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In Search of a Better World?: Reconsidering Sociology and Music Education as Utopian Fields

ABSTRACT

Music education research has in recent years been interested in defining music education's societal mission. Concepts such as praxial music education, artistic citizenship, or an activist approach tried to determine that music education's foremost task would be to transform societies. This seemed urgent in view of global crises. But is music education's foremost mission really social change? To a certain degree, this is a sociological question. To answer it, a look back to the beginnings of sociology as a field of research is a promising way to go. When sociology emerged as a specific field of investigation, it was not clear if its task would be only analyzing how societies work or proposing necessary changes. The tension between the present and the future, between reality and "utopia" was significant for an emerging field. But the close connection to utopia got lost over time. Sociologist Ruth Levitas revives the approach of understanding sociology as a utopian field and develops the concept of the imaginary reconstitution of society. Furthermore, scholars in utopian studies or political science emphasize the usefulness of utopia in critical relation to transforming societies. Understanding sociology as a utopian field could provide innovative ideas for music education.

Keywords

Sociology, music education, social justice, equality, human flourishing, utopia

“Utopians of the early 19th century considered themselves as social scientists and were so considered by their contemporaries” (Goodwin & Taylor 2009, p. 23).

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, music education research has been particularly interested in defining music education’s societal mission (Elliott & Silverman, 2015; Elliott et al., 2016; Hess, 2019; Regelski, 2015). This seemed urgent in view of politicians not being able to adequately address challenges such as the global refugee crises or global warming. But is music education’s foremost task really social change? Should music education be solely focused on transforming societies?

To a certain degree, this is, in fact a sociological question, as Johansen (2014) points out. It does not only concern music education and its possible tasks, but likewise how society works. Without knowledge about the structures and processes of society or what social change is, it is not possible to answer the question if music education’s main task is social change. Thus, Johansen (2014, p. 71) defines social change as “... the process by which differences are made in the lives of individuals and groups, deliberately or unintentionally, along with the consequences thereof for society’s micro, meso, and macro levels.” This encompasses for him likewise “the dynamics of the societal structures that regulate the conditions for these processes” (Johansen, 2014, p. 71). Johansen’s statement indicates that social change might be much more complex than is sometimes assumed in music education research (Elliott et al., 2016; Hess, 2019). It concerns societal structures and processes on different levels and affects individuals as well as communities—and sociology might indeed be the appropriate field of research since it is focused on how society works (Sztompka, 1994; Weinstein, 2010). But sociology in the way we know it today is the result of a process in which some characteristics of this field have changed—and some of these changed characteristics might be useful for better understanding and refining music education’s societal mission.

In the 19th century, when sociology emerged as a scholarly field, it was not clear if its task would only be analyzing how societies work or proposing necessary changes (Dawson, 2016). This tension between the present and the future, between reality and “utopia” was significant for this emerging field of research—although the utopian dimensions of sociology have mostly been lost in the course of its further development. However, British sociologist Levitas (2013a) revives this approach of understanding sociology as a utopian field and develops the concept of the imaginary reconstitution of society. Likewise, scholars in utopian studies (Moynan & Baccolini, 2007) or political science (Patterson, 2018) emphasize the usefulness of utopia in critical relation to transforming societies.

Understanding sociology as a utopian field could provide innovative ideas for music education and social change. Thus, this paper investigates the perspectives that sociology as “utopian science” could offer for music education, helping to question and

refine its societal mission. It starts with considerations about what utopia is before investigating the beginnings of sociology as a field of research, in view of utopia. The next section analyzes the meaning of utopia and the utopian dimensions of sociology for music education, redefining music education as a utopian field. The final part develops perspectives for the future.

UTOPIAS: EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE

When we use the word “utopia,” we often characterize something as an unrealistic idea or a dream. However, this common use of the word “utopia” is different from the meaning it has in sociology or political science. In these fields, utopia has more realistic, but also visionary dimensions. It is used as a point of reference for political systems, societal changes (Goodwin & Taylor, 2009) or as a method (Levitas, 2013a). Utopia is a multifaceted concept, as its Greek origin underlines, in which it literally means both a good place and a place that does not exist (Claeys, 2013).

Generally, utopia has, according to Levitas (2013b, p. 43), four different meanings: First, it is an expression of a desire for a better way of living, for the desire to be otherwise. Second, it can be understood as “irrelevant fantasy or nightmare, leading to totalitarianism” (Levitas, 2013b, p. 43), such as what happened during the Third Reich in Germany. Third, it can concern social practices prefiguring a better society; the Hippie movement in the 1960s is a good example for this. Fourth, it can represent an outline of an alternative society. Each one of these meanings describes some aspects of what utopia is, and what might be present in one or the other way when we use this term.

