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Book review response. Who wants to know? Author's response to review of A Contemporary Theory of Mathematics Education Research

Tony Brown

"Truth is always new, and if it to be true, it has to be new" (Lacan, 2008, p.17.)

I am very grateful to Gail FitzSimons for inviting me to write a response to the thoughtful review of my book by Kathleen Nolan and Constantinos Xenofontos for *Educational Studies in Mathematics*. Those two authors have successfully pinpointed and analysed many key themes of my book and I entirely agree with much of their assessment and take the rest on my chin. Despite their occasional and understandable confusion, I was very conscious of needing to clearly define my audience in writing the book. The challenge, however, defeated me as I kept on switching between modes in thinking about who I was talking to. Also, of course, I was switching between modes as to who I was thinking that I was, as I have histories in so many modes: a twinkle in my parents' eyes, embryo, baby, pre-schooler, pupil, student, mathematician, prospective teacher, practising teacher, teacher educator, researcher, professor, author, and each of those earlier modes has left a residue - a spectre - in my current (sense of) self. These spectres often peak out and interrupt what I say and I forget or don't realise which one of them is speaking through me and then to whom I, myself, am trying to speak. According to Lacan (2007, p. 66): "It is language that uses us".

I sympathise with any poor soul trampling through the thickets of my book, only to find that the answers they needed were in the relatively brief conclusion and so clear when they got there. To get the basic idea of my book, reading the prelude, introduction, and conclusion might do nicely, as they were written in an intentionally clear style. Chapters 5 and 6 provide data for teacher education and teaching. But the theory element is about troubling the boundaries of familiar analytical territory, working with new apparatus, being used by new languages. This process has helped me, myself, to think analytically about what mathematics education research is, or could be. Yes, the reviewers are right. By thinking through Lacan, a Freudian psychoanalyst, Badiou, a major Parisian philosopher, and Žižek, a social theorist drawing on Lacan and Hegel, mathematics education research is produced differently, transforming each of mathematics, education, and research in the process.

Of these high priests of disobedience, Badiou and Žižek have the advantage over Lacan and many more familiar referenced authors of still being alive. What's more, each of these two has written at least three books since I published my own in 2020. They have both moved on and they would have been horrified to have read my interpretations of their work. Last year, Badiou published the English translation of the third volume of his major work *Being and Event* (2005, 2009, 2022). The three volumes total nearly 2000 pages heavily laden with set theory, suitable for the most demanding of mathematical readers, whilst providing ample lucid material between them, but maybe not for prospective teachers. I am not yet half way through the third volume entitled *The Immanence of Truths* (Badiou, 2022) and my own thinking on how thinking evolves has already changed. Put simply, how do old ways of thinking get swept under the carpet to enable new ideas to flourish? A key new idea Badiou introduces this time is that of "covering-over," which "consists ... in superimposing a kind of

mosaic of finitude over the potential infinity of a situation (p. 193). He quotes Manuel Valls, a recent French Prime Minister, in providing a political example: "Security is the essence of freedom" (p. 193). Here Badiou ponders: "Security ... should be absolute. Otherwise, we are immediately exposed to ... what? Well, to the treacherous and terrifying infinity of risks" (pp. 193-194). Surely, "the free Western republican has the right, not to run any risk" (p. 194). Badiou reveals his own mischievous radicalism: "the police are the essence of freedom" (p. 194), "The phrase – protecting our individual finitude with the infinity of the police- may seem overly didactical. But it is fortunately risk free" (p. 194). Badiou continues:

The aim of all these strict but necessary procedures is to cast an extremely finite prison-like shadow over anyone who can be suspected of infinite tendencies and thus to re-educate them by the most republican methods. In particular, their alarming tendencies to believe that you can hope for something more than the world as it is will be eradicated. It is a tendency that is very aptly called 'radicalization,' which means: having radical thought. And 'radical' means: thinking things through to their root. That's the danger of infinity: the root! Might the things that we know have invisible roots that ought thought through forcefully and if need be, uprooted? This view of things is not just ridiculous but dangerous. (p. 194)

Methinks: No child left behind- the free child has the right, not to run any risk. School inspection is the essence of freedom. It helps education to be risk free. Or reduces risk? The inspection apparatus protects the freedom of the child to learn successfully, correctly, effectively, compliantly, etc. Chapter 5 in my book discusses in detail the regulative apparatus introduced in England to ensure teachers are "effective" in line with government preferences. International readers may be shocked to realise that "prospective teachers" in England get as little as thirty hours of teacher education in universities, where the government specifies what is included in those thirty hours. The marketisation of universities enables some to be more assertive than others in following their preferred way through. The six categories identified by the reviewers are susceptible to many of those same governmental preferences and, as an author, I am seeking to speak to potentialities without names that transcend those mosaiced facades. My book (Brown, 2020) concludes with this paragraph:

School mathematics does not generally reach for the stars, and often prefers to make do with some rather rusty scaffolding in the name of corrosive metrics. There is a recurrent sense that there should have been more to it than has been allowed. Whilst the truth of mathematics can sometimes be used to underwrite its ideologically motivated manifestations, we need to trouble the "truths" that are presented to us, towards encountering the spaces beyond and the hold they have on us. (p. 136)

Meanwhile, Žižek has been the author of some fifty books in that many years. I should correct the assertion in my book mentioned by the reviewers that he is my principal guide. He activates my thought rather than guides it. Direction is hard to ascertain. He cannot and does not tell us where to go. His 2020 book, *Hegel in a Wired Brain*, speculates on how the human is increasingly activated through the machinic supplements he or she deploys. My career span includes my father making my first basic calculator from a kit costing £18. It was

not sufficiently nuanced to help me in my final school exams or undergraduate mathematics course. But by the time I had become a teacher of mathematics there was public concern that calculators, by then readily available, would prevent children from learning mathematics with understanding. Younger readers can pursue the story from there on. Back to Žižek, who goes back to Adam and Eve to clarify the (symbolic) constitution of a human: To what extent is an “individual” human with a machinic supplement still a human, where that supplement may be a calculator, an online computer, a car or a gun, designed to suture human shortcomings? Is the capacity to have a machinic supplement a right? Some countries have advocates for that. When does the use of machinic supplement become so overwhelming that the specificity of the human operator becomes an irrelevance, or is fully substitutable by another mere holder of that subject position? Or when I have to genuflect according to the shaping of an online form so closely that I can’t get my train tickets or this paper submitted otherwise? Žižek worries about this erosion of humanity, or wonders what humanity has become. Again, I wonder, who am I talking to? I only know that you, dear reader, occasionally glance at the pages of *Educational Studies in Mathematics*. Who do you think you are? What do you think you are doing? Can you be certain?

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