

Foucault's Heterotopia and Pedagogical Space

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Abstract

*This essay prompts educators to think critically about how we represent and cultivate pedagogical spaces in our educational institutions. In Michel Foucault's 1967 lecture titled *Des Espace Autres*, Foucault introduces his three-fold taxonomy social spaces, including heterotopias. This article facilitates the normative work of educators in terms of conceptualizing the social spaces of our schools and their relations to the social structures of power. Foucault's heterotopia re-complicates our understanding of the evolution of pedagogical space and the cultural influences that produce it.*

Résumé

Cet article invite les pédagogues à réfléchir sur la façon dont nous représentons et cultivons les espaces pédagogiques dans nos établissements d'enseignement. Michel Foucault (1967) dans une conférence intitulée "Des Espace Autres", introduit sa triple taxonomie des espaces sociaux, y compris les hétérotopies. Cet article facilite le travail normatif des éducateurs en termes de conceptualisation des espaces sociaux de nos écoles et de leurs relations avec les structures sociales du pouvoir. La notion d'hétérotopie de Foucault rend notre compréhension de l'évolution de l'espace pédagogique et les influences culturelles qui y sont produites plus complexe .

If you are asked to draw a picture of a school, envision a school in your mind's eye, or verbally describe a school, chances are that you'd articulate a little red schoolhouse. While the little red schoolhouse bears little or no resemblance to the vast majority of schools attended by most of people, it endures, even internationally, as a consistently identifiable and readable symbol, a universal icon representing education or an educational institution. While a wide range of iconography represents educational institutions, the little red schoolhouse, for

better or worse, is among the most enduring and recognizable of all. It is an archetype, representing at once a space and place for education, corresponding to a pedagogical *space* or area used for a particular purpose, and a pedagogical *place* or area comprised of multiple spaces (e.g., specific pedagogical sites within the school, including the classroom, library, and curriculum). While antiquated, the little red schoolhouse logo is a common referent particularly to American schools, preschool programs, and even progressive education. Yet, the little red schoolhouse can be read as a powerful abstraction representing a multiplicity of meanings. Michel Foucault might link this symbol to the inherent issues of using discursive language, but he would no doubt recognize that, to some extent, it survives because it represents a space that serves the social structures of power. Our educational institutions are an integral part of the structure of social space, which Michel Foucault divides into three types: Real, utopian, and heterotopic space. This study centers on Michel Foucault's definition of heterotopia based on his 1967 essay, *Des Espace Autres*, or *Of Other Spaces*. Decades after it was written, the essay and its exploration of social space, continues to reverberate into the twenty-first century through scholarship in multiple disciplines and fields of study, including geography, film studies, literature, and teacher education. Foucault's description of heterotopia can help educators to think critically about the conceptual and physical pedagogical spaces we co-create for our students. Part of the normative project for educators is to question the structures of social space and power and the purposes that our pedagogical spaces and places serve. This study invites sets of questions, including *how do we conceptualize the social spaces of our schools? Do we provide the kinds of educational institutions we wish for our students? What kinds of pedagogical spaces do we wish to create?*

Michel Foucault (1984, 1986) writes that the twentieth century was above all else an epoch of space. Foucault describes the twentieth century as an era defined as much by the spatialization of social power as by the exploration of outer space, an age in which human beings are defined as much by their relation to space as to any human being. Foucault conceptualizes twentieth

century space as a structure simultaneously juxtaposed and dispersed in “*a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein*” (Foucault, 1986, 22).

In 1967, Foucault presented a lecture titled *Of Other Spaces* (“*Des Espaces Autres*”) to architecture students – clearly a group interested in deepening their understandings of the conceptual and material qualities of space and the theoretical tools of architectural analysis (Urbach, 1998) -- thus formally introducing the world to his three-fold taxonomy of real, Utopian, and heterotopic space.

