INTELLECTUALS OR TECHNICIANS? THE URGENT ROLE OF THEORY IN EDUCATIONAL STUDIES

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ABSTRACT: This paper discusses some problems with the field of educational studies and considers the role of post-structuralist theory in shifting the study of education away from a ‘technical rationalist’ approach (as evidenced in the case of much research on educational management and school effectiveness) towards an ‘intellectual intelligence’ stance that stresses contingency, disidentification and risk-taking.

Keywords: educational studies, social theory, policy science, policy scholarship.

1. GAME OPENING

In this paper I reflect upon my practice as an educational researcher and theorist and, in more general terms, consider the current state of educational studies. In doing so, I allow myself to be playful and, perhaps, at times outrageous. I am not attempting to be definitive. What I offer here is coming close to an approximation of something I might hope to say more clearly in the future. The spirit of what I am attempting, and some of the substance I wish to argue, are conveyed rather effectively in the following quotation from Michel Foucault:

I wouldn’t want what I may have said or written to be seen as laying any claims to totality. I don’t try to universalize what I say; conversely what I don’t say isn’t meant to be thereby disqualified as being of no importance. My work takes place between unfinished abutments and anticipatory strings of dots. I like to open out a space of research, try it out, then if it doesn’t work try again somewhere else. On many points ... I am still working and don’t yet know whether I am going to get anywhere. What I say ought to be taken as ‘propositions’, ‘game openings’ where those who may be interested are invited to join in; they are not meant as dogmatic
assertions that have to be taken or left en bloc... (Foucault, 1991, pp. 90–91)

My 'proposition', then, my 'game opening' here, is that educational studies is in a sorry state and in danger of becoming sorrier. That is to say, the weak grammars of educational studies, those concepts, relations and procedures upon which it rests, are becoming weaker. The serial segmented structures, those differentiating rituals which distinguish us from each other and from other fields of knowledge, are becoming more detached and insulated from one another. As Basil Bernstein might put it, the invisible light that shines waneley within the knowledge structures of educational studies is in danger of being snuffed out entirely.

It is hardly novel to suggest that the discourses and knowledge structures of educational studies are shifting in response to the political and ideological repositioning of the academy and of scholarship in the United Kingdom. It is important to make it clear that the state of affairs I am addressing here is, at least in part, symptomatic of a more wholesale reworking of the relationship between higher education and research and the state. However, the resultant changes in the practices of scholarship seem particularly marked and particularly paradoxical in the field of educational studies. More specifically, what I have called the sorry state of educational studies seems to me to stem in part from both the wholesale appropriation of other 'unreflexive' and utilitarian languages and an internal lack of dynamism, exacerbated by intellectual isolationism as educational studies pointedly ignores significant theoretical developments in cognate fields. The problem with educational studies, I am arguing, is that they are both too open to other discourses and not open enough.

This state of affairs is my topic. I want to spend some time exploring the problems with educational studies as I see them. I shall then consider the role of theory in reconstituting a new present for educational studies and conclude with some brief thoughts about the nature of theorising and the problem with theory. While bearing in mind the initial disclaimer quoted above, I will have, necessarily, to indulge in some generalisations. I must also acknowledge from the start that I will leave my argument only partially developed as well as embedded with contradictions. At times I will be likely to appear self-destructive and perhaps intellectually schizophrenic. I shall leave the reader to judge. I must also acknowledge that what I say may have somewhat less relevance to some disciplines within educational studies than it does to others.
2. British Sociology of Education as a Case in Point

To begin I want to take as my particular case in point my own discipline — the sociology of education — but, as I say, I intend my thesis to be more generalised. I shall rehearse a kind of vulgar history of the discipline in order to establish what I call the reincorporation of educational studies.

