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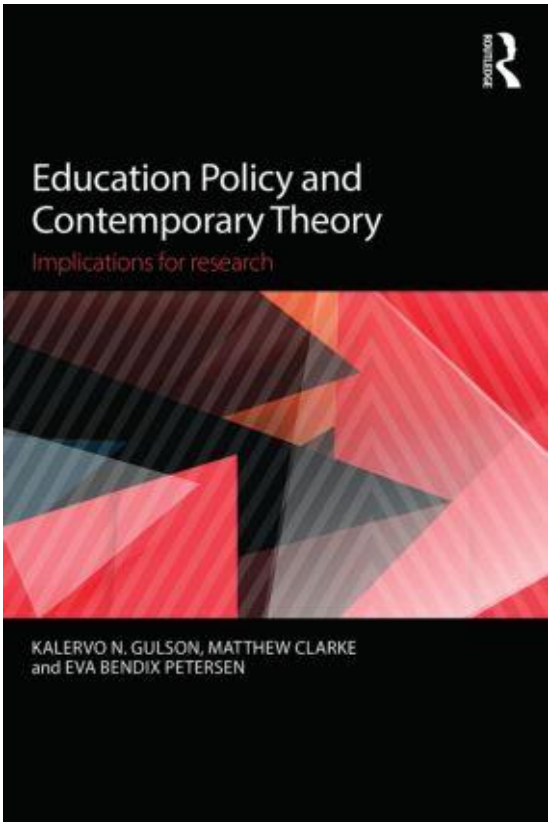

"Theory is finished," announced the *New York Times Magazine* in its 2003 Year in Ideas issue (Shea, 2003). We were at the end of a great era of literary and cultural theory, largely the product of a generation of post-World War II French intellectuals, a period when critics believed that language shaped the personal and political and that theory provided them with the tools to transform society. Now this theory had become frivolous and politically irrelevant. Terry Eagleton's 1983 *Literary Theory* had been one of the most widely read arguments that literature was far from apolitical and served to advance ruling-power interests. "Literature *is* an ideology," he proclaimed (p. 22). Three decades later, Eagleton would admit in *After Theory* that what had seemed to be stirring intellectual dissent had devolved into futility and farce, a revolutionary philosophy become an eccentric hobby. Perhaps worse, those drawn to theory lapse into arcane discourse and are diverted from meaningful engagement with the world.

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The editors of *Education Policy and Contemporary Theory* make a glancing reference to Eagleton's defection in the introduction, but they do not debate the obituarists of contemporary theory or address why some of the thinkers covered in this book have come under intense criticism elsewhere in the academy. The editors take an entirely affirmative approach to the book's range of contemporary theory, which they define as sets of assumptions about how the world works that cohere into traditions of sense-making. Like the literary theorists of an earlier era, they argue that those who dislike or ignore theory are simply in thrall to some older theory. And, in their view, no policy problem is free of theory. We have habituated ways of making sense, but theory like that on view here can challenge and perhaps transform our settled notions of the world. It provides an alternative perspective on education policy that is not bound to the assumptions of policy-makers.

Most importantly, the editors do not treat these theories as choices to be made in the development of an ideological identity, as when Morpheus offers Neo the red pill or the blue pill in the film *The Matrix*. In this film, which claimed inspiration from French theorist Jean Baudrillard, Neo must either continue in an anodyne, computer simulated illusion or have his eyes opened to the nightmarish truth of reality by choosing the red pill. Instead of presenting this stark choice, the authors write that "theories are tools to think with" (p. 2). The theory discussed in this book offers concepts and vocabulary that can provoke new ways to conceive of and conduct educational policy research. This makes the book compelling to a reader who is not ready to convert to a ready-made explanatory framework but may be willing to encounter some bracing ideas and be inspired to try new methodologies. The book is designed as a garage sale in which readers can pick and choose oddments of theory that may seem of immediate use in their study of education. It begins with a set of chapters that focus on key thinkers, including Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel de Certeau and Jacques Lacan. In the second half, the chapters introduce a key concept and discuss its methodological implications for people researching educational policy.

