

# TRYING TO BE AT HOME IN THE WORLD: EDUCATION FOR THE PRESENT

Gert Biesta

this is the power point of the presentation I gave  
at the Waldorf 100 Conference 'The Art of Education,'  
organised by the European Council for Steiner Waldorf Education  
Brussels, 7 November 2019

for any questions, please feel free to contact me at  
[gert.biesta@mu.ie](mailto:gert.biesta@mu.ie) or [gert.biesta@ed.ac.uk](mailto:gert.biesta@ed.ac.uk)

# TRYING TO BE AT HOME IN THE WORLD: EDUCATION FOR THE PRESENT

Gert Biesta

MANY THANKS FOR THE INVITATION

I WOULD LIKE TO SPEAK ABOUT



THE UNIQUE INSIGHT OF STEINER-WALDORF EDUCATION  
THE UNIQUE PRACTICE OF STEINER-WALDORF EDUCATION  
THE CHALLENGE NOT TO FORGET THIS  
THE NEED TO (RE)CLAIM A SPACE FOR THIS  
AND THE DUTY TO SHARE IT FREELY

**IN 40 minutes !**



THE UNIVERSITY  
of EDINBURGH

# WHAT IS EDUCATION FOR? A BRIEF HISTORY

## ANCIENT GREECE

GIVING FREE MEN WITH THE TIME AND RESOURCES TO BECOME MORE PERFECT

## REFORMATION

LEARNING TO READ FOR ONESELF

## ENLIGHTENMENT

GAINING THE COURAGE TO THINK FOR ONESELF

FROM THE LATE 19TH CENTURY ONWARDS  
PROVIDING EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES FOR EVERYONE

2019

SCORING HIGH IN PISA?  
BECOMING AS 'GOOD' AS FINLAND?  
and so on . . .



# HAS CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION LOST THE PLOT?

THE RELENTLESS OBSESSION WITH TEST-SCORES,  
MEASUREMENT AND LEAGUE-TABLES  
DOES SUGGEST THAT THERE IS SOMETHING NOT RIGHT

THE QUESTION WHAT EDUCATION IS FOR  
IS HISTORICALLY CONTINGENT

WHAT WE SEE AS EDUCATION'S TASK  
DEPENDS ON HOW WE WISH TO RELATE TO [OUR] HISTORY

rather than (just) looking forward, we should not forget the past

WHAT ARE RELEVANT HISTORICAL 'MARKERS' FOR OUR TIME?



## AFTER 'AUSCHWITZ' (1)



Theodor Adorno  
1903-1969

**Erziehung nach Auschwitz**  
»Die Forderung, daß Auschwitz nicht noch  
einmal sei, ist die allererste an Erziehung.«  
Theodor W. Adorno

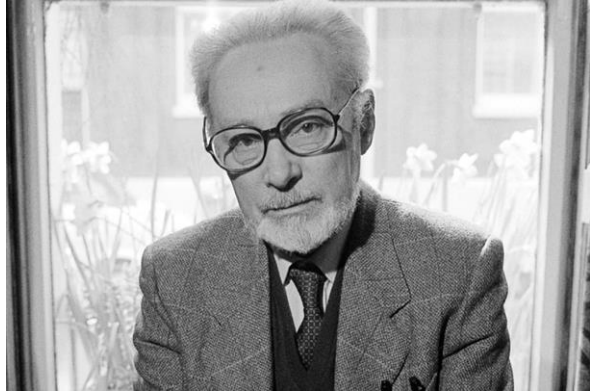
1966

**„The first demand upon education is that  
Auschwitz will not happen again.“**

**Sie geht so sehr jeglicher anderen voran,  
dass ich weder glaube, sie begründen  
zu müssen noch zu sollen. Ich kann nicht  
verstehen, dass man mit ihr bis heute  
so wenig sich abgegeben hat.  
Sie zu begründen hätte etwas  
Ungeheuerliches angesichts des  
Ungeheuerlichen, das sich zutrug.**

