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Sustaining the life-chance divide? Education for sustainable development and the global biopolitical regime

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ABSTRACT
What is being sustained in education for sustainable development (ESD)? Drawing on biopolitical theory, this article puts forth the hypothesis that it is in fact the very life-chance gulf that separates wealthy ‘sustainable’ mass consumers from poor ‘sustainable’ subsistence-level populations. Hence, in sharp contrast to the cosmopolitan buzz that characterizes the international policy discourse on ESD, it is argued that ESD feeds into the global life-chance divide as it prepares different populations for entirely different lives and lifestyles. In previous research that has dealt with global aspects of ESD, a dividing line can be drawn between scholars who emphasize tendencies towards neoliberal homogenization and those who highlight contingency, local re-articulations and spaces of contestation. This paper offers a third theoretical position that while sharing a deep unease with global neoliberal government is primarily concerned with its ‘will to divide’. As a corollary of this biopolitical perspective, the paper makes a case for critical empirical research that can lay bare the cracks and contradictions in the grand narrative of ESD as a cosmopolitan ethical enterprise.

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Introduction

It has become commonplace to talk about education for sustainable development (ESD) as a cosmopolitan ethical enterprise. The bulk of the countless policy documents, reports and leaflets that have been circulated globally during and after the United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005–2014) projects the idea that the world constitutes one single community and that we, in order to create a more sustainable and just society for all, must integrate the values inherent in sustainable development into all aspects of education and learning (e.g. UNESCO, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2012). But not everybody accepts this policy discourse at face value. A number of politically engaged scholars have, for example, issued warnings that ESD is running serious risk of being co-opted by a global neoliberal agenda that seeks to impose an economistic ‘one-size-fits-all’ frame of reference upon the world (Jickling & Wals, 2008; McKenzie, 2012; Sauvé, Brunelle,
However, such concerns about homogenizing tendencies in ESD have also been called into question by researchers who emphasize contingency, local re-articulations and spaces of contestation (Bengtsson & Östman, 2013; 2016; see also Gough, 2013). This paper proposes a third theoretical position which, while sharing a deep unease with global neoliberal governance in ESD, seriously disputes that homogenization was ever its goal. Thus, rather than attempting to invoke homogenous ‘sustainable’ rationalities, values, lifestyles and subjectivities across the globe, the paper suggests that global neoliberal governance in the field of ESD has strong differentiating effects and it is argued that much more attention ought to be paid to the neoliberal ‘will to divide’ (Walters, 2004). Hence, the paper challenges contemporary concerns about homogenizing tendencies in ESD by suggesting that what is in fact produced in ESD is a distinction between different populations and lifestyles.

The article has two basic intentions. First, drawing its inspiration from contemporary biopolitical theory, the paper argues that ESD, albeit often framed as a cosmopolitan ethical enterprise, forms part of a global biopolitical regime that consolidates distinctions between different forms of life. Hence, rather than challenging the grossly unfair, and far from cosmopolitan, distribution of life-chances around the world, ESD tends to feed into the global life-chance divide as it prepares different populations for entirely different lives and lifestyles. Second, based upon this argument, the paper makes a case for critical biopolitical research that can expose the neoliberal ‘will to divide’ within global ESD practices and, potentially, provide a foundation for discussing more radical political alternatives. As such, the paper primarily lines up with recent poststructuralist (Dahlbeck, 2014; Ideland & Malmberg, 2014; 2015) and biopolitical (Knutsson, 2013; Skoglund & Börjesson, 2014) critiques of ESD. Yet, on a more general level, the paper could also be viewed as a contribution to the broader field of educational research informed by biopolitical theory (e.g. Bacon, 2015; Ball, 2012; Lingard, Martino, & Rezai-Rashti, 2013; Peters, 2007; Simons, 2006). This literature has brought attention to biopolitical features of education, for example, how it strives to optimize the capacities of different ‘populations’ and mould particular forms of subjectivity through pedagogical techniques. Moreover, this literature examines how such interventions are intimately tied up with certain forms of knowledge and calculative representations of those who are to be governed. In a similar vein, this paper will highlight some significant biopolitical functions of ESD.

