

Aesthetic Judgement and Political Judgement

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ABSTRACT Prominent positions in the contemporary theoretical field of the humanities tend to conceptualize late modern communities in general as aesthetic communities of taste. In regard to political communities, this means reducing the political to an implication of the aesthetic discourse. This article argues for addressing the aesthetic and the political as distinct discourses that are, on the other hand, always engaged with each other in a conflictual interplay. Both discourses draw on and appeal to the ability of judgement, but according to their own distinct principles, and depending on their respective weight in the conflictual interplay, this entails quite different perspectives with regards to political practice and community formation.

KEYWORDS Differentiation of discourses, late modern community formation, aesthetic discourse and political community, aesthetic and teleological judgement.

The status of aesthetic discourse

As an implication of late modernity's posttraditional condition, the issue of community formation has become increasingly vital and consequently holds a central position in contemporary debates on society and culture.¹ One prominent current in the debate is communitarianism which unites a variety of arguments in the basic assumption that the late modern condition calls for *moral communities of value* – predominantly conceptualized in a more or less restorative or essentialist manner.²

However, the discussion in this article is concerned with another main position in the debate, namely a widespread tendency towards conceptualizing late modern community formation as a matter of *taste*. In other words, this position regards social practice in general under the auspices of the aesthetic discourse – not in the sense of art, but broadly understood as a sensuously and emotionally based principle for acting and creating meaning.

Thus, in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (to whom we shall return in greater detail in the following) habitually rooted preferences of taste orchestrate the positioning of the individual in social space and determine his/her orientation towards specific types of community.³ In Gerhard Schulze's analysis of the "experience society" the aesthetic orientation of taste has, due to the increasing level of general wealth, advanced to an overall societal condition which implies that a "psycho-physical semantics" and the associated search of the individuals towards "positively charged psycho-physical conditions" have become dominant in the collective space of meaning. Communities accordingly take the shape of taste-based lifestyle groups.⁴

Michel Maffesoli's analysis of the late modern community formation as a new, aestheticized version of the tribal society is likewise an exponent of the tendency towards generalizing taste and thus the aesthetic discourse as the universal principle of social practice and meaning formation.⁵ Furthermore, contemporary applications of this type of theory in lifestyle analysis and marketing strategies have the identification and the co-creation of communities of taste as their main focus.

The intention of this article is not to question the general thesis that the aesthetic discourse plays a large – and increasing – role in late modernity, but merely to challenge these tendencies towards totalizing taste and thereby the aesthetic discourse as the common denominator of contemporary communities by definition. With the aim of conceptualizing the specific features of political community formation, the article suggests a more differentiated and dynamic frame of reflection which elaborates on inspirations from sociological theory, not least from the tradition of critical theory and especially Jürgen Habermas' theory of modernity.⁶

As is the case for modernity in general, late modernity can advantageously be regarded as a societal formation that is not reducible to one totalizing principle. On the contrary, late modernity remains differentiated into a plurality of separate discourses and discursive domains that are working and generating meaning each on their own specific terms. Thus, in his sociological interpretation of Kant's philosophical thesis on the differentiation of reason (into understanding, practical reason and judgement), Habermas distinguishes between a cognitive-instrumental, a moral-practical and an aesthetic-expressive discourse (in Habermas' terminology "rationality of action") and corresponding discursive domains of practice dominated by the discourse in question.

Habermas' own work does not offer an elaborated account of the relationship between the aesthetic and the political, but primarily stresses the discursive differentiation and points out problematic implications in tendencies towards dedifferentiation such as the seductive reduction of political opinion formation to a matter of aesthetic fascination or the dogmatic reduction of aesthetic expression to political propaganda.

However, differentiation does not entail the elimination of interaction between discursive fields. As separate entities they are continuously involved in reciprocal interplay and interventions of a more or less conflictual nature in which hegemonic issues may occur. In other words, rather than being regarded as reducible to one discursive principle, the collective formation of meaning should at any time be analyzed as a specific and changeable relation of dominance between a plurality of discourses

which process a broad and heterogenous spectrum of social structures and types of experience. Depending on which discursive constellations are prevalent at a given time, we may be dealing with quite different types of meaning formation with correspondingly different perspectives for the development of communities and of society and culture in general.

Following this line of thinking, late modern communities cannot a priori be conceptualized as communities of taste. Constellations may occur in which the aesthetic discourse is predominant in the practice of the community in question, but this does not necessarily imply that cognitive and moral discourses are absent, and in spite of the prominent position of the aesthetic discourse in late modernity in general, it cannot be taken for granted that all late modern communities primarily generate meaning on the basis of a common taste.