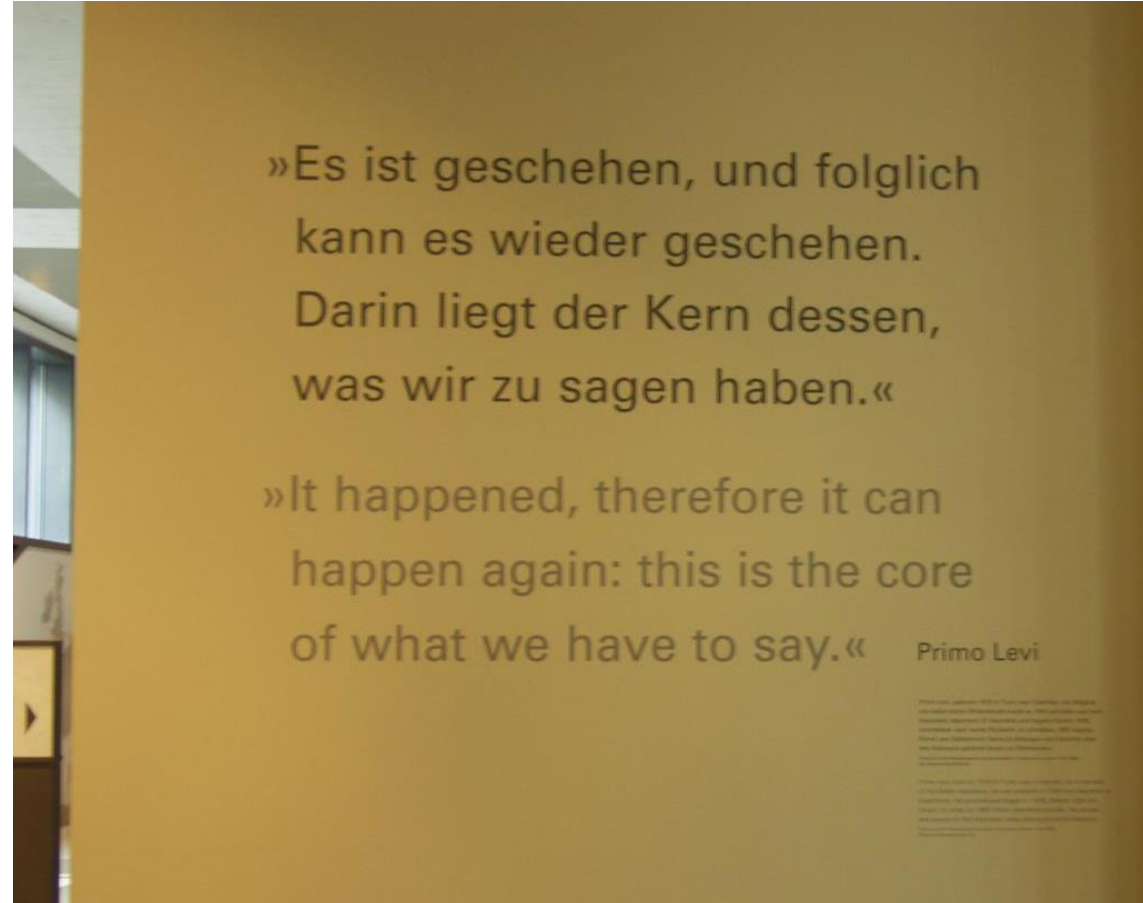


## AFTER 'AUSCHWITZ' (2)



Primo Levi  
1919-1987

**“IT HAPPENED,  
THEREFORE IT CAN  
HAPPEN AGAIN”**



# HERE WE ENCOUNTER THE ISSUE OF HUMAN FREEDOM

perhaps the riddle of human freedom or the mystery of human freedom

THIS IS A 'MODERN' EDUCATIONAL CONCERN



Jean-Jacques Rousseau  
*Emile, or On Education* (1762)

