

Life After Utopia

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Let me begin by stating my enthusiastic agreement with Claudia Ruitenberg's thesis, that "schools have always been heterotopic and heterochronic spaces and that attempts to reduce schools' heterotopic and heterochronic nature are attempts to curtail or reduce the emancipatory possibilities of school spaces." As a student whose pace was largely disconnected from the lockstep of the school, I resonate with Ruitenberg's stance. As a theoretician, I appreciate the ontological suggestion that students and teachers bring multiple temporalities and spaces to educational events, that they are, in Martin Heidegger's language, "always already" there.¹ I also appreciate Ruitenberg's political critique of those historic efforts to homogenize the space and time of schools, squelching the traits and relationships of the involved students and teachers. And as an old socialist, I am terribly fond of the term "emancipation," but, I must say, my attraction to this universalistic ideal of liberation is no longer appropriate at this point in theoretical history.

The term "emancipatory," it seems to me, has historically been defended by reference to a utopian vision of possibility. I am partial to socialist visions of utopia and, specifically, Karl Marx's injunction to work as we please and criticize after dinner, but of course, this ethereal vision came crashing to earth in the wake of Stalin's purges, leading to the charges by Theodore Adorno in philosophy and Ilan Gur-Ze'ev and Alexander Sidorkin in educational philosophy that utopianism is the prelude to violence and repression.² Despite their power, these European descendent criticisms of utopianism are anemic in comparison to the account of Indigenous scholar John Mohawk, who argues that utopian visions have been absolutely central to the violence and theft of colonization. In Mohawk's view, it is easy to rationalize the death and displacement of people if one is absolutely committed to some future aim. Mohawk contrasts European utopianism to those Indigenous stories which speak of a better world in the past and — in effect — exhort people to act carefully so as to preserve what little we have left.³

The tie between utopia and violence has led many European theorists to turn away from utopian theorizing. So when Michel Foucault contrasts his conception of "heterotopia" with utopia, it is — I take it — part of this basic theoretical sea change. As Foucault portrays it, "heterotopia" is a descriptive concept, which seeks to capture the dynamism of spaces already in operation. Particular spaces — he mentions museums, theater, and asylums — are distinctive in that they have a meaning in juxtaposition to all other spaces.⁴ Schools, we might say, have this quality because they operate as a measuring stick, which lives with people in the other parts of their existence. Even though Ruitenberg partakes in contemporary suspicions of utopia, she does not seem to be taken by this alter-utopian aspect of heterotopia. Rather, heterotopia excites her with the idea that schools juxtapose different spaces and temporalities within the same walls, and she employs this aspect of heterotopia to

disclose the many ways in which youth seek out spaces other than the official ones of the curriculum. She describes the ways in which both workers and students (and I very much appreciate how she pairs the two) construct their own emancipatory spaces despite the efforts of businessmen and schoolteachers to lock them into a regimen that sends them down specific corridors. Workers who read at the loom and students who read books held underneath their desks stand as examples of people who carve out their own mental time and space, in opposition to “dominant time.” For Ruitenberg, these acts of defining one’s own space and time — despite pressure to conform — “call attention to the *possibility* that students who divide their attention demonstrate not a lack of motivation or a refusal to be educated, but a decision to educate themselves.”

By insisting that we think of educational events in social fields of varied spaces and temporalities, Ruitenberg seeks to add to a portrait of educational possibility offered us by Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström in “A Manifesto for Education.” Biesta and Säfström are also dedicated to preempting any possible utopianism that, in their words, saddles “education with unattainable hopes that defer freedom rather than making it possible in the here and now.”⁵ Biesta and Säfström direct our attention to the ways in which youth address us — to the “what is” of their gesture. They emphasize that a child’s articulation of “what is” is a nontemporal distinction; that is, they are so repelled by any logic that would subordinate a child’s action to some posited future event that they prefer to define the child’s freedom using atemporal logic, in terms of the substance of the child’s act. Ruitenberg, in contrast, feels that we can maintain the focus on the distinctive substance of a child’s address, avoiding the utopian tendency to subordinate the present to a future, while viewing the event of the child’s creation as located in space and time, the heterotopia of the school.

