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Toward a theory of the educational encounter: Gert Biesta's educational theory and the right to the city

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This paper outlines a theory of the educational encounter, the space of, and the right to that encounter. Situated in response to neoliberal educational reforms, this theory is developed through a reading and synthesis of the educational theory of Gert Biesta, the architectural component of his theory, and literature on the right to the city. The author argues that the notion of the encounter is latent yet central in Biesta's work and that it can be further cultivated and more precisely attended to by turning to theoretical work on the right to the city, which is engaged here primarily through the lens of the encounter. Several themes are drawn out from the literature that can help in formulating a theory of the educational encounter such as the habitat/inhabit dialectic, the use/use-value/exchange-value framework of space, and the role of struggle in the production and maintenance of space.

Keywords: educational theory; encounter; Gert Biesta; Henri Lefebvre; responsibility; right to the city; urbanism

Introduction

That education has come under an intensified attack by neoliberal forces over the past several decades is widely acknowledged across varying sectors of educational theory and philosophy. The urgent question today, theoretical in nature and resting largely upon how we conceive of education – its history, context, purpose, and potentiality – is: how best to respond? This paper contributes to the debates around this question by beginning to outline a theory of the educational encounter (and the right to that encounter) that can advance this educational theory against neoliberalism. I do this through a reading and synthesis of the educational theory of Gert Biesta, its architectural expression, and literature on the right to the city.¹ I find that a notion of the encounter is latent in Biesta's educational theory and believe that it can be further developed by turning to theoretical work on the right to the city, where the notion of the encounter is more explicit.

The paper proceeds in several steps. To begin, I situate the project politically and historically by briefly reviewing some of the literature on neoliberalism, its effects on education, and providing a description of how the concept of neoliberalism is understood in the present inquiry. Next, I move to a synopsis of Biesta's (2006, 2009, 2010) more recent work dedicated to reconceiving education against what he has called the 'new language of learning' and the 'learnification' of education, concentrating primarily on his articulation

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of a 'language of education'. Biesta emphasizes the importance of asserting the question of subjectification – or how the singularity of the subject emerges through encounters with difference – in educational thought and practice. It is this concern that leads Biesta (2006) to a few brief, but nonetheless insightful examinations of the relationship between space and education by turning to post-functionalist architecture.

After showing how the notion of the encounter is immanent in this work, I seek to cultivate it by thinking Biesta together with literature on the right to the city, to which I turn next. I draw heavily from the foundational essay by Henri Lefebvre (1996) and on further developments by Don Mitchell (2003). I examine this literature primarily through the lens of the encounter, which is crucial to and possibly even synonymous with the right to the city. I draw out several themes from this literature, such as the habitat/inhabit dialectic and the role of struggle in the production of space, which are important for thinking through the educational encounter and provide something of a synthesis of the two readings. The conclusion summarizes the investigation as well as provides some words of caution about the project and the literature that I have called upon in its articulation.

Neoliberalism as theory and practice

There is an extensive and growing body of literature on the theory and practice of neoliberalism and its effects on education.² I deploy the term in this paper to describe capital's global offensive movement, beginning in the late 1970s, which seeks to 'bring all human action into the domain of the market' (Harvey, 2005, p. 3). In other words, neoliberalism involves privatizing subjects, spaces, goods, services, and social relations that were once public. Generalizing the rule of market logic throughout society involves two interdependent processes: on the one hand, the creation of markets in areas where they either did not exist or existed in a very limited capacity and, on the other hand, the production of a certain type of subjectivity that accepts, conforms to, and reproduces free-market conditions.