The chapters showcase a wide range of thinkers and ideas, and the contributors do not make explicit connections between the chapters. However, many of the chapters share a target: the functionalist view of the policy cycle. Though not detailed in the book, in simple terms, the functionalist perspective conceives of policies as decided upon, implemented, and then evaluated in a straightforward way. Each stage can be studied as a discrete phenomenon, and effects can be subjected to cost-benefit analysis in order to determine the policy's merit. For example, the *No Child Left Behind Act*, signed into law in 2002 and replaced in 2015, required states to develop standards and conduct annual testing of all students in certain grades. In the functionalist view, *NCLB* originated in the widespread perception of a problem—low overall achievement and achievement gaps by race. It was implemented by a Republican president who had initiated standards and statewide testing in Texas and drew on policy solutions from experts and specialists in the academy, including the "scientifically based reading instruction" of the *Reading First* section of the law. Finally, a functionalist account of *NCLB* would study the effects on various players, including minority populations, students with disabilities, and academically gifted students.

The book's contributors attack this functionalist view at various points, starting with a disassembly of the conventional notion of what constitutes a policy. Eva Bendix Peterson's chapter on the philosopher of history Michel Foucault depicts policies as multiplicities rather than as monolithic entities. To Foucault, we live in a network of

discourses, distinct ways of making sense of what is true and right and what knowledge is valid. Peterson uses Foucault to forge the conception of policies as discursive formations, in which policies can consist of both congruous and competing discourses. The analyst tries to disentangle these discursive components, bringing to light how the policy is a product of its time and place and how its "common sense" is constructed. Using this lens on my own example, a policy researcher might subject the text of the *No Child Left Behind* law to an analysis that uncovers its diverse genealogies, looking at where it connects to and breaks from policies of other times and places as well as unearthing its claims about knowledge and scientific understanding.

Foucault is invaluable to seeing how strange and inhuman institutions and ideas can be made to seem normal and natural, and his ideas pervade the volume. In his take on Foucault, Peter Bansel describes narrative as the means by which multiple discourses can be organized and given coherence, just as discourses are themselves ensembles of statements, practices and actions. Policies therefore rely on narratives to obtain stability and authority. Without this technology of narrative, their heterogeneity and artificiality is revealed. Bansel's striking example is the policy narrative by which the economic becomes the preeminent concern of public life and groups with lower socioeconomic status can be depicted as a national economic burden. In particular, these groups are shown to not adequately participate in the critical economic driver of higher education. Their stunted aspirations and deficient academic preparation prevent them from completing a college degree. According to Bansel, policy researchers must generate alternative policy narratives that break up this policy fiction. Instead of the stock character of the homogenous low SES subject, they can depict the diverse identities of racial and religious minorities and students from working class families. They can focus on the multiple forms of discrimination these groups experience rather than reinforcing the fiction of deficient humans in need of intervention.

In another break from the functionalist account, Foucaultian theory describes education policy as having a disciplinary power that far surpasses the scope of what is dictated in explicit terms in the text of the policy. Governments, in this view, do not primarily use policy to guide and command. The influence on individuals is more profound, affecting them at the level of their apprehension of the world and the ideas they take to be normative. It is through this subterfuge that policy limits what individuals can do. Policies work to constrain individual subjectivities through a subtle form of surveillance and through the establishment of universal norms of behavior. As Kaspar Villadsen explains in his chapter, when central governments implement performance management in schools, requiring formal procedures by which educators are appraised, these policies should not simply be understood as the centralized control of institutions and behavior. Teachers and administrators are instead choosing forms of self-conduct, regulating themselves by the more profound rationalities that buttress these reforms. Similarly, governmental instruments like quality indicators and benchmarks transform education professionals' conduct from a distance by targeting their subjectivity.