British sociology of education had its beginnings in and was primarily disseminated from the London School of Economics. The methods and politics of the subject were, from the late 1930s to the late 1960s, driven by the methods and politics of that institution. This placed education as part of both the post-war social reconstruction of Britain and the establishment of a modern welfare state. The concerns of researchers were focussed initially upon the problems of mass participation in the education system and the debilitating effects, for some children, of economic and material deprivation. The sometimes unarticulated assumption of the handful of education researchers at work at this time appeared to be that if these extrinsic sources of inequality could be removed or ameliorated then the repeatedly evident and apparently tight bond between educational attainment and social class could be broken. Crucially, the particular focus upon social class differences served to establish social class as the major, almost the only, dependent variable in sociological research for the next forty years. During this period, the sociology of education aspired to, and occasionally achieved, a positive and influential relationship with policy-making. Particular policy solutions, based upon the outcomes of empirical research, were pursued, particularly in relation to Labour Party policy-making. Both the discipline and its politics and its relationships to policy were set within the grooves of an upproblematic progressive, utopian modernism. This was the enlightenment project writ small. Research linked to ameliorative state policies focussed upon the achievement of equality and prosperity — the better educated we are the better off we are, individually and collectively. The discourse of this policy optimism was founded upon notions like the ‘wasted pool of talent’ and ‘compensatory education’.

As we know this dual optimism (that attached to the welfare state and that embedded in the practices and discourses of the discipline itself) did not last. In the 1970s the academic discourse of programmatic optimism was to be dramatically and decisively replaced by one of radical pessimism. The interpretations of the causes and solutions of inequality were scattered to the winds. Policy became an irrelevance as the reproduction of unequal social relations were discovered to be lurking stubbornly in every classroom nook and
cranny and every staffroom conversation; while at the same time they were rooted in the abstract needs of the state and the inevitable and inescapable requirements and workings of the economy. The teacher as cultural dope was now the subject of derision from all sides for failing to deliver either fairness or prosperity. A relationship between research and policy (at least at national level) was now not just pointless but also politically incorrect. Educational researchers found themselves grounded between negativity and complicity. With the collapse of the relationship between educational research and policy and the beginnings of a growing suspicion of liberal expertise within educational politics, the vacuum in the arena of educational policymaking was skilfully filled by the organic intellectuals of the new right.

In the 1980s things became more complicated as class analysis was displaced as the primary variable with race, gender and, later, disability and sexual orientation coming to the fore both in analytical perspectives and in a new but tentative liaison between theory and practice. But race and gender studies were only two parts of a more thorough-going fragmentation of the sociology of education as some researchers began to attach themselves to the industry of educational reform. While some one-time and would-be sociologists and other educational researchers now reinvented themselves as feminists or anti-racists, and indeed brought to educational studies a much needed infusion of invigorating new theory, others began to take on new identities as ‘school effectiveness researchers’ and ‘management theorists’. Around this latter kind of work, a new relationship to policy, or rather inside policy, was forged. Issues related to system design, analysis of provision and social justice were replaced by implementation studies focussed on issues like ‘quality’, ‘evaluation’, ‘leadership’ and ‘accountability’.

3. Policy Science and Policy Scholarship

In the 1990s whole areas of the sociology of education, specifically, and educational studies generally have been thoroughly reincorporated into the political project and discourse of policy and of educational reform. In some respects the discipline has come full circle. It is tempting here to consider this reincorporation by rehashing Brian Fay’s (1975) distinction between policy science and policy scholarship. It is a temptation I shall not resist. Fay defines policy science as ‘that set of procedures which enables one to determine the technically best course of action to adopt in order to implement a decision or achieve a goal. Here the policy scientist

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doesn't merely clarify the possible outcomes of certain courses of action, he (sic) actually chooses the most efficient course of action in terms of the available scientific information' (p. 14). This, Fay suggests, is a type of 'policy engineering': the 'policy engineer . . . is one who seeks the most technically correct answer to political problems in terms of available social scientific knowledge' (p. 14). Here policy is both de-politicised and thoroughly technicised. The preview of the policy scientist is limited to, and by, the agenda of social and political problems defined elsewhere and by solutions already embedded in scientific practice. Fay calls this 'the sublimation of politics' (p. 27).