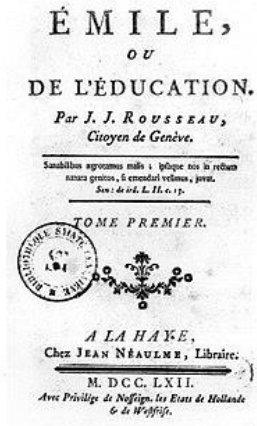
the two-fold task of the educator

[1] to shield the child from too strong influences from the 'outside'

[2] to shield the child from too strong influences from the 'inside' – the passions



in order to achieve sovereignty





# WHAT IS THE 'STATUS' OF THE QUESTION OF HUMAN FREEDOM? and how is it a concern for education?

DOES EDUCATION MAKE A DIFFERENCE?  
WHAT IS THE CONTRIBUTION OF EDUCATION?

NATURE – NURTURE – EDUCATION

1/3 – 1/3 – 1/3 ?  
50% – 30% – 20%?  
90% – 8% – 2% ?



# WAS ROSA PARKS UNABLE TO READ?



## DID ADOLF EICHMANN LEARN TO LISTEN TOO WELL?



## A REMARKABLE ANSWER



**NATURE + NURTURE = always 100%!**

**EDUCATION IS CONCERNED WITH A DIFFERENT QUESTION:  
HOW AN 'I' CAN STEP FORWARD FROM THIS**

**THE QUESTION OF EDUCATION IS OF A DIFFERENT ORDER**

**NOT: which natural and social factors determine how we become who we are,  
and how we can influence this process**

**BUT: Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit (summoning to self-action),  
which is not the injunction to be yourself but to be a self**

**'Is anyone there?'**

# THE EDUCATIONAL QUESTION IS AN EXISTENTIAL QUESTION

NOT THE QUESTION WHO WE ARE  
or how we become who we are



**IDENTITY**

BUT THE QUESTION HOW WE ARE  
how we try to live our lives, how we try to exist

what we will do with how we have become, with our identity,  
with what we have learned, with our capacities and competences  
but also with our inabilities, blind spots, and incompetences



**SUBJECT-NESS**

existing as subject, not object

**THE  
EDUCATIONAL  
QUESTION  
IS  
THE  
QUESTION  
OF  
THE  
I**

# THE OUTCOME? THAT'S ME!



NOT THE 'I' ON ITSELF OR JUST INTERESTED IN ITSELF, BUT THE 'I' IN THE WORLD

WHICH MEANS THAT WE NEED EDUCATION THAT IS WORLD-CENTRED  
RATHER THAN CHILD-CENTRED OR CURRICULUM CENTRED

ENCOURAGING CHILDREN TO TRY TO BE AT HOME IN THE WORLD  
A QUESTION OF COURAGE!

# THE UNIQUE INSIGHT OF STEINER-WALDORF EDUCATION

THAT THE CHILD IS NOT A DEVELOPING THING  
WHERE WE SHOULD TRY TO DIRECT ITS DEVELOPMENT



THE PROBLEMATIC 'PARADIGM' OF CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION  
(also via the brain, self-regulation, and so on)

BUT THAT EDUCATION IS ABOUT THE ARRIVAL OF THE 'I' IN THE WORLD  
WHERE THE 'I' HAS TO LIVE ITS OWN LIFE  
WHICH NO ONE ELSE CAN DO FOR THEM

NOT A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE  
BUT A BIOGRAPHICAL PERSPECTIVE

WHICH TRANSLATES INTO A UNIQUE EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE  
at least if one looks carefully!

