's theory emphasises the potential capacities of critical thinking and political action inherent in *all* human beings. Thus, although Arendt's strict and demanding concept of politics seems to dismiss the realm of work and business schools as politically irrelevant, every business student has a political potential that can be sparked. Events in political or economic institutions may seem non-political, but they do affect the common world or even lead to instances of political action, bringing political equals together to discuss issues regarding the common world. Through the reading of Arendt's theory employed here, business schools get the important role of promoting reflection on the place and role of business in the common world, which in turn enables a critical

understanding of how neoliberalism is intensifying humanity's devastating environmental impact and the associated ramifications. At the same time, by addressing various actors in the common world and acknowledging the need for political action, business schools can play an important role in bridging critical thinking with action. Arendt's political theory thus connects the two, thereby renewing the hope that critical thinking at business schools can make a practical difference.

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