It also produces, I suggest, another effect. Through a combination of financial restructuring and Faustian deal-making, the academy is tamed. As a result, research perspectives and research funding are increasingly tightly tied to the policy agendas of government. Moreover, the already weak autonomy of higher education is redefined as part of the cause of the nation's economic problems. Further, this problem-solving technicism rests upon an uncritical acceptance of moral and political consensus and operates within the hegemony of instrumental rationalism or, as Fay puts it, 'man (sic) must plan, and the function of the social sciences is to provide the theoretical foundation that makes this planning possible' (p. 27). In this scientific and technical project for research, the debates and conflicts which link policies to values and morals are displaced by bland rationalist empiricism, and the best we can aspire to is to be 'integrated critics' (Eco, 1994).

But, again, other effects are produced here. Firstly, this instrumental, rational empiricism is implicated and interested in the social construction of those subjects about which it speaks. It produces what Donzelot (19??) calls the 'landscape of the social' within which it then acts (I return to this later). Furthermore, in this 'will to knowledge' and the complex interplay between knowledge and the objects of its concern, the very nature of 'the social' is captured and constrained by social science's classifications and nosologies and by the drive to achieve parsimonious and totalising conceptions of social structures and processes. The epistemic assumptions of order, structure, function, cause and effect are variously mobilised to represent 'the social' and, in doing so, work to exclude many of the mobile, complex, ad hoc, messy and fleeting qualities of lived experience. We become locked into the simple but powerful and very productive assumption that 'the social' is susceptible to parsimonious and orderly totalising conceptions. Or, to use a slightly different lexicon, drawing again from Foucault, we can say that:
In appearance, or rather, according to the mask it bears, historical consciousness is neutral, devoid of passions and committed solely to truth. But, if it examines itself and if, more generally, it interrogates the various forms of scientific consciousness in its history it finds that all these forms and transformations are aspects of the will to knowledge: instinct, passion, the inquisitor's devotion, cruel subtlety and malice . . . (Foucault, 1977, p. 162)

4. MANAGEMENT THEORY AND SCHOOL EFFECTIVENESS RESEARCH

Perhaps it would be helpful at this point if I were to develop an example of policy science at work in a way which begins to illustrate some of the variety of points I have adumbrated above. 'Management theory' offers one example on which I have written previously (Ball, 1990 and 1994). So, let me move away from that slightly by considering the relationship between management theory and school effectiveness research. Again, my style of analysis draws on Foucault, in particular I shall employ his 'master trope' reversal. I will thus be seeking the negative activity of discourse.

Management theories, as modes of objectification, define human beings as subjects to be managed. This is a 'discourse of right' which legitimates the exercise of authority. Its primary instrument is a hierarchy of continuous and functional surveillance. Effectiveness research can be seen to have played a crucial role in laying the groundwork for the reconceptualisation of the school within which management discourse operates and has played its part in providing a technology of organisational measurement and surveillance. By technology here I refer to 'coherent or contradictory forms of managing and activating a population' which, like Bentham's panopticon, lend themselves to three particular polyvalent tactical applications.

First, effectiveness studies and school-difference studies re-centred the school as the focus of causation in explanations of student performance and variations in levels of achievement; displacing or rendering silent other explanations related to the embeddedness of education in social and economic contexts. And, in so far as the gaze of 'effectiveness' provided a scientific basis for the possibility of 'blaming' the school, it fitted perfectly (in terms of theoretical unity) into the discourses of derision which targetted schools as 'causes' of general social and economic problems within society at large. In addition, the focus on measurable outcomes also articulated directly with the political process of the commodification of education involved in the creation of an education market.