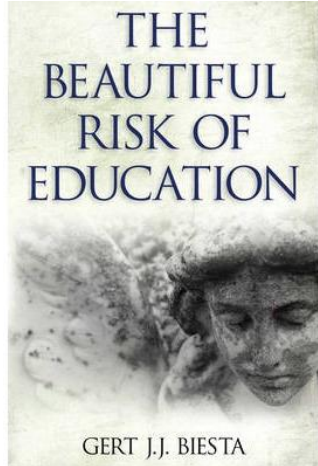


# THE UNIQUE SIMPLICITY OF STEINER-WALDORF EDUCATION

ONLY TWO PRINCIPLES: INCARNATION AND FREEDOM



HELPING THE CHILD TO ARRIVE IN THE WORLD  
HELPING THE CHILD TO ACHIEVE SOVEREIGNTY IN THE WORLD  
engager & émanciper (Philippe Meirieu)



this is not a matter of effective interventions  
but a beautiful risk

because the 'I' cannot be produced  
it is 'the work of the self'  
'Aufforderung zur Selbsttätigkeit'



arousing the desire for wanting to exist in the world as subject

# **OLD FASHIONED? OUTDATED?**

**A 100-YEAR OLD EDUCATIONAL CONCEPT  
STANDING IN A TRADITION OF AT LEAST 250 YEARS?**

**ISN'T IT TIME we BRING STEINER-WALDORF EDUCATION UP TO DATE?**

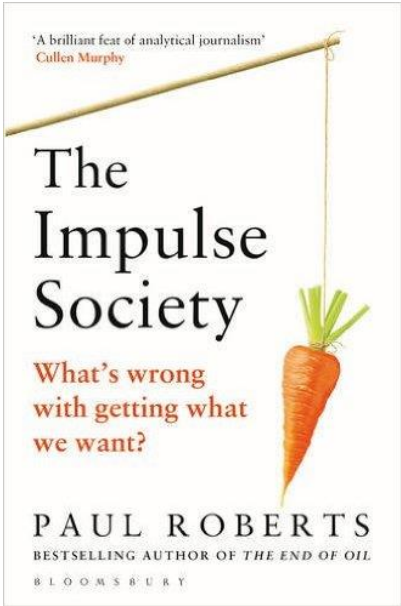


**such as 21<sup>st</sup> century skills for survival in an unknown future?  
high achievement in order to contribute to the knowledge-economy?  
instead of knitting, gardening and eurythmy?**

**OR IS OUR TIME IN URGENT NEED OF STEINER-WALDORF EDUCATION?**

**THAT ALL DEPENDS ON HOW WE CHARACTERISE 'OUR TIME'**





# AN IMPULSE SOCIETY

“America in the age of instant gratification”



“What is wrong with getting what we want?”  
quite a lot actually!

the difference between wants and needs

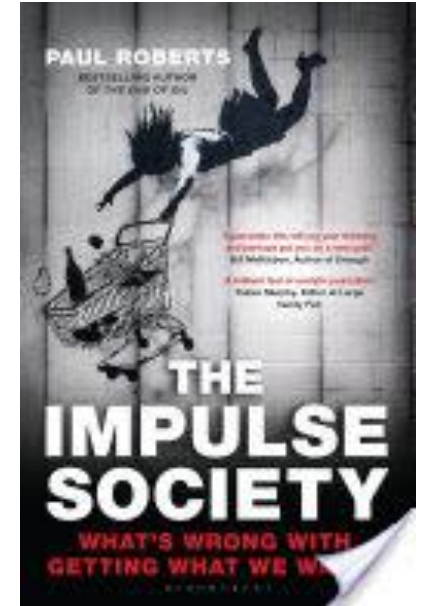


**70% of the US economy focuses on discretionary consumption**  
not on the things we need, but the things we ‘fancy’

“How to cope with an economy system that is almost  
too good at giving us what we want?” – obesity, addiction

“An economy reoriented to give us what we want  
isn’t the best for delivering what we need.”

Where do our wants come from?



# THE EMERGENCE OF THE DESIRE ECONOMY

How can the economy keep growing?

[1] in space – until the economy has become global

[2] in time – the stock market



“global capitalism has run out of space and out of time”

(see the most recent financial crisis)

How can the economy still keep growing?

By creating new desires!

Apple doesn't sell mobile phones . . .

