

Why Posthumanism Now?

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Therese Lindgren and Magdalena Sjostrand Ohrfelt have written a tantalizing essay. Intriguing questions and lines of analysis are suggested to its readers, but, like the fruit hanging over Tantalus's head, which receded as soon as he reached for it, some of the most interesting questions are left hanging. Like Tantalus, the audience for this essay is getting its just deserts, insofar as we are the ones who maintain the 4500 word limit on PES Yearbook essays, but I hold out hope that a future, longer version of this paper will satisfy my desire to hear more.

In this iteration, Lindgren and Ohrfelt note that the Swedish Skolverket positions pedagogical documentation within a post-constructionist/posthumanist framework. They situate the Skolverket's new interest in moving away from binary constructions, including culture/nature, human/non-human, mind/body, intellect/emotion, and theory/practice, in social conditions both global and uniquely Swedish. Specific to Sweden is the social commitment to state-funded early childhood care and education for children as young as one, and the evident willingness of nearly all parents to make use of such care. Global trends include the interest in measurement, in part for the sake of competitive international comparisons, and a growing belief that early childhood education is key to a nation being able to make its children the winners of those competitions. Having contextualized posthumanist early childhood education policy, Lindgren and Ohrfelt draw on Thomas Popkewitz's account of policy as effecting the "fabrication" of particular ways of being. They briefly sketch out a "fictional" – in Popkewitz's sense of fiction as making, as well as making up – account of the posthuman children growing up through Swedish preschools.

"What elements and themes," Lindgren and Ohrfelt ask, "are accentuated when posthumanist theory becomes practicable and is presented as a method in educational practice?" Because they have, appropriately, presented education

policy as responding to the perceived problems of its time, one broad answer to this question is the themes and elements raised by social, economic, and ecological crises that have captured public attention during the past ten years of European history. The essay refers in several places to these overlapping and interconnected but also distinct crises. With reference to how children are fabricated by Skolverket policy, they refer to a “political and philosophical notion about the world as being in a state of (ecological, financial, political, refugee, etc.) crisis.” Towards the end, they claim to have “discussed how the fiction [of] the posthuman child is fabricated as a response to the contemporary environmental, social, and financial crisis.” The pages in between, however, address in depth only one of those crises: the ecological. It is not clear to me whether this is because the ecological crisis is the focus of posthumanist Skolverket policy or because Lindgren and Ohrfelt chose to focus on it. In either case, I wanted to know more about how posthumanist policy addresses the other crises.

What really leaves me wishing for more, though, is a tension they allude to in the conclusion, which points directly to the other, unaddressed, crises. Lindgren and Ohrfelt point out that in a posthumanist approach, the child is fabricated “as a prophetic being at the same time as it is wiped out (through the dissolution of the subject).” A posthuman child, arguably, has no human rights. Even if this entails no more than the replacement of one set of fictions with another, where does this leave Syrian, Libyan, and other refugee children? These children have been brought to Europe not out of their parents’ commitment to living holistically with the natural world but rather out of desperate faith in a Europe that has imagined itself as a bastion of rights protected by law, at the national, regional, and international levels. Human rights, of course, have been honored in the breach for as long as they have been signed into international conventions. At the present moment, however, disregard for national and international laws and treaties heralds not a new posthumanist state of genuine mutual respect but, instead, nationalist chauvinism. How, without human rights, will the refugees’ hopes be addressed? How can posthumanism respond to the ugly nativism sweeping Europe (and the United States, of course), which promises to treat native-born children entirely differently than immigrant and

refugee children? The recognition of this tension, in my reading, is where the essay starts to get really interesting.

I am not convinced Lindgren and Ohrfelt could have discussed all the crises they mention – social and financial, as well as ecological – in 4500 words, especially given their commendable commitment to providing scholarly references. Even if they more explicitly tied the refugee crisis, the financial crisis, and the ecological crisis together (as surely could be done, but would require explanation), the essay would be significantly longer.

In 1999, Francis Schrag published a paper called “Why Foucault Now?” In it, he argued that education scholars (including, prominently, his colleague at UW Madison, Thomas Popkewitz) were drawn to Foucault at that particular moment because Foucault offered a stance on education, power, freedom, and the potential of politics to make a difference that spoke to hopes raised by social movements in the 1960s and 1970s, hopes that were dashed by the conservatism and infighting of the 1980s and 1990s. Rather than promising a road to utopia through revolution, Foucault’s writing offers critique that aims to promote change by puncturing complacency. And with revolutionary Marxism hard to believe in after 1989, Foucault offered, in Schrag’s words, an appealing means “for scholars, especially those with a flair for theorizing, to believe that, no matter how esoteric or precious their formulations, and no matter how limited their audiences, they are, even as they theorize, social activists engaged in laying the ground for social transformation.”¹

Suppose that, instead of taking Schrag’s word as a settled verdict on Foucault, on Popkewitz, and on scholarship like Lindgren’s and Ohrfelt’s, which incorporates Foucaultian modes of critique, readers take it as a gauntlet thrown at their feet. Why posthumanism now? Why dissolve human autonomy at the precise moment when refugees are streaming into Europe to claim their share of what the Enlightenment has produced? Is this because posthumanism shows the way to a politics that can supersede the binary thinking that supports colonialism, the exploitation and degradation of the earth, and the dehumanization of others? Or is it merely an attempt to give up on politics at exactly the moment when future citizens of Europe (and the United States, Canada,

and Australia) include Muslims, Africans, and others of the global poor? Foucaultian scholarship on educational policy, including Popkewitz's account of fabrication, has enriched readers' understanding of politics by shifting our focus from the political to the ontological. Only by attending to the ontological, can philosophers of education consider what other ways of being in the world education might make possible. After that, though, these new fabrications will still have to find a way to live together, and that is the work of politics. When posthumanism is carried into policy, carried out by human beings as all policy is, the questions become political once again.

By bringing posthumanist inquiry into the domain of educational policy, the Skolverket raises such questions. In this essay, Lindgren and Ohrfelt have taken an initial look at some of the questions posthumanist education policy raises. I look forward to hearing more.

1 Francis Schrag, "Why Foucault Now?," *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 31, no. 4 (1999): 375-383, 382.