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Subjectivity as a site of struggle: refusing neoliberalism?

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This paper extends the author's previous enquiries and discussions of governmentality and neoliberal policy technologies in a number of ways. The paper explores the specificity and generality of performativity as a particular contemporary mode of power relations. It addresses our own imbrication in the politics of performative truths, through our ordinary everyday life and work. The paper is about the here and now, us, you and me, and who we are in neoliberal education. It draws upon and considers a set of ongoing email exchanges with a small group of teachers who are struggling with performativity. It enters the 'theoretical silence' of governmentality studies around the issues of resistance and contestation. Above all, the paper attempts to articulate the risks of refusal through Foucault's notion of fearless speech or truth-telling (parrhesia).

Keywords: parrhesia; neoliberalism; refusal

Introduction

The political question ... is not error, illusion ... it is truth itself. (Foucault 1980, 133)

This paper takes up a line of enquiry that was begun in a series of papers on the mechanisms of performativity in education (Ball 2001, 2003, 2005, 2008, 2012) and explored further in a paper addressing the question of resistance in relation to neoliberalism (Ball and Olmedo 2013). The latter paper argued that subjectivity is a key site of political struggle in the contexts of neoliberalisation and neoliberal governmentality. That is, a modern form of politics for a modern form of government. Here I want to explore that premise further and explore a little more some forms of resistance to, or what I shall call the refusal of, neoliberalisation. Bearing in mind Nealon's (2008, 95) comment that perhaps 'it would simply cost political thinking too much to question the thematics of resistance', I want to see

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how far we might get in outlining instead, or rather in addition, a politics of refusal. In part, the use of refusal – rather than resistance – serves to highlight the specifics of my analysis, but it also enables some distancing from the more orthodox ontologies of resistance, which as Rose puts it are ‘too simple and flattening’ as ‘merely the obverse of a one-dimensional notion of power as domination’ (1999, 279).

So the discussion here is situated across what Dean (1994) calls the ‘terrains of government’, and engages indirectly with some key features of current education policy, particularly those which enact forms of ‘governing by numbers’, and in doing so it subverts the often stark division between micro and macro analysis. It rests on Foucault’s conceptualisations of neoliberal government as a particular configuration of the relationship between truth and power and the self (and thus ethics) or what Dean terms ‘the rapport between reflexivity and government’ (1994, 211).

The paper deals with three modalities of truth: the truths told about us – games of truth (Scott 1996); the truths we tell about ourselves – the care of the self; and the truths we tell to others – truth-telling or fearless speech. Thus, in what follows I want to take up and juxtapose two different, and in many ways incompatible, senses and uses of truth in Foucault’s work – the earlier work on the ‘will to truth’ and ‘the role truth plays as an authority enforcing value in politics’ (Ross 2008, 70), and a positive ethical conception of truth in relation to the care of the self and the practice of truth-telling in his later work, which is related to a more general exploration of the genealogy of critique in western society. Both the earlier and later works explore relationships between truth and power, but differently.

This foray into the terrain of ‘the will to know’ is also related to the attempt to articulate what is called post-social politics and addresses a set of problems within governmentality studies, which were discussed in a series of critical but constructive papers in *Economy and Society* (volume 25, issue 6, 1996). Generally, in those papers it is suggested that governmentality studies tend to:

- avoid the ‘messy actualities’ of governance (Barry, Osborne, and Rose 1993);
- present a one-sided ‘programmers vision’ of government; and
- maintain a ‘theoretical silence’ around contestation.

O’Malley (1996, 311) criticises governmentality studies for the way in which it ‘privileges official discourses, with the result that it becomes difficult for it to recognize the imbrication of resistance and rule’, and Weir et al. opine that: ‘Our preferences are more modest in wanting to claim a warm textual spot for a variety of micro and macro critical practices almost completely lacking in grandeur’ (1996, 512). The latter nicely represents my project here. I will explore a variety of micro critical practices, very

much lacking in grandeur. In doing so, I draw on the experiences and voices of a group of teachers with whom I have been in email contact over a number of years. However, I do not seek to speak for them, but rather to speak 'before' them and for myself, although it could be said that they 'speak for others'. The point for you and me and for them is to make new sorts of statements, new sorts of truth, imaginable.

