

The Beautiful Risk of Education (Gert Biesta)

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Review of

The Beautiful Risk of Education

by Gert J.J. Biesta, Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014

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Biesta's work in last two decades is of the kind that is too often lacking in philosophy of education discourses, or in foundations of education in general: examination that takes education itself, as a whole, as its "unit of analysis," and focuses on what education should mean. *The Beautiful Risk of Education* continues Biesta's efforts to articulate what in hindsight he refers to as a "theory of education" (p. xi), a theory not only in the descriptive sense but primarily in the normative one. This book is the latter in what can be seen as a series of three books by Gert Biesta. In *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* (2006) he develops subjectivity as a central dimension in education through a critique of the dominant discourse of learning in education and an exploration of the notion of "coming into presence." In *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (2010) he introduces a broader education framework by adding two other dimensions, qualification and socialization. In *The Beautiful Risk of Education* (2014) Biesta "focuses on a theme that was implicit in the other two books" (p. x), namely the weakness of education. Biesta believes this theme deserves explicit examination since it has important implications that might assist in engaging with his ideas in practical settings. This review is a good opportunity to take a comprehensive look at Biesta's work, after completing the 'trilogy'.

Biesta draws on philosophical texts from a broad range of areas, including ethics, politics, and theology, while at the same time he does not lose sight of his main interest: what is educationally desirable. This is a challenging attempt to combine two allegedly contradictory scholarly approaches: one that rests on other domains and another that seeks to define its own way. Indeed, as can be seen by reading this book in the context of Biesta's corpus, he faces the challenge by honestly engaging with both approaches in a search for a richer way of thinking about education.

In *The Beautiful Risk of Education* Biesta characterizes and argues against "strong" perceptions and practices of education, and explains and exemplifies a "weak" view through seven "themes": creativity, communication, teaching, learning, emancipation, democracy, and what Biesta labels "virtuosity". He defines his idea of "weak education" against current dominant perceptions of education and a "desire to make education strong, secure, predictable, and risk-free" (p. 2). "Strong" education is associated with "effective production of pre-defined 'learning outcomes'" and with "a limited set of identities" (ibid.). Biesta argues that this perception of education is a "fundamental misunderstanding of what education is about" (p. 3) since education "isn't a mechanism and shouldn't be turned into one" (p. 4). Actually, the educational way is "the slow way, the difficult way, the frustrating way, and, so we might say, the weak way, as the outcome of this

process can neither be guaranteed nor secured” (p. 3). The risk in education stems from the view that education is “not only interested in qualification and socialization but also in subjectification, that is, in the possibility of the event of subjectivity” (p. 139). For Biesta, following Levinas, subjectivity is not a quality one possesses, and therefore “subjectivity is not understood as an essence but as an event” (p.5). Events of subjectification occur “when individuals resist existing identities and identity-positions and speak on their own terms” (p. 7). Since the event of subjectification “may or may not happen” (p. 140), there is a risk in education, and “[t]o engage with the openness and unpredictability of education... means to take this risk seriously, and to do so not because the risk is deemed to be inevitable... but because without the risk, education itself disappears and social reproduction, insertion into existing orders of being, doing, and thinking, takes over” (ibid.).

Missing the Protective Potential in Arendt’s View

As part of his discussion of democracy Biesta evaluates Arendt’s understanding of politics—and as such her call to separate education from politics—through the lens of Rancière’s work. Biesta argues: “If Rancière helps us to see how education and politics are intimately connected if what is ‘at stake’ is the question of emancipation, Hannah Arendt... is an author who comes from the opposite end, as she has been one of the most outspoken critics of the idea that education and politics may have anything to do with each other” (p. 101). Since Biesta adopts Rancière’s ideas about equality, democracy, and politics in his discussion of emancipation, it seems that when Arendt challenges the place of politics in education, Biesta has the same meaning of politics in mind as Rancière’s, that is, human existence within conditions of plurality.

Biesta argues that Arendt’s argument is based on the assumption of psychological developmentalism. Quoting Arendt, he writes that it is “a particular view of childhood (and hence of adulthood) in which the child is seen as ‘a developing human being’ and childhood is seen as ‘a temporary stage, a preparation for adulthood’” (p. 110-1). Biesta argues that this view signifies “a fundamental distinction between children and adults” (p. 111). Thus, Biesta arrives at—and rejects—a stand that refuses to let children and students deal with the political realm. Once developmentalism is rejected, he argues, we have to accept “the intimate connection between education and democratic politics” (p. 8). However, this connection is established not by preparing for political existence but by experimenting it, since “political existence can never be guaranteed but always has to be reinvented” (p. 118). Therefore, Biesta concludes, “freedom cannot be produced educationally but can only be achieved politically” (p. 104).