The paper is organized in six sections. The first section provides a backdrop for the article’s general argument by presenting two ‘snapshots’ of ESD in Sweden and Rwanda. The second section offers a few conceptual clarifications. The third section provides a brief outline of contemporary biopolitical scholarship on ‘sustainable development’ as a tool for governing ‘surplus’ life. The fourth section argues that such a biopolitical perspective could, with some additions and contextual adaptations, lend itself well to critical studies of ESD. The fifth section sketches the basic contours of such a critical biopolitical approach. The final section concludes.
'Sustainable' mass consumption and life beyond its borders: snapshots of ESD in Sweden and Rwanda

Picture the following two scenes:

(1) Students and teachers at a ‘sustainability’ awarded school in a Swedish municipality are making preparations for a sustainability day in the school assembly hall. There is intense activity. On the agenda is a fashion show with fair trade and eco-friendly clothes, fair trade chocolate testing, eco-friendly skin and hair treatment and a guest lecture by a representative of a sustainable lifestyle magazine. The objective of the event is to encourage, and promote learning about, sustainable lifestyles. The sustainability day is a recurrent event at the school and it forms an important part of the school’s activities in the area of ESD.

(2) Students and teachers at a school in a Rwandan municipality are gathering on the schoolyard. As part of a school greening programme they will today, under the guidance and supervision of a donor-funded Rwandan non-governmental organization (NGO), engage in hands-on learning for sustainable development. They will build rainwater harvesting tanks and plant a fruit and vegetable garden at the school. The objective of the school greening programme is to improve sanitation and nutrition and to promote learning about water conservation and sustainable farming techniques. The NGO is one among several civil society organizations that are actively engaged in Rwanda’s ESD strategy and action plan (RoR, 2010).1

Whether these two snapshots reflect a broader global pattern can of course be debated. The basic hypothesis of this paper is that they do not merely represent random incidents, but this is an empirical matter that requires further scrutiny. Nevertheless, these two de facto examples inevitably raise a number of concerns. First of all it should be noted that both of these educational interventions are carried out with explicit reference to ESD and that both of the implementing institutions have received official recognition for their work. Undeniably, these are also two well-intended interventions. They both aim to invoke a sense of responsibility and care for the natural environment among the students, and they attempt to capacitate and prepare them for a more sustainable way of life, and thus, for a brighter future. Both of the interventions are further carried out in accordance with the ideals of learner-centred, practical and participatory pedagogical approaches. However, be that as it may, it is very hard to ignore the simple fact that these educational interventions involve completely different assumptions about the life trajectories of the students involved, and that this, in turn, affects the ways in which the two populations are being approached. In the first example, the students are targeted as potential bearers of a global mass consumer lifestyle. The assumption is that they, in the future (if not already), via their purchasing power, will be able to constitute themselves as ‘sustainable’ and responsible mass consumers. In the second example, the students are approached as people beyond the borders of mass consumption. The assumption is that they, in the future, will have to settle for petty consumption and become ‘sustainable’ through self-reliant, environment-friendly and subsistence-level farming. It is further, quite frankly, very difficult to see that these interventions challenge the current order in any significant way.2 Rather, adaptation to prevailing circumstances appears to be the norm.
So, what do the two educational interventions described above tell us about ESD? Are the differences between the way that the pupils are approached and trained, products of randomness or coincidence? In this article we argue that they are not, nor that they are compatible with the notion of ESD as a ‘cosmopolitan’ ethical enterprise. Rather, we argue that these two interventions are a manifestation of something that is central to the concept of sustainable development and that might be captured by applying a biopolitical lens. As we will see, from this perspective, something highly problematic is sustained in ESD: a separation of different forms of lives and lifestyles. The remainder of the article will discuss how ESD can be approached and problematized from the perspective of contemporary biopolitical theory. We start with a few conceptual clarifications.