Truths told about us: struggling over subjectivity

My argument is that in relation to the 'attitude' of neoliberalism generally, and in relation to the techniques of performativity specifically, subjectivity is now a key site of political struggle – not a sufficient site perhaps, but a necessary one, a point I shall return to. Struggle on this terrain is an engagement with, and can involve a refusal of, neoliberal governmentality in its own terms. That is to say, 'All those on whom power is exercised to their detriment, all who find it intolerable, can begin the struggle on their own terrain and on the basis of their proper activity (or passivity)' (Deleuze and Foucault 1977, 216). However, the other important point here is that governmentality is not solely the 'point of application' of power, but also its 'vehicle'. The individual is the site of power, where it is enacted or resisted/refused (Mills 2003); but never in an absolute sense, rather within multiple 'strategic skirmishes'. The issue is one of a recognition of and engagement with relations of power. As is often the case, in respect to all of this, Foucault uses key words with a dual meaning – for him, subject is systematically ambiguous; it means both being tied to someone else by control and dependence, and being tied to one's own identity by a conscience or self knowledge. The 'equivocal nature' of such terms, Foucault says, 'is one of the best aides in coming to terms with the specificity of power' (1982a, 789). The crucial point is that subjectivity is the point of contact between self and power (see below).

There are various sites or practices in contemporary education where this drama of self and government unfolds: school league tables, the Higher Education Research Excellence Framework, annual staff reviews, performance-related pay, for example. These are all 'sites of veridiction'. They articulate truth as the practice of government. We are incited, hailed, to recognise ourselves in their terms. That is to say, 'a regime of truth offers the terms that make self-recognition possible' (Butler 2005, 22). An extract from one of my MA student essays illustrates several of these points very nicely:

Schools are littered with data; at times it seems that everything I do as a practitioner is valued only in as far as it impacts positively on the data. Schools are fashioned by external forces acting upon the practitioners desire to do the right thing. What is achieved is summed up in a series of charts,

graphs, tables and detailed statistical analysis. The value we place on everything we do is formed by its relationship to the measure.

It is important to be clear what is meant here, after Foucault, by truth. Throughout his work, in very general terms, Foucault is interested in ‘the will to truth’ and in ‘games of truth’, and he uses the term in a variety of ways in relation to his methods of analysis. In his early work he asserts that truth is ‘centred on the form of scientific discourse and the institutions which produce it’ (Foucault 1980, 131), and that it is ‘subject to constant economic and political incitement’ (1980, 131). That is, and we can see this particularly now, there is a demand for truth. Foucault says ‘Power never ceases its interrogation, its inquisition, its registration of truth: it institutionalises, professionalises and rewards its pursuit’ (1980, 93). We might see all of this manifest, in particular, in the current relations between research and policy – articulated, for example, as ‘what works’ – but also in the grandeur and force and effectivity of such things as Programme for International Student Assessment league tables, school inspections, world ranking systems of universities, and in the proliferation of comparison websites – Rate my Professor, and so forth. Truth in this sense is diffused and consumed, and ‘is produced and transmitted under the control, dominant if not exclusive, of a few great political and economic apparatuses’ (1980, 131–132) – we might name OECD, OfSTED, McKinsey, Microsoft and Pearson (see Grek and Ozga 2010; Ozga 2008). It flows ‘around a diversity of apparatuses for the production, circulation, accumulation, authorization and realization of truth’ (Rose 1996, 45):

One could suggest that the OECD’s greatest impact has been in relation to its Indicators agenda, including PISA [Programme for International Student Assessment], and its role in constructing a global educational policy field through *governance by comparison* ... (Grek 2009, 3; original emphasis)

The concern here is not with what is true, but for Foucault, as with his other concerns, the how of truth and ‘the system of truth and falsity’ itself (Foucault 2013). That is, how some things come to count as true. As he says, nothing is true that is not the product of power. So that ‘instead of trying to find out what truth’ we would be better advised to try to understand why we accord traditionally conceived truth ultimate value, and place ourselves ‘absolutely under its thrall’ (Foucault 1988a, 107). Truth is a ‘system of exclusion’ (Foucault 2013, 2) and ‘a system of constraint which is exercised not only on other discourses, but on a whole series of other practices’ (2013, 2). These discourses ‘present themselves to subjects as environments fully on a par with the physical environment’ (Prado 2006, 86). There is a silent coupling of knowledge and power as a means by which we assign people to positions/categories and assign them value/worth: that is ‘the promise that categorization and comparison through standardised measurements

