Segmented prizing: biopolitical differentiation in education for sustainable development

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Abstract

Prizes and awards have received limited attention in scholarly research. The present paper engages with the prestigious UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development, which annually honours three outstanding projects related to education for sustainable development (ESD). Drawing on biopolitical theory, the paper explores what this prize can tell us about the global community’s quest for sustainable development. While the award is global in scope and alludes to humanity’s joint responsibility for the planet, the analysis shows that the winning organisations approach rich and poor populations around the world in entirely different ways; assigning to them different roles, responsibilities and lifestyles. ESD discourse thus displays a remarkable ability to accommodate the lifestyle divide that separates rich and poor; suggesting that inequality has become effectively normalised. Ultimately it is argued that differentiating practices in the global implementation of ESD constitutes an urgent area of further research for comparative and international education.

Keywords

Biopolitics; differentiation; education for sustainable development; inequality; lifestyle; prize

Introduction

Prizes and awards have become commonplace. The ceremonial spectacles and the staging of achievement that typically surrounds them can also be seen as logical elements of neoliberal ‘performative’ societies (e.g. Ball 2000). For the winners, prizes imply recognition, visibility and financial rewards, and as far as the less fortunate are concerned, they constitute a reminder that there is always room for improvement and that we can all learn from better examples. The educational domain is certainly not immune to this overall trend with prizes proliferating and being awarded for everything from outstanding university teaching to elementary school pupil performance. Likewise, there are today all manners of ‘sustainability’ awards which honours contributions towards the abstract goal of sustainable development. To provide references for these two statements seems redundant as a quick internet search will confirm that there are innumerable prizes both in the education and in the ‘sustainability’ domain.
The present paper is located in the intersection of these two domains as it engages with one of the most prestigious prizes in education for sustainable development (ESD): the UNESCO-Japan Prize on Education for Sustainable Development (UNESCO 2015). The prize consists of three annual awards of USD 50,000 each, which are honoured to outstanding projects related to ESD. As will be shown in greater detail below, the prize forms part of the Global Action Programme on Education for Sustainable Development (GAP) and it was inaugurated in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan, in year 2014.

It has been argued that prizes and awards, given their cultural significance, are underexplored in academic research (English 2008). This certainly applies to the Foucauldian tradition in which this paper is situated, where analyses of prizes and awards are scarce. There are, however, a few studies to be found. Informed by a Foucauldian conception of power as productive, Petersen and O’Flynn (2007) have examined how a famous international educational award functions as a neoliberal technique of power which shapes students’ subjectivity and desire. In a similar vein, Porter (2014) has explored how a World Bank essay contest is productive of particular forms of subjectivity and conduct amongst winning essayists.

In a related, yet slightly different Foucauldian tack, the present article explores what the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD can tell us about the global community’s quest for sustainable development. To this end, Foucauldian theory of biopolitics is employed (Foucault [1976] 1998, Foucault 2007, Foucault 2008; Lemke 2011). A biopolitical perspective places focus on the governing of life at the level of populations and the paper brings attention to how different roles, responsibilities and lifestyles are produced and assigned to different kinds of populations in a global sustainable development regime. Put otherwise, the paper argues that the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD can be seen as an instantiation of the biopolitical differentiation upon which the global implementation of sustainable development ultimately hinges. In so doing, the paper also makes a case for scholars in comparative and international education to make differentiating practices in the worldwide implementation of ESD subject to further empirical scrutiny. As will hopefully be evident, I believe that this is an urgent area for future research.

The entry point for collecting the material on which the study is based has been the UNESCO website (UNESCO 2018a). The UNESCO website is a central place for promotion of, and for providing detailed information about, the prize. It entails a range of printed documents, video clips, newsletters and a blog. The UNESCO website also contains links to the websites of several of the laureates which makes it easy to obtain further information about them and about their ESD programmes. In line with the article’s theoretical perspective, the material has been subject to a biopolitical analysis (Hellberg and Knutsson 2018; Lemke 2011) as outlined in section 3.

The article is organised as follows. The first section provides an overview of the prize in question and situates it within the broader framework of the GAP. The second section introduces Foucauldian theory of biopolitics; bringing the issue of differentiation to the fore. The third section demonstrates how the concept of biopolitics has been employed in previous research on sustainable development and ESD respectively, and further explains how the paper seeks to contribute to these literatures. This section also describes the paper’s analytical approach. Using a biopolitical lens, the fourth section explores differences in how awarded organisations approach rich and poor populations around the globe under the banner of ESD. The final section concludes the paper.
The GAP and the UNESCO–Japan prize on ESD

