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Accounting for a sociological life: influences and experiences on the road from welfarism to neoliberalism

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This is an attempt to review what I am now. To give some coherence to an incoherent academic life, written against the background of profound changes is what it means to be an academic. The paper begins in a welfare state primary school and ends in a global neoliberal university.

Keywords: subjectivity; welfare state; neoliberalism

Editorial note

This article is the result of a submission that was invited by the Executive Editors of the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. The article is published to coincide with the end of Professor Stephen Ball's term as Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education, University College London, UK.

Introduction

Now seems like a good moment to look back, take stock and prepare to move on.[1] Here I will attempt to give an account of myself to date, to make myself coherent, to write a biography[2] and thus write myself into existence – at least some parts of myself. I will submit myself to the genre of biography and some of its rules and tropes. However, as I write I am also repeatedly made aware of the limits of my coherence, and of the fictional quality of some of what follows. As a life and as an intellectual journey, my personal trajectory is only sensible, to me, as a set of ruptures, tensions and inconsistencies – which remain unresolved and are difficult to explain. My practice as an academic, a researcher and a writer has never been articulated by coherence and 'development' but by uncertainty, by a constant need to challenge and unsettle myself, to reconsider, move on or perhaps move away – to be something else. To quote Foucault: 'When I write I do it

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above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before' (1991, 27). That is particularly true here.

Also, I am incited to represent myself here as a singularity, an individual scholar who writes and thinks as an isolated mind within a network of abstract intellectual influences. This incitement is ever more pressing within the overbearing, competitive calculabilities of the neoliberal university. However, I am not that singular; I have benefited from and been changed by a whole set of intellectual collaborations and friendships of different kinds[3] – with Richard Bowe, Ivor Goodson (with whom I co-founded the *Journal of Education Policy*), Diane Reay, Meg Maguire, Alan Cribb, Maria Tamboukou, Carol Vincent, Carolina Junemann, Michael Apple, David Gillborn and Antonio Olmedo, and others, who have enabled me to think differently, to think outside the limits of my own intellect. I have been supported, challenged, encouraged and informed by these collaborators and colleagues and interlocutors. As a scholar, when I think and write, I am a composite of these experiences and exchanges. Furthermore, a long list of students have required me to explain myself better or have picked up and run with my ill-formed provocations in exciting ways. The intellect I constitute in this narrative is very much a collective effort.

A child of welfare

I was a child of Beveridge,[4] of the welfare state, of free milk and orange juice, of National Health Service dentistry. I am now a neoliberal academic working for a global brand, ranked in international comparison sites, for performance-related pay. My work has recently been rendered into an 'impact narrative' as required by the UK Research Excellence Framework in order to generate an institutional score that will be translated into future research funding. Sometimes in relation to this shift, as Judith Butler puts it, 'I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself' (2004, 15). I am going to try to construct a narrative of myself in relation to this shift, from the welfare state to the neoliberal state, not based on output indicators or productivity or impact, but on the messy reiterative interplay between my experiences of education and my disparate intellectual preoccupations.

My schooling began at Oak Farm Primary School in the London Borough of Hillingdon, and continued at Charville Lane Primary in Hayes. The schools still exist and Charville now presents itself on its website, through its strapline – a common trope in the contemporary education market – as: 'Striving for excellence in the community where everyone matters'. I will return to the education market later. My primary schooling was enjoyable and relatively successful. I often competed with Jennifer Appleyard, whose parents owned the local toy shop, to be top of the class. Places were allocated by end-of-year examinations and a system of stars displayed around the classroom wall. In the striving for position and the reward of being a class monitor I was good with words but not with numbers. I dreaded Mr Robinson's mental arithmetic classes and the mustard-coloured exercise books – I can remember the humiliations of calculations in the head that were done too slowly or too hastily. Charville Lane served a skilled working-class community drawn from council housing on one side and owner-occupied on the other. I was from the latter. I was confident and comfortable at school, I was in my place, a 'fish in water', as Bourdieu (1990) put it. We were prepared well for the 11+[5] and I passed with a score that enabled my parents to choose from a second tier of grammar schools – Hayes Grammar was the local school, but I went to Bishopshalt, two bus rides away, the only child from my school to go there. My best friend Colin Campbell 'failed' the 11+ and went to the local secondary modern school, Mellow Lane. Our friendship did not long survive the division. His attempts to 'call for me' to 'go out' were met with my mother's repeated refrain 'he's doing his homework'. He stopped coming.