I find Biesta’s argument against Arendt valid. However, since Biesta seeks a fundamental perceptual change about education, he needs to not only to offer an alternative but also to target obstacles to realizing this alternative; rejecting Arendt’s view on education in relation to politics misses an opportunity to do so. We have to bear in mind unwelcomed political and economic interventions in education that attempt to influence what is educationally desirable. These interventions are aggressive and uncompromising to the extent that what education actually means—and consequently its role and place in society—is dictated by self-interested forces that demand “strong” and mechanistic “education”. Being aware of such interventions, we should not just develop alternative conceptual frameworks for education; perhaps even more importantly, we should consider how to protect education from exploitive intrusions. Therefore, we should seriously examine philosophical calls to “isolate” education from other realms, especially those realms that seek a footing in education in pursuit of their own interests. Such philosophical calls might be fraught with underexamined

ideas that carry the potential to shield education (not in the sense of making it “strong”). Arendt’s (1961) observation that “education became an instrument of politics” (p. 176) and her plea to “decisively divorce the realm of education from the others, most of all from the realm of public, political life” (p. 195) is such a call that deserves our careful attention. Perhaps the separatist tone in Arendt’s work is not thoroughly founded or not motivated enough—it appears as part of a relatively short essay (“The Crisis in Education”) and not as part of a comprehensive program for education or a general social framework—but it is courageous and thought-provoking, and not every adaptation of it means “to declare the school a ‘no-go area’ for political existence” (p. 117), as Biesta worries.

To be sure, Biesta is well aware of the fierce political struggle around education. He criticizes the “very functionalist view of education,” a view that “paints a picture where society—and there is of course always the question who ‘society’ actually ‘is’—sets the agenda, and where education is seen as an instrument for the delivery of this agenda,” and that “thinks of the school as the institution that needs to solve ‘other people’s problems”” (p. 125-6). Biesta also notes that “governments in many countries have established a strong grip on schools” (p. 121), and with regard to understanding education as a causal process of production he states that “in a lot of countries education is rapidly moving in this direction and is becoming oppressive” (p. 146-7). Against this dominant instrumental and oppressive approach to education Biesta endorses weak education with an emphasis on subjectification and emancipation facilitated by professional judgment. But Biesta does not take the political struggle itself around education as part of his plan for education, or his “theory of education.” In the current situation where education is viewed as a legitimate instrument to gain power and control, as Biesta rightly observes, any comprehensive program for education—even if “just” philosophical or theoretical—must not only characterize the threats to education but also inherently *confront* them and offer ways to fend them off. Without a plan for how to overcome threats to education—at least conceptually—a vision or program for education is not just incomplete but also lacks significant practical force, and as such has little chance of being translated into action, even if accepted within educational and political circles.

In this sense, Arendt’s analysis of the “rise of the social” is something that educationalists should carefully examine with regard to education. For Arendt, in late modernity, with the expansion of the market economy, the social has increasingly invaded both the public and private realms, and resulted in “the demise of the political”, as Biesta (2014, p. 108) notes. As I see it, this dominance of the social underlies the interconnected phenomena that Biesta articulates in the educational domain such as the pursuit of “strong” education and “what works”, as well as what he labels the “learnification” of educational discourse and practice. Biesta mentions the “rise of the social” as an expression of the distortion and reversal of the hierarchy within the *vita activa*, but he does not explicitly link it to the current situation of education and to the threats to education. As there is a direct link between the “rise of the social” and the dominant perception and practices of education, an alternative view of education must deal with the rise of educationally oppressive social forces.

There is one point, however, where Biesta does acknowledge a threat to weak education and implicitly suggests a need for protective measures. This appears in the Appendix, and I suspect that alongside other explicit statements this is the reason why this interview with Biesta was attached to the book. In the Appendix Biesta admits and warns that “while subjectivity cannot be *produced* through education—or for that matter politics—it is actually quite easy to *prevent* the event of subjectivity from occurring... it is quite easy, both at the individual level and at the institutional level, to create situations in which the possibility for being addressed is edited out” (p. 145). It is crucial to understand, however, that situations that prevent subjectivity usually do not happen by accident. They are rooted beyond the individual or organizational level and originate

in the overall systemic and social context, in the general political discourse about education and by the dominant instrumental view on the role and place of education in society. And when this view leads to aggressive attempts to penetrate the educational realm in order to influence it, subjectivity becomes so vulnerable and so fragile that the first task is to protect it. We can say, relating to Biesta's discussion of teacher education, his critique of the discourse of "competencies" and his advocacy for practical educational wisdom, that as part of this wisdom educationalists should develop a 'sense' to 'feel' or 'detect' attacks on education (or threats to their professional judgment), and moreover to develop the capacity to keep these attacks away and to protect students and education as a whole.