In the context of global challenges such as climate change, depleting resources, environmental degradation and widespread poverty, ESD has become increasingly recognised as a political priority. In year 2002 the United Nation’s General Assembly proclaimed the period 2005–2014 United Nations Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, urging governments around the world to implement ESD in their respective education systems (UN 2005). As the Decade ended in 2014, the even more ambitious GAP resumed, aiming to further intensify action at all levels and in all areas of education, to accelerate progress towards sustainable development (UN 2015). Most governments of the world have endorsed the GAP and the programme gathers a plethora of authorities, institutions and organisations, all under the auspices of UNESCO. The GAP is implemented through partner networks, which allegedly serve as a ‘global community of practise’, and it entails five so-called Priority Action Areas: (1) advancing policy; (2) transforming learning and training environments; (3) building capacities of educators and trainers; (4) empowering and mobilising youth; and (5) accelerating sustainable solutions at local level (UNESCO 2014a). The GAP is further aligned with the 2030 Agenda and the associated Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the programme is often described as ‘key instrument to achieve the SDGs’ (e.g. UNESCO 2017a, 7). Worthy of mentioning in this context is also that we, at the time of writing this article, are approaching the threshold of the next (post-GAP) global ESD programme, possibly called GAP2030, which is expected to build on GAP but become even closer connected to the SDGs (UNESCO 2018c). The whole issue of the SDGs and global governance is something that has sparked discussions in comparative and international education recently (e.g. Cardoso and Steiner-Khamsi 2017; King 2017; Tikly 2017; Unterhalter 2017). Given the expected close connection between the post-GAP programme and the SDGs, the nexus between comparative and international education research and ESD research is also likely to grow in importance over the coming years.

The UNESCO–Japan Prize on ESD was inaugurated in connection to the launch of the GAP at the 2014 World Conference on Education for Sustainable Development in Aichi-Nagoya, Japan. According to the then Japanese Minister of Education, Hakubun Shimomura, the prize was installed to enhance the visibility of the GAP (UNESCO 2018b). The Government of Japan is funding the prize which consists of three annual awards of USD 50,000 each. The three prizes are honoured to outstanding work by individuals, organisations or institutions engaged in ESD. Nominees to the award are assessed according to three criteria. Firstly, the project should be using ESD to contribute to transformation towards sustainable development and it should also be able to display evidence of such change. Secondly, the project should address the three (economic, social and environmental) dimensions of sustainable development in an integrated way. Thirdly, the project should demonstrate an innovative approach to ESD (UNESCO 2015). Furthermore, the project should (a) have high impact in relation to invested resources, (b) be replicable by others, and (c) contribute to one or more of the abovementioned Priority Action Areas (UNESCO 2015). The jury, which is gender balanced and consists of five independent experts on ESD from different regions of the world, is selected and appointed by the UNESCO Director General for a two-year term. In September each year the three winners are announced through a press release on the UNESCO homepage and two representatives of each laureate are invited to
attend the prize ceremony which normally takes place in Paris a month or two later (UNESCO 2017b).  

The UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD obviously has a global scope. So far, laureates have also been relatively evenly distributed between different regions of the world, as well as between high-income and lower-income countries. In 2015 the prize was awarded to a German organisation that employs a ‘green office model’ to render universities more sustainable; an organisation in Guatemala and El Salvador that promotes youth leadership for community resilience; and an educational office in Indonesia that offers eco-friendly entrepreneurship programmes for the poor. In 2016 laureates included a UK student organisation that helps ‘greening’ universities; a commission of Okayama City in Japan that pursues a ‘whole city’ approach to ESD; and a Cameroonian organisation that empowers marginalised people to improve their own situation while contributing to environmental sustainability. In 2017 the prize was awarded to a UK organisation that uses visual media to raise awareness about global sustainability challenges; an organisation in Jordan that empower communities to utilise local knowledge for sustainable development; and a primary school in Zimbabwe that employs a ‘permaculture’ programme to promote sustainable livelihoods for poor households (UNESCO 2018a).

At the level of its discursive articulation, the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD invites humanity to come together in a joint endeavour towards sustainable development and various actors, distributed around the globe, are awarded for their efforts. This resonates well with the recurrent official message that GAP unites humanity in a common pursuit of a better and ‘greener’ life for all (e.g. UNESCO 2014a, UNESCO 2015, 2017a; UN 2015). The programme appeals to ‘the spirit of our collective humanity’ (UNESCO 2015, 3) and emphasises that the challenges ahead of us are ‘requiring everyone’s attention and involvement’ (UNESCO 2017a, 1). According to its statues, the prize is further in conformity with UNESCO’s policies and strategic objective of ‘empowering learners to be creative and responsible global citizens’ (UNESCO 2014b). While it is easy to resort to cynicism about these messages, I believe that there is some truth in them. However, they inevitably raise serious questions about the manner in which humanity is united in the quest for sustainable development, and about how responsible global citizenship is enacted in different socio-economic contexts. These matters constitute the central problematic of the article and, as will be argued throughout, a biopolitical lens can be helpful in shedding light on it.

**Biopolitics: optimisation and differentiation**

This paper employs Foucauldian theory of biopolitics (Foucault [1976] 1998, Foucault 2007, Foucault 2008; see also Ball 2012; Dean 1999; Lemke 2011; Miller and Rose 2008; Peters 2007). Nevertheless, and as will be explained further below, the paper also takes some inspiration from the quite different line of thinking around biopolitics offered by Giorgio Agamben (1998).