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Second, this research provided a scientific concomitant to the political re-emphasis on excellence, diversity and selection and the attempt to develop methods of appraisal which can be used to identify (and punish) ‘weak’ and ‘inadequate’ teachers, a process that feeds into systems of incentive and performance-related pay. Third, the effectiveness studies developed a technology of control which enables the monitoring and ‘steering’ of schools by applying ‘neutral’ indicators; they also continually ‘tap’ and measure more of that which is schooling, including ‘the “deep structure” of pupil attitudes and perceptions’ (Reynolds, 1990, p. 21). Thus, significant discursive and disciplinary work is done by effectiveness research, which is even further reaching in its implications when linked to notions of accountability, school review and school development planning. Here we may see the play and effects of power and domination at work in the direct relationships and immediate structures of school organisation. These are ‘the panopticism of every day’ which are constructed and enacted ‘below the level of emergence of the great apparatuses and the great political struggles’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 223).

In effect, through such schemes, teachers are entrapped into taking responsibility for their own ‘disciplining’. Indeed teachers are urged to believe that their commitment to such processes will make them more ‘professional’. Moreover, effectiveness is a technology of normalisation. Such research both constructs a normative model of the effective school and abnormalises the ineffective or ‘sick’ school. In relation to the concepts of ‘review’, ‘development’ and ‘self-evaluation’, it then draws upon the ‘confessional technique’ (an admission of transgressions and a ritual of atonement) as a means of submission and transformation. The secular confession is founded on the notion of normal as against abnormal transposed from the religious opposition of sin and piety. Such a transposition is most clearly evident in the methods of ‘appraisal’.

The normalising effects of ‘effectiveness’ are noted by Laurie Angus. In a recent review of school effectiveness literature, he comments that ‘predictability and efficiency are valued to the extent that schools would surely become dramatically more boring places than they are already’ (Angus, 1993, p. 343). He goes on to suggest that ‘not only is there a lack of engagement with sociological (or other theory), but also effectiveness work is largely trapped in a logic of common sense which allows it, by and large, to be appropriated into the Right’s hegemonic project... it advocates an isolationist, apolitical approach to education in which it is assumed that educational problems can be fixed by technical means and inequality can be managed within the walls of schools and classrooms provided that teachers and pupils

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follow "correct" effective school procedures" (p. 343). By such means 'normalising judgements' are turned upon the whole school and each school is set in a field of comparison - which again articulates with other current aspects of educational policy. An 'artificial' order is laid down, 'an order defined by natural and observable processes' (Foucault, 1979, p. 179). The definitions of behaviour and performance embedded in the order and the norm are arrived at 'on the basis of two opposed values of good and evil' (p. 180). The good school and the bad school, effective and ineffective practice. Through 'value-giving' measures the constraint of a conformity that must be achieved is introduced.

If self-examination fails, the expert, the consultant, the moral disciplinarian is at hand to intervene with their models of 'effective practice'. In this role the scientific and the moral are tightly intertwined. In effect, given the logic of management, ineffectiveness is seen as a disorder of reason and as such susceptible to cure by the use of appropriate techniques of organisation.

5. RE-ENVISIONING EDUCATIONAL STUDIES VIA CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY

I could go on, but my point here is to begin to explore an aspect of educational study and educational research by employing a different theoretical language and theoretical perspective, to focus upon unintended and overlooked consequences, so as to render our practice critically problematic. I am also seeking to demonstrate some of the ways in which our research and 'scientific' conceptualisations can be tied back into broader political projects and social processes and to the functions of managing and neutralising social problems. A facade of objectivity obscures this process and further empowers the research enterprise with the capacity to categorise, professionalise and contain a specified social problem.

By employing this kind of critical reflexivity we can re-envision educational studies as a whole as a disciplinary technology, part of the exercise of disciplinary power. Management, effectiveness and appraisal, for example, as I have suggested, work together to locate individuals in space, in a hierarchical and efficiently visible organisation. In and through our research the school and the teacher are captured within a perfect diagram of power; and the classroom is increasingly one of those 'small theatres', in which 'each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible' (Foucault, 1979, p. 200). It is thus that governmentality is achieved through the minute mechanisms of everyday life and the application of 'progressive'
and efficient technical solutions to designated problems. Governmentality is 'the ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics, that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population' (Foucault, 1979, p. 20).