will reveal and illuminate essential truths about students, teachers and schools' (Pignatelli 1993, 165). Thus, Burchell argues that an historian of the present must 'have a concern for truth' (1996, 31) and 'must be meticulous in describing the shapes it assumes' (1996, 32). This means that we must address the 'general politics of truth' within our neoliberal society and 'the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true' (Foucault 1980, 131). In the first instance, then, the 'truths' with which we are concerned here are the scientific truths of measurement and judgement and comparison. That is, certain 'techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth' (Foucault 1980, 131; Ball 2003; and so forth); the value and effectivity of which rest on the status of those enabled to speak these truths, those whom Rose (1996, 54) calls the grey scientists.

All of this promises to make 'government possible and to make government better' (Rose 1996, 45) through the 'technocratic embedding of routines of neoliberal governance' (Peck and Tickell 2002) in the everyday life of institutional practices. In the enactment of judgement and the practices of evaluation and comparison, truth¹ thus articulates our 'discursive currency' (Prado 2006, 80); that is, ways of thinking and talking about ourselves, to ourselves and to others – 'a regime of truth offers the terms that make self-recognition possible' (Butler 2005, 22). This, as Foucault puts it, is the face of truth which has been 'turned away from us for so long and which is that of its violence' (2013, 4). Such violence acts upon our relation to ourselves and to our subjectivities. Raymond, a teacher correspondent wrote:

My first introduction to 'accountability' was a (thank you for your excellent results) talk with a head teacher which kind of finally burst the bubble and destroyed any romantic ideal I had that teaching was an art and honorable profession. It became very much the numbers game and I had to sail close to my moral and ethical boundaries to do well.

The regime of numbers hails us in its terms, and to the extent we turn, acknowledge and engage we are made recognisable and subject. Once in its thrall we are reduced by it to a category or quotient – our worth, our humanity and our complexity are abridged. However, if, as Butler suggests, we 'question the regime of truth', we question also our 'own ontological status' (2005, 23), an issue I return to later. The question is what kind of self, what kind of subject have we become, and how might we be otherwise? Or more succinctly: 'Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are' (Foucault 1982, 785).

Let me quote one of the teachers with whom I have been exchanging emails. Nigel, a primary school headteacher:

I am a victim of the 'terrors of performativity'. The notion of calibrating performance sets in stone what is to be measured and how, and also gives power to a cadre, who are handed the status of determinators. Hubris takes over, just

as so too interpretative awareness and social insight implode. We also have associate assessors, but because our inspections system is about matching to a grade I wouldn't touch it with a barge pole [...] That is the space I operated in. It was never about imposing a judgement. My thinking has slowly shifted, through reading and contacts such as with you. Also by developments of practice, and making links with those developing techniques or materials. I have found others immensely influencing of my own professional growth: Pasi Sahlberg, John Macbeath, Andy Hargreaves, Dennis Shirley, Joe Bower, Maurice Holt, Carol Fitz-gibbon. But that is a character set who don't fit the performativity mould.

What this illustrates, I think, is that what one is struggling against is the anonymity of power and its 'dispersed and discontinuous offensives' (Foucault 1988, 80); that is, its practices and its truths and their effects and outcomes, rather than any intentions. Nonetheless, in this instance Nigel has other discursive resources which can articulate him differently over and against the 'determinations' of measurement. The prevailing 'discursive currency' is also made clear by Martin, another correspondent, a US school principal.

I find that one of the most fundamental challenges of my job is trying to avoid becoming incorporated into market modes of thinking. Of course, the more time you spend at work trying to please your superiors, the more you use the language of performativity and begin to believe in it yourself. And then, when I go back to my dissertation, it is difficult to be surprised by the data.

Martin is also here, I think, articulating a sense of refusal, a sense of who it is that he does not want to be – that is enabled in part by his dissertation work, which I will come back to.