**(Neo)liberal biopolitics**

In order to grasp the overall arguments of this article, some familiarity with a few concepts derived from the Foucauldian tradition is needed (e.g. Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1976/1998, 2007, 2008; Lemke, 2001, 2011; Peters, 2007). Foucault’s notion of *biopolitics* is critical. It refers to a form of politics concerned with administering and regulating the conditions of life at the aggregated level of populations (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1976/1998). Using his genealogical approach, Foucault located the birth of biopolitics in eighteenth-century Europe (Foucault, 2007, 2008). According to Foucault, political power in European societies had traditionally centred on sovereignty. This form of rule was based on transcendent juridical principles and exercised through punitive and violent practices in order to maintain control over subjects within a given territory. Characteristic of sovereign power was thus ‘deduction’ of goods, services, labour and time, and it had its ultimate manifestation in the king’s right to kill those who disobeyed his law. However, somewhere around the eighteenth century, this political paradigm became challenged and supplemented by ‘a new form of power that seeks to administer, secure, develop and foster life’ (Lemke, 2011, p. 35), that is, a form of rule concerned with augmenting human life rather than controlling legal subjects within a certain territory. This new ‘bio-power’ took two basic forms, disciplining of the individual body and biopolitics of the population (Foucault, 1976/1998, p. 139). Our concern here is foremost with the latter. In biopolitics, the ‘population’ is conceived of both as an epistemic and political object, whose properties can be known through scientific calculation and shaped, at a distance, through regulatory interventions. Such interventions, aiming to optimize the capacity of various populations, are made in a range of areas such as education, health, habitation, working life etc. Hence, biopolitics is a calculated and rather sophisticated mechanism of power, concerned with the welfare, longevity and productivity of populations (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1976/1998; Lemke, 2011). However, at the same time, biopolitics is inevitably premised upon, and tends to consolidate, distinctions between different populations (e.g. Bacon, 2015; Duffield, 2007; Reid, 2013; see also Agamben, 1998).

The concept of *liberalism* is likewise important. While this term conventionally refers to a political ideology or an economic theory, scholars in the Foucauldian tradition conceive of liberalism as an ‘art of government’ that uses the agency of free subjects as a means to achieve its goals (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 2008; Lemke, 2001; Peters, 2007). The
liberal art of government, which also emerged in the eighteenth century, relied upon a belief in the spontaneous self-regulation of the market and it grew out of a critique of sovereign attempts to intervene in ‘natural’ economic processes. Liberalism thus wanted to secure a sphere, beyond the state apparatus, where the dynamics of the market and the initiatives of enterprising people could operate freely. Yet, this did not prevent advocates of liberalism from wanting to shape the capacities of these economic actors through various biopolitical measures, for example, education and health. In other words, biopolitics and liberalism are different things but the former constitutes ‘a necessary condition’ for the functioning of the latter (Dean, 1999, p. 113). A liberal problematic of government thus essentially revolves around how to govern without governing ‘too much’ (Foucault, 2008, p. 319).

Unlike liberalism, which tried to safeguard the market place from too much government intervention, its descendent, neoliberalism, operated in accordance with a different logic. Neoliberalism is based upon the assumption that markets have to be actively constituted and nurtured through government intervention. It turns the principles of the market into a kind of model for all forms of government and it attempts to cultivate entrepreneurial life forms throughout all spheres of society (Dean, 1999; Lemke, 2001; Peters, 2007; Simons, 2006). Hence, rather than laissez-faire, neoliberal government actually involves large-scale intervention in the name of non-intervention. Neoliberalism further seeks to shift responsibility from the state onto individuals, minor collectives and populations through technologies of responsibilization (Dean, 1999; Hansson, 2015; Lemke, 2001; Knutsson, 2016). This involves, for example, measures to produce subjects that accept responsibility for their own livelihoods by trying to become economically self-sufficient (Lemke, 2001) and subjects that can conduct themselves responsibly in relation to the natural environment by engaging in a ‘greening of the self’ (Hellberg, 2015, cf. Macy, 1991).

