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British Journal of Sociology of Education: Review Symposium

Stephen Ball (2017) *Foucault as Educator*. London, Springer

88 pages

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Foucault as Educator is part of the 'SpringerBriefs in Education' series. Each volume in the set is tasked with providing 'a concise introduction to the life and work of a key thinker in education' to enable 'readers to get acquainted with their major contributions to educational theory and/or practice in a fast and easy way' (<https://www.springer.com/series/8914>).

This book is certainly not a 'fast and easy' introduction to the work of Foucault. While relatively short, it is both nuanced and extensive in its coverage of Foucault's concepts, ideas and methods. Ball draws from the full range of Foucault's studies on punishment, sexuality, madness and the human sciences. These studies have delivered a vast array of concepts, including discipline, normalisation and the panopticon, as well as methodologies such as archaeology and genealogy which are now widely applied within the field of education research. He also includes in his analysis Foucault's talks and lectures such as those delivered at the College de France published as *Security, Territory, Population* (1977).

The aim of *Foucault as Educator* is not to 'rehearse Foucault' or to offer a 'textual interrogation' of his ideas but to explore what we can learn from Foucault as an educator to 'enable us to think about education differently'(xiv). The impetus for the book is Ball's quest to confront his 'own failings as a Foucauldian educator in a neoliberal university and as a modernist' (xii). Ball is particularly interested in Foucault's techniques - his use of paradox as an empirical and analytic device, his technique of reversal which helps him to critique what is taken for granted or to politicise the depoliticised, his use of key words in a different sense, with different meaning and his use of demonstration as a technique - as tools to support the writing of alternative subjectivities which might support refusal and resistance of the current regime. The book therefore focuses on 'the form and style of [Foucault's] scholarly and philosophical practice as much as the content of his lectures and writing' (xiv); 'it is an

attempt to begin to envision education as an ethos of transgression and aesthetic self-fashioning' (xiii).

Ball succeeds in offering a detailed and wide-ranging exploration of the remarkable work of Foucault and its take-up within education. The three substantive chapters feature a brief abstract and a set of key words. Each introduces Foucault's narrative with Ball proceeding to elaborate and extend these ideas. He does so by drawing on the work of a select group of academics who have used Foucault in their own work (xvi) - more on this later. The book also makes excellent use of email exchanges between the author and three male teachers in the US and UK to add considerable depth to the analysis. Ball envisions such exchanges as part of the process of re-writing education.

The first chapter provides a familiar overview of Foucault's vision of the school as an apparatus of disciplinary power. Drawing from Allen's 2014 work (cited in Ball 2017, xv), Ball shows education as a form of benign violence which operates through disciplinary techniques and expert knowledge to construct a 'pedagogical machine'. Rather than going to school, Ball argues, we emerge from school as subjects already constituted by discipline (30). The next two chapters set about sifting through Foucault's guidance on how we might dismantle what we have learned and 'refuse what we have become'. Ball argues that critique in Foucault's sense, is itself education of a kind. He asks what we can learn from Foucault the teacher to 'uneducate' ourselves. He answers that 'we are invited to learn an attitude, a method, in relation to our own historicity, and our existence within and in relation to power. We ... learn the possibility of modifying our relation to our self and to our mode of existence' (35). That is, to understand our constitution within power/knowledge in order to confront the limits of ourselves and to engage in what Foucault referred to as 'ethical discomfort'.

Chapter three is where much of the originality and dynamism of the book is centred; it moves the focus on to subjectivity and Foucault's later work on 'the core of the self' or 'pedagogy of the self'. We continue to read about the work of others but they appear less intrusive than in the previous chapters. Authors are drawn on to expand, elaborate and clarify Foucault's ideas and to support the interpretation of the accounts of the teachers. While the teachers are based in schools, the text and the analysis speaks

loudly to those of us working within the elite, white neoliberal university space. Ball refers to the gripping but not totalising power that is operationalised through disciplinary mechanisms such as the performance review, disciplinary codes or standards and academic role expectations. Drawing on *Parrhesia* or truth-telling/fearless speech, Ball (67) explores the conditions and characteristics that are essential if we are to speak 'truth to power' and begin to write ourselves differently in relation to neoliberal education policy. This truth-telling or fearless speech is 'not assertion but refusal and critique, a confrontation of the normative with the ethical' (67). Ball proceeds to argue that '[s]peakers need to be frank, sincere and truly risk-taking'. Critical reflection alone is insufficient; 'it is about where you stand and what you do today, now – a provocation to respond to and engage in and develop the arts of misconduct' (69). One means of such self-constitution, Ball suggests is the technique of *self-writing*. Citing the work of Michael Peters, Ball refers to *self-writing* as the government of the self, a 'deliberate, self-conscious attempt to explain and express oneself to an audience within which the individual exists and seeks confirmation' (70).