Whereas Foucault shows how policy exercises its most profound influence by getting people to police themselves, Pierre Bourdieu notices infidelities in the step of implementation in the policy cycle. Rather than internalizing the rationalities of policy directives, people can ignore, resist or completely misinterpret them. Shaun Rawolle and Bob Lingard borrow Bourdieu's key concept of "fields," which he defines as highly specialized and somewhat autonomous spheres of action, such as the military or

organized religion. To Bourdieu, the power relations between and within these spheres structure human behavior. The education policy field, as one of multiple social fields that comprise the social world, develops its own logic of practice, while the field of the schooling system develops rules and understandings of its own. The policy enactment problem is created when policies are produced in the policy field and intended for universal application but are then moved to the school field, which has logics of practice that are more contingent and specific. Test-based accountability is a policy produced by the bureaucratic state field to improve student performance by attaching high stakes to standardized test scores. Educators, operating in a distinct sphere, may envision much broader goals for schooling, including the social, emotional, and artistic development of children. They may adopt complex notions of effective, appropriate pedagogy. The authoritative, universal claims issuing from the policy field are often reinterpreted and resisted by school-based practitioners.

Michel de Certeau's work further develops this conception of the "tragic frailty" of education policy (p. 32). It can be imposed, but its effects on the ordinary and everyday are never straightforward or fully explicable. It produces culture, refiguring beliefs and leaving a residue of practices and expression, but the unofficial and unmarked practices of everyday life exert their own influence on policy, constantly remaking and often subverting the output of the policy domain. In contrast to Bourdieu, Certeau does not conceive of policies emanating from one domain to another. The policy domain and the everyday exist in a single field, and an understanding of policy cultures requires the study of both normalized and informal, often disruptive, practices. Sue Saltmarsh's profile of Michel de Certeau focuses on the methodological implications of a cultural approach to policy analysis Researchers inspired by Certeau would study the beliefs and practices of teachers administering tests and students taking them, documenting and describing the heterogeneity of ordinary life while reflecting on the limitations of the researchers' own intellectual contact with the world.

This intense interest in the everyday is shared by scholars using actor-network theory. Radhika Gorur explains how this theoretical framework uses the study of mundane practices to understand how power is achieved, rather than using power as the explanation for why things happen as they do. Foucault is not cited, but his influence is apparent in the idea that power is not the property of any actor but is instead diffuse and pervasive, determining what is considered natural and normal. Researchers in this tradition primarily conduct case studies, and actor-network theory is particularly useful in the study of innovations and how new practices displace old forms and become taken-for-granted themselves. For example, a study of principals dealing with a mandate to use private tutoring companies in programs for "underperforming" students relied on interviews with officials, administrators and parents and a rich mix of policy documents and media reports to understand this practical accomplishment of power.

The editors intend the chapters to be quick overviews, aiming to keep them under 5,000 words, but only a handful of them would qualify as true introductions to the thinker or set of ideas under discussion. In most cases, the chapters primarily serve to pique the reader's interest in a particular line of thought, and as a result, the references of the various chapters are an invaluable source for further reading. Peterson's chapter on Foucault is one of the best, but she notes in closing that "I would like to say also that nothing beats reading Foucault's work itself" (p. 71).

That may be true for Foucault, but not for Derrida, at least for me. After a taste of it

in an English graduate program years ago, nothing will again compel me to read Derrida's work itself. In reading Greg Vass's lucid chapter on Derrida, however, I realized that some of Derrida's key ideas have kept a tenacious hold on my thinking. Vass describes his observation of stilted, evasive, and contradictory moments in interviewing teachers about policies addressing achievement gaps, moments that suggested there was more to consider than what the interviewees were literally articulating. Vass notices avoidance of certain ideas and discomfort with the binary racial categories that underpinned these policies. He attributes these snags to contradictions in the broader discourse about students' deficits, which attempts to address disadvantage without eradicating privilege. Vass convincingly argues that methods of deconstruction—including attention to silences and the erasure of problematic binaries in the analysis of qualitative data—can expand the policy analyst's toolbox.

Peter Barry, in his book *Beginning Theory*, acknowledges even in 1995 that the moment of theory had probably passed. But, wrote Barry, "After the moment of theory there comes, inevitably, the 'hour' of theory, when it ceases to be the exclusive concern of a dedicated minority and enters the intellectual bloodstream as a taken-for-granted aspect of the curriculum" (p. 1). As this happens, it becomes possible for more people to learn, teach, and use the tools of theory. Derrida's vagueness, Lacan's apparent improvisation, Bourdieu's dense sociological prose, or Foucault's laxness with historical fact may present obstacles for various readers, but this volume presents the opportunity to dig out ideas and concepts of real use for making the familiar study of education policy strange again.

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