A neoliberal biopolitics can thus be understood as a form of government, operating at the collective level of populations, that uses the agency of ‘free’ subjects as a means to produce ‘responsible’ conduct, and that inevitably involves distinctions between different forms of life. As upcoming sections will show, a central argument of this article is that sustainable development, and its companion ESD, can be understood as a biopolitical regime that operates under the premise that different types of populations must take on entirely different responsibilities.

Importantly however, taking note of these ideas does not mean that we know exactly what is going on in different geographical spaces. Rather, what we need to do is to use the insights of Foucault and contemporary biopolitical scholarship as tools for asking questions about the workings of ESD projects. This way of approaching questions of ESD will be developed further below.

**Governing surplus life: sustainable development and the global biopolitical regime**

The Foucauldian concepts of biopolitics and (neo)liberalism have been employed in a range of critical studies of sustainable development. Mark Duffield’s work on the increasing amalgamation of security and development in the post-Cold War development discourse is seminal in this context (e.g. Duffield, 2007, 2008, 2010). Duffield
provides the intriguing argument that ‘sustainable development’ has, over the past decades, emerged as a central neoliberal technique of governing and containing life that is ‘surplus’ to the global economic system. In other words, while much research has explored development interventions as a series of attempts to improve the lives of those deemed to be underdeveloped, Duffield examines the role of these technologies in terms of how they function to ‘secure the western way of life’ (Duffield, 2007, p. 2). He elaborates:

The acceptance of sustainable development marked a victory for the liberal counter-critique of nationalist modernization that had attended the process of decolonization and independence. It marked an end to earlier assumptions that, through state-led industrialization, the underdeveloped world would pass through various stages before coming to resemble the developed. Demanding a more equitable sharing of the world’s resources in order to maintain the self-reliance of global surplus population, sustainable development breaks this aspirational goal. Its effect is to confirm a biopolitical distinction between insured and non-insured peoples. Rather than reducing the life-chance gap between the developed and underdeveloped worlds, sustainable development is better understood as a means of containing the latter. Poor and non-insured communities are expected to live within their own powers of self-reliance. (Duffield, 2007, p. 68).

Placing focus on the way that sustainable development targets the poor, Duffield has described the entry of sustainable development in mainstream development thinking and practise as a confirmation and ‘deepening of the biopolitical division in global population established during the period of decolonization’ (Duffield, 2007, p. 68). Hence, what we see is a global biopolitical separation between ‘insured’ populations in the West and ‘non-insured’ surplus life beyond its borders. The lives of these populations are valued differently, their life-chances differ dramatically and they are governed in different ways for entirely different life-trajectories. Moreover, according to this perspective, placing responsibility on people themselves (rather than states) is intrinsic to governing rationales of sustainable development, a technology of government that becomes especially pertinent in relation to the poor.

Reid (2012, 2013) has further developed Duffield’s problematization of sustainable development and the focus on self-reliance through his work on the subject of neoliberal governance. Reid contends that sustainable development governing strategies are productive of a subject of resilience who is deprived of its politics:

The resilient subject is a subject which must permanently struggle to accommodate itself to the world. Not a political subject which can conceive of changing the world, its structure and conditions of possibility […][b]ut a subject which accepts the disastrousness of the world it lives in as a condition for partaking of that world and which accepts the necessity of the injunction to change itself in correspondence with the threats and dangers now presupposed as endemic (Reid, 2012, p. 74).