Heterotopia is an interesting word choice for Foucault. As the son of a physician, Foucault may have first encountered *heterotopic*, as a medical term from the Greek, meaning “in the wrong place,” such as a heterotopic bone formation where bone is not normally found (medterms.com). Foucault may have resonated to the layers of meaningfulness and meaninglessness associated with the “hetero-“ prefix, considering that he was a gay man intrigued by the intricacies of discursively language (Foucault, 1972).

While Foucault did not invent the term *heterotopia* (Urbach, 1998), Foucauldian heterotopia provided critical groundwork for developing *heterotology*, a discourse of the Other, and has proven to be a touchstone for scholars from a broad range of disciplines and subjects. For decades, academicians ranging from the fields of cartography to poetry as well as urban policy and contemporary cinema have critiqued Foucault’s views of alternative social spaces, which have been subjected to wide interpretation, conceptualization, and application. Heterotopia may be at once a sketchy topology, a complex abstraction, and a map easily misread, but we can only speculate on any finer points or inherent contradictions identified by critics. Foucault chose not to elaborate on his conceptualization of heterotopia and arranged for “*Des Espaces Autres*” to be published only after his death in 1984 (Collins, 2003).

Foucault (1984, 1986) divides social space into three aspects: *Real*, *utopia*, and *heterotopia*. Foucault describes heterotopia as a collective of conceptual and material schisms between real social and Utopian or ideal social space. These alternative,

phantasmagorical, and ordinary spaces include carnivals, libraries, museums, military camps, colonies, cemeteries, and brothels (Grierson, 2001; Urbach, 1998; Milojevic, 2003; Best & Struver, n.d.). Heterotopia can be understood as a site for isolation, punishment, and banishment (like mental hospitals, prisons, and military camps), yet it can be a sacred site (such as monasteries and cemeteries), or forbidden space (like brothels). Heterotopia can be understood as a space of juxtaposition and transgression and microcosm of the social order of the natural world (Peters & Humes, 2003), as well as the fountainhead of culture (de Certeau, 1984) and the mother of all social space, “*formed in the very founding of society*” (Foucault, 1986, 27). It has endured throughout the course of Western history and in virtually every human civilization on earth, corresponding to an unwieldy collection of *Other* spaces, where transience and timelessness intersect with normal and ideal constructs of chronology, identity, sexuality, and reality. Foucault (1986) specified two primary roles of heterotopia: To create a space of illusion that is of and for the Other, and to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space. Heterotopia may be compared to a mirror, reflecting society upon itself and making the real seem unreal, as it re-presents, contests, and inverts real social spaces. Foucault understood that all social spaces exist in a certain relation to each other and to the social structures of power. Yet, as Foucault describes it, heterotopia is a kind of neutral zone beyond the reach of the conventional social structures of power and power relations. Heterotopias gerrymander around the jurisdictions of the *normal* social structures of power. Heterotopia is often in opposition to its spatial counterparts, and it defies *normal* constructs of space and time (Grierson, 2001). Milojevic (2003) claims that heterotopia is embedded in social, political, and moral oppositions at such intersections as public and private, pleasure and work, and knowledge and experience. Although heterotopia can be understood in obtuse relation to real or ideal social spaces, Foucault (1986) maintained that it is an oversimplification to refer to heterotopia simply as an alternative social space. Heterotopia can be connected to or disconnected from real social

space, yet it is not formed arbitrarily, as “*each heterotopia has a precise and determined function within a society*” (Foucault, 1986, 25). Foucault (1986) describes heterotopias as in a state of continual flux, as the relationships inside and outside the confines of the spaces we occupy are perpetually re-contested, renegotiated, remapped, and rearticulated.