Aesthetic discourse and political community

In the following the potentials and limitations of the *aesthetic* discourse in respect to the formation of *political* communities will be discussed. It will be a basic assumption that a political community will always be based on a social interest and a common will to optimize the position of this interest in societal practice at large. The thesis is further, that in a modern democracy, competent and sustainable political communities must be able to reflect beyond their own narrow horizon and attend to their interests in obligation to the common good as a discursive frame and correspondingly handle conflicts of interests in peaceful, dialogical forms.⁷

If an aesthetic discursive intervention into the community formation contributes to enhancing the ability of the community to attend to its interests on these terms, we are dealing with a constructive discursive balance which strengthens and qualifies the political community. If, on the contrary, the intervention is of a nature that deprives the community of the means to develop its ability to reflect its interests dialogically and in obligation to the common good, we are dealing with a depoliticizing dequalification of the community in question. We may in this connection benefit from the aesthetics of Kant in distinguishing between three different categories of aesthetic discursive practice:⁸

Firstly, the monologic, hedonistic pleasure of satisfying immediate, sensuous inclinations and desires – individually or in communities, but always within a private, self-centered horizon. Kant characterizes this type of discursive practice as orientated towards “the agreeable” and as limited to the horizon of private interest and the immediate emotions and desires it satisfies.

This type of aesthetic discursive practice is an essential – though not all-encompassing – element in the heterogeneous tendency towards the aestheticization of the political in late modernity. It is for instance significant for political agents' marketing of themselves with the political substance fading away behind spectacular staging and seductive forms appealing targeted and exclusively to senses and emotions. The ambition of this type of practice is merely to be agreeable, and due to its suspension of critical reflection it bears a danger of the political process degenerating to demagogic manipulation.

It further mobilizes special interests by confirming the immediate, private preferences of taste and aesthetic fascinations of the public and channelling them into the formation of political sym- and antipathies and thereby into the development of the imagination of belonging to particular political communities. In the perspective of this article, this type of discursive practice represents an aesthetic dequalification of the political community in so far as the private, monological interest is not being challenged towards self-reflexivity, nor is it brought into reflective exchange with the discursive frame of the common good.

Secondly, the discursive practice which Kant calls the "judgement of taste". Kant distinguishes between the private judgement and the aesthetic judgement. The private judgement is of an idiosyncratic nature, based as it is on the private sensuous preference of taste. The aesthetic judgement of taste, on the contrary, involves a universalizing, reflective mediation between sensuous perception and concept. Kant's theory of the judgement of taste deals with the latter.

The judgement of taste refers to an aesthetic delight that is characterized by "disinterested pleasure" in that the judgement is raised above private interests and desires and paves the way for a contemplating, qualitatively estimating pleasure with regard to beautiful forms – also entitled "the aesthetics of the beautiful". Even though it is based on the subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure, the judgement of taste is by way of its disinterested nature characterized by an element of reflective distance to its object. The judgement of taste further claims universal validity in that it is proposed as a dialogical offer to the general public – as a suggestion as to how everybody might suitably estimate the forms of the given object. The judgement of taste operates on the basis of the assumption of an a priori *sensus communis* which makes it possible to communicate the disinterested feeling of pleasure or displeasure without using concepts. The notion of *sensus communis*, to which the judgement of taste refers, can further be understood as a community-orientated ability to perform

aesthetic estimation, a societalized sense of form, structure, composition etc. Thus, the aesthetic formation of experience to which the judgement of taste gives rise, works within the familiar and well-ordered horizon of established form-tradition.

Furthermore, the beautiful is in the philosophy of Kant a symbol of the good, in as far as the aesthetics of the beautiful implies a certain degree of cultivation and *Bildung* in order to transcend the merely sensuous desire and associated special interests, and in as far as the judgement of taste in its reference to the notion of *sensus communis* unfolds within a universal idea of morality.⁹ In other words, Kant installs an affinity between on the one hand the form-estimating aesthetic judgement and its *sensus communis*, and on the other hand an *ethical* judgement and an associated ethical *sensus communis*.

Consequently, the judgement of taste bears essential, constructive potentials for the formation and qualification of political communities due to its discursive emancipation from the narrow horizon of special interests, its dialogical, public nature, its foundation in the notion of an aesthetic *sensus communis* and its possible exchange relation to an ethical *sensus communis*. Yet, in itself it seems to be an insufficient basis for the creation and development of competent and sustainable political communities. Partly due to its restriction to a non-conceptual, feeling-based estimation of forms, partly due to its emphasized disinterestedness and the associated lack of capacity to reflect conflicts of interests as a fundamental feature of society as an overall political community.