Michel Foucault is today one of, if not the most cited scholar in the social sciences and humanities. His work is contested and has been subject to endless debates. To add to the complexity, Foucault embarked on different intellectual projects, and his thinking continuously evolved, throughout his career. Hence it probably goes without saying that it is impossible to provide a comprehensive introduction to Foucault’s work, especially in a short piece like this. Yet a few very general remarks on his conception of power
might be useful before turning to the specific issue of biopolitics. In an oft-cited passage from *Discipline and Punish* Foucault contends:

> We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it ‘excludes’, it ‘represes’, it ‘censors’, it ‘abstracts’, it ‘masks’, it ‘conceals’. In fact power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belongs to this production (Foucault [1975] 1991, 194).

Thus, for Foucault, power is productive and generative, rather than coercive and inhibiting. It is productive of ‘truth’, knowledge, subjectivity, practise and, as happens to be the case here, conceptions of sustainable subjects and lifestyles. Furthermore, ‘power is everywhere’ (Foucault [1976] 1998, 93). It is dispersed, relational, enacted and embodied. Hence it has no centre, it cannot be possessed by someone, and it is impossible for a subject to be placed ‘outside’ power relations. Now, the subject, and processes of subjectivation, occupy a central position in Foucault’s thinking around power. For Foucault, the subject is, on the one hand, a target of power, but on the other hand also an agent, capable of acting and exercising a certain degree of freedom, whose very ‘conditions of existence are provided by power’ (Hansson and Hellberg 2015, 22). Governing is therefore ultimately about ‘the conduct of conduct’ and about shaping subjects that can exercise their freedom in the ‘right’ way. I will return to this point below.

We now turn to the key concept of *biopolitics*. In Foucauldian scholarship, biopolitics refers to a form of politics concerned with governing the conditions of life at the level of populations (Foucault [1976] 1998). Through his genealogical studies, Foucault identified a significant shift in the practise of government somewhere in the 18th century. European societies, Foucault argued, had traditionally been characterised by sovereignty. Sovereign power was based on transcendental juridical principles and it mainly operated in the form of ‘deduction’ of people’s goods, products, services, time, or even their lives. Its most extreme manifestation was the king’s legal right to kill those who dared to break his law. However, the 18th century marked ‘the entry of life into history’ (Foucault [1976] 1998, 141). Sovereign rule then became increasingly complemented by a new, and more generative ‘form of power that seeks to administer, secure, develop and foster life’ (Lemke 2011, 35). This productive power over life had two dimensions: disciplining of the individual body and biopolitics of the population. My concern here is with the latter.

According to Foucault, biopolitics is oriented towards augmenting human productivity and longevity. It seeks to *optimise* populations through interventions in the biological, social and economic processes which sustain their existence. Notably, ‘the population’ is both an epistemic and a political object, whose living circumstances authorities (claim to) know something about on the basis of information processing, and which can be shaped, at a distance, through regulative interventions. Foucault uses the neologism power-knowledge to highlight the co-constitutive relationship between power and knowledge. Power consumes, or operates in the light of, knowledge. One can say that power brings knowledge into its own field of operation but, in so doing, it simultaneously produces particular forms of knowledge. It calculates, categorises, maps, collates information, for example about populations and their assorted living conditions, and thereby constitute epistemic objects of government. The employment of knowledge in biopolitical governance is further intrinsically linked to specific ways of
constructing problems, wherein a deficient reality becomes measured against a political ideal. As Miller and Rose (2008, 61, emphasis in original) contends: governing ‘is a problematizing activity’. In this process governing authorities formulate, by reference to information about contemporary (mis)conduct, a ‘problem’ that requires, and allows for, some kind of intervention. In other words, concerned authorities have to construct a problem, make it visible, and devise a way of catalysing new and ‘better’ forms of conduct. For instance, to pick an example close to the concerns of this paper, behaviour that is more ‘sustainable’ and mindful of the natural environment.

To sum up temporarily, biopolitics is thus a rather sophisticated form of rule; concerned with optimising the life of populations, operating in the light of specific knowledge about the living conditions of those it seeks to govern, and seeking to rectify their ills based on particular modes of problematisation.

But what, then, about the agency of these subjects? Foucault (2008) further argued that the ‘birth of biopolitics’ was intimately connected to the emergence of liberal modes of government. He even speaks of ‘liberalism as the general framework of biopolitics’ (Foucault 2008, 22). For Foucault liberalism does not denote a political ideology or an economic theory, but a specific ‘art of government’ that uses the freedom and agency of subjects, i.e. their capacity to think and act, to achieve its ends. Liberalism’s concern was how to govern without governing ‘too much’ (Foucault 2008, 319). It was seeking to shape the capacities of individuals and populations through biopolitical means, and to utilise their freedom for its own ends, while at the same time respecting their liberties and rights. Political economy, which emerged as field of knowledge in the 18th century, brought the idea of ‘natural’ economic laws that ought to be respected in government operations. This new logic did, however, not simply translate into ‘less’ government (Foucault 2008, 145). Rather, the new economic theories alongside statistical information about populations, enabled new kinds of more sophisticated interventions. Instead of dominating or commanding, liberal government was seeking to shape, entice, stimulate and encourage conduct deemed ‘wise’ within the parameters of the political economy.