There are many stories illustrating how utopia could appear such as the German *Schlaraffenland*, describing a country where wishes come true, where there is as much food and pleasure as one wishes. But there are likewise political visions of a better world such as in More’s (1989 [1516]) famous book *Utopia* which gave the entire genre its name. It sketches a new society and political order which is intended to facilitate human flourishing. Likewise, Wilde (1891) characterizes utopia not only as an idea, but as a political program:

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias (p. 292).

For Wilde, utopia is a vital concept for mankind because it shows something we could aim for. It represents visions of a better society and is connected to social transformation. While Wilde presents his ideas about utopia in a political essay, there have been many different ways of expressing notions of better worlds, e.g. in novels. Likewise, there have been explicit utopias that openly describe a better society such as that of More (1989 [1516]). But there are also implicit utopian ideas which can be found in the arts, in research (e.g. music education) or in political documents (Levitas, 2013b). Levitas (2001), for instance, investigated New Labour’s and Tony Blair’s social policy and

the relation between work and income. She found many hidden inconsistencies such as policies being designed to help the poor, but in reality supporting mechanisms of oppression.

There is, indeed, a close relation between the concept of utopia and political thinking (Goodwin & Taylor, 2009). Many aspects of today's societies that we take for granted were first mentioned in utopian thinking before becoming reality, such as unemployment benefits, public health care, or women's rights. Socialism certainly played a significant role in this process. This indicates that utopia is not as unrealistic as it sometimes seems, but rather a realm for exploring ideas, to see how they play out in an imagined society. But utopia's relation to reality can be close or more distant, such as indicated by the notion of real utopias—as developed in the field of political science (Wright, 2010), connecting visions of a better society with what is possible, without completely losing the openness of alternative futures.

Generally, a broader understanding of utopia indicates that many fields have utopian dimensions, even though often unnoticed. It might be time to openly acknowledge the implicit utopian visions in many areas and to discuss them, for instance in sociology or in music education concerned with social change. But to do this, for instance regarding sociology, it is useful to first go back to the origin of this field.

THE BEGINNINGS OF SOCIOLOGY IN VIEW OF UTOPIA

In 1906, historian, sociologist and Science Fiction author Wells addressed the newly founded *Sociological Society* in London. He spoke about the “so-called science’ of sociology and asserted that “there is no such thing in sociology as dispassionately considering what *is*, without considering what is *intended to be*” (Wells, 1906, p. 367). He saw the “creation of utopias—and their exhaustive criticism’ as the “proper and distinctive method” for the new discipline sociology (Wells, 1906, p. 367). He claimed all sociologists to necessarily be utopians since they are interested in the improvement of societies and a better future (Wells, 1906): “Sociologists cannot help making Utopias; though they avoid the word, though they deny the idea with passion, their very silences shape a Utopia” (p. 367). For Wells, the connection between sociology and utopia seemed to be a most natural one since the new field of research was supposed to not only be restricted to what is, but also to what could be. Generally, Wells’ statement was certainly a programmatic one because he was a possible candidate to become the first Chair of Sociology at the London School of Economics.

However, sociology did not keep its close relation to utopia, but has rather distanced itself from it during its further development as a field of research. Levitas (2013b) describes the reason for the break with utopia in this way:

Sociology claimed respectability on the basis of science, and, in keeping with a general discursive polarization between science and utopia, rejected its utopian affiliation (p. 42).

To become a respected field of research, it was necessary for sociology to give up its utopian roots. It was supposed to be much more about analysis, description and objectivity than about imaginations and visions of better worlds.

However, to thoroughly understand sociology's relation to utopia, much depends on how sociology is defined. As a field of research, sociology is concerned with how people live and how they organize their communal life. It is concerned with the mechanisms and structures of society. Levitas (2013a, p. 66) refers to the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, who argued in 1959 that sociology is concerned with the connection between private problems and public issues, with the intersection of biography and history, the impact social contexts and historical events have on our personal lives (Mills, 1959). There are certainly many ways of defining what sociology is and how it is connected to individual and societal life (Wright et al., 2021, pp. 2-5). But one significant aspect of definition might be the question if sociology should only analyze and describe how society is or also develop visions of a better world. If sociology would be concerned with a better world, then, there would be an obvious connection to utopia. If not, it is more complicated and much depends on how utopia and utopian thinking are described. Thus, Levitas (2013a) states: "To describe sociology as utopian is simply to assert without derogation that it contains implicit and sometimes explicit ideas of a good society" (p. 67).

A brief look at the history of sociology underlines these facts (Levitas, 2013a, pp. 67-68): The term was coined by the French mathematician and philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857), who, with the utopian socialist Henri de Saint Simon (1760-1825) and the social Darwinist Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) founded sociology as a field of research. Comte, for instance, was a positivist thinker, who was interested in uncovering the laws of development of human history, regarding social order and social change, aiming toward a scientific organization of society, where individuals could live the life matching best their interests, talents, as well as the needs of society. Comte's ideas are clearly utopian, but also critical regarding social reformers and their sometimes anti-scientific approach.