Telling truths about ourselves

I want to move on from the truths told about us to explore the possibilities of speaking differently about truth in the spaces that Nigel and Martin are beginning to open up here. That is, first, to think about the truths that we might tell about ourselves, and, second, in the next section, the truths that we might tell to others. The first involves 'the games of truth in the relationship of self with self, and the forming of oneself as a subject ...' (Foucault 1981, 11). What I want to suggest, picking up from the extracts from Nigel and Martin, is that there are possibilities signalled here of an active reconstruction of the relation between government and self-government – employing a particular Foucauldian trope – a reversal or inversion. If subjectivity is the key site of neoliberal government, the production of particular sorts of 'free' ethical subjects – striving, enterprising, competitive, choosing, responsible – then it is here also, in 'our relation to ourselves', that we might begin to struggle to think about ourselves differently. As Dilts

(2011, 132) points out, Foucault was insistent that thinking about ‘the subject constituted as practices works both within and against neo-liberal subjectivity and neo-liberal conceptions of freedom, truth, and reality’. Truth-telling is one means of attempting this.

The issue is how we seek to constitute and recognise ourselves through technologies – the intellectual, practical instruments and devices which shape and guide ‘being human’, or, more specifically here, being a teacher or a researcher. A form of Socratic self-examination. That is, the activity of the subject within a field of constraints, crafting or re-crafting one’s relation to oneself and to others or ‘local problems, local solutions’, as (Blacker 1998) puts it. This involves both critical work, destabilising accustomed ways of doing and being, and positive work, opening spaces in which it is possible to be otherwise – both of which Nigel and Martin are undertaking. These are modifications in our relation to the present and the different ways in which we are able to recognise ourselves as subjects. I am following here Foucault’s conscious move from an emphasis on technologies of domination to an emphasis on technologies of the self, a shift he announced in his Dartmouth lectures of 1980 (Foucault 1993).

To be clear, what I am outlining here is ‘not a struggle to emancipate some pristine truth from the distortions wreaked upon it by power or ideology, it is not a battle on behalf of truth’ (Blacker 1998, 358). It is certainly not a revelation of some interior depth – rather, it is an agonism, a process of self-formation through engagement. This is not merely a matter of ‘denying or resisting truth, power or wealth, but attempting to articulate and deploy them otherwise’ (Nealon 2008, 95). In arguing against truth, an opportunity for the rearticulation of self is created. However, as noted above, by illuminating the limits of self-constitution we do make ourselves vulnerable in different ways. ‘We await the ineluctable link between ethical well being and loss of self’ (Pignatelli 1993, 171); that is, we risk a facelessness, making ourselves unrecognisable and irrelevant. Indeed, as we attempt self-formation we submit ourselves to ‘an experience, then, in which what one is oneself is, precisely, in doubt’ (Burchell 1996, 30). Over and against this, in Foucault’s (1983a, 360) words, ‘a person is nothing else but his relation to truth, and this relation to truth takes shape or is given form in his own life’.

We can see something of this in Walter’s attempts to write himself differently in relation to the performance management review system his school operates. He seeks to articulate himself in concepts set over and against those which hail him through the measurements and categories of performance (see below). This is a practice of agonism, an attempt to wrest his self-formation from the techniques of government and to make himself intelligible in different terms. In this respect he seeks to conduct himself differently, to forge an aesthetics of teaching, of being a teacher, and to loosen the connection between subjectification and subjection:

I attach a description of an Ofsted inspection of a lesson. It is written by a teacher I met on a course (I am now a primary specialist which I love doing). This teacher read my own description of a bogus observation that I had experienced (I sent you an email about this on Jan 9) and felt compelled to write in detail about her own similar experience. Result: one crushed teacher and one grade produced for the data banks. (Walter)

In the INSET before last we learned about how OfSTED are now looking to ‘triangulate’ evidence so that how you are judged as a teacher is not just about your performance on the day but involves looking at the results and progress of the children you teach. It’s not clear why it took OfSTED twenty years to realise this.

