‘Educating Jade?’ ‘Class, Ignorance, Desire and Knowledge’ the social and Educational Significance of Not/Understanding in Higher Education

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Abstract

The reluctance of the white working class to enter into (higher) education but (possibly increasingly?) onto ‘reality TV’, seems to confirm their portrayal as ‘ignorant chavs’. This paper was prompted by the notorious incident, in which ‘ignorance’ was perhaps the least critical concept used to account for Jade Goody’s racist comments on Big Brother (Steve Jefferies, The Guardian, 24th May, 2008).

In contrast, do the formal practices of higher education deal with ‘ignorance’? Is ‘ignorance’ even a salient or explicit category and should it be? Recent moves in HE towards ‘personalisation’ (Clegg & David, 2006), are seen as degrading the challenge of higher education by promoting the idea of the passivity of ‘fragile students’ (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2008) but Pelletier’s (2009) recent account of Ranciere’s theoretical project offers a new conceptual grammar for thinking the sociology of knowledge. I take an interest in this via a related Butlerian move into performativty.

Introduction (1) Ignorance and Knowledge

I begin this enquiry, twice deliberately, first through ‘representing’ Jade in 3 pen portraits and then ‘through’ theory. The initial production of ‘Jade’ locates her in three ‘mediascape’ (Appadurai, 1996) considered as the playing out of a self within the moral economy of a media ‘career’. Her projection and representation in the public imagination can be characterized as tracing a curve of moral evaluations of her ‘putatively charming ignorance’ (Jeffries, May, 6th 2006, The Guardian) to her image as ‘[t]he princess of pig ignorance’ (!) (Parsons 20th January 2007 the Mirror) and now rests in neutral - a fragile stasis because she has recently announced that she has cervical cancer.

Scene 1: Becoming Famous

Jade Goody was a young woman from Bermondsey who became a national celebrity by virtue of her ‘ignorance’ and its performance in the show. She thought East ‘Angular’ was ‘abroad’, talked about ‘escape goats’ etc – reminiscent of Mrs. Malaprop in Dickens. She was even attributed a ‘glossary’ (see Jade, My Autobiography, 2006:279-281). She was recognized as ‘authentic’ and ‘real’ and she in turn made great play of being unpretentious. She went on to make a considerable fortune after her initial exposure on the show in 2002 and cashed in her ‘fame’, investing in houses and a business. After leaving Big Brother (2002) she never returned to her old home, acquired an agent and notably a tutor to help with her level of literacy.

Scene 2: Becoming Infamous

Jade was subsequently re-invited onto Big Brother in 2006 and was, seen and heard to collude with others, in racist comments about Shilpa Shetty, the Bollywood, starlet who went on to win. Jade was evicted from the programme soon after despite recanting and with much controversy. She was subsequently invited to India, and thus, set up to be re/educated’ (redeemed?) by her participation on the Indian version of the show.
Scene 3: Becoming Ill

The extent to which her legibility as a working class celebrity subject is sustainable can perhaps be estimated by the gap between her assertion in her auto-biography that she can let fame alone and her subsequent inability (like Princess Diana, Hey, 1999) to escape others' 'investments' 3 in her image/brand. And at a time of maximum duress, when the last thing one might need is the voyeurism of others’ interest - if the current level of attention persists, she might be compelled to die in public, as it were!

Introduction 2; Knowledge and Ignorance

This paper is inspired intellectually by Caroline Pelletier’s brilliant deconstruction of Ranciere’s critique of Bourdieu (Pelletier, in press, 2009). She depicts Ranciere’s criticism as directed at Bourdieu’s ‘whole enterprise’ (Pelletier, 2009: 2) since Ranciere’s theoretical speculation is intent on asking what it would mean to refuse ‘reproduction’ but focus instead on the performative effects of an[yl] academic discourse that enunciates knowledge about the real which the Other is not (by virtue of such a theory) in a position herself to know. As Pelletier continues, summarizing Ranciere’s intellectual oeuvre:

‘Rancière targets an often noted tension in Bourdieu’s work, between the denunciation of domination and the modelling of its ineluctable reproduction. It is not uncommon to see the absence of an account of political agency described as a ‘limitation’ of Bourdieu’s work… Rancière, however, sees in this the truth of Bourdieu’s entire discourse. It is a discourse, Rancière argues, which places the poor in one position in society, and the sociologist in another; in which the poor are objects of study rather than intellectual subjects.