While these are general features of liberal government, an important difference between the ‘classical’ liberal and the neoliberal ‘art of government’ is that the former was seeking to contrive a space within society where the market could operate freely, whereas the latter is turning the principle of the market into a general principle for all forms of government. Hence neoliberalism is actively seeking to constitute markets, and to nurture entrepreneurial lifeforms, in all societal spheres (Foucault 2008, 131). Another significant aspect of neoliberal rule is responsibilisation, i.e. neoliberalism involves active measures to produce subjects that accept responsibility for their own living conditions and livelihoods (e.g. Dean 1999; Lemke 2001; Peters 2017).

The liberal will to optimise, however, has a flipside. The inescapable twin of biopolitical optimisation is differentiation. Although biopolitics is a sophisticated form of rule, striving to optimise life and operating through the freedom of those it seeks to govern, it inevitably divides humans into different categories (e.g. Foucault [1976] 1998). These categories are constructs. They are produced through power-knowledge and thus constitute epistemic objects that are amenable to various forms of intervention. Hence, depending on what kind of lives populations are perceived to lead, and what their living conditions are known to be,
they are approached and responsibilised in different ways by governing authorities. The issue of differentiation between forms of life have been discussed extensively in the biopolitical literature over the past decades. A prominent figure in this debate is the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (e.g. 1998). Unlike Foucault, Agamben does not perceive biopolitics as a modern phenomenon but argues that life has always been the object of politics. Furthermore, Agamben does not analytically distinguish between biopolitics and sovereignty but stresses their intimate connection. For Agamben the main line of biopolitical separation is that between bare life (zoë) and political life (bios) – i.e. mere physical existence versus life belonging to the political community of rights – which he traces back to antiquity (Agamben, 1998). Agamben’s work has been criticised by, amongst others, Lemke (2011, 59–64), who argues that Agamben is too preoccupied with how bare life is excluded, oppressed and killed; thus failing to recognise productive (bioeconomic) interventions that actually enhance survival and support life.

In the present paper biopolitics is understood in line with Lemke’s, more conventional Foucauldian, thinking, i.e. as a modern life-administering power seeking to optimise populations within the parameters of the political economy (Lemke 2011; see also Hellberg 2018; Knutsson 2016). Optimisation of, and differentiation between, populations are thus both perceived as key elements of biopolitics. Hence, the issue here is not an Agambian concern with inclusion/exclusion in/from the political community, but rather how different populations are constructed and targeted, and what roles and responsibilities they are assigned, in the global community’s quest for sustainable development. Nevertheless, borrowing from Hellberg (2018), Agamben’s work is important in that it reminds us that the only right that seems available to certain members of this global (bio) political community is the right to the very basics of survival.

**Biopolitical scholarship on (education for) sustainable development**

How, then, has biopolitical theory been employed in previous research on sustainable development and ESD, and how does it inform the present paper’s analytical approach?

Although administration of ecological processes is a central element of modern biopolitics, Foucault himself did not pay much attention to environmental affairs (Rutherford 1999). Nor could he, of course, foresee the enormous influence that sustainable development discourse would have several years after his death. There is, however, a quite extensive environmentality-literature that applies Foucauldian theory of biopolitics to studies of environmental governance (e.g. Agrawal 2005; Fletcher 2017; Luke 1999; Rutherford 2007). Furthermore, as indicated above, Foucault’s studies were mainly confined to Europe. He showed limited interest in how biopolitics operated in developing countries or in the massive interventions that international aid organisations pursue in such environments. Other scholars, most notably Mark Duffield (2007), has explored the biopolitics of international aid. Duffield argues that sustainable development has, over the past decades, emerged as a biopolitical regime of governing and containing populations that are ‘surplus’ to the global economic system. These are people who are effectively irrelevant to the capitalist system, either as producers or consumers, since capital accumulation can proceed without them. Sustainable development, Duffield suggests, is not about extending western lifestyles and modes of social protection to such ‘surplus’ populations in the South, but rather about keeping them in
their place. In order to curb migration and other perceived ‘security’ problems, development agencies attempt to govern poor populations to settle for a basic and self-sustaining lifestyle, i.e. to make them ‘live within their own powers of self-reliance’ (Duffield 2007, 68). Duffield mainly discusses the economic dimension of sustainable development but, as will be evident, his arguments can easily be extended to matters of environmental sustainability.