In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu has a point in his critical discussion of Kant's definition of the judgement of taste as "disinterested" and *sensus communis* as a universal consensual frame.¹⁰ It seems fair to say that this definition in historical practice has tended to generalize the elite's particular, refined orientation of taste as the universally valid and solely legitimate one – and correspondingly to marginalize more "popular" orientations of taste as illegitimate and vulgar. On this background, Bourdieu emphasizes that an aspect of interest is always inherent in the judgement of taste. However, Bourdieu's analysis totalizes this point of permanent power struggle and thereby neglects the rational core of the concept of the judgement of taste and *sensus communis*: namely that the social reality of ongoing power struggle is interwoven with the emerging of common societal concerns and an experience-based political culture that transcends the horizon of special interests. In this respect, modern democracies, conflictual as they may be, have developed universal forms of reflection which in principle offer the possibility of establishing a com-

munity of citizens that reasons in obligation to the discursive frame of the common good.¹¹

In other words, whereas Kant's theory on the judgement of taste can be criticized for unjustifiably universalizing a specific orientation of taste, Bourdieu's critique of Kant marginalizes the perspective of universality as such and thereby the associated potentials for the development of democracy. This limitation thus implies that Bourdieu's analysis of the political process remains fixated to the horizon of agents struggling for special interests, whereas the universally reflecting horizon of citizens is non-existing – or rather: it is by definition regarded as a blind for the power strategies of the upper class.

Correspondingly, Bourdieu does not address politics as a duality of struggle of interests and reflective regulation of common societal concerns, but instead as a “field of consumption” in which each agent acts, orientates and positions him-/herself in the power struggle on the basis of his/her “political taste”. This taste is understood as rooted in the life-long, class-specific formation of embodied sensory, emotional, moral and cognitive dispositions which Bourdieu conceptualizes as “habitus”. As the pivotal point of the practice of the individual this habitually shaped taste further contributes to reproducing the very symbolic distinction and social division of class from which it originates.

To be sure, this article agrees that different social backgrounds equip the individuals with quite diverse resources, e.g. in terms of qualifications for engaging in universal public discourse. But instead of Bourdieu's deterministic conceptualization of this basic fact in the term of habitus, the suggestion here is to regard these background resources as elements of a dynamic, ongoing process of experience in which learning processes and self-transcending political formation, i.e. Bildung, are possible perspectives.¹² This processual perspective further points beyond Bourdieu's concept of taste, which remains confined to the horizon of the aesthetics of the agreeable and the idiosyncrasy of the private judgement. Hereby the field is opened for transversal public dialogue on both taste and politics – and for realizing that although taste in the restricted sense of Bourdieu often appears to be a factor in political processes, politics as such cannot reasonably be reduced to the conduct of taste, just as political communities cannot be understood satisfactorily as mere communities of taste.

Thirdly, the type of aesthetic discourse which Kant refers to as the “aesthetics of the sublime”. In Kant, the sublime feeling arises in the confrontation with the superior forces of nature, but in the present context it is interpreted as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Here we are dealing with an

aesthetic experience which “pleases immediately by reason of its opposition to the interest of sense”.¹³ The delight of the sublime feeling is, in other words, highly ambivalent, a joy mixed with terror, the intensity of which is so overwhelming that it momentarily suspends the experiential and communicative horizon of normality and manifests itself as an “isolated moment of ruthless and contextless attention”, as Martin Seel has put it.¹⁴

The sublime feeling, thus, has an emphatic character of exception, it emerges in the individual experience of rupture and loss of control, and it can therefore hardly be conceived as an edifying resource for the formation of politico-cultural communities. But in the individual’s accompanying discursive restoration work in the shape of the reason-based processing of the experience of sublimity, the displacements of patterns of experience and reflection which it has caused, may encourage processes of *Bildung* that may also have implications for the understanding of political communities in terms of e.g. expanding the reflective horizon of the participants and relativizing self-interest.