It is in this way that epistemological development within the human sciences, like education, functions politically and is intimately imbriated in the practical management of social and political problems. The scientific vocabulary may distance the researcher (and the manager) from the subjects of their action but, at the same time, it also constructs a gaze that renders the 'landscape of the social' ever more visible. Through methodical observation the 'objects of concern' identified in this landscape are inserted into a network of ameliorative or therapeutic practices. The point is that the idea that human sciences like educational studies stand outside or above the political agenda of the management of the population, or somehow have a neutral status embodied in a free-floating progressive rationalism, are dangerous and debilitating conceits.

But now I have run ahead of myself and I want to return to Fay's work to consider the alternatives to policy science more closely. Fay (1975) offers two alternatives to policy science; one is interpretive social science, and the other is critical social science. Both are familiar enough I think not to require extensive discussion here, except to say this: Fay argues that 'an interpretative social science promises to reveal to the social actors what they and others are doing, thereby restoring communication by correcting the ideas that they have about each other and themselves' (p. 90). Now that may be an oversimplification, but I shall let that go at present and note Fay's comment that interpretative social science is deeply conservative in that 'it leads to reconciling people to their social order' (p. 91). That may be equally contestable, but again I shall leave that argument for another time. Fay's second alternative, critical social science, rests on the proposition that 'social theory does not simply offer a picture of the way that a social order works. Instead, a social theory is itself a catalytic agent of change within the complex of social life which it analyses' (p. 110). Now this is an attractive and popular intellectual position for policy scholars. It is a position I find, at least some of the time, personally comfortable and conducive. But is it a real alternative to the failings that Fay finds in policy science? Only partially I think. We need to think carefully here about the use and meaning of terms, especially those in Fay's final phrase, 'a catalytic agent of change within the complex of social life which it analyses'. I have three nagging and related problems with this formulation. First,
social science, here, is set over and against the social, social life, which it acts upon and analyses but is not part of. The critical social scientist is not seen as part of the struggle for 'truth' but is placed above and outside it with clean hands and clean conscience, representing the 'conscience of society as a whole'. Social scientists are not seen to have interests, careers or identities at stake here; they are free moral agents, unencumbered by everyday ideological limitations and personal ambitions.

The second worry is that 'the critical' in critical social science is too limited and does not extend to a reflexive consideration of the ways in which social science constitutes 'the social' and its own ethical subjects; in this case the 'falsely conscious' and those of 'raised consciousness'. This spartan and familiar duality, upon which the critical social scientist then works, does significant injustice to the 'complex of social life' to which Fay himself refers and trades on a rather simplistic notion of unified and stable social subjects.

Third, in the educative, revelatory role which Fay attributes to the critical social scientist, an uncritical rationalism and progressive humanism are smuggled back into the social scientist's practice in the form of 'consciousness raising'. This is achieved by offering to social actors 'an alternative conception ... of what they are' a simple essentialism, in other words. I am not arguing that Fay's model of critical social science is irredeemably flawed, but its epistemological emphases are in danger of collapsing it back into that which it seeks to distinguish itself from. Cohen (1993) makes the point more dramatically:

I propose to withdraw the automatic 'cognitive advantage' of university critical writing, on the grounds that no such advantage is warranted: our writings are outfitted for the grooves of 'reason', 'society', 'need' – each of which is a cosmos of mythology unto itself. In making this withdrawal, I am more or less expressing 'no confidence' in the essential activities of the modern university. (p. x)

6. TOWARDS A POST-STRUCTURAL ALTERNATIVE

So can I discern still another position in all this? Is there another, a fourth way? In the way things like this are supposed to work it is probably incumbent upon me to attempt to do so. But I will make my attempt in a rather elliptical fashion I am afraid. Before doing so I shall return once more to Fay's distinctions.