…Emancipation within such a scenario, is a question of knowledge: it is constituted by knowing the world in a way which transcends a subjective perspective rooted in a system of domination’ (Pelletier, 2009: 2-3, my emphasis)

But on the contrary, as Pelletier interprets:

‘…Ranciere suggests, the “underachievers”, the ignorant, cannot tackle their powerlessness by gaining knowledge, but rather by contesting the hierarchy which prevents their speech from being heard’

(Pelletier, 2008: 14, my emphasis)

This implies that the task is not one of redistributing education but of contesting what is meant by the divisions knowledge institutes:

‘For Rancière, statements should not be checked against a presumed given, empirical reality but on the basis of what a proposition brings to presence. Consequently, emancipation should not be thought of in terms of possessing ‘reflexive’ knowledge; rather it is related to changing the ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière, 2000). Rancière’s summary of his book Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy explains what he means by this phrase: “I wanted to highlight that the forms of the political were in the first place those of a certain division of the sensible. I understand by this phrase the cutting up (decoupage) of the perceptual world that anticipates, through its sensible evidence, the distribution of shares and social parties. It is the interplay of these forms of sensible evidence that defines the way in which people do ‘their own business’ [what is ‘proper’ to their social function] or not by defining the place and the time of such ‘business’, the relation between the personal and the common, the private and the public in which these are inscribed. And this distribution itself presupposes a cutting up of what is
visible and what is not, of what can be heard and what cannot, of what is noise and what is speech” (as quoted in Dillon, 2005, p. 432 cited by Pelletier, 2009: 6).

As Pelletier expresses it:

‘Discourse, including social sciences discourse, is political precisely because there is disagreement over what is seen and perceived. This is because there is no ‘sensible’ totality of social relations, as implied in Bourdieu’s notion of ‘field’, but rather antagonistic ways of crafting and ‘knowing’ realities, and producing absence as Otherness’.

(Pelletier, 2009:6).

This interpretation – this specific ‘division of the sensible’ performs a complex refutation of Bourdieu’s logic and as a consequence casts serious doubt on the ‘innocence’ of most critical theory work. According to this alternative performative problematic - it is the ‘division of beings/knowledge into representable and non-representable’ (Pelletier, 2009, 14) that confounds claims of a consensual equality in the ‘politics of knowledge’ since mass education regulates what is to become perceptible, what is to count as legitimate knowledge, and who is seen as legitimate knowers (cf.Bernstein,1977:85⁴). As Pelletier elegantly summarises it:

‘The issue then is not to prove equality, nor to know the causes of domination, but to see what is made perceptible in the verification of equality’.

(Pelletier, 2009:14)

I next turn to one of the central propositions of Pelletier’s appropriation of Ranciere’s central argument that turns on the question of what happens when we re/think education/theory as a performative rather than as emancipatory.

The ‘presumed ignorance’ of the working class: Ranciere’s critique as presented by Caroline Pelletier

Using Ranciere’s (1987/91) critique of Bourdieu, Pelletier (2009, in press) sums up;

‘Ranciere’s key argument, however is that rather than closing the gap between “intellectual” and “manual worker”, this conception of emancipation, or emancipated discourse, founds the very distinction between the two. In other words, it is precisely by opposing social truth and ideological illusion, or scholastic and practical reason, that the scientist can give himself the task of “speaking for those whose presumed ignorance grants [him his] domain. (Ross, 1991, xviii)

Accordingly, it is academic desire to know which is invested in the production of the ‘presumed ignorance of the working class’ Hence the rationality and rationale of a critical Bourdieusian reflexive sociology offers an account of a ‘social order [bound to a description of itself] that could only ever be misrecognized,…and it is a description of why only a small elite will ever understand such a description’. (Pelletier, 2008: 5).

