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Foucault, power, and education

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Abstract

Book review of: Foucault, power, and education, by Stephen J. Ball, Abingdon, Routledge, 2013, 178 pp., £24.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-415-89537-8

BJSE Review Symposium – Stephen J. Ball – *Foucault, Power and Education*

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At the close of his new book, Stephen Ball explains that he "tried to turn education policy inside out, using exclusion and abjection to think about policy rather than policy to think about exclusion" (p.153). At its start, Ball asks the question of himself "do I really want to contribute to the Foucault industry?" (p.25). He then continues to explain the book is "a set of exercises in analysis that can be used as starting points to address some practical issues in the world of education… the book is not about Foucault but rather 'doing Foucault'" (p. 25). This book certainly is about the 'doing'. By taking this emphasis, together with the 'inside out' approach to examining education policy, the book succeeds in taking the reader through firstly, the complexity of ideas in Foucault's own work and secondly, in helping one to 'think otherwise' about education. One is left, quite simply, with a view of education and its sociology that is quite different to when one began.

In using this 'inside out' approach with "exclusion and abjection to think about policy", this new book takes a noteworthy departure from customary modes of educational policy analysis. What it does is make modes of exclusion central to navigating the discussion as opposed to being its objects. We see at numerous twists and turns discussion of the 'excluded', the 'special', the 'degenerates' and of 'learning difficulties'. Thus we have the opportunity to read of those at the 'outerlands' of education scholarship, those usually confined to what might be called the 'othered' disciplines of education. This was a tactic used by Foucault for interrogating education. As Ball explains, citing Foucault, by focusing on the subjection of the 'outsider', we are prompted to think differently about curriculum, timetables, in sum the "multiple network of diverse elements – walls, space, institutions, rules, discourse'" (Foucault, 1979, p. 307 cited in Ball, p. 41). We are also, as this book conclusively demonstrates, forced to reconsider educational policy, its analysis and the discipline of sociology of education.

Key considerations of education policy are targeted in this book. For instance, the 'performative regimes' of the neo-liberal university. As Ball sums up, "productive rather than truthful individuals are the new subjects and the central resource in a reformed, entrepreneurial public sector" (pp. – 139-40). This part of the book (chapter 4) will greet those of us in the higher education 'enterprise' with an eerie sense of familiarity, and leave us, perhaps as it did me, with much unease. Yet there is to be a twist for the reader, as we have the opportunity to think through 'How not to be governed in that way' (the title of the chapter 4). Here Ball calls on "subjectivity, ethics, resistance, freedom" and connects these with both his earlier analysis of education policy and the more 'disciplinary' themes of Foucault's work. The latter, as Ball rightly points out, are those with which education research has a tendency to obsess, with the result that the less 'disciplinary' of Foucault's work, such as on assujettissement (subjectivation), is somewhat neglected. Yet there are ways forward, and these can and need to be

engaged by scholarship on education. As Ball describes, this connects ethics, with genealogy and the consideration of relations of power,

> ...an art or technology of living, a set of practices through which we establish a relationship to ourselves of self-examination and determined artfulness, and through which some possibilities of freedom may be achieved, at least temporarily... This brings into play the deployment of genealogy as a critical ontology of ourselves, as a means of confronting our own revocability... There is a simple logic here. If power acts upon us in and through our subjectivity, then that is where our resistance and struggle to be free should be focused. (pp125-6).

The trick is in recognizing where to focus: and this Ball contends, is where a genealogical type stance is crucial. Reflecting on work by Deborah Youdell and Julie Allan, Ball discusses how power relations have been used by these authors "to make sense of power relations at the margins, in the interplay of norms and abnormality..." (p.149). As Ball points out, the type of analysis that takes up this work on ethics and power, can accentuate the productivity of power relations and the possibilities "to develop new forms of subjectivity" (p. 150).

While there are numerous points I could elaborate upon, I am particularly drawn to the analysis that uses Foucault's term 'race' and the consequences of this analysis for education and for the sociology of education. At the start of this section of the book (mid way through chapter 2) Ball gently forewarns us, "the argument is precise but also shocking and complex and I want to be as clear as I can" (p. 55). We are reminded of Foucault's discussion of the dark shadow of biopower, namely, "Once the state functions in the biopower mode, racism alone can justify the murderous function of the state" (Foucault, 2004, p.256, cited in Ball, 2013 p.61). After citing this quote from Foucault's (2004) lecture series at the Collège de France 1975–76, Ball is careful to underscore the point that "*Foucault is using the term racism here in a very particular and specific sense*" (p. 61, emphasis in original). Indeed, in putting Foucault's interpretation of racism to work, a convincing case is mounted that connects, rather than severs, eugenic and cultural explanations of educational difference. These are two viewpoints often depicted as opposites. Against this common depiction, these disciplinary opposites suddenly appear as much less distinct. For instance, reflecting on "post-war social reconstruction of Britain", Ball points out,

> *...the modes of thought on which this reconstruction drew are not significantly different from eugenics and that in many ways eugenic modes of thought remain thoroughly ingrained within education policy and practice.* (Ball, 2013, p.91, emphasis in original)

The clarity of connection between the two is made possible by Ball's careful genealogy of education policy (and I would argue, also his approach 'from the inside out'). Here we come to the disheartening realization that exposure of 'eugenic modes of thought' is not necessarily a thing of the past; but to our alarm, can be witnessed in recent (and arguably present day) educational practices. For example, referring to Gillborn's (2010b) discussion of

'degenerate discourses' and Tyler's (2006) analysis of a 'Chav mum', Ball points to how we are "skirting on the limits of humanity and bodies as objects of disgust (Ahmed, 2004)" (p.113). Citing Foucault, Ball then makes the explicit connection between Foucault's analysis and the contemporary objects of racism that 'represent danger',

> This is again the realm of abnormality, of lepers – and the ways in which racism, in Foucault's sense of 'breaks in the species', functions not so much as 'the prejudice or defense of one group against another as the detection of all those within a group who may be the carriers of a danger to it'. (Foucault, 2003, p. 317, cited in Ball, p.113)

Ball's close attention to Foucault's use of the term racism brings the reader (along with the author) to discomforting realisations about public education, about the practices of sociology of education, and about our place as educators and/or researchers within the contemporary educational enterprise. Ideals of public education are now far less rosy than we might hope, prompting Ball to pose the question, "Perhaps we must cease to celebrate the creation of state schooling and see it instead as an 'inglorious moment' in the 'modern play of coercion over bodies' (Foucault, 1979, cited in Ball p.191)?"

Ball's 'personal' approach and the discussion of his autobiography as a scholar demonstrates how we might conduct the 'exercise of analysis'. By calling attention to the uncomfortable relationship between public education and its 'sociology', this notable book forces us to encounter the disquieting proposition that sociology of education is not a simple observer in the troubles of education. At the same time, it also calls into question the 'cultural enterprise', making us wonder where we might be continuing along a line trodden earlier by the eugenists. Contemporary sociology becomes far from heroic, and the discourses that strive for equity and the aegis of 'cultural' layering, dividing and individuating of populations not so innocent.

This brings us to an uncomfortable insight: we may well be not so distinct from that which we often critique, or at least that from which we seek to be set apart. Ball's use of Foucault's analysis of racism takes us to the realization that as sociologists of education, there is a danger of sharing an uneasy continuity with the human sciences of eugenics, much more so than we might want to believe. His analysis convincingly shows us that unless we engage in a critical ontology of ourselves, our disciplines, our institutions, and of our practices as educators and researchers, this will quietly and insidiously, remain.

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