

Boarding Schools: Educational heterotopias or allotopias?

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Abstract

The French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) applied the concept of heterotopia to spaces so heavily charged with symbolism that they had to be concealed from the scrutiny of ordinary persons, they were the hot spots of a culture, zones of troubled signification. He gave the example, among other related environments, of a traditional boarding-school.

*Foucault left heterotopias open for discussion and we can find a fair number of interpretations of what he meant by this concept. In my turn, I suggest we should better call these ‘other places’ as allotopias, from their ‘difference’ and ‘separation’, since the Greek *allos* implies differentiation (something distinct from) more than a simple ‘variation’ rendered by the Gr. *heteros*. Further on, I will introduce two other concepts, the hyperplace and the hypoplace, which are useful to the perception of the boarding school as a symbolic topos and to understand the common patterns it shares with other confinement institutions, making the body of literature on boarding schools an important field to the study of the psychology of confinement and of power relations embedded in educational practice.*

Keywords: Foucault, heterotopias, hyperplaces, hypoplaces, allotopias.

Michel Foucault is best known for his concepts of governmentality and biopower and for his explorations in the social history of madness. Mostly from the 1990's onwards, educationists have been reading and reinterpreting his work to discuss issues of power in the classroom, relations between governments and education, surveillance and punishment in school.

Foucault divided power into two sorts: the first he called ‘sovereign’, traditional, a more visible and theatrical form proper to the *ancien régime*, and the second ‘disciplinary’, a more subtle and modern variety, inscribed on the micro level of daily life. He further characterized the latter like as authority, i.e., relational, demanding a free subject, and constantly (re-)negotiated, governing more by assuring consent through conditioning of the will than by brutal coercion.

Foucault important remark that the new ways did not replace entirely the old, and something always remained from the old practices, is important to the theorization of ‘other spaces’. In modern times we still have places where more or less brutal coercion did not gave way to manipulated and ‘manufactured’ consent, territories where some forms of *total power* (Goffman) persisted. This pattern was present in a number of institutions, apparently diverse but actually similar in nature, ranging from prisons, camps of mass incarceration, re-education centres for juveniles (where controlling behaviour was the main goal), convents and monasteries (souls were to be controlled here), hospitals and sanatoriums (places where bodies were the main subject of control), asylums for lunatics (where minds were supposed to be changed) and finally schools and boot camps (summing up all others, controlling and changing behaviours, souls, bodies and minds altogether).

There were other even more radical experiences of confinement, namely the terminal confinement, like in old times the leprosies and the sanatoria for tuberculosis patients. The outburst of AIDS suggested to some the need to create “aidsatoria” (“sidatoria” in French), which in fact were never built by a number of reasons and met with public disapproval, but some sections in the hospitals were created to isolate and confine this special type of patients. Terminal confinement has a different character from all others: its aim is not to control life but death.

Foucault also promoted the use of the word ‘heterotopias’ in his 1967 book *Of Other Spaces - Heterotopias*. This late work was not part of the official Foucault corpus, being only released to the public for an exhibition in Berlin around the time of its author's death.

Foucault included a traditional boarding-school among other related environments that could be considered as 'other places', secretive and protected from the eyes of the outsider:

"In the so-called primitive societies, there is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call *crisis heterotopias*, i.e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis: adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly, etc. In our society, these crisis heterotopias are persistently disappearing, though a few remnants can still be found. **For example, the boarding school, in its nineteenth-century form, or military service for young men, have certainly played such a role, as the first manifestations of sexual virility were in fact supposed to take place "elsewhere" than among the family**".¹ (Notice here the association between military service and the boarding school).

It is possible to question the use, or misuse, of the qualifier *hetero-* to the noun *place*, or *topos*, as has been employed by Foucault and others on semantic grounds: the word 'heterotopia' is well known to doctors as a medical term for the slight displacement or misplacement of an organ or other body part to an abnormal but adjacent location. Medicine is basically Greek in concept and vocabulary and we find here the term in its correct use: a small variation, a slight shift, not a totally different place: for instance, there is heterotopia when some grey matter falls into the deep cerebral white matter, not into the stomach...

Thus heterotopia designates misplacement and it is not an appropriated word to name a secluded and radically different place. The composite noun to be employed here would be *allotopias* (places of otherness): in his passage on boarding schools Foucault clearly alludes to places different from the ordinary, exceptional, *sacred* in the Latin sense of both fearful and forbidden to the common people, not to a mere changing of place. The *allotopic* concept allows us to qualify the boarding school experience as *rite de passage*, i.e. an uncommon, exceptional crossing, which separates a life period from all previous and future events, leaving a durable imprint for the "over-significance", excessive meaning, pluri-semantic quality of such a life period that instigated so many novels and memoirs. It is possible to bring another example of historical allotopias, the Roman (Indo-European) *uer sacrum*. As being an anomalous, exceptional confluence of time and place, allotopias are reserved to an exclusive and highly restricted number of people, previously chosen to turn into more exceptional beings afterwards,² they are meant to last for a limited, precisely defined span of time, in a isolated and inaccessible place and under strictly regulated conditions, leaving all others to live this adventure only *vicariously*.³

For their surplus of identity and signification, the Foucaultian heterotopias, or, better saying, allotopias, fall into the broader category of hyper-places (over-places), too much invested with significance and meaning. This category also comprises other topias which do not share the main characteristics of *allotopias* – i.e., transiency, seclusion, strict regulation, exceptionality –, but are nevertheless symbolically overcharged, like for example cemeteries, so important in the literature of the late Romantics, or brothels, so popular in the Realist literature (brothels meant an alternative to the family bedroom, and the bedroom inside a house was already the hyperplace of a family home, separated from the visitor's access area in modern times). Foucault also uses these two examples.