Duffield’s biopolitical analysis of how poor people are targeted in the name of sustainable development has been further elaborated by Reid and Evans in their works on the resilient subject (Evans and Reid 2014; Reid 2012, 2013). There are also a few studies that explore how sustainable development functions as a biopolitical regime of governing wealthy populations in high-income countries (Skoglund 2014; Skoglund and Börjesson 2014). Yet, there are but a few biopolitical studies (Hellberg 2014, 2017, 2018) that empirically contrast how different types of populations are governed in different ways in a sustainable development regime.

In the narrower confines of ESD research, the concept of biopolitics has also been employed to some extent. Gough (2017) has used a biopolitical lens to trace discursive shifts in international declarations and Australian curriculum documents pertaining to ESD. Little (2015) has explored biopolitical dimensions of ESD in the context of US prisons and Shava (2011) has analysed the biopolitics of ESD interventions in indigenous knowledge communities in the context of South Africa. The term biopolitics also figures, albeit briefly, in Hursch, Hendersen and Greenwood’s (2015) broader discussions of how neoliberalism impinges on ESD. However, works concerned with biopolitical differentiation in ESD remain sparse. Recently, though, there have been calls for such studies and methodological issues pertaining to them have also been discussed at length (Hellberg and Knutsson 2018, see also Knutsson 2013).

Informed by this methodological groundwork (Hellberg and Knutsson 2018) alongside Lemke’s (2011, 117–123) more generic ‘analytics of biopolitics’, three dimensions are highlighted in this particular paper. A number of analytical questions pertaining to each of these three dimensions have been raised in relation to the material. Firstly, as biopolitics operates in the light of certain knowledge about the lives of those it seeks to govern, a biopolitical reading of the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD must bring attention to how different populations are constructed as ‘appropriate’ for particular forms of interventions. What kind of knowledge, assumptions and problematisations underpin the ESD interventions of the organisations that the UNESCO expert jury deems worthy of being awarded? Secondly, as subjectivation is central in biopolitical governance, a biopolitical reading of the prize must discern what kind of subjectivities and lifestyles that are promoted through the awarded organisations’ ESD work. How are laureates calling the subjects upon which they intervene to lead their lives in the name of sustainable development? Thirdly, as knowledge and power cannot be separated, a biopolitical reading of the prize must consider how structures of inequality are (re)produced, as well as the political economy under which ESD is subsumed. How is this global award relating to power-knowledge and to economic asymmetries that divides the world population? These analytical questions constitute the entry-point to the empirical material of the study in accordance with the below.
The hipster in the barista bar and the subsistence farmer: biopolitical differentiation in ESD

Without claiming to be comprehensive, but indicative of a general pattern, this section uses a biopolitical lens to explore differences in how rich and poor populations around the world are targeted under the banner of the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD.

Winning this prestigious prize is of course not easy. It requires, amongst other things, significant expertise and knowledge about the lives of the people upon which one intervenes. How does this knowledge, and its assorted assumptions and problematisations, translate into notions of ‘appropriate’ interventions? Let us first consider how ESD is unpacked by laureates operating in lower-income countries. Beneficiaries in these settings are typically presented by the laureates as living in poverty. For example, the Cameroonian laureate seeks to ‘improve the lives of the underprivileged, marginalised and vulnerable’ often located in ‘hard-to-reach communities’ (UNESCO 2017c, 2). Similar language is used to describe the living conditions of beneficiaries in El Salvador, Guatemala, Indonesia and Jordan. In Zimbabwe, beneficiaries are described as ‘low-income subsistence farmers who needs assistance with so many aspects of their lives’ (UNESCO 2017d) and here we are even told that ESD interventions ‘impacts greatly on the alleviation of hunger’ (UNESCO 2017e, 6), implying that not having enough to eat is a common problem amongst this particular population. Overall, laureates operating in lower-income countries thus confront us with an image of life marked by poverty and hardship.

The preferred mode of problematising this hardship appears to be to attribute it to poor peoples’ mindsets and to their lack of knowledge. This way of constructing the problem, in turn, enables certain forms of ‘appropriate’ interventions. The Cameroonian laureate thus provides a ‘life changing training’ (UNESCO 2017c, 3) that sets out ‘to build capacities and change the mind-sets of indigenous people to create a more sustainable community’ (UNESCO 2016a). In more concrete terms this implies an integrated approach to education, entrepreneurship and environmental protection, aiming to empower poor people to improve their own situation while at the same time cater for the natural environment. In a similar vein, the Indonesian laureate provides eco-entrepreneurship training for the poor, seeking to facilitate opportunities through e.g. organic farming and handicrafts from recycled garbage (UNESCO 2016b). In Zimbabwe the remedy is a permaculture programme which provides ‘quality education and increased access to a clean environment, food and water’ and which empowers beneficiaries with the ‘sustainable development skills and competencies’ (UNESCO 2017f) that they supposedly lack. Hence what we can see is that the problem is ‘diagnosed’ in a particular way which, in turn, makes it susceptible to ‘appropriate’ ESD response.