The drive toward marketization and privatization is what has placed education directly in the crosshairs of neoliberal reforms, primarily in those countries where education has historically been considered a public good. Neoliberal educational reform is accomplished in a variety of ways, but generally entails 'either creating closer linkages between education and the economy or placing schools themselves into the market' (Apple, 1998, p. 7). In the former instance, schools become reduced to vocational factories and in the latter instance, they are privatized or transformed into public-private hybrids via vouchers, choice programs, and charter schools. These political and economic changes are accompanied by changes in subjectivity. As Ball (2012) writes, 'neoliberalism gets into our minds and our souls, into the ways in which we think about what we do, and into our social relations with others' (p. 17). In other words, relative to education, neoliberalism affects the financing, production, and maintenance of school buildings and buses just as much as it affects curriculum design, pedagogy, and educational relationships; students and their guardians become 'customers' or consumers and 'the teaching/learning relation' is 'reduced to an implicit contract between buyer and seller' (Peters & McDonough, 2007, p. 159). Education, the commodity at stake in this contract, is oriented toward the production of a marketable worker (Gulson, 2007). The theory of the educational encounter that I develop in what follows is intended to militate against both of these developments. In particular, I am concerned with reclaiming the public, rethinking educational purpose, and opening education up to different and new forms of subjectivity.

It is also important to acknowledge that there are numerous and important debates taking place about *how* neoliberalism should be defined and utilized as a theoretical

framework for understanding contemporary political, economic, and social relations. Peck and Tickell (2002), for example, have argued for the importance of ‘walking a line’ (p. 381) between ‘overgeneralized accounts of a monolithic and omnipresent neoliberalism’ and ‘excessively concrete and contingent analyses of (local) neoliberal strategies’ (p. 382). In response, Gulson (2007) has claimed that neoliberalism is best theorized as a bricolage (and not a binary), thereby viewing ‘the “monolithic” and “extralocal” aspects of neoliberalism as mutually constitutive’ (p. 191). In other words, ‘neoliberalism is [in many ways] a meta-narrative’ (p. 179), but this meta-narrative is highly contingent upon the varied localized ways in which it is made manifest in policy and practice. In fact, it may be more proper to speak of neoliberalism as a meta-narrative that itself is not homogenous, but actually depends upon its varied instantiations.

Neoliberalism and Biesta’s educational theory

One of the mechanisms through which education has progressively become viewed and treated as a commodity is through what Biesta has termed the ‘new language of learning’ (2006) and the ‘learnification’ of education (2010). Biesta’s (2006) problem with the language of learning ‘is that it has facilitated a redescription of the process of education in terms of an *economic transaction*’ (p. 19). This positions the learner as a (indebted) consumer with a demand for knowledge, and the teacher and educational institution or site (public, private, or hybrid) as the supplier of that knowledge. Biesta (2006) summarizes its effects:

... to think of education as an economic transaction not only misconstrues the role of the learner and the educator in the educational relationship, it also results in a situation in which questions about the content and purpose of education become subject to the forces of the market instead of being the concern of professional judgment and democratic deliberation. (p. 31)

Learning describes a process and doesn’t denote the ‘content and direction’ (Biesta, 2010, p. 18) of that process, which eclipses discussions about the purpose of education (and subjugates that discussion to the logic of the market).

Against this language of learning Biesta seeks to (re)formulate a language of education, one which allows for questions about the purpose of education to be raised. He argues for a reconception of education that emphasizes its social, relational, and therefore incalculable (and immeasurable) nature. The educational relationship has three fundamental components, all of which trouble the language of learning: (1) trust (without ground), (2) (transcendental) violence, and (3) responsibility (without knowledge).

First, education always involves risk: ‘Not only is there a risk that you do not learn what you wanted to learn . . . There is also the risk that you will learn things that you couldn’t have imagined,’ and ‘the risk that you will learn something that you didn’t want to learn – something about yourself, for example’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 25). This risk runs counter to the autonomous and sovereign, yet indebted (Lazzarato, 2012), consumer that is the subject at the base of the contemporary neoliberal society. Accountability and evaluation here are also rejected, as risk – and its correlative of trust – is always ‘about what is *incalculable*’ (p. 25). The trust involved in the educational relationship is axiomatically without ground and the subject of the educational relationship is something other than a consumer.