In contemplating my recent visits to British Educational Research
Association conferences I want to extend Fay’s nosology. Alongside policy scholarship, policy engineering and policy science we also need to recognise the role in educational studies of policy entrepreneurship. I intend the term to carry a variety of meanings. It seems clear to me that there are areas of activity which attach themselves to educational studies which have bases in institutions of higher education, which lead to the giving of papers at academic conferences, which display little or no pretence of scholarship or science. The point of policy entrepreneurship is not to research practices, but to change them into an image of policy. It rests on the proselytising and, in some cases, the sale of ‘technically correct answers’. The entrepreneur’s interests, in terms of identity and career, are bound up directly and immediately, rather than once removed, as in the case of policy science and critical social science, with the success of their dissemination.

We might pick out ‘the self-managing school’ as an example of one such focus of dissemination, ‘enterprise in higher education’ is another, ‘teacher appraisal’ another, ‘mentoring’ and ‘partnership’ in initial teacher education are others. The policy entrepreneur is committed to the application of certain technical solutions or organisations and contexts which are taken a priori to be in need of structural and/or cultural change. Here inquiry is replaced by belief; questioning by subjects becomes resistance; research is replaced by experience and common sense; data are displaced by anecdotes. I cannot help but be reminded of C. Wright-Mills’ comment in The Sociological Imagination that:

There is no necessity for working social scientists to allow the political meaning of their work to be shaped by the ‘accidents of its setting’, or its use to be determined by the purposes of other men (sic). It is quite within their powers to discuss its meanings and decide upon its uses as matters of their own policy. (Wright-Mills, 1977, p. 198).

But it is possible again to situate such developments in a broader context? In the era of late modernity the urge to represent is verging on the obsessional and forms of certainty have become valuable commodities as we seek both to know the world a little better than those with whom we compete and assert greater and more detailed control over our environment. Unmediated knowledgability has its attractions and its price in many fields of the human sciences (Beck, 1992).

It is not difficult to anticipate the direction in which I am now moving – towards a post-structural, post-epistemological alternative. I wish to argue that the absence of theory leaves the researcher prey to
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unexamined, unreflective preconceptions and dangerously naive ontological and epistemological a priori. I shall rail and curse at the absence of theory and argue for theory as a way of saving educational studies from itself.

As a further aside, it is important to note that the collapse or abandonment of theory within educational studies has its parallels elsewhere in the field of education, like, for example, in the removal of theory work from teacher education courses and the concomitant reduction of teacher development to a matter of skills and competences and on the job training. Teaching like educational studies is thus reconstituted and depoliticised. It is changed from being an intellectual endeavour to being a technical process. Indeed this coincidence of change is in no way surprising for these technologies are all part of the same contemporary dispositif -- the unity of a discourse through a period of time, 'a limited space of communication'.

Manifestations of this dispositif seem to be increasingly common in my post. Two recent examples come to mind. First, a notice announcing the founding of the UK Evaluation Society which is intended, in part, 'to represent ... the views and interests of the evaluation profession'\(^3\). Second, an invitation to subscribe to a new journal, Quality Assurance in Education. Journals and societies are key sites within the academy from which a discursive lexicon may be articulated and disseminated.

6. The Role of Theory

But how can theory help? What is the point of theory? The point is that theory can separate us from 'the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibilities of no longer seeing, doing or thinking what we are, do or think?' (Mahon, 1992, p. 122). Theory is a vehicle for 'thinking otherwise'; it is a platform for 'outrageous hypotheses' and for 'unleashing criticism'. Theory is destructive, disruptive and violent. It offers a language for challenge, and modes of thought, other than those articulated for us by dominant others. It provides a language of rigour and irony rather than contingency. The purpose of such theory is to de-familiarise present practices and categories, to make them seem less self-evident and necessary, and to open up spaces for the invention of new forms of experience.