My move to Bishopshalt was a disaster, I found myself in a Bourdeurian nightmare. Adrift in an alien world of gowns, masters, Latin and cross-country running. Michael Cornes and I were the only working-class boys in our year; his father – a pilot – drove a plane. The other boys, none of whom very often acknowledged my existence, were almost without exception, it seemed, the sons of lawyers, doctors or stockbrokers. The teaching was dull, didactic and repetitive. Talk, board writing and snap questions. I was now a 'fish out of water', frightened, isolated and very ill at ease. My capitals, which had served me well, were now ill-attuned to the institutional habitus of the grammar school – class distinctions were everywhere, my dispositions were rendered null and void (Bourdieu 1986). Much out-of-lesson time I spent in the wood-panelled library reading Sherlock Holmes – I am not sure why, but it was an escape from the immediate exclusions of the all too real world of Latin grammar and algebra. I assumed the mantle of school failure by the end of the first week. Much of my time at home was spent struggling with gnomic homework tasks, which made little sense to me and for which my parents were unable to give much practical help. Even my facility with words now seemed inadequate. My practical sense had no purchase on this world of middle-class taste, entitlement and easy accomplishment. I was lonely, unhappy and increasingly alienated.

Because of a change in my father's work, I moved after one year to another grammar school with a more mixed demographic than Bishopshalt – it was classed differently. Nonetheless, my relation to grammar schooling remained strained, to say the least, for several years to come. Sport and English literature were my only real interests. I only began to recover any enthusiasm for schoolwork in the sixth form (16–18 years – which I was allowed to enter 'on probation') when for the first time I encountered teachers who could interest and inspire – thank you Mr Rigby. Most of my grammar school teachers could not teach their way out of a wet paper bag!

New universities!!!

I got a place at Sheffield University to do History and Social Studies – I was interested in industrial archaeology – but decided not to go. I wanted to be in the 'real' world, and spent 18 months exploring various career options before university re-emerged as a more preferable option than banking or librarianship. I got a place, by default rather than choice, at the University of Essex, the most politically radical and social diverse of the post-Robbins[6] 'new' universities. In size and social make up and architecture it was rather like a large comprehensive school. I began as a politics major but quickly switched to sociology and chose the sociology of education as my specialist area. My tutor for this was Denis Marsden and his book *Education and the Working Class*, written with Brian Jackson (Jackson and Marsden 1962), was of course on the reading list. Reading the book was an extraordinary experience. It was about me, about my life, my experience, my successes and failures, my struggles. The book remains as potent now as it was then, a true classic of class analysis which anticipated a great deal of Bourdieu's conceptualisation of class processes and the textures of class life (see Ball 2011). Furthermore, this was a practice of sociology that made absolute sense to me. It dealt with inequality in a nuanced but visceral way. It was grounded in mundane struggles and compromises, in the aspirations, failures, complexities and pain of real lives. I decided that this was what I wanted to do with my life – do sociology – tackle inequality through research and make it intolerable. In my second year Colin Lacey's (1970) book *Hightown Grammar* was published, based on an ethnographic study of Salford Grammar school. Again this was a book that captured the processes of schooling, of exclusion, differentiation and normalisation, to which I had been subject; I was enthralled and outraged. This kind of research was a channel, a productive one it seemed, for the dissatisfactions which had shaped my secondary school career, and shaped who I was. Here was a way of relating 'personal troubles' to 'public issues' as C. Wright-Mills (1970) described the 'sociological imagination' – another key reading in my formation as a sociologist. Here was a way of confronting and analysing the 'hidden injuries of class' that were deeply embedded in the English education system – and which in many ways remain so even now, powerful but mostly unacknowledged. Denis Marsden and Colin Lacey were to become significant influences in my career as a sociologist – Colin as my PhD supervisor at the University of Sussex, a model of support and provocation, and Denis as one of the examiners of my PhD thesis (Ball 2011). Denis' small book on comprehensive education policy (Marsden 1971) also played a key role in my emerging interest in the relationship between policy and practice in education. Another encounter with policy and a symbolic moment in the bigger story I am trying to tell here also occurred in my time at Essex. Despite my protests with many others on the streets of Colchester in 1970, Margaret Thatcher – then Secretary of State for Education – 'snatched' away my free school milk. She also raised the cost of school meals.