Second, education and the educational relationship necessarily entail a certain kind of violence. As Biesta (2006) writes:

Instead of seeing learning as an attempt to acquire, to master, to internalize, or any other possessive metaphors we can think of, we might see learning as a reaction to a disturbance, as an attempt to reorganize and reintegrate as a result of disintegration. (p. 27)

Education here takes place in response to what is other and different; it is about the emergence of the singularity of the subject, or what Biesta calls ‘coming into the world’. This is something that unlike, for example, learning a language, cannot, by definition, be done on one’s own with a book, internet program, or set of instructions; it entails an *intervention*. The educator is not a transmitter of information, but someone who facilitates occasions for subjects to ‘come into the world’, a process which importantly is ‘*not* about self-expression’ but ‘about entering the social fabric’ (p. 28). Education as intervention ‘is a form of violence in that it interferes with the sovereignty of the subject by asking difficult questions and creating difficult *encounters*’ (p. 29, emphasis added). This stands against the neoliberal idea that teaching is a technique that *should* be easy *if* the appropriate technique is applied by a ‘competent’ technocrat (teacher). Difficulty and disruption are not aberrations in education, but what belong to education proper (pp. 74–75).

Third, because education involves risk and the deliberate intervention of others, education requires a particular kind of responsibility on the part of educators. It ‘is a responsibility for the *subjectivity* of the student, for that which allows the student to be a unique, singular being’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 30). This responsibility stands in contrast to the neoliberal emphasis on economic *accountability*, for one because accountability implies calculation and the ability to measure and quantify education (again, education as commodity).³ Instead, the educator’s responsibility is ‘a responsibility for something (or better, someone) that we do not know and cannot know’ (p. 30). Congruous with this – and this is a central tenant in Biesta’s work – is the insistence that the question of subjectivity, that is, the question of what and who counts as human, is not assumed in advance, but left radically open.

The space of the educational encounter

I want to suggest that one implicit yet fundamental thread that runs throughout Biesta’s rethinking of education is the concept of the encounter. In fact, I would argue that the encounter is not only central to, but could also be seen as organizing this language and conception of education; education is, in the last instance, about the encounter with alterity, which is how one comes to encounter oneself, or how one ‘comes into the world’, and how one learns. The three fundamental components of the language of education relate directly to the encounter: there is the risk and the incalculability of the encounter, the transcendental violence of the encounter, and the educator’s responsibility for facilitating and allowing for the encounter. Likewise, Biesta’s (2009) critique of humanism, ‘that it specifies a norm of what it means to be human *before* the actual manifestation of “instances” of humanity’ (p. 102), can also be read as an insistence on leaving open the possibility for the encounter in education to take place (the encounter being the ‘instance’ when humanity emerges or is made manifest).⁴

Thus, one of the primary tasks and responsibilities of the educator is to help facilitate the encounter. There are two components of educational responsibility for Biesta. The first is a responsibility for ‘the creation’ and maintenance of ‘worldly spaces’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 150), where encounters can take place. The second is the responsibility of ‘asking the simple but in my view fundamental educational question: “What do you think about it?”’ (p. 150).⁵ It is this first task, the responsibility for the space of the encounter, which leads

Biesta into a brief, but nonetheless insightful examination of the role of space and, more specifically, school architecture.

Given Biesta's critique of humanism and his insistence on leaving open the question of what the subject can become through the educational encounter with alterity, he turns to theories of school architecture that do not prescribe or attempt to produce in a linear or causal way the manner in which people interact with space. In Biesta's theory of educational space, that is, neither the subject nor the space are taken as predetermined or pre-existing; both come about through interaction and transgression. To help imagine this space where education by encounter happens, Biesta leans on the architectural theories of Bernard Tschumi and Herman Hertzberger.