Our headteacher drew attention to the new language of ‘In Need of Improvement’ that replaces ‘satisfactory’. She said that, in a sense, it is meaningless, because even an outstanding teacher is ‘in need of improvement’. I would prefer “we are always learning’, a subtle difference but one that cuts to the heart of how we currently define education and learning. (Walter)

This is the interweaving of *bios* (life) and *logos* (principle), another sort of agonism, with a focus not on concepts or the abstract or ideal but on practices ‘forms, modes and styles of life’ (Foucault *n.d.*). That is, not a going back but a going beyond that involves experiments with limits and with transgression; thinking about how one is now and how one might be different. In other words, this is the care of the self, the work of the ‘politics of the self’, a continuous practice of introspection, which is at the same time attuned to a critique of the world outside: ‘critique is the movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. Critique will be the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility’ (Foucault 1997b, 386). This is a form of ethics and a set of techniques of living, a concrete practice of freedom. Established patterns are to be challenged in order to ascertain what it is that is no longer indispensable for the constitution of the self: ‘The ethical project which emerges is to envision one’s self constitution as an on going task, an achievement requiring artistry in the face of the looming, omnipresent threats to our freedom to invent ourselves’ (Pignatelli 1993, 165). Nigel talks of an ‘individual’s connections to learning and insight (that) literally build new knowledge’, and Walter refers to ‘intuitive experience and enjoyment’ and being ‘much less conscious of “Learning Intention” and target-driven and much more built around fun and unconscious development of the whole person’.

One means of this self constitution, Foucault suggests, is the technique of self-writing. This is one of ‘the arts of oneself’ or the government of the self: ‘Writing as a personal exercise done by and for oneself is an art of disparate truth’ (Foucault *n.d.*). This seems particularly apt here. Walter’s blog,

Martin's thesis and Nigel's conference papers and book ideas are all forms of writing which work from and on a set of institutional circumstances:

Here's a recent piece of mine. What I want is to have my professionalism restored to me, a culture of formative enhancement, and to continue as a reflective practitioner – as I was, and which was working so superlatively well, but it can't be 'how-gooded'.

I've a book in me – based on my major report to our inspections review. (Nigel)

I now have a blog: <http://jennycollinsteacher.wordpress.com/>

It is under a pseudonym as you can see. I have taken the liberty of quoting a number of your works without first asking your permission (see October 13 'Reflections on the New Public Management Systems). As a fan of *Breaking Bad* I am glad to see that my pseudonym in your essay is Walter. (Walter)

Such writing 'also constitutes a certain way of manifesting oneself to oneself and to others' (Foucault *n.d.*), something which again seems evident for these teachers. The emails used and referred to here may also play their part in these 'arts of the self'. Technologies of the self are not enacted in a vacuum, but always within a web of human relations. Again Foucault (*n.d.*) notes; 'the reciprocity that correspondence establishes is not simply that of counsel and aid; it is the reciprocity of the gaze and the examination'. Here writing, reading and responding changes the correspondents. In a similar way, writing this paper is part of my own self-examination:

This was what I had experienced! It made so much sense and to see the system being explained and rationalised (and critiqued) was very powerful. Your writings have given me help to find answers to many questions I have been struggling with over the last decade. I feel empowered ... (Raymond)

I wrote a paper enclosed where I quoted you. So thanks for helping me stay sane. But your thinking does not permeate our audit-managerial monolith. The effects are dire – harming the real job to an extreme degree, and undermining confidence in the service so that parents are at our throats. They are confused by a mismatch of rhetoric, reality and expectation and here it is descending into a mire of confusion and despondency. (Nigel)

To reiterate this is not a matter of 'knowing the self' but rather the 'care of the self'; that is, the formation of an art of living, or here an art of teaching. In his later lectures, Foucault identified two avenues of the care of the self as the two primary concerns of western philosophy:

On the one hand, a philosophy whose dominant theme is knowledge of the soul and which from this knowledge produces an ontology of the self. And then, on the other hand, a philosophy as test of life, of bios, which is the ethical material and object of an art of oneself. (Foucault 2011, 127)

It is the latter with which he is primarily concerned. He makes a further distinction between pedagogy, what we know or rather what we do not know, and the “psychagogical”, the transmission of a truth whose function is not to endow any subject whomsoever with abilities, but whose function is to modify the mode of being of the subject to whom we address ourselves’ (Foucault 2010, 407). That is, what are we? Perhaps again this distinction is evident in Nigel and Walter’s articulations of teaching and learning.