Of central importance here is the idea that sustainable development negatively affects (poor) people’s ability to think and act in relation to changing the world; rather, Reid suggests, they have to change themselves in order to cope with uncertainty. In a recent publication, Evans and Reid (2014) has further explored the relationship between resilience and poverty in what they call the ‘sustainable development-resilience nexus’, and moreover, how the emphasis on resilience in neoliberal governmental thinking works to neutralize political ambitions. Evans and Reid argue that in
contemporary neoliberal governance, resilience has shifted from being a property of the biosphere to become a property of humanity. Simultaneously, the idea of ‘service’ has shifted from being understood in relation to the economy to be conceived as a capacity of the biosphere. In these two parallel shifts, Evans and Reid argue, it is the poor that are ‘crucified’, since resilience is demanded of poor populations and at the same time poor populations are understood to degrade the capacity of ecosystem services (p. 35). According to Evans and Reid, this cynical policy logic can be summarized as follows: ‘ensuring the resilience of the biosphere requires making the poor into more resilient kinds of subjects, and making the poor into more resilient subjects requires relieving them of their ecological ignorance’ (ibid). They also note that women are a particular target population within the category ‘poor’ and argue that such categorization is immanent to the logic of resilience as it works so as to ‘divide life into various taxonomical groupings of distinct vulnerability’ (ibid, p. 36). The idea that sustainable development has differentiating effects, through biopolitical distinctions between different forms of lives, is central to this article, and it has also been the theme in other scholar’s work (e.g. Cavanagh, 2014; Hellberg, 2014).

Based on the above, what we are after in this article is the distinction(s) that are made between poor populations, often living on subsistence level, in what sustainable development documents and policies usually term ‘least developed countries’ or ‘developing states’ and the richer populations in ‘developed states’, where most people enjoy a mass consumer lifestyle and where systems of social security are (still) in place.3 In scholarly work, the expressions ‘global North’ and ‘global South’ are often used in order to place focus on these distinctions. This expression is problematic in the sense that it simplifies the complex global political map – not least in relation to questions regarding sustainable development and the environment (Clémençon, 2012) – and the diversity within states. It is also productive of the very distinction that is often critiqued by authors who use it (Eckl & Weber, 2007, cf. Knutsson & Lindberg, 2012). Hence, this expression is not something that we can take as ‘objectively given’ (Eckl & Weber, 2007, p. 6), but rather it is one of the ways in which the distinctions, that we want to place focus on, come to the fore. Therefore, in the following text, we will use this expression when the authors on whose work we draw on do so. The question of how distinctions between different populations are made is however also an empirical question as the proposed framework directs attention to exactly that of how different populations are categorized.

**Sustainable development and the production of different forms of life and (green) subjectivities**

As indicated above, biopolitical readings of sustainable development have provided indispensable inspiration to this article. Yet, for our purpose, these approaches have to be supplemented on a few accounts.

The point that the above discussed literature makes about ‘sustainable development’ as a biopolitical technique of governing surplus populations is critical. However, we would like to add that ‘sustainable development’ also functions as a regime of government, albeit in entirely different ways, among the wealthy inhabitants of the planet.4 That is, in relation to what, for example, Skoglund (2014, p. 166) refers to as the
‘overdeveloped Northern citizen’. ‘Sustainable development’ has a remarkable ability to translate into different meanings and the immense success of this concept is of course due to this elasticity. This helps explain, we argue, why it is possible for governing institutions (be they schools, NGOs, private companies, UN agencies or any other concerned authority) to design completely different interventions for different populations in the name of ‘sustainable development’. It also helps explain why different people can – and are encouraged to – constitute themselves as responsible subjects in very different ways. The ‘sustainable’ resilient subsistence-level farmer and the ‘sustainable’ mass consumer are thus both promoted subjectivities in the current global biopolitical regime of sustainable development. In a recent publication, Ove develops a developmentality approach in order to explore how we might conceive of how regulatory aspects of development in the global South can be connected to the construction of ethical identities in the North (Ove, 2013). Such a focus is central to the arguments of this article since what is produced in ESD is not merely a resilient subject in the South but also particular forms of subjectivities in the North. There is a growing body of critical studies of ESD that can be consulted here (e.g. Dahlbeck, 2014; Dahlbeck & De Lucia Dahlbeck, 2012; Ideland & Malmberg, 2014; 2015; Skoglund & Börjesson, 2014). Some very interesting work has also been conducted in other disciplines (e.g. Kreuger & Gibbs, 2007; Swyngedouw, 2010). Thus, while accepting the proposition that sustainable development is of relevance to the formation of subjectivities both in what is referred to as ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ states and regions of the world, it is only when we start digging into how governing institutions construct different types of populations as appropriate for particular forms of interventions that we can understand the full measure of the global biopolitics of (education for) sustainable development (cf. Hellberg, 2014, 2015; Knutsson, 2013).