Biesta (2006) coins the term 'disjunctive space' when writing about Tschumi's architectural theory. For Tschumi, 'Space . . . only exists *by grace of the happening of events*' (p. 46). Space, that is to say, is in part produced through the events and encounters that occasion it. This conception of architecture and space is post-functionalist, in that it does not posit a cause-and-effect relationship between the planning and experience of space. On the contrary, Tschumi sees architecture as the 'point of noncoincidence, of disjunction, of failure . . . between the (supposed) cause-and-effect relations of . . . use and space' (Tschumi in Biesta, 2006, p. 45). The architect cannot plan for these events. As Tschumi writes:

Event is the unpredictable, it is the thing that you cannot write in the program. It is the surprises! In many ways what I will try to do in a building is to put the program in such a way that it triggers unsuspected and unpredicted interactions. That is what I call event. The event is not what architects prepare. That's why I also say that the architect is not designing the event but is designing the conditions that may or may not trigger events. (Hartoonian & Tschumi, 2002, p. 85)

Biesta (2006) is interested in this conception because it's 'open to the manifestation of different forms of subjectivity, different ways of coming into the world' (p. 110). In other words, to the extent that it can, it takes the incalculable event into consideration. Yet, Tschumi does not take into consideration the plurality and alterity that is so important to the educational encounter because he neglects to pay adequate attention to the social and worldly context of his projects. As an example, Biesta (2006) cites Tschumi's building at the privileged and high-security Columbia University in New York City.

The post-functionalist architect who does take difference and plurality into account when considering space and the built-environment is Herman Hertzberger. Hertzberger uses the city as a model and metaphor for architecture, the city being that which is oriented toward 'provid[ing] the opportunity for us to inspect, assess, keep an eye on and bump into one another' (Hertzberger in Biesta, 2006, p. 112). One of Hertzberger's buildings, the Montessori College Oost in Amsterdam, is held up as an exemplar of a worldly space, as 'a building in which everyone crosses everyone else's path' (p. 114). This is enabled by the number of areas for congregating and the lack of visual and spatial barriers. As a result, this Montessori school is a building 'with opportunities for encounters, for use, and events' (p. 114). Additionally, this schoolhouse is filled with objects whose use is not prescriptive, which helps facilitate a *unique* response from the subject. As Hertzberger (1969) writes:

A thing, exclusively made for one purpose, suppresses the individual because it tells him exactly how it is to be used. If the object provokes a person to determine in what way he wants to use it, it will strengthen his self-identity. (p. 66)

The built structures of education should not come with directions, as these directions would be predicated upon already existing subjectivities and modes of being in the world.

We could summarize the latent notion of the educational encounter in Biesta's educational theory as follows: education is about how the singularity of the subject emerges in response to the encounter with alterity; because this encounter is incalculable and unpredictable, it entails risk; because the encounter is an *intervention* into the life of the student, it entails transcendental violence; the educator is responsible for the emergence of the singularity of the subject through the encounter with alterity, in part, through the creation and maintenance of spaces of plurality and difference, and this is a responsibility without ground. What I want to focus on developing specifically in the rest of this paper is the notion of the space where the encounter takes place, the relationship between space and the difference necessary for the encounter, and the responsibility that the educator has for the creation and maintenance of these spaces.

The right to the city: A cry and a demand

The right to the city, as articulated by Lefebvre (1996), is both a 'cry and a demand' (p. 158) that springs forth from the alienation of life and subjectivity that occurs as a result of industrialization and capitalist development. Published a year prior to the events of May 1968, on the centenary of the publication of volume one of Marx's *Capital*, the short but highly influential book seeks to update Marxism through an incorporation of spatial analysis. It is a Marxist reading of the development of the city, from ancient times to industrialization and urbanism, which deploys a dialectic that is non-determinist and open-ended. While the book itself is more of a fragment than a totality, it is widely cited and has provided the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings for and across a range of academic fields and activist work. In this section, I want to first provide an overview of the book and then develop some of the central concepts in the book and in later literature that have import for a theory of the educational encounter.