What I find most intriguing about Ruitenberg’s argument is her unwillingness to stick with the purely descriptive account of heterotopia offered by Foucault. It’s as if she longs for a small part of that utopian worldview, namely the ability to define some social relationships as egalitarian. For their part, Biesta and Säfström build ethical judgments into their account of the child’s address, when they say, as the child acts or speaks, we witness the emergence of “freedom.” Ruitenberg goes further: the child’s address asserts the child’s “equality.” Ruitenberg’s appealing conception of equality is taken from Jacques Rancière, who offers a commonsensical conception of the term, emphasizing our abilities to create meaningful lives together and to converse with one another. The child’s address, in Ruitenberg’s interpretation, claims an equal place in the intersubjective world of humans. So, all of a sudden, this descriptive account of heterotopia becomes infused with the ethical substance needed to defend democracy.

Given my socialist commitments to terms like “emancipation” and “equality,” I find it very gratifying when Ruitenberg argues that a youth’s enunciation amounts to a claim to equality, but I fear that my commitment to these universalistic concepts is a bit of race-blind nostalgia on my part. When a young person addresses us, the distinctive substance of their gesture is indeed critical, but it is silently accompanied by the constraints from which they speak. Humans are indeed speakers, but we also

are — à la Immanuel Kant and Henri Lefebvre — creators of space and time,⁶ and when we focus our attention on the address of an individual child, it is tempting to neglect the collective ways in which space and time emerge. Social spaces, I suggest, facilitate and delimit our possibilities: some intersubjective spaces encourage specific statements, while other spaces preempt them. Youth who create Gay-Straight Alliances have recognized this and have commonly sought to create spaces where they can feel physically safe and speak more freely. When youth speak, they do so with sensitivity to the surveillance they act under, the ways in which their acts will be received by those around them, the language they are supposed to use, and the topics that are considered permissible — to name a few considerations. For many youth of color in the U.S., schools are white spaces, which render many possible utterances off limits.⁷ If we think that, to be free or equal, all a child needs to do is address us, then we may very well be assuming a privileged child. If Charles Mills is right to argue that, in the U.S., because youth of color are already defined as subhuman, their expression is not sufficient for either freedom or equality. Expression is a prerequisite to such ethico-political achievements, but — and here the anti-utopians are right — many youth will never see either freedom or equality. In Mills's view, universalistic conceptions of freedom or equality, which neglect the constraints of race, fool us into neglecting the realities of many people's lives and operate as part of what he calls the "epistemology of ignorance."⁸

Like the youth who have created Gay-Straight Alliances, many contemporary youth understand that they will never express themselves spontaneously within the official regime of the school. Consequently, they develop their own organizations with distinctive intersubjective, temporal, and spatial patterns, which allow understandings to emerge that otherwise might never be heard. Such collective efforts may lead to a world in which freedom and equality are a reality, or they may just be valuable in the here and now.

1. Francois Raffoul, *Heidegger and the Subject*, trans. David Pettifrew and Gregory Recco (New York: Humanity Books, 1998), 27.

2. Ilan Gur-Ze'ev, "Adorno and Horkheimer: Diasporic Philosophy, Negative Theology, and Counter-Education," *Educational Theory* 55, no. 3 (2005): 343–65; and Alexander M. Sidorkin, *Learning Relations: Impure Education, Deschooled Schools, and Dialogue with Evil* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 37–8.

3. John C. Mohawk, *Utopian Legacies: A History of Conquest and Oppression in the Western World* (Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers, 2000), 1–14.

4. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," trans. Jay Miskowicz, *Diacritics* 16, no. 1 (1986): 24.

5. Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström, "A Manifesto for Education," *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 5 (2011): 541.

6. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell, 1991).

7. Cynthia L. Bejarano describes the difficulty Mexicana/o youth have in speaking in a high school in ¿Qué onda? *Urban Youth Culture and Border Identity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005).

8. Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 97–118.