Therefore, it is not enough to acknowledge that education is exploited politically as an oppressive instrument and that consequently subjectivity needs to be guarded; it is also crucial to ask questions about *who* profits from preventing subjectivity and who tries to attack it, and to trace the specific strategies taken by oppressive factors that wish to shut down any alternative view of education. To use Biesta's terminology when he distinguishes between two understandings of creation, the weak existential ("in terms of encounters and events", p. 12) approach to education he offers has to acknowledge and block the prevalent strong metaphysical ("in terms of causes and effect", p. 12) ways education is perceived, not just to present itself as an alternative.

Looking broadly at Biesta's work vis-à-vis the rise of the social, it seems that Biesta's attempt to juxtapose subjectification with qualification and socialization, as more or less three equal overlapping dimensions or domains in which "educational processes and practices always operate" (p. ix), might erode subjectivity. Following the realization that the question of subjectivity—which was addressed in the book *Beyond Learning* (2006)—"is not the be-all and end-all of education" (p. 147), Biesta adds in the book *Good Education in an Age of Measurement* (2010) two other dimensions, qualification and socialization. In *The Beautiful Risk of Education* Biesta explains that the domain of qualification "has to do with the ways in which, through education, individuals become qualified to do certain things (this is the domain of the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions)", and the domain of socialization "has to do with the ways in which, through education, individuals become part of existing social, political, professional, and so on 'orders'" (p. 64). Thus, Biesta states that "education is never one-dimensional in its intentions and ambitions so that there is always the difficult question of how to strike the right balance" (p. x), that "teachers constantly need to make judgments about how to balance the different dimensions" (p. 130), and that the art of teaching "is precisely that of finding the right balance among the three dimensions" (p. 147). However, Biesta does not address the fact that constant interventions have shifted education so radically towards an interconnected mesh of qualification and socialization—or, perhaps more accurately, qualification in the service of socialization—that any balance that might have existed in the past has been violated. It seems that as a result Biesta does not find it necessary to devise protective measures in order to allow teachers the opportunity to restore or create a balance. As suggested above, protecting education means to prevent self-interested forces from prescribing an instrumental sense of education, especially through identifying and blocking exploitive efforts of qualification and socialization.

It is important to note that adopting Arendt's view for a vision of education that protects education from the political sphere is not unthinkable. A recent work that explicitly adopts Arendt's call to separate education and politics is by Masschelein and Simons (2013). In their book *In Defense of the School: A Public Issue* they argue that in order to truly prevent the school from reproducing social inequality, schools must be a place of suspension from society. As I read them, they reject the dominance of both Biesta's qualification and

socialization dimensions, and, noting that “[p]olicymakers are often tempted to look to the school for solutions to societal problems” (p. 93), they stress, as if in response to Biesta:

we make a clear distinction between school and politics, between educational responsibility and political responsibility, between the renewal made possible by pedagogy and political reform. In one way or another, politics is about negotiation, persuasion or a struggle between different interest groups or social projects. The table at school is not a negotiating table; it is a table that makes study, exercise and training possible. (p. 94)

Educational Theory of Education?

It is useful to examine Biesta’s book, and particularly his critique of Arendt, through the lens of his work on how education as a field and academic discipline is perceived. His rejection of a separation between education and politics seems at odds with the Continental construction of education that he has explored in recent years (2011, 2014b) and seems to find worth considering. Biesta (2011) explains that the Anglo-American construction and the Continental construction differ in their answer to “the question of whether there are forms of theory and theorising that are distinctively *educational* rather than that they are generated through ‘other’ disciplines” (p. 176). The English-speaking tradition generally denies a distinct educational theorizing and takes a ‘disciplinary approach’ according to which education is constructed by the contributions of other foundational disciplines. On the other hand, on the Continent, particularly in the German-speaking world, a central idea in *Pädagogik* is “the idea of education as a discipline in its own right with its own forms of theory and theorizing” (p. 189). According to this approach, Biesta explains, “we need a theory of education that is neither psychological, sociological, historical nor philosophical, in order to identify our object of study” (p. 190). Unlike the academic orientation in the Anglo-American construction, for *Pädagogik* there is more than just something to explore in education; there is something to take care of, an ‘asset’ to tend to, to look after: the child. But close examination of Biesta’s earlier work reveals a complicated picture that sheds light on *The Beautiful Risk of Education*.