Furthermore, in processes of social revolution a periodic presence of sublime feelings may occur in the formation of political community. In such cases we are dealing with a state of collective ecstasy which is nourished by the rapid flux of events and the all-encompassing and fundamentally incalculable character of the revolutionary changes. This type of aesthetic discourse, however, is both chaotic and transient and therefore not an adequate basis for the formation of sustainable politico-cultural communities. According to historical experience, the sublime feeling will be superseded by the more pragmatic and prosaic discourses of power- and interest struggles, as the revolutionary process develops into more lucid and institutionalized forms. If we, on the contrary, imagine the politicized discourse of the sublime perpetuated, it would lead to totalitarian consequences in the shape of collectivistic pressure towards unity and identification resulting in denial of conflicts and difference.¹⁵

This understanding of the aesthetic dimension of revolutionary processes bears some resemblance to Jacques Rancière’s notion of the both politically and aesthetically breaking “event” in which society’s established, unequal and basically unjust system of distribution of the sensible, “police”, is interrupted by “the political”, i.e. the intervention of the voices of the marginalized, thus making their arguments and demands tangible and audible and alternatives to the social order of “police” visible.¹⁶ By way of its aesthetic/performative dimension, the event accentuates the radically egalitarian nature of the political and thereby challenges not only the established distribution of resources, but society’s

whole organization of the common, including which perceptions, articulations and visions are valid and legitimate.

However, Rancière's analysis appears to be devoid of any concrete, experiential perspective of process. Struggles of interests and the associated processes of experience of the involved agents do not count as genuinely political, since they by definition refer to discourses based on inequality. The "event", on the other hand, seems to be of an almost mythical nature: an apparently privileged, uninfected representative of a superior common good, i.e. the marginalized, somehow breaks through the aesthetic and political order of "police" and paves the way for a true and altogether different society based on equality. Questions of judgement, aesthetic experience, associated learning processes of individual agents and concrete potentials for political community formation have no place in this abstract dichotomy.

Political judgement as a composed entity

It appears to be an uncontroversial assumption that a well-functioning democratic political community presupposes empowered citizens whose political judgement is qualified. However, as we have seen, the mentioned types of aesthetic discursive practice only to a limited extent equip the individual with this quality of judgement. But the aesthetic discourse does not hold a monopoly on constituting judgement. If we conceive of judgement in the sense of the broad tradition from Aristotle's concept *phronesis* via Kant's *Critique of Judgement* to Hannah Arendt's¹⁷ and recently Oskar Negt's¹⁸ and Christoph Menke's¹⁹ interpretations of the concept, it becomes evident that judgement is not limited to aesthetic practice, but must be conceptualized as an integral part of the faculty of knowledge in general. It is further developed and cultivated in specific forms depending on the individual's practical life experience and the associated formative processes.

Judgement basically performs the mediation between the specific and the universal, between sensory object and theoretical *understanding*. But it differs from the logical-conceptual rationality of understanding and reason by drawing on imagination, intuition and emotions in its mediating activity. In this sense judgement is an ability that cannot be formalized and reduced to general cognitive laws, but in concrete practice it nevertheless plays a central role in the establishment of general orientation. Judgement enables the individual to estimate whether a phenomenon is covered by an existing universal concept or not, and it equips the individual with an intuitive feeling of what is the general aspect of concrete situations and what is therefore suitable and relevant.

Kant further distinguishes between two modalities in the work of

judgement: the *determinative* mode in which the movement of mediation takes its point of departure on the general level and subsumes the specific under an existing universal concept; and the *reflective* mode which departs from the specific and grants its unique qualities precedence over existing universal concepts. Therefore, the reflective judgement unfolds as an unceasing movement of investigation between an object that cannot be fully determined and a universal concept that cannot be found.²⁰

The *aesthetic* judgement, as represented by the judgement of taste, operates in the reflective mode and establishes orientation on the basis of a disinterested and non-conceptual, subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure in regard to forms – with a universalizing reference to the aesthetic *sensus communis*.²¹ Its investigative function may, by the mediating work of imagination, be brought into interaction with theoretical understanding as well as reason and the ethical *sensus communis*, but this interaction is not established automatically and may thus as well not materialize.

The judgement that unfolds in *political practice* in general, including the public debate, in democratic late modern societies should be regarded as a composed entity. Like the aesthetic judgement, it operates in the reflective mode in its investigation of a plurality of possible mediations between on the one hand a concrete political case or a special interest and on the other hand the consideration of the common good. In this context, the condition of practice is always complex and genuinely difficult to estimate, and logical argumentation is generally at the most able to establish some *degree* of certainty as to what is true, just and right.²²

Ethical and aesthetic questions as to the personal credibility and rhetorical power of persuasion of the political agents therefore often play a central role in the political process as guarantors of the certainty that a factually orientated political discourse is not fully able to provide. So, with contextually shifting weight, it is fair to assume that the operative judgement of political practice draws on both cognitive, ethical and aesthetic discourses in its movement of investigation between the specific and the universal.