What kind of subjectivities are then promoted through these interventions? From a biopolitical perspective, these ESD programmes could be seen as instruments for optimising poor people, that is to make them emerge as responsible beings capable of sustaining their own livelihoods and the natural environments in which they live. Hence the kind of subject that laureates seek to shape is self-reliant, responsible, enterprising and mindful of the environment. This desired being must of course not be mistaken for a ‘real’ subject as power interventions can shape, but never completely determine, subjectivity (Dean 1999, 32). Yet, that ESD interventions can indeed be, in a Foucauldian sense, productive of both
subjectivity and lifestyle is illustrated by a testimony of a couple enrolled in the
Cameroonian laureate’s programme:

“Thank God, the ESD programme has made us realise that the answer to joblessness is not
in ‘bush-falling’, that is, moving out to Europe and North America in search of greener
economic pastures like many African youths do today and sometimes perish on the way.
The couple is now settled under the firm shelter of their farm in Ekona, a small locality at
the foot of the eastern flank of Mount Cameroon. (UNESCO 2017c, 4).

Without placing any judgments on the accurateness of this assessment, the resemblance
with Duffield’s (2007) argument about sustainable development as a biopolitical means
of keeping poor people in their place is striking. For certain types of populations
appreciation of a basic rural life, rather than aspiration for a Western lifestyle, seems
to be the recipe. On this account, the power of subjectivation should probably not be
underestimated.

Laureates operating in high-income countries, on the other hand, confront us with
a very different image. The awarded British student organisation, for starters, informs
us that a recent survey in the UK shows that 80 per cent of the student population
‘would accept a pay cut of £1,000 a year to work for a company with a strong ethical and
environmental record’ (UNESCO 2016c). Notably, this annual pay cut exceeds by far the
total yearly income of many people in lower-income countries.

The laureates in the UK and Germany appear, as compared to those in lower-income
countries, less inclined to use adjectives about their beneficiaries’ lives. Yet, as will be
evident, their target groups are clearly educated and privileged. A UNESCO newsletter
about the Japanese laureate is more outspoken about people’s living conditions as it informs
us that: ‘Okayama City is known as one of the most comfortable places to live in Japan. But
the city offers more than an enjoyable lifestyle; it is also a world leader in the promotion of
ESD’ (UNESCO 2017g, 1). Evidently, we are now far away from poverty and hardship.
Consequently, modes of problematising are quite different. Laureates in high-income
countries are clearly not concerned with beneficiaries in terms of their basic survival
needs. Rather they claim to respond to more abstract and global sustainability problems.
Moreover, ethical concerns and considerations of what wellbeing, happiness and sustain-
ability might mean are brought up. The UK and German laureates are both targeting
universities. Big institutions which, according to laureates, have an important role in
building more sustainable societies, but that often fail to integrate sustainable development
in a coherent way and often have high ecological footprints themselves.

The UK student organisation is awarded for its Green Impact programme which
helps university staff and students to render campuses and curriculums ‘greener’, while
simultaneously generating economic savings. This involves everything from little
actions such as rewarding students who power down their computers for the Easter
break with chocolate eggs, to big interventions such as reorganising chemistry labora-
tories in more sustainable ways. The German laureate provides a Green Office Model
which has spread to several European universities. Green Offices are funded by uni-
versities, part of their organisational structure, and run by university staff and students.
They offer whole-institution approaches to sustainability, including lecture series,
research, policy support, and lobbying for solar cells, fossil fuel divestment, recycling
and sustainable catering. Green Offices also provide pleasant venues where university
staff and students can come together over free organic coffee. For example, a new Green Office is described by staff member as having:

a cleaner look and feel with perfectly matched second-hand furniture that is still in mint condition, lots of wood, metal and of course green. To put it all in one sentence: hipster barista bar meets modern office with flexible workspaces (Green Office Utrecht 2016, 10).

Apparently, this location invites subjects to enjoy, discuss and conduct intellectual work. Everything with reference to sustainable development. Like their counterparts in lower-income countries, these promoted subjects are also responsible and environmentally-minded. Yet, they are able to reconcile these properties with enjoyment, wealth, university education, office work and a hipsteresque lifestyle. Hence, apparently, these subjects are invited to constitute themselves as sustainable in a very different fashion.

How, then, does the various ways in which laureates approach beneficiaries relate to power-knowledge and to the political economy? The present analysis suggests that rich and poor populations are targeted in different ways under the banner of ESD. Some are expected to emerge as responsible and sustainable beings within the parameters of mass consumer lifestyle, whereas others are expected to settle for a much more modest way of life. It should also be noted that what is reported as significant improvements of poor people’s lives, sometimes celebrated as ESD Success Stories (e.g. UNESCO 2016b, 2017c), still imply living conditions that would be completely unacceptable to most people in high-income counties. That assessments of what is ‘sustainable’ differ so dramatically gives us an indication of how power and knowledge interlace as ESD unfolds globally. What is deemed, i.e. constructed as, sustainable apparently varies with your socio-economic whereabouts. The different ways in which rich and poor are approached further suggests that the global political economy is basically taken for granted; at least there are few signs of it being questioned by laureates. Hence, these ESD interventions do not seem to challenge structures of inequality, but rather confirm people’s position in a biopolitical matrix. This is where biopolitical differentiation, optimisation and political economy interlace. Biopolitics in its neoliberal form, clearly visible in many of the abovementioned ESD interventions, does not express care for populations through redistribution, but through moulding sustainable subjects and lifestyles, neatly adjusted to comply with different economic conditions.

