

“New” Emancipation, Education, and the Differences That Make a Difference

Cathrine Ryther
Stockholm University

Clearly, much more needs to be said about the differences that will make a difference.

—Gert Biesta

I would like to thank Gert Biesta for writing an essay the spirit of which I find so sympathetic. His aim, to “see if it is possible to think emancipation differently,” demands attention, and it is within this aim that I would like to dwell as well.

In attempting to think emancipation differently, Biesta makes two moves. First, he uses a Jacques Rancièrian critique of the underlying logic of modern emancipatory education to problematize the emancipatory role of demystification. Second, he presents an alternative, Foucauldian logic designed to shift emancipatory education away from demystification in order to overcome the problems exposed by Rancièrè’s critique. Rather than the vertical movement beyond, or outside, power that formed the basis of “old” emancipation, Biesta applies Michel Foucault’s methodology of “eventalization” as an emancipatory logic always contingent within a discourse of power/knowledge. Emancipatory possibility lies in the recognition that this power/knowledge discourse is not singular, but only one among alternative power/knowledge discourses between which it is possible to move. “New” emancipation thus represents a broadening of our horizons, not a tower to the moon. The horizon in question is made of alternative power/knowledge constellations, and the task of emancipation entails critical action to explore and test these alternatives. This action as critique is not a search for truth or authenticity but an event of questioning what we take for granted, in order to see that which makes it “singular, contingent, and the product of arbitrary constraints,” and therefore open to challenge. What is emphasized in this new logic is plurality, the multiplicity of explanations for facts, events, their interrelations, and domains of reference. The goal is to unsettle what is, by enstranging what we take to be obvious within it, making it dangerous and showing it to be difficult. Through this critical action it is possible to see that what is represents only a limited facet of possibility. And this critical action is not reserved for emancipators who set others free, but is rather an equal, experimental opportunity for all. There is no privileging of knowledge, experience, or leadership. Instead, what is privileged is doing. New emancipation is not done to or for people, it is done by people; we emancipate ourselves. To draw a rough line in the sand, we can consider the shift Biesta makes as a move from an old logic of emancipation, which emphasizes freedom, to a new logic which emphasizes independence. What I question is whether this new logic accomplishes Biesta’s goal to “overcome some of the problems and contradictions” inherent in the old logic of emancipation. What expanse of space does his response to these contradictions open up, and how unfamiliar is it?

Biesta identifies three contradictions in the assumptions of traditional emancipatory logic. The first two of these contradictions are closely related and concern the nature of the traditional emancipatory relationship. This relationship, built on the assumed necessity of demystification for emancipation, installs a double enslavement¹ on the one to be emancipated. On the one hand, this “emancipatee,” if you will, experiences a knowledge dependency on the emancipator, who provides an otherwise inaccessible truth necessary for independence. On the other hand, there is an unequal power differential between the superior emancipator and the (always-) not-yet-superior emancipatee — a power differential that is necessary for the role of the emancipator to exist the first place. This double enslavement appears to be a knotted loop — in order for the emancipatee to gain equality and independence an emancipator is needed, but the emancipator cannot exist unless there also exists an untraversable inequality between them. The paradox is damning! But the critique also only makes sense if we ignore the insights of Foucault’s eventalization, which Biesta presents far too compellingly for me to disregard.

If what makes critique emancipatory is, as Biesta argues through Foucault, the questioning that shows facts to be contingent, complicated, and pluralized, we have no choice but to question anything that presents itself as discrete, firm, or unquestionable — including subject roles. It no longer is tenable to critique the emancipator and the emancipatee as always discrete and distinct from one another. Understood through the logic Biesta uses, the “fact” of these separate subject roles must be blurred, complicated, and made difficult. We can no longer take for granted the separation or identification of emancipator and emancipatee. If, according to the position that Biesta and Rancière² take, and with which I agree, we can only emancipate ourselves, this already assumes that it is possible to occupy multiple subject roles at once; if emancipation is something we do rather than something that is done to us, we must necessarily occupy the subject positions of both emancipator and one to be emancipated — and likely other positions as well — simultaneously. Thus this difference, while it may make a difference, does not break from the traditional emancipator/emancipatee logic; it simply internalizes it. In aiming to think emancipation differently it seems to me that, at least on this point, Biesta has been more successful in complicating the subject³ than in overcoming the contradictions of the old logic of emancipation.

The internalization of the emancipator/emancipatee relationship that occurs when we read Rancière through Biesta’s Foucault highlights that combining these two philosophers in this order is not entirely unproblematic. By turning from Rancière to Foucault to outline a new logic of emancipation Biesta is left with the pressing question of whether new emancipation “makes any sense in relation to our existing educational practices.” Rancière’s philosophy offers several entries to this question; here I will raise only two. In the first place, Rancière makes an explicit effort to go beyond Foucault by considering why, if we emancipate ourselves, acts of critique so rarely have an effect that “proves” things can be different.⁴ Secondly, Rancière reminds us that we still need others for emancipation, not to be demystified,

but to give fuel to our “passions and desires for another world.”⁵ While we emancipate ourselves, we do not do so in isolation from others.

Rancière’s reminder of our relation to others brings me to the third contradiction Biesta identifies in the traditional emancipatory logic, one which deals with the faith we can have in truth claims. He writes, “the logic of emancipation dictates, after all, that we cannot really trust what we see or feel, but that we need someone else to tell us what it is that we are really experiencing and what our problems really are.” At issue is the question of how we can know that we know what we know. The logic of the traditional perspective, Biesta argues, is that we can only have faith in what we know when someone else has told us what it is. In contrast to this, the logic of new emancipation makes possible “a situation in which people ‘no longer know what they do,’ so that the acts, gestures, discourses which up until then had seemed to go without saying become problematic, difficult, dangerous....it actually opens up a space and in a sense even a demand for judgment.” The difference is not that we now “know that we know,” it is that we know that we do not know anything for sure, and we no longer need that pointed out to us. The third party can no longer give us faith. Biesta then makes what I find to be a leap of logic, namely that this new emancipatory perspective has the potential to “validate everyone’s experience.” While I agree that making everyone’s experience questionable and dangerous has the potential to open new spaces, I fail to see how it is validating — egalitarian, yes, but egalitarian in the sense that it is a call for universal suspicion, not universal legitimacy.

Ultimately, the question of whether or not it is possible to think emancipation differently still has not been answered here. I wonder if this question is really so relevant. More important than Biesta’s logical aim is, in my mind, the point he highlights: emancipation is something we *do*. The differences that really make a difference are not moves of logic. It is perhaps these that deserve our focus.

1. The writing of Anna Julia Cooper deserves credit for giving me this phrase. See “The Intellectual Progress of the Colored Women in the United States Since the Emancipation Proclamation: A Response to Fannie Barrier Williams” (1893), in *The Voice of Anna Julia Cooper*, eds. Charles Lemert and Esme Bhan (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1998).

2. See, for example, Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, trans. Kristin Ross (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991), 57.

3. Other scholars have gone much further in complicating the subject from this perspective. See, for example, the articles in the special issue on Judith Butler’s philosophy in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 27, no. 4 (2006): 421–534.

4. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 32.

5. Jacques Rancière, *The Nights of Labor*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), 20.