Pelletier’s intervention is an audacious attack on a current sociological ‘deity’⁵. She draws analogies between Ranciere’s epistemological position and Butler’s notion of ‘performativity’ (1997)⁶ to point out the force of Ranciere’s further pertinent questioning:

‘What image does it project of the subject? What has to be included and excluded form such an image to be held together?’

(Pelletier, 2009:5)
Towards A Post-Bourdieuian Sociology of (Higher) Education?
Performing Ignorance; A re/reading of Jade

‘Ignorance’ is certainly the subject position assigned to, taken up by and sutured onto the body of Jade Goody, which amplifies a certain vested production of how the working class is now routinely represented. Moreover can ‘theory’ even the deconstructive kind, ever escape the problem which:

‘Rancière raises [of] how to speak about inequality without offering (one’s own) knowledge as its remedy or positioning oneself above or behind the back of those being discussed’. (Pelletier, 2009:1)

Did Jade’s entry into the popular imagination partly arise because of the way her reception then was dependent upon a requirement to ‘perform’ a specific form of (charming) ignorance? Was this discursive position set up by the cultural and material dynamics of the ‘greedy institution’ of reality TV and the knowledgeable elite who govern this?

This move to know anew their own power revalorizes an investment in a powerful (because legible) knowledge to which Jade’s (body) represents the constitutive outside. Stuart Hall’s comments cast performances and identifications which constitute them as intertwined each in its ‘other’ in the psycho-social imaginary:

All the symbolic and narrative energy and work is directed to secure us ‘over here’ to fix each in its appointed species place. It is a way of masking how deeply our histories actually intertwine and interpenetrate; how even necessary ‘the Other’ is to our own sense of identity; how even the dominant, colonizing, imperializing power only knows who and what it is and can only experience the pleasure of its own power of domination in and through the construction of the Other.

(Hall 1992:16)

If the original spark for this paper was the role of the popular (TV, Newspapers, ‘opinion’) in the performative citation of Jade’s subject position in a ‘romance’ of ‘ruin’ and ‘redemption’, I think the Rancierian imaginary assists here (augmented by Butler’s performative, Hey, 2006) in pointing to a performative citational chain in which Jade’s ‘original’ ignorance shifts significance. Following Ranciere ‘ignorant subjects’ are ‘not heard’ and this elision work as the performative grounds of the ‘justifiable’ imposition of a mass education deemed to overcome ‘difference’. Yet inequality is recuperated precisely in that assumption of a hierarchical division of the knowledgeable/ignorant.

Hence Jade’s ignorant failure is required by the system but intriguingly it is subsequently re/cited under the conditions of ‘the capitalism of intimacy’ (Rutherford, as a ‘commoditised’ and hence recognized form of performative ‘authenticity’. It is as if she has cornered the market in transforming being a ‘nothing’ into becoming a ‘somebody’ and her knowledge form i.e. ‘ignorance’ is the ‘constitutive outside’ brought inside.

Ironically it is because she returns to fulfill the ‘absent other’ of the Rancierian logic of the ‘division of the sensible’ – i.e. the ‘ignorant working class’ that she can, in this very particular economy - perform this ‘absence’ and cash it in. Her very dis/qualification opens her up to a reward even within a discourse and system that seldom disguises its systematic contempt of ignorant ‘people like her’.