At the end of my Economic and Social Research Council studentship, which had funded my PhD work, I got a job as a university lecturer at Sussex. I had already been doing some teaching in the department. I had come a long way from Charville Lane, but the class gap between primary school and university occasionally made itself felt and still does sometimes. There are still moments at which my 'distinction' becomes apparent and the structuring and reproductive work of the 'corporeal hexis' come into view – when my voice or embodiment or tastes are out of place.

My research studies, as PhD student and lecturer, of the relations between social classes, schooling practice and education policy were undertaken initially within the sensibilities and epistemology of ethnography. My methods drew inspiration from Colin Lacey's work, and the Chicago school of sociology – I read George Herbert Mead and Herbert Blumer, and thence Howard Becker and Anselm Strauss – both of whom I was later lucky enough to meet. I became part of a community of British ethnographers, mainly as a result of attending the St Hilda's college seminars run by Peter Woods and Martyn Hammersley, and made my own contribution to the development of a British school of educational ethnography. I edited some St Hilda's books and a book series with Ivor Goodson, which collected together a group of exemplary ethnographies of schooling.[7]

In some ways, ethnography as a sensibility and a practice mirrored and suited the tensions of my institutional experiences; it rests on being neither insider nor outsider, but both *Stranger and Friend* as Hortense Powdermaker (1966) puts it in her intellectual autobiography. Even so I retained a sense of quiet disaffection partly in relation to the theoretical and critical limitations of symbolic interactionism and partly in relation to the parochialism of Sussex. My burgeoning interest in policy made me realise the extent to which the real action was going on elsewhere, in London. Theoretically within the disciplinary norms of the sociology of the time it was expected and assumed that we were all a 'something' – a Marxist, a feminist, a critical realist or whatever, enfolded gently in their affirmations and 'transcendental teleologies' (Foucault 1972, 172). This was then more than a matter of perspective; it was an allegiance, a sense of identity and ontological security, a basis of mutual recognition and distinction, and sometimes therefore a source of public disputation and conflict. I still remember the first proper conference I attended, which was marked by acrimonious exchanges between Althusserians and Poulantzians. They interrupted one another's papers and shouted each other down. Being a something, being a 'wise fool', seemed to have many attractions.

The question was, however, what kind of something was I? I read widely and tried out various ontological positions for size but none seemed quite to fit. As 'cognitive and motivating structures', as 'already realised ends – procedures to follow, paths to take …' (Bourdieu 1990, 53), they did not work for me, they did not fit me or perhaps I did not fit them. My moral career at secondary school and as a university sociologist seemed to be mirrored in my theoretical career – both were couched in a sense of unease, a kind of nomadism. Even so, Bourdieu, who has made his appearance above, was to become increasingly significant in my practice of sociology, his 'experiments' with habitus, capitals and field provided the method for a series of Economic and Social Research Council-funded research projects stretching across 20 years, interrogating the subtle and persistent ravages of class inequality, increasingly played out in new ways across the fuzzy terrain of various education marketplaces.