There are hyperplaces inside other hyperplaces, niches of extreme meaning in an already over-meaningful topia: examples might be the dormitories in boarding schools, shower facilities in prisons, refectories in convents, isolation cells in asylums are places where people supposed to be alone are together, or vice-versa. Places that somehow mark a disturbing shift inside the already exceptional circumstance.

Hence, hyperplaces are a supra-category of emotionally significant places, where excess of meaning, with overlapping and contradictory layers (as Foucault remarks), is the result of strong memories pervaded by a deep sense of taboo and secret. They are the symbolical intimate parts in the social and geographical body of a nation.

At the bottom of the scale of meaningful places we have the hypoplaces. They are 'non-places' or 'nowheres' and were studied by Marc Augé in an essay of 1995 - *Non-Places, introduction to an*

anthropology of supermodernity. For him, non-places are “(s)paces formed in relation to certain ends – transport, transit, commerce, leisure”.⁴ Nowheres are not real *topoi*, a definite spot where we could stay and remain, but only a way to somewhere else, a not-yet-a-place, where transiency becomes the only paradigm.

These under-invested places are plainly accessible to the common man and were multiplied in contemporary times: railway stations, airports, highways, supermarkets, big department stores, shopping malls, hotel rooms. Their anonymity makes them ‘cold’ and aggressively over-commoditized. Any appropriation and emotional connection becomes impossible, as they are the exact contrary of the hyperplaces.⁵

Contrarily to the allotopic hospitals, prisons, schools, they are never to evoke strong emotional responses and powerful souvenirs. Whereas hypoplaces are underinvested with meaning, hyperplaces are overcharged with connotations for those living (or imagining how life would be) there.

Allotopias call for a severance from the rest of the world while hypoplaces are channels for the ordinary people to communicate, commute and mix with a multitude of strangers. Allotopias need secrecy, restriction and taboo; hypoplaces rely on advertisement and publicity. It is true that some hypoplaces share characteristics with hyperplaces, like the strict control of time operated in airports and hotel rooms. But we never look at these places with a sense of intimacy, of strong repulsion or, inversely, of belonging: they are not special and ‘different’ for us, they cannot become over-meaningful like hospitals, boarding schools and prisons etc., and they are not emotional places:

Scale of topia:

Hyperplaces (comprising allotopias) are places **to stay** during special moments of life, overcharged with meaning

Ordinary places where **we remain**

Hypoplaces **to pass through**, also transient as the hyperplaces, but inversely undercharged with meaning

What makes boarding schools hyperplaces of allotopic kind is, much like other allotopias, the presence of strong power relations reminiscent of the ‘sovereign’ type of power, associated to the categories of seclusion (and secrecy), surveillance and some loosening of it (breaks), transiency, exceptionality and eligibility.

The following graphic compares boarding schools with other total institutions over these categories:

PLACES OF CONFINEMENT	SOVEREIGN POWER	SECLUSION	UNDER SURVEILLANCE	HALTS, ‘BREAKS’	TRANSCIENCE	MEANT FOR EVERYBODY
PRISON	YES	YES	YES	YES	MAYBE	NO
JUVENILE CORR.	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
B. SCHOOL	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO
BOOT CAMP	YES	YES	YES	BO	YES	YES ⁶
CONVENT	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO
HOSPITAL	YES	PARTIAL	YES	POSSIBLE	YES	YES
PSYCH. ASYLUM	YES	YES	YES	POSSIBLE	REMOTE	NO
LEPROSY	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO

Thus all places are charged, undercharged or overcharged with meaning, and inside each place enriched levels and layers of meaning can be spotted, ranging from the less to the most significant spot.

Literary works dealing with boarding school life detect distinct levels of hypertopia: the dormitories, the sports field, the refectory, the headmaster’s office, etc.

Notes

¹ <<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>>.

² “Despite their reputation for excellence, elite boarding schools remain largely *outside the public gaze*, and debates about schools rarely consider these highly selective, privileged institutions“ - What Is an Elite Boarding School? Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández, *Review of Educational Research* 79-3, 1090.

³ For example through the reading of popular boarding school literature: “For most children in the UK the closest they will come to a boarding school is reading about Harry Potter’s adventures”. Meabh Ritchie (2009) From bored to board, *TES Magazine*, 29 May.

⁴ trans. John Howe, London: Verso, 94.

⁵ *pace* Agacinski (1987), who mistakes the Foucauldian heterotopia for non-places: “a non-place, a nowhere, something like what Michel Foucault (...) called a heterotopia”, *La ville inquiète*, Paris: Gallimard, 204-5.

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