Now such a register, I realise, grates upon the anglo-saxon, positivist, utilitarian ear. We prefer our intellectualism expressed in the more sober tones and nuances of semantic deliberation and rational planning. Within the British tradition, intellectualism, science or scholarship often only seem to be regarded as valid and

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useful when weighed and measured by concrete outcomes. Chris Shilling (1993) made just this point in a review of a collection of papers drawn from recent work in the sociology of education. He took it as sign of the times that the editors ‘should have to justify the sociology of education and, by implication their own collection, by a highly reflexive positioning of it within an essentially utilitarian tradition of research based upon measuring the social outcomes of educational policies’ (p. 103). He goes on to describe the sociology of education as ‘a discipline which has been in decline in Britain for far too long’ (p. 103). In effect, the sociology of education and educational studies are in a state of ‘intellectual stagnation’. Most particularly, we are experiencing what Randall Collins refers to as the ‘loss of cultural capital’, that is the neglect of significant ideas, concepts and theories. Or, as Shilling puts it in his review: ‘Quite simply, the contributors to this volume have paid insufficient attention not only to previous traditions in the sociology of education, but to the most important current developments in sociology. Contemporary sociological theories in such areas as modernity, postmodernity, structuration, self-identity, the civilising process, consumption, and the body have much to offer the study of education’ (p. 111). All of this relates back to my initial point about the dangers of isolation. It also illustrates the basic transition, both cultural and structural, which is underway in educational studies – the transition from intellectual intelligence to technical rationalism.

But to return to the role of theory. The point about theory is not that it is simply critical. In order to go beyond the accidents and contingencies which enfold us, it is necessary to start from another position and begin from what is normally excluded. Theory provides this possibility, the possibility of disidentification – the effect of working ‘on and against’ prevailing practices of ideological subjection. The point of theory and of intellectual endeavour in the social sciences should be, in Foucault’s words, ‘to sap power’, to engage in struggle, to reveal and undermine what is most invisible and insidious in prevailing practices. Theories offer another language, a language of distance, of irony, of imagination. And a part of this, as Sheridan puts it, is ‘a love of hypothesis, of invention’ which is also unashamedly ‘a love of the beautiful’ (Sheridan, 1986, p. 223) – as against the bland, technical and desolate languages of policy science and policy entrepreneurship. However, in taking such a stance intellectuals cannot simply seek to rehabit the old redemptive assumptions based upon an unproblematic role for themselves in a perpetual process of progressive, orderly growth or development achieved through scientific and technological ‘mastery’ or control over events or by the assertive
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re-cycling of old dogmas and tired utopias. 'The regime of “truth” gave the intellectual, whose business truth was, a certain “universal” status' (Sheridan, 1980, p. 222). This is no longer available or desirable. The process of disidentification also involves a transformation of intellectuals and their relationship to the “business of truth”. The post-epistemological theorist will eschew the scientific claim to originality, discovery and the improvement of the human condition.

What I am groping towards here is a model of the educational theorist as a cultural critic offering perspective rather than truth; engaged in what Eco calls ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’ (Eco, 1994). Or to put it another way:

Criticism is a matter of flushing out that thought (which animates everyday behaviour) and trying to change it: to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such... As soon as one can no longer think things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult and quite possible. (Foucault, 1988, p. 154)

For Foucault, freedom lies in our ability to transform our relationship to the past, to tradition and much less in being able to control the form and direction that the future will take, in the mad scramble of late modernist life we seem to need to latch on to elusive images of who we are and what our existence means. But, in the place of such rigid and anterior norms and discourses, we must, as Richard Rorty suggests, locate a playing field on which ideas are toyed with and radical ironies explored. In Rorty’s post-epistemological view, edifying conversations, rather than truth-generating epistemological efforts must be the staple of a post-structural social science (Rorty, 1979). To quote Foucault again: ‘I think that there are more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions in our future than we can imagine in humanism as it is dogmatically represented on every side of the political rainbow’ (Foucault, 1988, p. 15)