However, in the mid-1980s another French theorist, another Professor of the College de France, who died in 1984, was about to intrude into my modernist anxieties and re-write them. In 1985 I returned to London to become Tutor for the MA in Urban Education at Kings College, following in the footsteps of the admirable Gerald Grace and Geoff Whitty. While in some senses, aesthetically and demographically, King's had much in common with Bishopshalt Grammar – 'how nice to hear a demotic accent' remarked a Professor of French at a reception for new staff – intellectually the challenges and opportunities were invigorating. The MA attracted teachers from across London and beyond who were wanting to bring critical perspectives to bear on their understanding of the relations between schooling and the urban – Meg Maguire was one of my early students. The course syllabus required me to read widely in the then dynamic fields of urban theory and state theory. But most significant and challenging and compelling reading was Foucault's (1979) *Discipline and Punish*. In an odd but different way this was like reading Denis Marsden – a version of what is sometimes called 'the Foucault effect' (Gordon et al. 1991) – it was about me and my experience of schooling, but now I read myself as a subject in the 'eye of power' (Foucault 1980). Like Denis Marsden and Colin Lacey, Foucault's attention was focused on mundane processes and quotidian practices, on minute institutional divisions and categorisations, on 'the little tactics of habit' (1980, 149) but as part of 'an apparatus of total and circulating mistrust' (1980, 158), and as modalities of discipline and regulation. I began the MA course each year by taking students out for a walk around the area of Waterloo station, to look at the Victorian schools, the Peabody housing estates and the local laying-in hospital. I wanted them to see the urban landscape as a grid of power, and as literally and in effect an architecture of the modern state, as a 'disposition of space for economico-political ends'

(1980, 148). My point was that power was literally made visible and visceral as architecture and space, and as practices of division and exclusion. Concomitantly, inside these institutions, 'Technical social science began to take form within the context of administration' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983, 134); that is, as professional expertise – teachers, social workers, sanitary engineers and doctors emerged as state actors and enactors of the state. Government in the nineteenth century, as the 'political technology of the body' (Foucault 1979, 26), was increasingly concerned with the minds and bodies of its populace, and their well-being, as an indicator and facilitator of the well-being of the nation and its security. We were looking at a genealogy of ourselves as the effects and subjects of power. As Devine-Eller says 'Though Foucault himself never wrote an extended history of education, he could easily have' (Devine-Eller 2004, 1).

I began to read more of Foucault and make increasing 'use' of the many and diverse tools in his theoretical box. In 1990 I edited a collection of papers drawn from a conference held at Kings (Ball 1990a), which brought together a set of papers that deployed Foucauldian concepts and methods to explore schooling. Reading Foucault made sense also in relation to my interest in policy and the state; it made a link between discipline – individualising – and regulation – totalising – and the management of the population. The former was still apparent in the organisational and pedagogical practices of schools. The latter was evident in the left-over eugenics (the starting place of the sociology of education in Britain; Ball 2008), which underpinned the 11+ examination I sat, and the claims made in the Norwood Report (1943), the dangerous and unsafe basis for tripartite education, that it was possible to identify three types of child with three types of mind by testing for 'intelligence'. The welfare state came back into view, in a very different way, through a very different lens.

What was increasingly important to me was not just the pertinence of Foucauldian analytics and concepts to the objects of my concern – I was making increasing use of discourse, power and subjectivity as tools in my work on education policy – but the style and stance of Foucault's work, the kind of scholar and intellectual he was, and his own struggles not to be 'a something'. That is, the particular ethics of intellectual work as a practice of self that he undertook. Indeed his work is defined by his attempts to find a position outside the human sciences from which to see the social world and to see the human sciences as a part of that social world – a space that is both liberating and impossible. In many respects Foucault only really makes sense when his substantive works are viewed, read and understood in relation to his refusal to accept the inscriptions and limits and structures of 'normal' social science. As Johanna Oksala (2007, 1) suggests: 'To get closer to Foucault's intent, it helps if one is willing to question the ingrained social order, give up all truths firmly fixed in stone, whilst holding on to a fragile commitment to freedom'. Foucault's intellectual project rested on seeking to find a space beyond traditional disciplinary or theoretical positions, from which he could subject those positions to analysis and critique, and trouble the ‘inscription of progress’ within modern politics and scholarship. He set himself staunchly against the notion of a universal or self-evident humanity. There is a dual ambivalence here, one aspect in relation to scholarship and one in relation to the practices of government and the constant challenge of ‘not knowing what and how to think’ (Burchell 1996, 30). Confronting this ambivalence involves finding ways to work in the tensions between technologies of competence and technologies of the self. I will come back to this.