Before proceeding to the concluding section, it seems pertinent to be a bit reflective and, as a way of anticipating critique, to touch briefly on a few potential objections to my arguments.

Firstly, we have the risk of simplifying a complex global socio-economic map. Obviously, this paper is concerned with how a liberal biopolitical sustainable development regime differentiates between, on the one hand, very poor populations, who are living on subsistence level and have very limited possibility to partake in mass consumption, typically found in what I refer to in this paper as lower-income countries, and, on the other hand, wealthy populations, typically, but far from exclusively, living in high-income countries where most people enjoy a mass consumer lifestyle and where social security systems are (still) in place. A few remarks of importance here. Eckl and Weber (2007), amongst others, argue that scholars who divides the world by words – e.g. North-South, developed countries-developing countries, et cetera – is running the
risk of reproducing the very distinctions between people that they simultaneously claim
to criticise. I believe that Eckl and Weber have a relevant point and that this is a risk
that deserves to be taken seriously. However, I also want to stress that the question of
how distinctions between populations are made, as ESD is implemented globally, is
ultimately an empirical one, and that how people are categorised and constructed as
appropriate for particular kinds of ESD interventions is exactly what needs to be further
explored through scholarly research (cf. Hellberg and Knutsson 2018). A related poten-
tial objection is that populations living in high-income countries, and in lower-income
countries for that matter, are far from homogenous. This is certainly true. Huge and
increasing income-differences can, for example, be found in high-income countries
today (e.g. Milanović 2016). Be that as it may, and without trivialising ‘the killing fields
of inequality’ in these areas of the world (Therborn 2013), it is (still) rare in high-
income countries to find large populations living in the kind of extreme poverty, and
leading the kind of self-sustaining subsistence-level lifestyle, that is relatively common
in the lower-income countries. Moreover, it is clear from the empirical material that
laureates operating in high-income countries actually approach their beneficiaries as
bearers of a mass consumer lifestyle.

Of further note is that the paper’s employment of the category lower-income countries
could be criticised as it, in fact, amalgamates what the Organisation for Economic and Co-
operation and Development’s Development Assistance Committee (OECD/DAC) refers to
as, when categorising aid recipient countries, low-income and middle-income countries
(OECD/DAC 2018). There are indeed significant differences between these types of
countries. However, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of the world’s
extremely poor people, leading the kind of self-sustaining subsistence-level lifestyle that is
discussed in this paper, actually live in middle-income countries (e.g. Kanbur and Sumner
2012). Hence, in that particular respect, i.e. with reference to the existence of large segments
of extremely poor populations in these countries, the amalgamation is probably not that
problematic. Moreover, again with reference to the empirical material, it is clear that
laureates operating in what I refer to as lower-income countries are focusing their ESD
interventions on the poor. This fact, alongside the fact that the opposite appears to be the
case in the high-income countries, probably have something to tell us about the persistence
of (post)colonial discourses and about for what kind of purposes it is possible to attract
economic resources (e.g. prize money) in this world. Having said all of this, I would still like
to emphasise that future empirical studies of how ESD is implemented globally ought to
take differences within, as well as between, countries into account.

Secondly, we have the issue of limitations imposed by the data. The apparent absence of
any critical interrogations of global economic (and other forms of) power structures in the
empirical material must of course not be taken to reflect a friction-free world and/or that
laureates are completely indifferent to such matters. As argued by Foucault, ‘where there is
power, there is resistance’ (Foucault [1976] 1998, 95). While recognising that power is
productive of resistance, however subtle it might be, there are still (probably for many
reasons) very few traces of it to be found in the material available at UNESCO’s and the
laureates’ websites. On this account, the paper is of course limited by the kind of empirical
material upon which it rests. Be that as it may, it is still very important to recognise that the
UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD, at the level of its discursive articulation, appears complicit
with, rather than critical of, the global political economy. Arguably this also reflects how
environmental discourse has transformed over the past decades (e.g. Blühdorn 2013; Knutsson 2018) and in a way it echoes the famous maxim, which has been attributed to both Frederic Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that ‘it has now become easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’.