Lefebvre begins with a brief theoretical and historical overview of the city, which undergoes transformations as a result of changes in the mode of production. The city, of course, predates capitalism, but it is the advent of capitalist production and the process of industrialization that is seen as the primary motor for the development of the city as a built-form and the decay of the urban as a form-of-life. Industrialization transforms the city by making the city not only the place where exchange happens (as in the city under mercantilism), but also the place where production – the production of commodities, customs, habits, and languages – takes place. It concentrates people (proletarianizing them), production, reproduction, and ultimately capital.⁶ This process, however, is an implosion–explosion, an unfinished unity of contradictions: industrialization is an 'assault and ravage [on] pre-existing urban reality', one of displacement and uprooting, yet it also creates the city, where 'One finds or reinvents urban reality' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 81).

It may be helpful here to tease out the difference between the city and the urban, a conceptual distinction that Lefebvre makes explicit at one point and seems to disregard at others. The difference between the city and the urban is thusly summarized:

We should perhaps here introduce a distinction between the *city*, a present and immediate reality, a practico-material and architectural fact, and the *urban*, a social reality made up of relations which are to be conceived of, constructed or reconstructed by thought. (p. 103)

The city is a built-form, a historical and physical site, and the urban is an ensemble of social relations that are founded by it. As Lefebvre writes, 'Urban life, urban society, in a word,

the *urban*, cannot go without a practico-material base, a morphology' (p. 103). This should help explain the contradictory character of the industrialization of the city as described by Lefebvre, for while the city and the urban exist only in relationship to one another, this can (and I would argue, under capitalism, must) be an antagonistic relationship. For the purposes of my project here, I want to focus on a handful of key concepts and frameworks provided by Lefebvre – and built upon by others – that can help us think more precisely about the space of the encounter and the educator's responsibility for and relationship to that space.

The encounter and/as the right to the city

For Lefebvre and others, the encounter is central to the production of and right to the city. The city contains 'the spontaneous theatricalization of encounters which take place in it' (Lefebvre, 1996, p. 113), encounters that produce the urban: 'As place of encounters, focus of communication and information, the *urban* becomes what it always was: place of desire, permanent disequilibrium, seat of the dissolution of normalities and constraints, the moment of play and of the unpredictable' (p. 129). The city is the practico-material morphology that facilitates the encounter, which in turn produces the urban: 'Urban life suggests meetings, the confrontation of differences, reciprocal knowledge and acknowledgement (including ideological and political confrontation), ways of living, "patterns" which coexist in the city' (p. 75). The right to the city, therefore, is the right to the encounter and the right to the urban, and the struggle over the city and for the urban is also a struggle over and for the encounter.

What does it mean to say that there is a struggle over the encounter? Although often using different language, Mitchell has deepened the role that the struggle over the encounter plays in the right to the city. Mitchell (2003) writes that, 'for the encounter with difference to really succeed . . . the right to *inhabit* the city – by different people and different groups – had always to be struggled for' (p. 18). Mitchell, here, is referring to Lefebvre's distinction between habitat and to inhabit. The right to inhabit the city is the right to produce the city; the right of urban dwellers to be central in the production of the spaces, rhythms, and relations of the city. But the ability to inhabit is encumbered by city as habitat, or the production of the city by planners, developers, banks, financial and land speculators, and corporate interests. The right to inhabit, the right to be central in the production of the city – or what Lefebvre called the city as *oeuvre* – is the right to the city as *use-value*, whereas the city as habitat is the right to the city as *exchange-value*. The city as habitat works to suppress the possibility for encounters to take place or, more accurately, works to ensure the domination of the exchange-value of the encounter. An exemplar of this is 'disneyfication', a hyper-planning of space that prescribes even 'the sorts of "surprises" one is supposed to encounter in urban space' (Mitchell, 2003, p. 140). City planning and the city as habitat serve an exclusionary function, dispossessing workers, marginalized groups, and an increasing number of students from their dwellings and other support networks (such as schools and universities).