Reading Foucault makes me question my practice as a scholar and social critic, and to ethically question what I am and what I might become. I have had to confront not simply the ways in which I am produced and made up as a modernist researcher, but rather the ways in which I might be revocable – how I might be different. Foucault makes me uneasy, or rather speaks to my unease, in a productive and generative way. He has unsettled my sense of the claims I might make about my work, its purposes and its role in the enterprise of modernist human science, although I revert to that enterprise regularly and with ease, often with a sigh of relief. This is a productive unease that is different from the nomadic dissatisfactions of my earlier career. It requires, as Edward Said argued, ‘both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability’ (1994, 10), and it means accepting that work is always ‘unfinished and necessarily imperfect’ (1994, 17), despite the increasingly frenetic demands for definitive statements, ‘effective’ truths, and firm and conclusive ‘findings’. It also means giving up on spontaneous empiricism, casual epistemologies and theory by numbers, and involves a constant struggle against the governmentalities of scientism to find a proper rigour, a thoughtful reflexive and practical rigour – a rigour that goes beyond the niceties and safety of technique to find a form of epistemological practice that is not simply self-regarding. As Foucault put it: ‘Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write’ (1972, 17). Foucault writes what Barthes calls ‘writerly texts’; that is, texts which invite the reader to participate in the making of meaning rather than simply be subject to it. Indeed Foucault’s elusivity creates spaces for the readers and users of his work to be creative and to be adventurous. All of this is demanding and liberating in equal measure. Both Bourdieu and Foucault offer a form of social scientific practice and thinking which is not limited to the discursively constructed boxes, categories and divisions of modernist sociology. Neither aspired to write ‘a theory’, and both are critical empiricists.

I have not given up entirely on my modernist enlightenment social science, or on doing ethnography with its privileged speaking subject, but my relation to these practices and to myself is different. I explored some of the tensions, the 'dangerous encounters' between ethnography and genealogy, in a book edited with Maria Tamboukou (Tamboukou and Ball 2004). I find myself, as Patti Lather (2005, 2) nicely puts it, 'Using and troubling' at the same time concepts and ideas that seem productive but limiting. This has, I think, made me more reflexive, sometimes at least, while at the same time I also recognise that certain versions of reflexivity also carry with them the subtle ministrations of government, and I am critically aware of the many ways in which sociology constitutes the objects of its theorising. Bourdieu was critical of what he called the 'intellectualist bias', which always arises when a researcher is insufficiently critical of the 'presuppositions inscribed in the act of thinking about the world' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2001, 39), and the failure to grasp 'the logic of practice' which is embedded in this. My intellectual practices are thus always unstable and unresolved;[8] sometimes I think that visually represented they might look something like Derrida's (1974) *Glas*. The book is written in two columns in different type sizes, each column weaves its way around quotations of all kinds. In between those columns Derrida attempts to place his own signature. These are fragmented and contradictory but not unrelated lines of thought; they both diverge and intersect. This seems about right.

With the wisdom of hindsight and in contemporary sociological parlance I can think about this now as an attempt to escape from the powerful binaries that demarcate the sociological field and a renunciation of the grand theoretical divides that make up the history of sociology. This also seems about right – but in the midst of my discomforts and dilemmas, what it was that discomforted me did not seem so clear cut and my responses did not seem so intellectually coherent.