Fearless speech: the truths we tell to others

I want to go on to address a third version of truth – the truth we tell to others. That is, *parrhesia* – truth-telling as an activity, ‘as a role’. This articulates the problem of truth in a different way; it is not an interrogation of truth effects or about ‘the problem of truth’, but rather ‘the problem of the truth-teller’ (Foucault 2001, 169). The last two sets of Foucault’s lectures are different from his earlier work at least in the sense of being less analytic and genealogical in some ways, but they do have some divergent continuities with his previous concerns, in particular with regard to the ongoing focus on the relations of truth, government and subjectivity – what he calls three poles: ‘the pole of *aletheia* and truth-telling; the pole of *politeia* and government; and finally the pole of what, in late Greek texts, is called *ethopoiesis*’ (the formation of *ethos* or of the subject) (Foucault 2011, 66).

Truth-telling, or fearless speech, according to Foucault rests on four criteria or characteristics:

- The speaker makes it manifestly clear what he believes, a frankness, a clarity of belief that ‘expresses his personal relationship to truth’ (Foucault 2001, 19). ‘He says what he knows to be true’ (2001, 14).
- The moral quality of the teller. That is, ‘the moral courage of the *parrhesiastes* is evidence of his sincerity, for there is a clear danger in telling the truth’ (Peters 2003, 212; original emphasis) – an ‘ethics of risk’.
- The duty to tell the truth. An ethical characteristic of the good citizen. ‘No one forces him to speak, but he feels that it is his duty to do so’ (Foucault 2001, 19).
- Truth-telling as a form of criticism. ‘*Parrhesia* is not to demonstrate the truth to someone else, but has the function of *criticism*: criticism of the interlocutor or of the speaker himself’ (Foucault 2001, 17; original emphasis).

Foucault here is interested in the status of the speaker and the stakes and effects of these practices, and their ethical value, not the definition of truth itself; not what is spoken, but how. *Parrhesia* involves speaking boldly in

the face of risk or danger, speaking plainly when there is a difference in power between the speaker and listener, speaking frankly even when it flies in the face of the prevailing discourses. This boldness is founded on a willingness to criticise, not just social conditions, 'intolerable and catastrophic realities' as Burchell (1996, 31) calls them, but oneself; indeed, especially oneself. It is the relation to oneself that is important, a shaping of the will – a different kind of 'will to truth'. The parrhesiastes are also exemplars, and they do not aim to persuade but to tell. Their speech is not assertion but refusal and critique, a confrontation of the normative with the ethical – a challenge to the normalising truths of the grey sciences. Foucault values truth-telling as an agonistic practice not a normative one. It is the 'relationship between the speaker and what he says' (Foucault 2001, 12) that is important here, as is the situation, the context of telling.

Let us see if there is evidence of fearless speech. I want to consider the teachers with whom I have been emailing as parrhesiastes, as speakers of truth, or fearless speakers, as ethical subjects, as exemplars rather than persuaders. Indeed, teachers are one of Foucault's four key figures in relation to truth-telling (see Besley 2005). However, I do this not with the intention of producing a heroic subject possessed of rare attributes. Both Walter and Nigel have had bruising confrontations with prevailing regimes of truth and power:

Last term I was pretty outspoken during my first 'Performance Management' meeting of the year. This led to a letter from the governors stating: The Governors ... wish to convey to you their disappointment in the fact that you were not prepared with all the evidence needed at the initial meeting to make a judgment. It is their expectation that all staff come to meetings ready with all the evidence required so that time dedicated to such meetings can be purposefully used [...] It was noted that some of your comments were not conducive to such a meeting, for example, you stated that 'you did not like being performance managed' (or words to that effect). It is essential that all staff show respect for the processes in the school which secure better outcomes for children. It is the role of leaders in the school to challenge the performance of staff in relation to improving outcomes for children. respect must be shown for their role. It is expected that your future conduct in such meetings is professional. (Walter)

Our ghastly performance measuring system blasted apart any different approaches to curriculum, and more importantly the nature of curriculum and its enactment. For standing up for myself I am now being mangled, another friend of mine near here, also a small school HT, even worse, and so well evidenced. We don't have time to do their ghastly systems if class committed and they are to the wrong conceptual notions, overloaded and imposed, so ghastly even for those with more time. (Nigel)