Another aspect that is not fully explored is how people’s environmental conduct is governed. The primary concern for theorists such as Duffield is with economic aspects of ‘sustainable development’. More precisely, how development agencies and their NGO companions, in the name of ‘sustainable development’, attempt to invoke petty entrepreneurial forms of economic self-reliance among the global poor. Yet, in the context of the critical study of ESD that we propose, this is not enough. For our purpose, more emphasis has to be placed on the government of environmental behaviour. Plenty of work has of course been done in the field of environmental education but the broader literature on environmentality and green governmentality can also provide useful theoretical inspiration (Agrawal, 2005; Luke, 1999; Rutherford, 2007; see also Luke, 2001; Peters, 2001). However, what is of particular interest to us is to what extent, and how, different environmentalties or green governmentalities are formed in relation to different types of populations and how they attempt to produce certain forms of behaviour and certain types of subjectivities.

As indicated above, contemporary biopolitical theory provides strong arguments for conceptualizing ‘sustainable development’ as a neoliberal technique of governing and containing surplus populations in developing countries. Contrary to conventional wisdom, the function of this global biopolitical regime is not to alter the unfair distribution of the world’s resources but rather to maintain and police the generic life-chance divide. In line with the modernist assumptions that underpinned Walt Rostow’s famous stage-theory – highly influential in the advent of international development...
cooperation – it could of course be argued that poor communities will eventually ‘catch-up’ and, accordingly, that the future will hold mass consumption for all. However, today many scholars – and arguably even international development institutions and other proponents of liberalism themselves – seriously dispute that this scenario will ever materialize. There are several reasons for this. One is that capitalist development continuously manufactures ‘surplus’ populations through accumulation by dispossession, for example, global wholesale privatization of public goods, land grabbing and patenting of indigenous knowledge (Duffield, 2007; Harvey, 2003). Another is that the laws of thermodynamics simply do not allow for mass consumption for all (Hornborg, 2011). Against the backdrop of these predicaments, the current global biopolitical regime of sustainable development, which is premised on distinctions between different forms of life and lifestyles, offers a liberal ‘solution’. At the individual level, there is, of course, always a chance of social mobility. Yet, at the level of populations, the life-chance gulf remains a homeostatic condition. In this article we take these arguments very seriously. However, we would still like to add that they need to be further qualified through empirical research. Works that use biopolitics as a theoretical lens largely remain in an abstract discussion about the governing of populations and subjects. Our approach to this scholarship is therefore to use these ideas as a framework for asking certain questions about the workings of ESD. In our argument, more time and energy should be devoted to exploring how different subjects engage with this regime of government. In other words, we propose that more attention should be paid to biopolitical ‘effects’.

So what would the contours of an approach for studying ESD from a biopolitical perspective be? What we are arguing for here is that in order to study the effects of ESD interventions, we need to make empirical studies in different locations and settings both in the so-called developed and developing regions of the world as well as among both poor and rich populations. When designing these studies, we can productively make use of scholarship focusing on (environmental) subjectivities and ideas about the ‘greening of the self’. This brings us to the next section of the paper, which will outline ways in which we can approach questions of what global ESD practises produce.

**Exploring global ESD practices biopolitically: the contours of a critical approach**

In order to design studies for analysing global ESD practises and their effects, we suggest below a few ways in which they can be approached from a critical biopolitical perspective.

First, a critical biopolitical reading of ESD must bring attention to how different governing institutions – be they schools, NGOs or other relevant actors – construct different populations as appropriate for particular forms of ESD. As indicated above, biopolitics conceive of populations as epistemic objects whose properties can be known and as political objects whose behaviour can be shaped (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1976/1998; Lemke, 2011). Consequently, such research must uncover the kind of knowledge that governing institutions (claim to) have, and the assumptions they make about the lives, lifestyles and life trajectories of particular populations (cf. Duffield, 2007; Reid, 2013; Hellberg, 2014; see also Bacon, 2015; Lingard et al., 2013). How are different
populations ‘thought’ and distinguished? What kind of information, assumptions, problematizations, rationalities and values underpin such constructions and distinctions? Particularly (and here we remain in the study of ESD at a global level), a critical biopolitical reading of ESD can focus on how different subjectivities are constructed in the ways that ESD projects target individuals, both in relation to and in contrast with each other and what such constructions tell us about how the global biopolitical community is envisioned.