There are two major types of heterotopias: Crisis and deviance. On the one hand, *crisis* heterotopias are shelters in times of crisis (Tamboukou, 2004) but also sites of banishment for young people, who are sent to orphanages, residential schools, or military camps. Foucault (1986) wrote that crisis heterotopias are often *nowhere* spaces that usually exist without geographical markers or mapping of any kind, yet locals implicitly know where they are and what function they serve. Crisis heterotopias are often gender-specific and found in various cultures throughout history (Tamboukou, 2004), corresponding to sites reserved exclusively for women menstruating, giving birth, or seeking protection from spousal abuse. Men have their own crisis heterotopias, which offer fellowship and sanctuary. On the other hand, *deviance* heterotopias are sites where those perceived to be abnormal are hospitalized or incarcerated, for example, or are in some way effectively isolated from society. Deviant heterotopias are spaces for prisoners, as well as the aged and infirm, just as they are designated for forbidden, often clandestine, relations and transgressions.

Heterotopia, an integral part of the social construction of space that is already in motion, is defined in part by its relation to time in that it exists outside the chronologies that dominate human life in real social space (Grierson, 2001). Heterotopia can be transitory, like *carnivale*, or essentially timeless, like the spaces in museums and libraries appropriated for the preservation of history. It corresponds to sites of historical preservation and conservation (where history can be understood as a fact and a lie). Foucault (1984, 1986) explained that heterotopia is a site with an alternative relation to time, marked by the perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time, constituting a place of all time that is in itself outside the realm of normal chronology; in effect, heterotopia has its own time zone(s), or even none at all.

Foucault (1986) suggested that heterotopia emerges at points that mark absolute breaks with traditional time, where time stands still. Foucault (1986) found heterotopia functions in relation to all the space that remains; it is “*a place without a place, that exists by itself, that is closed in on itself at the same time is given over to the infinity*” (p. 25), a statement that could just as easily describe a postindustrial site, cyberspace, or a cemetery. The confluence of chronology and heterotopia can be understood as multifarious, at once classic, pristine, novel, corroded, corrupted, and impermanent, as it is manifestly monumental and unmonumental, as well as heroic and antiheroic. Heterotopia can be a great time machine, a contraption part vacuum and bellows, simultaneously gobbling and abolishing as it preserves and hoards cultural concepts of time and identity, all the while accumulating, suspending, converging, and compressing space and time in its vortex. Grierson (2001) articulates the alterity of heterotopic chronology: “*At the grave, as at the edge of infinite space, cyber and actual, the body as an embedded epistemological phenomenon disintegrates. I am, yet I am not*” (p. 8).

Foucault (1984, 1986) described the dominant social structures of power as naturalized or traditional history trajectories, meta-certainties inscribed throughout the history of Western thought through its by binary thinking and disciplinary discourses. Through a brief historical analysis of how space has been conceived over time in Western civilization, Foucault (1984) asserts that hierarchical, spatialized binaries, such as the sacred and the profane, celestial and terrestrial, protected and open, and urban and rural, are a remnant of the Middle Ages. Foucault asserts that medieval thought inscribes and naturalizes modern social and spatial practices, notably in terms of communal identity and individual subjectivity, which pervades certain religious colonies and the notion of *scientific truths* (such as those disrupted by Galileo). Further, Foucault explains that the Western philosophical and architectural systems comprised of hierarchies, grids, binaries, and dialectics — began to wane after Descartes, whose fixed and highly orderly spatial system

eventually gave way to the more flexible and interrelated spatial conceptualizations and constructs in the Modern Epoch. It is not John Milton's island but a ship at sea that Foucault (1984, 1986) found as the perfect metaphor for heterotopia,

The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*... a floating piece of space, a place without a place... that is closed in on itself and at the same time is given over to the infinity of the sea and that, from port to port, from tack to tack, from brothel to brothel... goes as far as the colonies in search of the most precious treasures they conceal in their gardens...[If you think of this] you will understand why the boat has not only been for our civilization... [simultaneously] the great instrument of economic development... [but also] the greatest reserve of the imagination (Collins. 2003, p. 6).