Walter is, in effect, 'inventing new rules for the game of truth' (Burchell 1996, 33) in relation to which he conducts himself and at the same time he

is highlighting the contingency of practices. He will not submit himself to this technique of government and mounts a criticism of the system of truth to which he is subject – as in his refusal of the terms on which he was performance managed. He is unwilling to speak of himself in terms of this regime of truth it articulates, but instead speaks against it. In a similar way Nigel is contesting the truths which are embedded in new practices of teaching and learning and mobilising a set of counter-truths. I think it can be argued that these speakers are frank, moral and sincere, and clearly risk-taking. They are converting shame into courage. Although, as Pignatelli (1993, 173) suggests: ‘This is a matter of speaking truth to a form of power which remains deeply embedded in how we understand and assign value to ourselves’. They are re-examining themselves, or their relation to themselves, through this confrontation with risk and refusal, and in relation to prevailing discourses.

Dear Stephen,

I am attaching a letter that I plan to include with my own annual ‘Staff Questionnaire’. It is an attack on the relatively new system of insisting on an Ofsted grade for every termly lesson observation. I have used some of your writing about ‘Performativity’ as a lengthy quote at the beginning. (Walter)

Walter has also set up his own blog (<http://jennycollinsteacher.wordpress.com/>).

Again here Walter is resisting practices, confronting power in the most immediate sense, very much within Foucault’s conception of power; nicely and aptly expressed by Nealon as ‘a series of local, sometimes crazy (but still rational, all-too-rational) schemas, deployed almost blindly, certainly experimentally, with not central organising principle’ (2008, 99). All of this relates to the ‘specificity of the politics of truth in our societies’ (Foucault 1980, 132). Nigel, Martin and Walter are challenging ‘the ensemble of rules according to which the true and the false are separated and specific effects of power attached to the true’ (Foucault 1980, 233). This is expressed as, and may be a good example of, what Foucault writes of as ‘the will to discover a new way of governing oneself through a different way of dividing up true and false’ and also calls ‘political spirituality’ (1983, 233). However, it is the moral status of speakers which is of primary concern: ‘It is not that what the *parrhesiastes* sees is invisible to others, it is not the case that “truth” is recalcitrant, but that others choose not to see it’ (Ross 2008, 71; original emphasis). These teachers, as Pignatelli (1993, 158) puts it, are ‘taking up the challenge of creatively and courageously authoring one’s ethical self’. In relation to all of this, Foucault stresses both the open-endedness of the present as a project and freedom as a process of struggle.

Walter is refusing the truths told about him and his colleagues and confronting the anonymity of power, and in doing so is seeking ways of ‘caring for himself’. This is not a positive ethics, not a matter of asserting ideals, but rather an aestheticism – an imaginative creativity. This is ethics as a practice rather than a plan, as ‘the kind of relationship you ought to have with yourself ...’ (Foucault 1984, 263). It is creating a space, and thus a confrontation with power, within which it is possible to make oneself thinkable in a different way – ‘to become other than how you find yourself’ (Lawlor and Sholtz n.d., 22). These teachers are utilising their and other’s knowledge, their competences and their relation to truth ‘in the field of political struggles’ (n.d. 128) – they are not ‘rhapsodist[s] of the eternal’ (n.d. 129) but ‘hyperactive pessimists’ situated in local and immediate fields of struggle. Critical reflection is not enough. As Dilts (2011, 143) puts it, this ‘requires us to think not just about how to resist the use of power, but how to conduct ourselves under those rules’. It is about where you stand and what you do today, now – the provocation to respond and the arts of misconduct.

The politics of refusal

There are two refusals or a double refusal here, and concomitantly two forms of risk. The first refusal is again double-headed, it is a disengagement or renunciation of our ‘intelligible’ self and a willingness to test and transgress the limits of who we are able to be, a constant engagement with ‘what it would mean to exceed or go beyond oneself’ (Pignatelli 1993, 166), and at the same time a renunciation of the comforts of a transcendental self and the belief that we can know ourselves in some way authentically. The second refusal, implicit or explicit, is of the categories and norms which seek to represent us. It is a rejection of comparison and improvement, and indeed of excellence. That is, the ‘moving outside of, resisting, averting these gridded, measured spaces or, at least, diluting their power – is an ethical (as well as political matter)’ (Pignatelli 1993, 173). The task is that of ‘detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony ... within which it operates at the present time’ (Foucault 1980, 133). The first form of risk is that engendered by ‘the perils of self-examination’ (Pignatelli 1993, 169), the rigours and discipline of uncertainty and unsettledness, an acceptance that ‘there is little possibility of ideological and hegemonic closure, no relief from the incessant tensions and contradictions that inform one’s identity’ (Giroux 1994) and the possibility at the same time that we render ourselves unrecognisable to our colleagues and even in some ways to ourselves. This arises from the avoidance of fixity and rather the continuous responsibility to choose ourselves through what we do, our practices, not our ideologies. That is, ‘Tak[ing] oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration’ (Foucault in Rabinow 1987, 41). The second kind of risk is that of exposing ourselves to censure or ridicule or marginalisation.