Second, at the core of a biopolitical approach is a focus on the pedagogic techniques through which these populations and individuals are governed (e.g. Ball, 2012; Knutsson, 2016). Hence, we should pay close attention to the mundane instruments and tools that render ESD practically operable in different contexts, for example, educational policies; curricula; school (‘greening’) programmes; ESD ‘experts’ and personnel; didactic devices; learning materials; examinations, diplomas and other performance indicators; assessment criteria; ‘sustainable school’ awards or similar certifications etc. Previous work on biopolitics has further taught us the importance of paying attention to how people’s agency and freedom can be used in order to secure ‘the ends of government’ (Dean, 1999, p. 15; Miller & Rose, 2008) through processes of responsibilization (Dean, 1999; Hansson, 2015; Lemke, 2001; Knutsson, 2016). This raises a number of questions in relation to ESD. In what ways are pedagogic techniques put to work so as to conduct people’s conduct? How is the ‘freedom’ and agency of subjects shaped and employed in these educational processes? How is knowledge of the abstract notion of ‘sustainable development’ structured, recontextualized and translated to ‘fit’ particular populations? How do technologies of (individual) responsibilization play a part in constructing particular ideas of the good and sustainable society, the good life as well as the good (global) citizen/subject? And how do such technologies of responsibilization relate to larger (bio)political imperatives and distinctions?

Third, a critical biopolitical approach, we argue, ought to pay more attention to the effects of ESD interventions in different places and locations in line with what Rutherford suggests (2007). Such a focus should include not only constructions of the good society/life/subject at a general level but also how the individual subjects themselves engage with such governing interventions through conduct, practice, compliance, negotiation, resistance and identity formation (e.g. Gupta, 2012; Hansson, Hellberg, & Stern, 2015; Knutsson, 2014). Such a research endeavour places emphasis on the uncertainty of governing and requires rich empirical studies in different local contexts. Such studies can, for example, focus on the creation of subjectivities and how they relate to material effects. We know, for example, from environmental psychology and studies of the materiality of environmental ethics that we cannot assume that (changed) values necessarily result in (changed) practises. This last point includes paying attention to the agency of those who are governed (Hansson et al., 2015) and the different ways in which they engage with and/or resist governing rationales of ESD. How do the students relate to the notion of sustainable development or to sustainable lifestyles? How do they relate to their own and others’ ways of life? To poverty and wealth? To the good/desirable life? To responsible and sustainable ways of life? Where do they locate responsibility? How do they understand class, race and gender in relation to sustainable development? To whom (or what) do they ascribe agency? In what ways do the students construct themselves as active shapers of outcomes or as powerless?
Conclusion

Appearances can be deceptive. When seen in isolation, most ESD interventions are likely to be perceived as well intentioned and benign. It is only when we broaden our field of vision, and start to compare how different populations across the globe are being constructed and intervened upon under the banner of ESD, that a more problematic picture is allowed to emerge. This paper has, by building on contemporary biopolitical theory, put forth the argument that global ESD practices work to (re) produce, and further consolidate, distinctions between different forms of life. Since different populations are prepared for entirely different lives and lifestyles, ESD actually helps to sustain the generic life-chance gulf that separates wealthy mass consumers from poor subsistence level populations. Thus ultimately, we suggest, this is what is being sustained in ESD.