On the one hand, although Biesta does not explicitly declare a preference for the Continental approach over the Anglo-American one in his work, it seems that he sympathizes with the independence implied in the Continental construction. For example, he (2011) states with regard to “the relative autonomy of *Pädagogik*” that “[t]he key idea here was that *Pädagogik* had a role to play in protecting the domain of education – and through this, the domain of childhood more generally – from claims from societal powers such as the church, the state or the economy” (p. 187). Biesta (2014b) also says that within the Continental construction “we find a situation where education developed as an academic discipline in its own right, on a par with, rather than subordinated to psychology, sociology, history and philosophy” (p. 71). This sympathy to the Continental approach of treating education as an endeavor with its own autonomy aligns with ideas expressed in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* that resonate with the Continental aspiration for a theory of education that stands on its own legs. For example, he argues that Arendt’s notion of freedom—which he embraces—provides us with “a way of understanding democratic education that is nonpsychological and nonmoral but nonetheless thoroughly educational” (p. 104). Biesta also states that “the particular common sense about education that is being multiplied” by the discourse about competence—which he criticizes—is an “un-educational way of thinking about education” (p. 124). Later on he says that “we wish to move beyond the language of learning,

we need to engage with a way of speaking and thinking that is more properly educational” (p. 127). Biesta also talks about the “educational concern” (p. 3), “the educational question” (p. 55), the “educational thinking” (p. 133) and “*educational* point of view” (p. 103).

Moreover, Biesta declares in the Appendix that his theory of education “[c]onceptually... hangs on two notions, ‘coming into the world’ and ‘uniqueness’” (p. 141), both of which were already developed in *Beyond Learning* as educational notions (although with reference to philosophical ideas, for example when Biesta criticizes humanism since it “is unable to grasp the uniqueness of each individual human being”, 2006, p. 7). Biesta states in *Beyond Learning*: “The role of the educator... has to be understood in terms of a responsibility for the ‘coming into the world’ of unique, singular beings, and a responsibility for the world as a world of plurality and difference” (p. 9-10). Thus, we can conclude that the theory of education that emerges from Biesta’s book (and perhaps his recent work in general) is quite “distinctively *educational*,” and as such has a Continental flavour.

On the other hand, however, Biesta also integrates a disciplinary approach in *The Beautiful Risk of Education* as he converses with ‘discussion partners’, as he calls them, from different philosophical areas (see p. 26 with regard to Dewey and Derrida and p. 101 with regard to Arendt, Rancière and others can also be considered as Biesta’s interlocutors). In particular, his theory of education is closely associated with the notions of politics, democracy, equality, and plurality that are not educational notions in and of themselves; after all, not every discussion about the way human beings live together takes an educational point of view. Therefore, it is difficult to say that Biesta attempts to develop a theory of education (or that he sees education as an academic discipline) that has theoretical and conceptual power “in its own right” (an expression Biesta uses, e.g. 2011, p. 189). In this sense, Biesta’s firm rejection of Arendt’s call to separate education from politics demonstrates his reluctance to allow education such sovereignty over its own business. Therefore, it is unclear how to settle Biesta’s sympathy toward Continental educational autonomy with his tendency to draw on other disciplines; does he just “consult” his “discussion partners”? Does he doubt whether genuine educational way of thinking is actually possible? Is it Biesta’s attempts to advocate for Continental construction within the Anglo-American community’s approach to philosophy of education that he (2014b) is afraid is “a historical mistake”?

From this emerging ambivalence, found in *The Beautiful Risk of Education*, between the Anglo-American construction and the Continental construction, it seems that this book reflects Biesta’s attempt to bring the two constructions into a fruitful conversation with the aim of developing a theory of education—or, as I prefer to see it—an educational way of thinking. As he argues in a 2011 paper: “even if the two constructions are to a certain degree incommensurable as there is no common measure that would allow for the simple conversation of the one into the other, I do not see such incommensurability as the end of communication” (p. 190). Perhaps acknowledging that you cannot have it both ways, and therefore seeking to move beyond these constructions, he adds: “Incommensurability rather indicates a situation in which different traditions might become curious about each other, might learn about each other and, through this, might also begin to see their own ways of doing and thinking differently.” (p. 190). Thus, it is perhaps most appropriate to view this book as Biesta’s exploration of how two approaches to education, with their different historical and cultural foundations, can be useful for offering new horizons for education. The last point explains why *The Beautiful Risk of Education* is recommended to anyone who is looking for a fresh, rich, and responsible foundational conceptualization of education.

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