The actions and stances outlined here are forms of transgression. As Allan puts it, ‘transgression emerged in Foucault’s writing as a subversive tactic which could enable individuals to transform themselves’ (2012, 30, BERA online); and Dean (1994, 54) explains that transgression ‘works at the limits that have defined ways of being, doing, and thinking’, seeking the ever present possibility of the ‘undefined work of freedom’ (Foucault 1997). That is: all of this rests on the effort of what Blacker calls ‘attentiveness’ ‘to how one’s actions get absorbed by the power/knowledge regime’ (1998, 360) or what Maxine Greene calls wide-awakeness:

Human beings define themselves through the *projects* with which they become involved. By means of engagement with a project, the attitude of wide-awakeness develops and contributes to the choice of actions that lead to self-formation.

<http://www.newfoundations.com/GALLERY/Greene.html>

This is a negative ethics – an ethics of avoidance, based upon renunciation, exile, homelessness, disengagement and a dispersion of the ‘serene unity of subjectivity’ – not a search for positive values, for alternatives. This can open up new horizons for experiment in democracy and human relationships (De Lissovoy 2011), explorations in collective refusal perhaps. Here discipline and self-government are turned back on themselves as a freedom of possibilities rather than abstract illusions. Although, as Ross (2008, 71) suggests, the politics of ‘self stylisation’ perhaps has limited aspirational force, and she relates this to Foucault’s ‘considered refusal of the tendency to overestimate possible counter-paths’.

All of this is highly unsettling and disconcerting; the coherence of the subject, or rather the ‘matrix of intelligibility’ (Butler 1990) which underwrites the subject, is threatened. There is no retreat here to either a unitary or essential subject. Indeed, this may instigate what De Lissovoy (2010, 1132) calls ‘the crisis of the subject’, which he sees as a stage ‘in a dynamic process ... rather than a simple switch in point of view or affiliation’. Established and perhaps cherished professional skills and judgements are made unreliable² in this process. As Blacker cogently argues, we should not expect the consistency of a tightly integrated social subject, for that is part of what must be given up. Neither does this analysis mean that the configuration of struggle is, nor are its starting points, always the same. In various sites we may need help, from our unions, colleagues and so forth: ‘Alliances of shifting points of resistance around concentrations of power become a possibility’ (Macleod and Durrheim 2002, 47). Tactics will vary between sites and issues, and the conditions of possibility also vary. The ‘question concerns ways to mobilise, focus or intensify practices of resistance, in so far as they are already all over the place’ (Nealon 2008, 105). Refusal is everywhere in the field of everyday life, but there is ‘no single

locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt' (Foucault [1976] 1988, 96) but rather shifting points of resistance that 'inflare certain parts of the body, certain moments in life' (Foucault, 1978, 96). Transgression may take different forms and there are 'numberless potential transgressions' (Bernauer 1987). What is addressed here may be necessary but perhaps is not sufficient in the resistance to neoliberalism; nonetheless it has an immediacy 'in its connection with people's lives' and in relation to 'concrete questions, difficult cases, revolutionary movements, reflections and evidence ... It is all a social enterprise' (Foucault 1991, 159). The point is that in neoliberal economies, sites of government and points of contact are also sites for the possibility of refusal. However, the starting point for a politics of refusal is the site of subjectivity. It is a struggle over and against what it is we have become, what it is that we do not want to be.

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Notes

1. Foucault does not offer a definition of truth; rather, he provides a multi-faceted characterisation (Prado 2006, 81).
2. Perhaps this is something like Du Bois' (1905/1995) idea of double consciousness, a form of living between a damaged oppressed self and a sense of who you might want to be, beyond oppression.

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