Living the neoliberal university

The practices and technologies that make up and re-make higher education have changed slowly but inexorably since my time as an undergraduate, a long-term ratchet effect of many small moves, initiatives and reforms. These have worked upon the funding, accountability and productivity of and access to higher education in practical, immaterial and affective ways, to change what it means to teach and research in higher education. The practices and technologies to which I refer include the Research Assessment Exercise[9] generally, but also annual reviews, league tables and rankings, impact narratives, CVs, performance-related pay, the granting of degree-awarding powers to commercial providers, off-shore campuses, student fees, expanding overseas recruitment, and Public Private Partnerships. I began working in a 'new' welfare university and now find myself living the life of a neoliberal academic, a neoliberal subject. In this sense, in some respects, as I did at the beginning, I write and research about myself, about my performance and reformulation, within the incitements of neoliberal productivity. Needless to say, both Bourdieu and Foucault are more than a little helpful in thinking about neoliberalism. Foucault's 1978–1979 College de France lectures *The Birth of Biopolitics* (Foucault 2010) offer a remarkable genealogy of liberalisms, and concomitantly of the state and the diabolical interplay between globalisation and neoliberalism – 'New liberalspeak: a new planetary vulgate' as Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) call it. Very helpfully, Aiwah Ong, Jamie Peck, Wendy Larner and the wonderful John Clarke have all worked with and used Foucault to interrogate the mobile technologies of neoliberalism, both the big-N, 'out there' in the economy and, the little-n, 'in here' in our daily life and our heads. The latter, the little-n, is realised in a set of local practices which articulate the mundane rhythms of our email traffic, our form-filling or peer reviewing, and re-modulate the ways in which we relate to one another as neoliberal subjects – individual, responsible, striving, competitive and enterprising. The former, the big N, has generated a new iteration of my policy community ethnographies, worked on with Carolina Junemann (Ball 2007, 2012; Ball and Junemann 2011), which had begun in the 1980s (Ball 1990b). These were researched using what I have come to call 'network ethnography', and are informed by a range of political sciences literatures which attend to the shift from government to governance, especially the writing Bob Jessop, Mark Bevir and Chris Skelcher. This parallels Foucault's account of the shift from discipline (welfare) to governmentality (neoliberalism). Perhaps if I am creative enough I can establish a kind of coherence here after all?

The latter, the little N, has generated a series of papers on performative individualism (for example, Ball 2003, 2005), with an appreciative nod to Judith Butler and J.-F. Lyotard. In education there is a proliferation of new spaces of such individualism, which are at the same time spaces of calculation. They produce new and excruciating visibilities within which we as academics relate to one another, and in relation to which we must seek our place and our worth and to fulfil our needs and desires. My email is punctuated by frequent and insistent requirements for me to account/count for myself. We are constantly expected to draw on the skills of presentation and of inflation to write ourselves and fabricate ourselves in ever lengthier and more sophisticated CVs, annual reviews and performance management audits, which give an account of our 'contributions' to research and teaching and administration and the community. Typically now applications for posts and for promotion run to 40/50 pages and are littered with scores, indexes and ratings. We are constantly incited to make spectacles of ourselves. This is part of what Lynch et al. (2012) call 'crafting the elastic self', which is produced for and by evaluation and comparison, and the danger is that we become transparent but empty, unrecognisable to ourselves in a life enabled by and lived against measurement, our days are numbered – literally. These techniques do not simply report our practice; they inform, construct and drive our practice. New kinds of productive social subjects are the central resource in a reformed and re-forming entrepreneurial public sector. Those who ‘under-perform’ in the regime of measurement are subject to moral approbation. The dry, soul-less grids and techniques of reporting elicit a range of unhealthy emotions and distort our relations with colleagues. Sociality and social relations are being replaced by informational structures. We come to ‘know’ and value others by their outputs rather than by their individuality and humanity. This is part of a larger process of ‘ethical retooling’ in the public sector, which is replacing client ‘need’ and professional judgement, the foundations of the welfare state, with commercial forms of accountability-driven decision-making, the foundations of neoliberalism. There is for many of us in education a growing sense of ontological insecurity; both a loss of a sense of meaning in what we do and of what is important in what we do. Are we doing things for the ‘right’ reasons – and how can we know? There is a sense of constant change and concomitant anxiety and insecurity and increasing precarity – what Lazarrato calls the ‘micro-politics of little fears’ (2009, 120) – neoliberal affects. Higher education now employs casual labour at a level second only to the hospitality and tourism industry.