But will any theory do? I think not! We must consider how as well as why we employ theory. Theory can also work to provide comforting and apparently stable identities for beleaguered academics in an increasingly slippery world. Theory can also serve to conjure up anterior norms and lay its dead hand upon the creativity of the mind. Too often in educational studies theory becomes no more than a mantric reaffirmation of belief rather than a tool for exploration and for thinking otherwise. Such mantric uses of theory typically involve little more than a naming of spaces. This is what Dale (1992) calls ‘theory by numbers’. The map simply needs to be coloured in rather
than researched. We all too easily become stuck in what Althusser (1975) calls a ‘descriptive theory’, a transitional phase in theory development, based upon a ‘special kind of obviousness’ (p. 133). ‘Every descriptive theory’, he argues, ‘thrusts the risk of “blocking” the development of the theory . . .’. The paradox of critical social science is that our rational, humane utopias are always formed within the discourses, dispositifs and epistemes from which we seek to escape. It is the past that is the problem here not the future.

There is another sense in which we need to think about how we theorise. It relates to the ambition of our enterprise and the style and scope of our endeavours. On the one hand, there is a kind of theorising that is parsimonious, certain and closed. This is also typically a hard-edged, essentially male form of knowledge. More often than not, critical social science takes this form and is as a result both too sure of itself and over ambitious. On the other hand, there is a kind of theorising that rests upon complexity, uncertainty and doubt and upon a reflexivity about its own production and its claims to knowledge about the social. What I am trying to convey here is beautifully expressed by Teresa de Lauretis who describes feminist theory as requiring:

leaving or giving up a place that is safe, that is ‘home’ -- physically, emotionally, linguistically, epistemologically -- for another place that is unknown and risky, that is not only emotionally but conceptually other; a place of discourse from which speaking and thinking are at best tentative, uncertain, unguaranteed. (Lauretis, 1990, p. 138)

Disidentification as a practice for educational studies will almost certainly involve a loss of identity, of universal status. It will threaten our certainty and our sense of usefulness. But, maybe, those things have been swept away anyway. The question is do we reiterate our tired, anterior, mantric theories; do we do what ever we have to do to make ourselves useful as technicians of social management, or do we re-invent ourselves as intellectuals and cultural critics?4

I realise in all this that I am teetering between fatalism and scepticism (Sawicki, 1991). Perhaps I am occupying what De Lauretis calls the ‘eccentric’ perspective. Nonetheless, I take some heart from a comment by Andre Gorz who wrote: ‘The beginning of wisdom is the discovery that there exist contradictions of permanent tension with which it is necessary to live and that it is above all not necessary to seek to resolve’.5

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8. Notes

1. A version of this paper was given as the Annual Address to the Standing Conference for Studies of Education, Royal Society of Arts, London, November, 1994.

2. Rorty (1989, p. xvi), for example, defines ethnography rather differently.

3. In the light of some of my earlier discussion, it is fascinating to note that the literature advertising the UK Evaluation Society is disseminated by the Social Science Forum whose motto is 'Understanding Today, Shaping Tomorrow'.

4. One of the most common responses to the original version of this text was to ask whether I am leaving myself and educational studies open to the criticism that the point of philosophy is not simply to describe the world, but to help to change it. My text may be read as deficient in those terms, but I intend to convey very much the opposite message. I would see a specific and situated politics, a politics of the immediate, of the everyday, of the personal as the logical concomitant of my arguments. Furthermore, I am counselling both boldness and modesty. Boldness in relation to the specifics of power, both in our own backyards and in our research sites. Modesty in our normative claims and in our general political ambitions. But this is a dangerous politics very different from the safe, fictive revolutionism that remains a la mode in some parts of the academy.

5. I am grateful to Jo Boaler, Alan Gibb, David Halpin, Iram Siraj-Blatchford, Maria Tsimboukou and Jack Whitehead for their comments on earlier versions of the text. Some of which I have acted upon, others of which remain as food for thought, for further writing and further conversations.

9. References


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