In taking on and expanding Foucault's later works on 'self-writing' and 'self-care', Ball, addresses (implicitly, at least) some of the criticism levelled at Foucault for his all-embracing and somewhat claustrophobic account of power. MacNay for example, argues that in Foucault's earlier work, the reduction of individuals to passive bodies makes it difficult to see how resistance could come about (MacNay 1992). Ramazanoglu (1993) also criticises the lack of a value-position or an ideological base from which individuals might resist this power. Understandably, given the length and scope of the book (it is not about Foucault) Ball avoids extensive engagement with these debates. This does not mean that issues of power/resistance and ideology are steered away from altogether. On page 41, for example, he writes:

Foucault believed that we are more able to recognise power and its oppressions in the immediacy of our social relations than in the abstract politics of labour and capital. Critique is thus aimed at specific points of power, immediate institutional settings and resistance is a set of provocations, mundane rebellions, without reference to pre-established moral positions or commitments or even clear goals and purposes.

Having read *Foucault as Educator* at the tail-end of the University and College Union (UCU) strike in 2018, I was particularly interested in these questions about the mode and basis for resistance. How do we move from the individual acts of 'critique aimed at specific points of power' or indeed from the individual project of *self-writing* to a collective truth-telling to bring about real change? Is it possible to imagine an alternative form of education without starting from a particular ideological position? The UCU strike began as a dispute over pensions but soon grew into collective critique of the neoliberal university. Academics working both within their local union branches and through the medium of social media, began to share possibilities for alternative education relations and structures. Many publically refused/questioned the corporatised values and assumptions that have become normalised within UK universities. However, the momentum that was built soon dissipated once the strike ended. Even during the most optimistic moments of the struggle, which drew together academics from a range of different backgrounds, too many colleagues (including those who research and write about inequalities) were unwilling give up the privileged status afforded to them by accountability mechanisms such as the Research Assessment Exercise. How is alternative *self-writing* to happen when so many benefit from the exclusionary spaces of the elite academy?

A related issue is that in speaking truth to power, not all educators operate on a level playing field. Ball acknowledges that '[t]echnologies of the self are not enacted in a vacuum, but always within a web of human relations of mutuality and sociality' (70). I wanted him explore this in a little more detail since we know that the power relations that are embedded in and sustain modern educational systems, position people differently, according to ability, class, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. The work of black activist scholars like Audre Lorde, Patricia Hills-Collins and more recently Heidi Mirza, Sara Ahmed and Kalwant Bhopal among others, gives a telling account of how the fearless speech of some scholars, particularly black women, is often silenced or may be heard as anger. If they attempt the sort of disruption that Ball advocates in this book, they are often accused doing so with malicious intent (Ahmed 2018; see also Gabriel and Tate, 2017; Bhopal, 2018). With educators having different starting points, what is

said and how it is communicated is important, as Ball argues, but so too, are the social filters through which the legitimacy of the speaker is framed.

Relating back to the 'Foucault and Education' experts, I also wanted genuinely to know more about why the select group of academics listed in the Introduction (xvi) are predominantly (if not all) white and western-based. Is it because there has been little take-up of Foucault by scholars of colour in education? If so, why is this? So many of Foucault's ideas were written in parallel with, or expanded by, the work of scholars of colour including Edward Said, Frantz Fanon and Audre Lorde. Yet, within the field of education few black scholars identify or are identified as experts on Foucault. Perhaps Foucault's eurocentrism and his silence on Western colonialism is a factor (see Said 1986; Spivak 1988). Young (1995) has questioned this especially because Foucault's tools have been pivotal to the birth of the field of postcolonial studies and understandings about race. He argues that while 'Foucault had a lot to say about power, [...] he was curiously circumspect about the ways in which it has operated in the arenas of race and colonialism. His virtual silence on these issues is striking' (1995, 1).

Of course, some of the questions that I have raised are beyond the scope of this very fine and thought-provoking book. I have no doubt *Foucault as Educator* will be widely read and referenced. It looks set to become another Ball-Foucault classic.

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