Exchange-value and use-value, however, under the capitalist mode of production, exist in a dialectical relationship, which means that even as they stand directly opposed to each other, they depend upon each other. Even with the trend toward disneyfication, then, the use-value of the encounter still persists. As Lefebvre (1996) writes, 'The form of the urban, its supreme reason, namely simultaneity and encounter, cannot disappear' (p. 129). Stated more boldly: 'use and use value resist irreducibly' (p. 170). This is simply and precisely because exchange-value ceases to exist without use-value, for no one exchanges useless

things. Importantly, however, there can be use without exchange-value. This is one way to define the right to the city: the right to use.⁷ This formulation also installs the abolition of private property at the center of the right to the city and the right to the space of the educational encounter.

History can be seen as a struggle between those who demand the right to use and those who repress the right to use which, under capitalism, is done in the name of exchange-value. The right to use, including the right to the encounter and spaces of the encounter, is not a matter of planning but a matter of struggle. This can be seen clearly in the production of public space, as ‘it is when, to fulfill a pressing need, some group or another *takes* space and through its actions *makes* it public . . . Representation both demands space and creates space’ (Mitchell, 2003, p. 35). The fight for the city is a fight against exclusion, which, particularly with the ascendancy of private property, has been at the heart of the city. Thus, affordable and decent housing is central – but not reducible – to the right to the city. Just as importantly, the fight for public space is central to the right to the city and what makes the cry and demand so threatening, for public space is where use and use-value can reign over, and perhaps eventually annihilate, exchange-value. And it is what lies behind the current drive for both the privatization of public space and ‘the substitution of private spaces to fulfill many of the functions of public space’ (Marcuse, 2006, p. 923). Consider, for example, how ‘the common areas of private shopping malls . . . have become the “streets” for passeggiatas and planned and random encounters, bookstore cafés have taken over some of the functions of public libraries, museums become private venues for weddings and fundraisers’ (p. 923). School vouchers, charter and private schools, and online learning can also be seen as instances of the substitution of the private realm for the public realm in education.

The (right to the) educational encounter, space, and the right to the city

It should be clear at this point that the right to the city is not one right among others. Instead, it ‘manifests itself as a superior form of rights’ that includes the right ‘to habitat and to inhabit . . . to the *oeuvre*, to participation and *appropriation* (clearly distinct from the right to property)’ (Lefebvre, 1996, pp. 173–174), as well as the right to ‘information, symbolism, the imaginary and play’ (p. 147). It is a right that, if fully realized, would radically rework previous notions of rights.⁸ As I have contended above, the right to the city includes and can be seen as the right to the encounter that is so central to education. One of the first things that we can see by synthesizing these two literatures is that, if education is about the singularity of the subject and its emergence through encounters with difference, then the struggle for education against learning predates the neoliberal era. This establishes, in part, the theoretical and economic terrain on which we are operating. Learning, in other words, has existed in antagonism with and against education. Learning is about habitat and education is about inhabiting. Althusser (2001), for example, famously argued that the school under capitalism had become the primary institution for the reproduction of capitalism and capitalist social relations. Indeed, even in the late 1700s, over a century before the development of the US public school system, Benjamin Rush advocated for schools on the basis that they ‘will lessen our taxes . . . enlighten us in the great business of finance . . . by increasing the profits of agriculture, and by promoting manufactures’ (quoted in Good, 1918, p. 217), not to mention the disciplinary role of schools. The development and planning of cities, like the development and planning of schools, has, particularly since the eighteenth century in the United States, been motivated by the demands of capital and exchange-value. Even with public schools, exchange value has played a dominant role

through the reproduction of particular forms of labor-power (Althusser, 2001). There have, of course, been variations in the methods used by capital to appropriate education and the school for its own ends, just as surely as there have been varying resistances to these methods. The historical–materialist framework provided by the right to the city, I believe, can help us appreciate more fully the forces behind the structural shifts taking place in education facilitated by the new language of learning. Related to this, but more pertinent to the current investigation is how the right to the city can help us understand the difference in the educational encounter, the relationship between the encounter and space, and the educator's responsibility in and for that space.