“bit by bit, the market place has moved inside the self”

“only the bottomless appetites of the self can contain all the output of a capitalist economy which can never stop growing”

# WHAT IS NEW IN THE IMPULSE SOCIETY?

not that we have desires and are sometimes selfish, but

[1] “that the selfish reflexes of individuals have become the reflexes of an entire society”

[2] “Government, the media, academia, and especially business – the very institutions that once helped to temper the individual pursuit of quick, self-serving rewards, are themselves increasingly engaged in the same pursuit.”

## CONTEMPORARY EDUCATION SUFFERS UNDER THIS

not good enough, but excellent – number 1 in the league table  
competition instead of collaboration

permanent improvement instead of realising good education here and now



and the question the impulse society doesn't ask and doesn't want to hear  
is whether what is desired is what should be desired

# **TWO RATHER WORRYING CONCLUSIONS**

**[1]**

**THE IMPULSE SOCIETY IS NOT INTERESTED IN THE QUESTION OF THE 'I'  
BUT JUST WANTS EVERYONE TO RUN BEHIND THEIR DESIRES**

**[2]**

**THE IMPULSE NO LONGER HAS THE INSTITUTIONS  
THAT CAN HELP US TO STAY IN A RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR DESIRES**



**THE QUESTION OF ACHIEVING SOVEREIGNTY**

**HERE WE FIND THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SCHOOL**

**NOT AS A PLACE FOR LEARNING**

**BUT SCHOOL – ‘SCHOLE’ – AS FREE SPACE AND FREE TIME**  
**NOT YET OCCUPIED BY SOCIETAL AGENDA’S**



**SCHOOL AS THE TIME WE GIVE TO THE NEW GENERATION IN ORDER TO ENCOUNTER  
THE WORLD AND THEMSELVES IN RELATION TO THE WORLD**

**THE SPACE AND TIME TO WORK THROUGH THE QUESTION WHETHER EVERYTHING  
THAT APPEARS AS DESIRABLE IS WHAT WE SHOULD BE DESIRING**

**THE SCHOOL AS THE TIME AND PLACE WHERE WE CAN TRY, FAIL, TRY AGAIN ...  
... AND FAIL BETTER (Samuel Beckett)**

# CONCLUDING COMMENTS [1]

WE LIVE IN IMPATIENT TIMES  
WHERE SOCIETY CONSTANTLY ASKS MORE FROM THE SCHOOL  
IN ORDER TO SOLVE SOCIETY'S PROBLEMS  
(workforce, citizenship, social cohesion, and so on)



the logic of “What kind of school does society need?”

PARTICULARLY IN SUCH TIMES WE NEED TIME AND SPACE TO HELP EACH OTHER  
AND PARTICULARLY THE NEW GENERATION TO ACHIEVE SOVEREIGNTY



STEINER-WALDORF KEEPS CLAIMING SUCH FREE SPACE  
AND CONTINUES TO FOCUS ON THE QUESTION OF SOVEREIGNTY



THE QUESTION OF HUMAN FREEDOM-IN-THE-WORLD



## **CONCLUDING COMMENTS [2]**

**STEINER-WALDORF EDUCATION THUS RESPONDS  
TO THE CHALLENGE FOR EDUCATION 'AFTER AUSCHWITZ'**



**THIS PROVIDES AN IMPORTANT LESSON FOR ALL EDUCATION**

**AS LONG AS STEINER-WALDORF EDUCATION CAN FIND THE RIGHT LANGUAGE  
FOR ARTICULATING WHAT IS 'AT STAKE' IN WHAT IT SEEKS TO DO  
AND DOESN'T GET LOST IN TRANSLATION**

**FOR THIS IMPORTANT WORK A DIFFERENT QUESTION COMES INTO VIEW**



**NOT “WHAT KIND OF SCHOOL DOES SOCIETY NEED?”**

**BUT “WHAT KIND OF SOCIETY DOES THE SCHOOL NEED  
SO THAT I CAN CONTINUE TO BE SCHOOL?”**

**SO THAT IT CAN BE A PLACE WHERE WE CAN ENCOURAGE THE NEW  
GENERATION TO TRY TO BE AT HOME IN THE WORLD**

**THANKS  
FOR  
YOUR  
ATTENTION**