Thirdly, someone might want to raise a question along something like the following lines: but do these ESD interventions, then, not bring about betterment in the various contexts where laureates operate? Answering this question is clearly beyond the scope of this paper, but I see no immediate reason to doubt that improvements are taking place. Nor do I question the solidness of the UNESCO expert jury’s assessment when selecting worthy winners. My point is simply that it is very difficult to disregard the profound element of inequality as ESD unfolds globally. Even if the livelihood of a subsistence farmer improves significantly, the lifestyle gulf that separates her/him from the hipster in the barista bar is still abysmal. This inevitably raises a number of questions. How much inequality can a development that is considered sustainable allow for (cf. Hellberg 2017)? Has inequality become effectively normalised in sustainable development discourse? Is inequality even a prerequisite for sustainable development? I shall return to these matters below.

Conclusion

As argued by scholars like English (2008) and Petersen and O’Flynn (2007) prizes and awards can tell us important things about society. In this particular case, about the global community’s quest for sustainable development. The present analysis of the UNESCO-Japan prize on ESD demonstrates that organisations are awarded for projects which target rich and poor populations around the world in very different ways; assigning to them different roles, responsibilities and lifestyles in the name of sustainable development. Hence, rather than a global award, uniting humanity in a cosmopolitan sense, the UNESCO-Japan Prize on ESD is perhaps better described as a case of ‘segmented prizing’ where different kinds of interventions, in relation to different categories of populations, are being rewarded.

The paper has contributed to knowledge about biopolitical differentiation in (education for) sustainable development (cf. Hellberg and Knutsson 2018). Informed by a Foucauldian understanding of biopolitics, the paper has argued that the prize can be seen as an instantiation of a liberal sustainable development regime that has a global scope and that is inclusive in that it is ‘requiring everyone’s attention and involvement’ (UNESCO 2017a, 1) but that nevertheless differentiates strongly. Yet, while it makes sense to talk about the global community’s quest for sustainable development as a form of modern (neo)liberal biopolitics – in a conventional Foucauldian understanding of the term – it is still worth recalling Agamben’s (1998) arguments. After all, what seems to be offered to certain members of this community is a (bare) lifestyle that allows for little more than the basics of survival. Other community members, on the other hand, are invited to enjoy and (mass) consume their way to sustainable development.

It should of course be acknowledged that more research is needed to further qualify the overall argument of this paper. On this account, I believe that explorations of differentiating practices in the global implementation of ESD constitutes an urgent area of future research in comparative and international education. While recognising that more research is needed, it is still rather difficult to see the pattern of differences that emerged from the
empirical material in this study as a simple product of randomness or coincidence. The fact that ESD discourse is able to accommodate the lifestyle divide that separates the hipster in the barista bar from the subsistence farmer is also quite remarkable. That it seems acceptable, or even self-evident, that different people should become sustainable in entirely different ways points to a situation where inequality has become virtually normalised. Some historical reminiscence is perhaps useful here. In the early decades of international development, it was widely agreed, at least officially, that development interventions served to enable poor ‘underdeveloped’ societies to catch-up with the ‘developed’. Hence, supposedly, all people on the globe would eventually be able to enjoy the comforts of a modern mass consumer lifestyle. The colonial tenets of this modernisation ideal could of course be, and has indeed been, criticised, but that is beside the point here. The point is that the very idea that the poor should catch-up has become obsolete. As put by Duffield (2007, 68) ‘sustainable development breaks this aspirational goal’. Given planetary boundaries and that the rich inhabitants of the world are uninterested in any inconvenient lifestyle changes, the global gap between the rich and the poor increasingly appears as a prerequisite for sustainable development.

A final remark. Lest I should be misunderstood, I am not suggesting that UNESCO or the expert jury, let alone the laureates themselves, are to blame for the problems that this paper has brought into focus. These actors probably do their best, given prevailing circumstances, in the contexts in which they are situated. My concern is rather with these prevailing circumstances which, of course, are difficult for individual actors to do something about. Hence, my point is that the UNESCO-Japan prize on ESD forms part of a global biopolitical regime that govern us all (cf. Foucault [1984] 2000, 474). If we want to destabilise this regime, the first step is arguably to render some of its manifestations visible. This paper has attempted to do so.

Notes

1. Some clarifications around the paper’s terminology might be useful here. (1) Those who decide which organisations that receive the prize are systematically referred to as the “jury”. (2) The organisations that have received the prize for their ESD programmes are referred to as “laureates” or as “awarded organisations”. (3) The people that the awarded organisations target and intervene upon, through their ESD programmes, are referred to as “beneficiaries”. This use of terminology is consistent with the vocabulary used in the UNESCO documents upon which the study is based.

2. For an excellent and systematic overview of different theoretical approaches to biopolitics see Lemke (2011).

3. For an interesting volume on how to study ‘the agency of being governed’ see Hansson, Hellberg, and Stern (2015).

4. For discussions about non-liberal or authoritarian forms of biopolitics see Dean (1999, ch. 7). Of further note is that the distinction between liberal and authoritarian power is not always clear-cut in practise but could rather be thought of as a continuum (Dean 2002; Knutsson 2016).

5. ‘Segmented prizing’ is a wordplay on the economic term ‘segmented pricing’. In the field of economics segmented pricing refers to a differentiating practise whereby companies charge different prices for different categories of people for the same product/service.
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