

A RESPONSE

Reading and re-writing the self: an epilogue

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Reading this issue of the LRE is strange and salutary. Two different feelings are evoked. The first is that for any scholar, perhaps the most important thing is to be taken seriously. And these articles do that. The second is that I wonder who this figure is, this Stephen Ball, who haunts the pages of these articles. Is it someone I know or who I might be, or is it a fictional character who is written or made up by these texts, a literary construction who is brought into some kind of existence by the writers of the papers, but who otherwise does not exist. In both senses, the production of these articles serves to render Stephen Ball, as author and writer, as some sort of coherent scholarly subject, as the producer of ideas that seem to have a sensible relation to each other over a period of time or which can be made to seem sensible through the skills of commentators. And I am grateful for that. Even so what gets obscured by the focus on this individual scholar is that he, like most scholars, is not as individual as all that. I have been enabled to think, and been supported, challenged, encouraged and informed by many collaborators and colleagues and interlocutors. As a scholar on paper, I am a composite of these experiences, and when I think and write people like Richard Bowe, Carolina Junemann, Meg Maguire, Antonio Olmedo, Diane Reay and Carol Vincent are in my head and in my words, as are now a long list of students who have required me to explain myself better or who have picked up and run with my ill-formed provocations.

In many respects, I have always – well sometimes – sought to write in ways that elude conventions and escape from established positions even if I constantly collapse back into them. That is to write ‘between’ rather than ‘in’, to think differently but also tentatively. In many ways my will to write is based on dissatisfactions – the conceptual inadequacies of work on school organisations and education policy analysis, the desperate misrepresentation of ‘how schools do policy’, the erasure of money and power as concerns for educational research, the way in which teachers and researchers are rendered as manipulable dupes by those Nikolas Rose calls *grey scientists*, and the antiquated politics of some forms of critical theory. My responses to these ‘problems’ are constructed through a method which is, I accept, deeply paradoxical – made up of a commitment to ethnography on the one hand, and the adoption of Foucauldian analytic sensibilities on the other. That is, a particular and perverse confrontation between theory and data. This is evident in the relationships between policy network analysis and microphysical flows of power, and the dualistic analysis of policy as text and discourse, as topology and dispositif, as agency and subjectivity, and the making up of the experience of neoliberal subjects through the mundane practices of performativity. Nonetheless, somewhere between hermeneutics and post-structuralism I remain concerned about very modernist problems of inequality – social class and race in particular. My work on *choice* has been one focus of this. We have to think about new and old inequalities together – about both poverty and subjectivity. But to quote Foucault: ‘Everything I do,

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I do in order that it may be of use' (Defert and Ewald 2001, 911–912). The point is not to tell people what to think, but to provide tools with which it is possible to think. Perhaps, the most satisfying aspect of the papers in this volume, for me, is the evidence that they offer of usefulness. There is another but related kind of usefulness which underpins my work. The desire to show that, 'things are not as necessary as all that'. The ultimate relevance of what I write is not based on citations or recognition, but on engagements with teachers, trade unions and educational movements.

I am very clear that my work is always tentative, always unfinished, it is a process of development – of dead ends and possibilities. The next piece of writing I hope will be just that bit better than the last. To quote Foucault again: 'When I write I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before' (Foucault 1991, 27).

References

- Defert, D., and F. Ewald eds. 2001. *Dits et Écrits 1954–1988. Vol. II, 1976–1988 Michel Foucault*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Foucault, M. 1991. *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori*. New York: Semiotext(e).