For Biesta (2006), education is about the emergence of the singularity of the subject, which takes place through encounters with others and 'implies coming into a world populated by other beginners, a world of plurality and difference' (p. 49). Calling upon Hannah Arendt's notion of action, Biesta stresses 'that we can only act if *at the very same time* others can act as well, that is, if others are also able to bring their beginnings into the world' (p. 49). The responsibility of the educator 'is to make sure that there are at least opportunities within education to meet and encounter what is different, strange, and other' (p. 69). Thus, the space of the encounter and the differing subjects and ways of being that occasion the encounter are tied together.

Because the encounter requires difference, and in particular different subjects, an educational theory of the encounter must attend to the material struggles of different social groups. This is where Harvey's (2009) articulation of the right to the city as the 'greater democratic control over the production and utilization of surplus' (p. 328) is crucial. In other words, the right to the space of the educational encounter is bound together with and dependent upon the right of students and educators to housing, transportation, communication, play, and so on. In order for the student to 'come into presence' and to encounter alterity, there has to be a world of other beginners capable of acting. This world and its beginners, however, exist in and depend on a host of material requirements, which must be taken into primary consideration. This is the relationship between the city and the urban, it is the practico-material morphology which is, at the same time, produced by and productive of the educational encounter. Relatedly, the educational encounter is bound up with the right to recognition. Here, I do not mean to imply that alterity and otherness must be recognized, knowable, or clearly identified or articulated. Rather, I mean that the status of the other *as a subject* must be recognized. In order for the educator to intervene into the life of the student, to ask the difficult questions that education demands, the student must be recognized as such, and this recognition is both material and discursive. But what of the educator's responsibility here and what of the element of space?

Again, returning to Biesta, he theorizes responsibility in two ways. The first theorization Biesta (2006) offers is:

that educational responsibility, the responsibility of the educator, is not only a responsibility for 'newcomers'—it is at the very same time a responsibility for the world. It is a responsibility to create and keep in existence a 'worldly space' through which new beginnings can come into presence. (p. 107)

The second formulation offered is that educational responsibility 'entails asking the simple but in my view fundamental educational question: "What do you think about it?"' a question that takes other forms, such as 'Where do you stand on this?' and 'How will you respond?' (p. 150). This formulation relates most clearly to the second component of Biesta's language of education where education is seen as an intervention into the life of the student.

It is also tethered to the first formulation of responsibility because in order for a student to be called to respond, there must first be a world of other beginners, a world of difference for the student to respond to. The question, then, is *how* can educators ‘create and keep in existence a “worldly space” through which new beginnings can come into presence?’ (p. 107). The possibility of the existence of such a worldly space where the educational encounter, facilitated by the educator, can occur is directly tied to the material and social organization of society. This means first that the responsibility for the educational encounter involves a responsibility on the part of the educator to struggle for ‘greater democratic control over the production and utilization of the surplus’ (Harvey, 2009, p. 328), which is to say that it necessarily entails a struggle over the means of value production. Second and relatedly, because the encounter with alterity demands the presence of different subjects and social groups, a presence which is always the result of struggle, the responsibility for the educational encounter demands a responsibility for supporting the struggles of social groups to assert their right to recognition and participation, not only in the city, but in the school and other educational sites as well.