Such a perspective is clearly in stark contrast to the policy buzz about ESD as a cosmopolitan ethical enterprise. Yet, it also challenges some of the more critically oriented scholarship that has dealt with global aspects of ESD. Hence, in our argument, a biopolitical lens can help us illuminate some important features that have gone largely unnoticed in previous research. While we share the concerns raised by some scholars about neoliberal governance in ESD (Jickling & Wals, 2008; McKenzie, 2012; Sauvé et al., 2005; Sumner, 2008), we are not as worried about homogenization. Differentiating effects seem to be a much more urgent problem and in our argument a biopolitical perspective can help us to expose this neoliberal ‘will to divide’ (Walters, 2004). Other scholars within the field have opposed the idea about global neoliberal homogenization by stressing contingency and by arguing that ESD is re-articulated in entirely different ways in different socio-cultural and geographical contexts (Bengtsson & Östman, 2013; 2016; see also Gough, 2013). We completely share these researchers’ scepticism about homogenization and we certainly recognize the merits of their work. Still, in our argument, their perspective does not allow us to recognize that ESD is intimately tied up with a global biopolitical pattern of distinctions between different forms of life. In other words, while we fully acknowledge the importance of previous research on global aspects of ESD, we still maintain that a biopolitical approach offers an important ‘third position’ that can provide significant contributions to the field.

Yet, it is important to be humble and recognize that this is conjecture, based on a limited number of empirical examples, alongside the findings from previous biopolitical scholarship on sustainable development. Hence, we certainly do not claim to know exactly what is going on in different geographical spaces, and as argued above, here we can take note of work on ESD that highlights contingency and local re-articulations (Bengtsson & Östman, 2013, 2016). Rather, this is a call for empirical research that not only takes our concerns seriously but also makes them subject to critical examination. As a corollary, the article has sketched the contours of what such a critical biopolitical study of ESD might entail. We have stressed the importance of exploring how different populations are constructed as appropriate for particular forms of ESD. Moreover, we suggest that researchers ought to pay close attention to the pedagogic techniques through which these different populations are approached, governed and responsibilized. We have also emphasized the significance of bringing much more attention to the ‘effects’ of these biopolitical interventions.
not only in terms of how the good society/life/subject is constructed at a general level but also in terms of how individual subjects engage with these governing techniques.

Finally, in relation to the last point, it is important to keep in mind that just because global neoliberal ESD practices are premised upon distinctions between different populations, and attempt to responsibilize them in entirely different ways, this does not mean that these efforts are necessarily ‘successful’. Governing is uncertain. As argued by Miller and Rose, governmentalities are ‘eternally optimistic, but government is a congenitally failing operation’ (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 17). Hence, critical study of ESD must not restrict itself to exploring attempts to divide, govern and responsibilize. It must also explore the full measure of what such interventions invoke including resisting subjectivities among different populations. If we are seriously interested in alternatives to the prevailing global order, it seems more reasonable to pin faith to such deviant voices or instances of parrhesia (Foucault, 2001; Peters, 2003) rather than to current manifestations of ESD.

Notes

1. As we want to protect the identity of the actors in these two examples, they are presented anonymously. The first example is derived from the empirical fieldwork that one of the authors conducted for his PhD thesis. The second example is derived from the annual report, and website, of a Rwandan NGO.

2. The students in the first example are of course being informed about the negative environmental effects of, and the unfair treatment of labourers in, the current international trade regime. This is certainly important. Yet, the only real alternative that is offered to them appears to be an ‘appropriate’ mass consumer lifestyle. They are not exposed to any discussions about the possibility of an entirely different political economy.

3. Our point here is not that populations in ‘developed states’ are homogenous. We acknowledge that vast inequalities exist within these societies. These differences are however not the main focus of this article.

4. As his conceptual distinction ‘insured’/‘non-insured’ life demonstrates Duffield certainly recognizes that ‘we are all of the community of the governed’ (Foucault quoted in Duffield, 2007, p. 232) albeit in different ways. Yet, in spite of this, Duffield exclusively focuses on ‘sustainable development’ as a tool for governing ‘non-insured’ surplus populations.

5. Reid and Evans are concerned with environmental aspects of government. However, their discussions are foremost theoretical and primarily revolve around how ecological reason has been appropriated by neoliberal economic rationality through the new doctrine of resilience (Evans & Reid, 2014; Reid, 2012, 2013).

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