



## Education excavated

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**Forms of education: rethinking educational experience against and outside the humanist legacy**, by Emile Bojesen, Abingdon, Routledge, 2021, 148 pp., £29.59 paperback, ISBN 9781032083193

It is possible for an academic field to be caught up in its own concepts, 'trapped by its own ideas', as Hannah Arendt puts it in her *Essays in Understanding* (Arendt 1994, 11). Such entrapment is accompanied by a deadening of the original problems, which recede to a background that is increasingly taken for granted. What is needed in such a case is reactivation. This phenomenological idea, first launched by Edmund Husserl, has been taken up in political theory in recent decades (Marchart 2018, 90–92). The stakes of reactivation are not only the restoration of original energies and pioneering spirits, but also an uncovering and recovering of sedimented assumptions, patterns of questioning, and the importance of projects that jointly constitute our engagement with the world (of concepts) that has since been shaped. Reactivation is thus in equal parts about excavation, about insurgence against the prevailing orthodoxy, and about renewed engagement with the fundamental work of philosophy.

Emile Bojesen's *Forms of Education* sets up camp in the study of education and is relentlessly reactivating. As the author notes, the field is often seen as a social science (113) that studies the accumulation of knowledge in individual subjects or groups of subjects, reliant on a relatively fixed notion of both knowledge and the subject (*ibid*). This is the product of a specific way of thinking about education, informed by its humanist legacy, which the book aims to deconstruct (1). This legacy imposes a certain logic on education, which in turn justifies the imposition of (semi-)obligatory education and its important societal role in producing some preferred outcome, however conceived, by its own preferred mode of institutionalisation and associated pedagogies. Bojesen draws on many philosophical traditions and insights, but the closest approximation to his own views is Ivan Illich. This is because contemporary study and philosophy of education are mostly interested in providing reasons for exercising the compulsion to educate in a specific way, while Illich's book *Deschooling Society* (1971) denies the traditional educational motives their institutional guarantees, seeking to overthrow both the latter and the former. Even Illich, however, is now outdated because of his 'prophetic optimism' concerning the immanent collapse of the school system and the alternative envisioned by Illich himself, which was to focus on open distribution of educational resources (123). Thus, while Illich's radical programme continues to inspire, Bojesen embarks on a renewed investigation of educational experience, for two reasons. First, this investigation of educational experience is to underpin the critique of existing educational theory and practice. Second, it is expected to create new educational avenues, necessary for a real alternative.

The humanist legacy underpinning current approaches to education comes with its own particular logic, which is developed and criticised in the first part of the book with references to authors ranging from Cicero to Dewey. This is not undertaken in the mode of a history (even of the present), as the invocations of humanists come across as elements of a well-curated collection rather than as a systematic narrative. Instead, the goal seems to be to lay bare sedimented layers of the humanist legacy from the point of view of the present. For the purposes of this essay I want to first restate the humanist legacy's underlying logic in order to

survey Bojesen's central critical intervention, and then consider his own constructive efforts after the layers of sediment have been removed.

In order to make these efforts possible, Bojesen 'seeks to forsake' (1) the usual or canonical (both my own formulations) texts and topics of the practice and philosophy of education, insofar as these are beholden to and framed by the humanist legacy and move within its universe. The structure of this enframing is as follows: the social mission of humanism (whether this is conceived as economic growth, improving culture, enabling citizenship, or in yet another way) presupposes a primordial educational lack which is to be filled through the redeeming work of education. Briefly put, this redemption requires the fixed subject to absorb a fixed body of knowledge so that a fixed outcome can be attained – in a specific way. But no matter the exact form that education takes, its structure is today a mode of excluding the experience of education insofar as it falls outside of these boundaries. It is this structure that produces a highly artificial, instrumental, and compulsive process, even as schools and theories tout their progressive values. Is there an alternative? For Bojesen, education is to be conceived instead as the 'perpetual formation and deformation of unstable subjects' (2), which is a definition of education that he claims has the capacity to include all other definitions of education. It stands to reason that the authors invoked by Bojesen in order to elucidate the experience of education are not the usual suspects, or figures that one would even associate with education if not for the series of breakthroughs accomplished in this book. In what follows I attempt to highlight important innovations that stood out to me. I also attempt to develop them in order to push the envelope yet further: these are my own reflections on where *Forms of Education* may lead today's educational thought.