The architects that Biesta leans on to articulate a post-functional space of the educational encounter acknowledge the importance and limitation of planning. Hertzberger emphasizes architectural planning ‘with opportunities for encounters, for use, and events’ (Biesta, 2006, p. 114). Yet, as Biesta (2006) notes, architecture has ‘to be functionalist in one way or another’ (p. 115) in order to be architecture. The approach taken is a deconstructive one, wherein the responsibility of the architect and the educator is ‘to be committed to both spaces and events, to both design and the transgression of design, to both building and its undoing’ (p. 115). By turning to Lefebvre, I believe that we can deepen this conception of space. The Lefebvrian distinction between habitat and to inhabit, between space as planned and space as appropriated, produces a dialectic that is subject not to concrete laws, but to the push and pull of struggle. Public spaces tend to originate as planned habitats, and this is especially true for public schools. Yet, as these spaces are occupied and lived in, they become inhabited and appropriated in varying ways; encounters are forced even in the most planned spaces, from curricula to hallways. We can say, then, that the space of the educational encounter is produced through a deconstructive dialectic between planning and transgression and between habitation and inhabitation.

Conclusions and cautions

This theory of the educational encounter, which is situated in the contemporary neoliberal moment, begins with Biesta’s articulation of education as social, relational, and incalculable, involving risk, (transcendental) violence, and responsibility (without knowledge). It is spatialized first through the ‘post-functionalist’ architectural theorists, whom Biesta calls upon, and second through a turn to the right to the city. This latter move introduces the habitat/inhabit dialectic, the use/use-value/exchange-value framework for examining the space necessary for the educational encounter to occur, and the role of struggle in the production and maintenance of that space. It helps us to think more precisely about what the alterity that one encounters in education is, how it comes to be, and how it is sustained. This, in turn, ties education and educational responsibility directly to the overall material and social organization of society.

Debates about what neoliberalism is and how it should be used as a theoretical framework for understanding contemporary policies and social relations were noted above. The same must be said of the right to the city and the encounter. As a theory and practice, the right to the city has undergone transformations over the past several decades and has varied

according to location. Mayer (2011), for example, documents how ‘actually existing’ right to the city movements have evolved in correspondence with changes in the organization of capitalist production as well as how those movements can ‘be problematized against the background of the transformed role of metropolises of the global North within the new international division of labor’ (p. 64). Not all encounters are educational and productive. In fact, the neoliberal encounter is destructive, primarily because it works to prevent and cut off other encounters and differences. For economy and purpose, here, I have focused on only a handful of writings within the literature on the right to the city and the encounter. Thus, the arguments above are not oriented toward producing a monolithic theory. They are rather oriented toward beginning to outline a theory of the educational encounter, the space of that encounter, and the right to that encounter. The hope is that such a theory can provide a useful way of understanding and responding to the current neoliberal offensive against education, thereby moving forward the struggle to assert education as inhabitation against learning as habitat.

Notes

1. I thank the associate editor and anonymous reviewers at *Critical Studies in Education* and Don Mitchell for their critiques and help in framing and tightening this paper.
2. A wide-ranging collection of work on neoliberalism and its nuanced and localized effects on education can be found in a special issue on the ‘International impact of neoliberal policies on education’ of *Critical Studies in Education*, 48(2).
3. For more about the history of accountability in education, see Biesta (2010), pp. 50–72.
4. See Biesta (2006), pp. 1–12 and (2010), pp. 17–80 for more on his critique of humanism.
5. Here, Biesta draws heavily on the work of Jacques Rancière. See Bingham and Biesta (2010).
6. Harvey (2009) makes an important, similar argument, that capitalist production played the central role in the creation of the modern city, particularly by ‘absorbing the surplus product that capitalists perpetually produce in their search for profits’ (p. 317).
7. Thus, Marcuse’s (2009) political program for the right to the city calls for strengthening those ‘sectors of everyday life that are free of capitalist forms, operating within the capitalist system but not of it, not dominated by it . . .’ those sectors ‘that are not motivated by profit but rely on solidarity, humanity, the flexing of muscles and the development of creative impulses, for their own sake’ (p. 195).
8. This is so for Lefebvre, but other right to the city theorists have taken the notion of ‘rights’ in varying ways. See Attou (2011) for an examination of the differing notions of rights used in the right to the city literature and how they often conflict.

Notes on contributor

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