There are many examples for the utopian dimensions of sociology in the writings of Durckheim, Gilman and others (Levitas 2013a, pp. 68-70), at the core of their work being notions of better societies. Even if the connection to utopian thinking might not be as obvious as in the writings of Wells (1906), these publications tell something about the general relation of sociology and utopian thinking. Levitas (2013a, p. 93) states about Wells' characterization of general utopian elements in sociology:

Wells is surely right that sociologists carry out silent utopias in their work, both as substance and as inspiration. Utopia's exclusion was never absolute, but its presence was persistently denied. It was not recognized as sociology, and the utopian content of sociology was seen as serious flaw. But sociology contains repressed utopias.

While this statement indicates that sociology's connection to utopia has never been completely lost, nevertheless, it has been largely marginalized—and it might be a point of debate if this strengthened or weakened sociology as a field of research. However, in

recent years, in view of the success of the emerging field of utopian studies and attempts at redefining sociology's meaning for society, these utopian dimensions became again points of interest.

Sociologists Dawson (2016) and Levitas (2013a) thus try to revive the old tradition of utopian thinking in sociology. Dawson (2016) states that all theories of society have utopian elements. But in view of the ideal of a value-free sociology as presented by Weber (1864–1920), it is not easy to determine if sociologists should go beyond analyzing and present concepts for an alternative future. To uncover the sometimes-hidden societal alternatives and utopian energy, according to Dawson, there are three steps that many sociologists take in their theories (Dawson, 2016, p. 3): A first step is to identify a problem of society. This critical part of social theory can concern, for instance, economic inequalities, alienation, or exploitation. Second, it is important to propose an alternative and suggest changes. This can concern large transformations brought about by revolutions such as the transition from capitalism to communism or smaller ones such as introducing a new policy, for instance free health care for everyone. Third, it is about legitimizing and justifying the intended changes, regarding the question of whether the proposed alternatives really solve problems. Applying these three steps to sociological theories helps to uncover their utopian dimensions.

In her concept of the imaginary reconstitution of society, Levitas (2013a) likewise suggests three steps to identify the utopian dimensions of fields or concepts: the archaeological, the ontological and the architectural mode. While the archaeological mode investigates what ideas of a good society are hidden, for instance, in various kinds of writings, political programs or papers, the ontological mode aims at further outlining what the imagined society would look like, what kind of people would live there, what important values or norms it would have. The third mode, the architectural one, is concerned with imagining a potentially better society, later again being subject to the archaeological mode in terms of extensive critique.

Furthermore, sociologist Weinstein (2010) raises the interesting issue if sociologists understand themselves as “social engineers,” secretly hoping that someone might use their research about society and its processes for much needed societal transformations (p. 331). Patterson (2018) even points out that society in all its complexity is generally bound to the future, to visions and imaginations about what could be. He asserts that “modern society is a historical structure in constant flux that always occupies an imaginary landscape set in the future” (p. 26).

Particularly Dawson's (2016) and Levitas' (2013a) approaches show how it is possible to discover and uncover the utopian dimensions of fields of research, theories, or various kinds of documents. Levitas (2013a) even suggests using utopia as a method for a more comprehensive approach to politics, using the three modes of utopian thinking, critically evaluating the current reality, but likewise developing a vision of a better reality—and unearthing the implicit utopias we have in various fields. This can also concern music education in theory and practice.

RETHINKING SOCIOLOGY AND MUSIC EDUCATION AS UTOPIAN FIELDS

Understanding music education and sociology as utopian fields underlines their interest in just societies and possibly, in social transformations. Even if the connection to utopia and utopian thinking has been controversial for sociology, sociologists such as Levitas (2013a) and Dawson (2016) show that it is possible to understand sociology as a utopian field, without disregarding scholarly standards. But still, they point out that this notion of sociology is not unproblematic.

Maybe, in music education, in view of utopian thinking, social change should also not be a completely uncontroversial topic with which almost everyone automatically agrees. Rather, it should be something to be considered more carefully—and to be critically reflected. Following Levitas (2013a) and Dawson (2016), this certainly means questioning our notions of social change and the social impact of the arts, no matter where these visions are hidden—in music education concepts such as praxial or activist music education, in curricula, personal teaching philosophies, or foundations of our profession. But this might not happen without opposition since questioning the arts' social impact is often regarded as questioning something which should not be questioned because it could undermine the very foundation of what we do. Thus, Belfiore and Bennett (2008) might be right that “a belief in the power of the arts to transform lives for the better represents something close to orthodoxy amongst advocates of the arts around the world” (p. 4). When questioning the arts' and music education's social impact, it could thus be helpful to understand music education in a more comprehensive way, not just aiming at societal change. Music education likewise has artistic and aesthetic dimensions (Fossum & Varkoy, 2012; Kertz-Welzel, 2022; Rinholm & Varkoy, 2021).