While interdisciplinarian Julie Thompson Klein (2005) criticizes Foucault's heterotopia as a space of contradictory practices and theoretical positions with an "illusory unity and coherence" (p. 110), and Clifford Geertz (1980) regards heterotopia as a curious combination of sense and nonsense, geographer David Harvey (2000) critiques Foucault's heterotopia, asserting that the field of geography, missing from Foucault's analysis of space, is critical in relation to philosophical and political knowledge. Further, Harvey (2000) criticizes the postmodern predilection of using spatial metaphors, like heterotopia, that do not correspond to any specific physical locality or are organized in any systematic way, as evidenced, for example, in the work of Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault. Harvey critiques what he refers to as postmodern metaphors on the basis that such metaphors fail to connect to the "material circumstances of lived geography" (p. 544). In fact, Harvey (2000) states, "The disruptions of spatialities provide merely a means to argue for a broad-based political pluralism and a multidimensionalism of

difference,” which evade “questions of real geography and even the production of space” (p. 540-1).

Heterotopia invites a range of questions about Foucault's explanation of social space and power. How exactly are heterotopias discerned from general or real social spaces and orders? Once a heterotopia always a heterotopia? For example, considering that once a space has been identified as an alternative space, it risks *Disneyfication* or reinvention, like the SoHo neighborhood that becomes less operational as an alternative space when it becomes popular and rents increase or the original residents leave. How alternative is or must be heterotopic space; is it the space or activity that occurs in the space that is alterior? Is heterotopia really alterior or are we made to think it is? While Foucault (1986) asserted that space is a fundamental aspect of any exercise of power or form of communal life, how can any heterotopia exist completely outside of the structures of social power? While Foucault described some heterotopias that allow a respite from social norms and structures, and others that are highly-controlled, regimented sites, such as colonial heterotopias, prisons, and military schools, it is unclear how any heterotopia can ever be completely unencumbered by the constraints of social power. Are heterotopic spaces at best inconsistently or transiently heterotopic, and then only *by degree* or *to some extent*? Foucault is critiqued in his inability to unequivocally and precisely establish the invisible but visibly different operational spatial discontinuities that distinguish heterotopia from all other social spaces (Massey, 1999). Further, considering that heterotopias range from Disneyland to Las Vegas, and gated communities to terrorist camps, it appears that Foucault over generalized by describing all heterotopias as critical, liberatory, or emancipatory spaces. In fact, although Foucault stated, “The ship is the heterotopia *par excellence*,” Harvey (2000) asserts that a commercialized cruise ship is unlikely to be an emancipatory space. Further, the ship metaphor is somewhat puzzling, for considering that heterotopia essentially *flies under the radar* of social power, why did Foucault choose a ship at sea instead of a real or imaginary aircraft or spacecraft? Foucault's

spatial taxonomy generated more questions than answers as it calls into question the borders, characteristics, limits, tensions, contestations, and potentialities of the socially constructed spaces we so often take for granted.

As educators it is helpful to question the social structures of power and the ways we participate in the construction of pedagogical spaces. We may wish to consider if there is greater educative, creative, and democratic potential in space conceptualized as heterotopic rather than real or Utopian. If educational spaces correspond to real, ideal, or heterotopic space, is it possible to change, or do the greater structures of social power do the choosing for us? Can the most salient characteristics of a heterotopic pedagogical space produce an educative space that is consistently and comprehensively non-hegemonic? Is it possible or desirable to strike a balance between all three types of space? Our understanding of pedagogical space can be broadened and enriched through Foucault's spatial construct. Through his description of heterotopia, Foucault helps us to understand the social structures of hegemonic power and the layers of meaning often "hiding in plain sight" in our educative spaces. He helps us to recognize that power does what it must to survive, just as he prompts us to engage questions about the shape-shifting spatialization of power and knowledge. Foucault's spatial theory can apply to exploring the spaces where education is produced but also contested, resisted, and redefined. Foucault's heterotopia is problematic, yet it challenges, advances, enriches, and re-complicates our understanding of the evolution of pedagogical space and the cultural influences that produce it.

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