Beverley Skeggs and colleagues (Skeggs, 2008, Skeggs et al, 2009) also note how Jordan aka Katy Price is also held in contempt by many ‘intelligent’ people but appreciated by many working class white women for the recognizable performance of a ‘glamorous authenticity’7 which the ‘ignorance’ is re/cited
as. This mobility of 'knowledge/self/performances' paradoxically seems to suggest a contestation of who controls the performance even if it does not endorse the legitimacy of the form?

In/Conclusion

Different interpretations of the subject, performatively install, at the same time as they offer, the (ignorant?) subject of these same rationalities. These contrastive readings in their turn cast light on the contradictory rationalities within which higher education, its staff and its students are currently located at the behest of policies compelling ‘excellence’ and ‘inclusion’. The discourse of excellence derives from elite models of educational prestige and knowledge whilst inclusion is targeted at ‘non-traditional’ students. In this clash (of class cultures/knowledge/rationalities) what is audible and legible in the former cannot be seen or heard as anything other than that which is to be applied to the latter as their knowledge/real is to be ‘overcome’ or ‘corrected’.

Hence we might turn to a very different pedagogic form of attention expressed in recent productive discussions of psychoanalytic concepts – which have broken free from the consulting room's authority relations to enter into domains of knowledge and meaning-making that found another performative subject – which raise from another direction - different) questions about what would it mean to rethink education through r a psycho-social ‘division of the sensible’ and within this create a space for (1) questioning essential models of the subject but which (2) recognizes her ‘passionate attachments’ to forms of fictions which (currently) make her intelligible in the real. Britzman argues that:

‘The learner who can work through her internal disruptions, bit by bit, can let go of the painful objects she holds to be herself and can be moved to action’.  
(Britzman, 1998, p132)

This is a model of learning which is interested in the learner’s internal landscape, her depth psychology as those accumulated ideas come to represent her ontology, to constitute what we think of as our self (see Hall, 1996, Hey 2006) for a fuller articulation of Butler’s move (1990) to think identity as a performative.

I want to leave the discussion with a question about how we might make classrooms spaces for ‘Jade’ as part of the productive effects of recognizing the performative effects of an (ignorant?) dominant critical social science paradigm - one that does not know its own investments in the presumption of the ignorance of its ‘other. This might then lead on to see the need for questioning the canon of critical knowledge as having privileged insight into the ‘non-traditional’ student for example, and for shifting our emphasis from talking to that of listening, less perhaps to the slips of the unconscious, than the way our different subjects come to know themselves through their own division of the sensible to share with us their ‘real’.

References


Clegg, S, David, M., (2006) Passion, Pedagogies and the Project of the Personal in Higher Education Twenty First Century Society 1, 2 pp. 149-165,


Hall, S. (1992) Race, Culture and communications; looking backward and forward at cultural studies *Rethinking Marxism* 5:10-18


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1 I was initially drawn to thinking about the nature of ‘ignorance’ by becoming captivated about how a specific moral re/education project was assembled around Jade (for those who do not watch *Big Brother Channel 4* can I suggest http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/6274881.st inter alia).
Interestingly there are 5 terms in the lexicon relating to 4 negative evaluations of intelligence, doughnut, Muppet, nugget, tog and 1 positive viz. ‘sharpest tool in the sandwich box.

Here I am referring to material, psychic and cultural investments with their different types of payoffs.

"How a society selects, classifies, distributes, transmits and evaluates the educational knowledge it considers to be public, reflects both the distribution of power and the principles of social control." (Bernstein, 1977:85).

Bourdieu is the most cited sociologist in the UK.

Thus how the subject emerges and with what political effects has preoccupied scholars working deconstruction from philosophy (Pelletier’s Ranciere, 2009) and psychoanalysis (Britzman, 2006, Butler, 1990, 1997). How else might a Butlerian understanding of performativity engage with a Rancierian problematic is something of interest to me to be taken up in later work. I can only gesture to it in this paper.

This is to say the least a self-cancelling term but I am left with no other term at the moment to think with.