However, starting to critically question our general notion of music education's social impact can be a useful first step. This can include critically approaching what social change is as well as our notions of the just society. Philosopher Carlton (2006) correctly emphasizes that there are a variety of concepts of the just society. The just society could, for instance, concern political dimensions such as a liberal society, but likewise a religious or scientific orientation regarding the chosen people or a rationally driven society. But it could also be the fair or the ordered society. It might be elitist or democratic, pacifist or sustainable. It is not clear what the just society is—neither in general nor in music education. It could be helpful to use utopia as method in music education, as proposed by Levitas (2013a), to better understand the utopian visions we have in music education and how the just society should look like—and we might well discover that we do not all agree in our visions, even though we might have thought we would.

But understanding music education and sociology as utopian fields does not only concern theory. It can likewise affect what is going on in music education classrooms. It can be about teaching utopian thinking through encounters with music, getting to know utopia as literary work or various ways of discussions or explorations, following

Levitas' (2013a) modes of utopian thinking. Music education can be a place of exploration and transformation since the arts have always been considered to have utopian power (Brooks, 2016). Educating young people's imagination, guided by the arts' power to "release the imagination" (Greene, 1995), is an important mission of music education. Levitas' (2013a) and other sociologists' work can inspire to reconnect with this dimension of the arts and particularly music.

Certainly, understanding sociology and music education as utopian fields should not lead to reducing music education's focus to social change, as has often been done in the past (Elliott et al., 2016; Hess, 2019; Regelski, 2015). Music education is also about music's artistic and aesthetic dimensions and should be a place which is, at least at certain times, free of any purpose. It is a place for learning and practicing utopian thinking, for enjoying music and intense musical experiences (Kertz-Welzel, 2022). Being a free space does not mean there is no purpose at all because encounters with music always have transformative power, foster self-growth and creativity. Understanding music education as a free space can be a supplement to concepts of music education as focused on social change (Kertz-Welzel, 2022). Having an approach to music education that promotes social and political engagement, but likewise one that is focused on the music itself, providing a free space for artistic and aesthetic experiences, are two sides of the same coin—and are likewise the result of understanding music education as utopian field, supported by a solid sociological foundation (Kertz-Welzel 2022).

CONCLUSION

Reconsidering sociology and music education as utopian fields opens new perspectives. It helps us to better understand music education's connection to notions of the just society. This facilitates a critical discussion about our notions of better worlds—and should also be informed by knowledge sociology has to offer, for instance sociology of change (Sztompka, 1993) or praxeological approaches (Schatzki, 2019). Understanding sociology as utopian field is a critical, but also imaginative endeavor which could help music education to rethink its goals, particularly in relation to society and social transformations. Likewise, this could lead to new perspectives for sociology of music education as an emerging field, openly addressing issues of social change in a critical, but visionary manner.

However, sociology should not completely go back to its utopian beginnings, since the professionalization of sociology as a field of research cannot and should not be reversed. But we can learn from its utopian beginnings and the utopian dimensions it still has. Maybe, Goodwin and Taylor's (2009) notion, as stated at the beginning of this paper, that "utopians of the early 19th century considered themselves as social scientists and were so considered by their contemporaries" (p. 23) can inspire more thorough descriptions of what we want in music education, who we are and who we want to be considered as—maybe as utopian thinkers, social engineers or socially responsible musicians and educators.

This likewise includes being more open for interdisciplinary approaches. Fields such as utopian studies and future studies show that there is an increasing interest in critically discussing and clarifying how the future could look. The future has a lot to do with education in terms of preparing young people who will be in charge of society in the future. Realizing the utopian dimensions of education and music education, learning from the beginnings of sociology, as for instance discussed in the research of Dawson (2016) or Levitas (2013a), can be a significant part of this endeavor. Sociology of music education as a field of research should embrace the utopian dimensions of early sociology (and the hidden ones of current sociology), but in a critical way. Moylan (2007, p. 224) states about the utopian mission in general:

The utopian vocation—pursued by activists, artists, and scholars, not to mention each of us in our everyday lives—must include an apprehension of its own internal and external limitations and challenges.

Being utopian in the way Levitas (2013a) describes it, in connection to early sociology's utopian dimensions, clearly involves being critical, as does the general mission of musicians, music educators and scholars. Reconsidering this dimension of early sociology helps to better understand and refine music education's mission in the 2020s, in view of its societal responsibility, but not being confined to it.

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