As noted already, my intellectual responses to these ‘problems’ are constructed through a method of research and analysis 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 – an unstable but productive aporia. That is, a particular and perverse confrontation between theory and data. This is evident in the relationships between policy network analysis (Ball 2012) and microphysical flows of power, and the dualistic analysis of policy as text and discourse, as topology and dispositif, as agency and subjectivity. Nonetheless, somewhere in this elision 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 in various sectors of the education market (Vincent and Ball 2001; Vincent et al. 2012). The point is that we have to think about new and old inequalities together – poverty and subjectivity, domination and exclusion, redistribution and recognition. That is, think both post and neo together at the same time, as Michael Apple (1995) puts it.

What am I?

In relation to all of this, it is not surprising perhaps that recently my interests have turned to attend to the possibilities of refusal and contestation and to subjectivity as a site of struggle – a modern form of politics for a modern form of government. This has involved thinking, with Antonio Olmedo (Ball and Olmedo 2013), about some of the most intimate aspects of our experience of ourselves and the possibilities of certain ‘arts of existence’ in relation to contemporary neoliberal education. This 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’ (2007, 211), and draws in particular on some of Foucault’s later work on ‘the care of the self’ and parrhesia – truth-telling (Ball 2015). 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, 66)

It is the latter with which I am primarily concerned. That is, who or what are we?

So where am I now, where have I got to, who am I? Within all of this as an academic subject I am made uncomfortable again, out of place once more; my home in the ivory tower is being flattened by neoliberal bulldozers to make way for a fast-fact higher education franchise in which all knowledge has is price and which, as Ansgar Allen puts it, ‘is distinguished not by its greyness and economic subjugation, but by a gaudy proliferation of colour. It has become the rampant breeding ground of jobbing academics in search of the next “big” idea’.[10] I began with both memories of and a critique of welfare education and end with a critique of neoliberal education, and have inhabited and struggled with the discomforts of both. I am left with a sense of process rather than destination, unease and refusal rather than affirmation, in a space in which I am (im)possible and in which sociology as a vocation, as something I do, is being re-inscribed as a resource for the management of the population, which is how it started. This is a space nonetheless in which I continue and struggle.

In the end I wonder who this figure is, this Stephen Ball who haunts the pages of this article. Is it someone I know or who I might be, or is it a fictional character who is brought into some kind of existence in this text, but who otherwise does not really exist? There were fleeting moments in the text when I seemed to glimpse the person he might be but eventually he always eluded me.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. On 31 September 2015 I stand down as Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education, University College London, UK. On August 17 I take up the position of Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education, University College London.
2. I am very aware of the difference and separation between the subject who writes here and the one who is written about.
3. As well as, of course, a personal life that has sustained and enriched my intellectual preoccupations.
4. The *Report of the Inter-Departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services*, known commonly as the Beveridge Report, was an influential document in the founding of the welfare state in the United Kingdom, published in December 1942. It was chaired by William Beveridge, an economist, who identified five 'Giant Evils' in society – squalor, ignorance, want, idleness and disease – and went on to propose widespread reform to the system of social welfare to address these. I revisited the report in Ball (2013).
5. A test of intelligence used for allocation to different types of secondary schooling.
6. The Robbins Report (the report of the Committee on Higher Education) was commissioned by the British government and published in 1963. The report recommended immediate expansion of universities, and the number of full-time university students rose from 197,000 in the 1967/68 academic year to 217,000 in the 1973/74 academic year with 'further big expansion' thereafter.
7. These were published by Anna Clarkson's father Malcolm in his Falmer Press imprint – Anna has been my book editor at Routledge for many years.
8. I was asked by Pablo del Monte, is un-resolution a form of resolution?
9. The Research Assessment Exercise is an exercise undertaken approximately every five years on behalf of the four UK higher education funding councils to evaluate the quality of research undertaken by British higher education institutions. Research Assessment Exercise submissions from each subject area (or unit of assessment) are given a rank by a subject specialist peer review panel. The rankings are used to inform the allocation of quality weighted research funding each higher education institution receives from their national funding council.
10. See http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/ansgar-allen/in-praise-of-economically-illiterate-academic.

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