But if the ideal is a democratic political community based on the public opinion formation of empowered citizens, it seems equally fair to say that the relevant political judgement is first of all constituted by a rationally and factually qualified ability of estimation in respect to the *content dimension* of political matters, including the reflection of both conflicts of interests and common concerns. In this perspective, the judgement of taste's non-conceptual and disinterested communication of a subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure in regard to forms, appears in itself to be an insufficient basis for democratic political community formation.

To this end, we may find inspiration in the other main type of judgement which Kant presents in *The Critique of Judgement*: the teleological judgement. This type of judgement also operates in the reflective mode, but departs from the a priori assumption of a basic *purposiveness* according to which the phenomenon in question is reflectively investigated by means of the overall, meaning-seeking, speculative movement of reason. This reason-based activity of the imagination is further engaged in a close relationship of exchange with the ethical *sensus communis* which we in the political context might suitably define as society's experience-based politico-cultural community of values which is continuously shaped and reshaped in the positioning struggle of special interests and their efforts to determine the common good.

In other words, a qualified democratic political community relies on a judgement which primarily performs its mediation between the specific and the universal in dialogue with concepts and arguments of reason and which is capable of reflecting conflicts of interests and of processing them towards the perspective of the common good. A political judgement that meets the challenges of late modern social reality has, in other words, to be able to work on the complex terms that struggles of interests are a basic fact of society but also that the collective experience of the process of struggle at the same time continuously generates the common good as a discursive frame, a political *sensus communis*, which we as a societal political community obligate ourselves to reflect in legitimizing our actions.²³

The aesthetic judgement may, due to its very way of functioning, contribute to strengthening the universal perspective, the ability to establish a reflective distance to immediate, private inclinations and interests which is necessary for the development of a democratic community, and the ability to imagine alternatives to the status quo. But its own means of production – the non-conceptual, disinterested, feeling-based estimation of forms and the fundamental rejection of reflecting the conflictual content dimension of social practice – makes it insufficient as the main principle for the formation of political communities. Instead, a reason-based political judgement should be granted precedence.

Notes

1. For a broader outline of this debate, see Henrik Kaare Nielsen, "Fællesskabets posttraditionelle vilkår", in *Fællesskabsfølelser: Kunst, politik, filosofi*, eds. Mikkel Bolt and Jacob Lund (Aarhus: Klim, 2009).

2. See the presentation and discussion of this heterogenous tradition in *Kommunitarismus*, ed. Axel Honneth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1993).
3. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 1984).
4. Gerhard Schulze, *Die Erlebnisgesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1992).
5. Michel Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes* (London: Sage, 1995).
6. Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981).
7. Henrik Kaare Nielsen, *Kritisk teori og samtidsanalyse* (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2001).
8. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952). See also Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge University Press, 1979); Howard Caygill, *Art of Judgment* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1989); Martin Seel, *Ästhetik des Erscheinens* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003).
9. Cf. Paul Guyer, op.cit., 312ff.
10. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction*.
11. Henrik Kaare Nielsen, *Demokrati i bevægelse: Sammenlignende studier i politisk kultur og nye sociale bevægelser i Vesttyskland og Danmark* (Aarhus University Press, 1991).
12. Cf. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972).
13. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, 118.
14. Martin Seel, "Zur ästhetischen Praxis der Kunst", in *Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen*, ed. Wolfgang Welsch (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1993), 407.
15. Charles Taylor, "Wieviel Gemeinschaft braucht die Demokratie?", *Transit*, no. 5 (1992).
16. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004).
17. Hannah Arendt, *Das Urteilen: Texte zu Kants politischer Philosophie* (München: Piper, 1985).
18. Oskar Negt, *Der politische Mensch* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2010).
19. Christoph Menke, "The Aesthetic Critique of Judgment", in *The Power of Judgment: A Debate on Aesthetic Critique*, eds. Daniel Birnbaum and Isabelle Graw (Frankfurt am Main: Sternberg Press, 2010).
20. Cf. Rüdiger Bubner, *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1989).
21. See also Christoph Menke, "The Aesthetic Critique of Judgment".
22. Oskar Negt, *Der politische Mensch*.
23. Henrik Kaare Nielsen, *Konsument eller samfundsborger? Kritiske essays* (Aarhus: Klim, 2007).