Bojesen's innovation on the level of authors and references invoked also occurs for the notion of the experience of education itself. Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* is awarded its own chapter (Chapter 7) and provides the occasion for the elaboration of psychoanalytic and deconstructive themes; in the conclusion to the book, Bojesen describes *The Waves* both as the 'centrepiece' of his argument and as 'the single richest resource I have found in communicating the breadth of educational experience that both challenges and exceeds the educational authority of the humanist legacy' (129). Bojesen's use of Woolf's novel develops the critical purchase of the notion of educational experience in a highly convincing way. Woolf's description of the lives of a cast of characters is, in her own term, a playpoem which focuses on the individuality and multiplicity of each of their experiences. Bojesen does not only capture this well, but his account itself captures something hitherto insufficiently unacknowledged in the study of education: educational experience appears not as a generic input, but as irreducible, complex, and multiple. While Bojesen's Freudian reading (with appropriate distancing gestures with respect to Freud's own humanist trappings) is also convincing and discloses Woolf's text in a very interesting way, it comes with a logic of its own which 'lumbers' (in Bojesen's own phrase, also from the conclusion) his reading. It also, and perhaps more problematically, threatens to domesticate the rich description of educational experience by organising it within an established framework of theoretical concepts. This points out a general problem with 'talking about experience': clearly, we need to refer to educational experience, but the nature of this experience also means that conceptual description does not cover it completely. I would, however, want to distinguish between a conceptual approach within an established framework, such as a broadly Freudian framework, and a conceptual approach generated by the account of educational experience itself. It is also notable that even the version of Freud that Bojesen invokes, more or less freed from humanist trappings, makes educational experience answer to an established conceptual framework. This opens the possibility that any conceptual capture of educational experience, even in non- or post-humanist terms, makes this experience answer to a (theoretical and/or practical) set of

functions and purposes. If that is the case, then the humanist legacy expresses the historically and currently hegemonic mode of such a capture; but it would itself be an aspect of the limits imposed on educational experience rather than its full description. In other words, the humanist legacy would in this case be closer to an account of an important and dominant symptom rather than the underlying condition.

Another breakthrough is the discussion of the ‘plural speech’ (112) of conversation, which Bojesen develops from the work of Maurice Blanchot in Chapter 10. Conversation is there described as a form of education that leaves the artificiality of humanism behind in an ‘alternative mode of thought and form of education’ (113). Conversation does so through its mode of interruption (and interrupting oneself) and its plural aspect: conversation is the movement of ‘turning together towards the infinite of speech’ (120). This at the same time enables a ‘disestablishment of the subject’ (113). Conversation in this Blanchotian vein is clearly an important theme for both philosophy as a whole and educational thought in particular. Here, too, I wonder if one might not go further. While the teleological aspect of notions such as *Bildung* and related humanist projects is cast aside (we are not after a particular ‘formation’ through the application of specific ‘information’), Bojesen’s definition of education seems to inherit *Bildung*’s parameters when it comes to the subject and impact of education: even in Bojesen’s radical questioning and redefinition of education we are dealing with an admittedly unstable set of individual subjects that are (de)formed through education. There is a danger here of according an original primacy to the subject, which is only subsequently dissolved through conversation. Conversation is in turn quite a specific, intellectually coded activity with its own underlying phenomenology. It is possible that Fred Moten’s notions of the *ensemble* and *study* (see for instance Moten 1994; Harney and Moten 2013) would provide more capacious and possibly more fundamentally ‘anarchic’ starting points than conversation – such capaciousness, it seems to me, is required if we are aiming for a definition of education with the capacity to include all other definitions of education. The notion of transindividuality in the work of Étienne Balibar (see Balibar 2020) provides another avenue. In both cases, the question is raised whether the role of the individual subject and a conversation involving several such subjects in plural speech is not a relatively narrow aspect of educational experience, which is perhaps even derivative.

These two lines of response are occasioned by *Forms of Education* and would not have been possible without the effort of reactivation that unfolds itself on its every page. It digs out problems the field had forgotten about and buried beneath layers upon layers of sedimentation: I certainly had neglected them in my own thinking. Bojesen’s criticism requires a response; the alternative outlined inspires. My own response is thus one of gratitude, cheering-on, and an attempt at taking part in and furthering its reactivating effort. *Forms of Education* should be read by anyone in the broad field of thinking about education, if only to throw all of us off the usual trails leading towards all-too-familiar educational institutions. The book raises further questions about the nature of the problem posed by humanism, the phenomenological contours of educational experience, and even the definition of education, among many other questions. Its great success is that these questions have once again become available.

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