



What Is It That I Have Become? Some Fragments

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There are many ways to write oneself. Most popular is the story—a life lived, experiences accumulated, lessons learned, wisdom acquired, triumph or tragedy—a coherent and linear self. I do not want to do that. That is a fiction. Rather, I offer some fragments, some discontinuities, and some tensions and paradoxes that make up what might be called my biography. I want to think about “what it is I have become.” And I will do that against the backdrop of the epistemic shift that has framed and forged my intellectual career—the shift from a welfare state to a neoliberal state, from one

form of domination to another, an intensification. I will try to make sense of myself as a social subject, as produced contingently and historically across that shift, and allude to some struggles and resistance to not being governed thus—another kind of fiction perhaps. This will encompass both my experience of education, very briefly at school and at university and the evolution and reorientations of my intellectual preoccupations as a researcher and “scholar.” There is a class, social class, sub-text to some of this; but I will not dwell on that. I have written about it before.

Let us try this. As I say, I want to write myself as a social subject, or rather two contrasting and incoherent subjects, two historically contingent, unstable subjects, and the foreshadow of a third. One was an Enlightenment subject, produced in a world defined epistemologically by rationality and progress; the other is a Neoliberal subject produced by self-interest, competition, and profit as individual dispositions and as the solution to social problems of any kind. The latter did not erase the former but overlaid, colonised, and distorted. The third is ill-defined, a struggle in process and it will continue so.

So, this is an account of discomforts, misalignments, and a long circular journey from school and back again; from loving and then hating school; from wanting to “save” it, to wanting to erase it. It is also an account in which my singularity is exaggerated far too much. The opportunities

I have had, the things I have thought and written, and the wisdom I have acquired, such as it is, have been a collective effort. I have been supported, encouraged, facilitated, stimulated, criticised, informed by, and learned from a long list of teachers, colleagues, and collaborators, and my life-partner, Trinidad.



I would have been able to think much less well without them. It is difficult to find the right words to express how grateful I am.

FALSE STARTS

I really enjoyed my working-class primary school. I liked learning except Maths. I remember the cover of the mental arithmetic books we used and the stern Mr. Robinson the Maths teacher. I was a fish in water as Bourdieu put it.¹ I was successful and happy. My experience of my middle-class secondary school, Bishopshalt Grammar, was very different. I had none of the right cultural, social or economic capital to flourish there. I was isolated, lonely, and lost. I quickly turned from being a best student to a failing student and quickly learned to hate school and my teachers, most of whom could not teach their way out of a

wet paper bag. The myth of the English grammar school says otherwise. A change of school, several years of rapprochement, a gradual dilution of my alienation, and the intervention of my French teacher Mr. Holford, in cahoots with my mother, did get me some almost decent examination grades. I applied for university, got a place—Sheffield, to do Industrial Archaeology—and then changed my mind. My disillusionment with “education” was still in play. I always remember a young boy whom I interviewed in a research study about post-school choices who said, “I don’t want no more learning.” I know what he meant. Instead of going to university, I worked on a sewerage farm for a few months—interesting—then as a trainee trust administrator in the Dickensian offices of Barclays Bank with dip ink pens and dusty ledgers—boring and unlikable—then as a trainee professional librarian at the Portsmouth Library Service—interesting and boring. I decided on a career as a librarian and got a place at Library College, but I was moved from the bustling Central Library to a branch library next to the Portsmouth FC football ground, and the boredom of long empty days with no readers made me think that perhaps university might be a good idea after all. Late in the day, I was offered a place at the University of Essex to study politics but quickly switched to sociology. I had lectures from John Goldthorpe, David Lockwood, Peter Townsend, Paul Thompson, Micheal Mann and others—a star line up. In the second year, you had to choose a specialist option. The sociology of education, given my school experiences, intrigued me. It was taught by Denis Marsden, lovely man and co-author of *Education and the Working Class* (1966). This was a book about me and

¹ “... when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a “fish in water”: it does not feel the weight of the water,

and it takes the world about itself for granted” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127).

my experience. It was about my struggles and disillusionment; the damage done to my self-confidence and sense of being out of place were all there. One of the other set readings for the course was *Hightown Grammar* (1970) by Colin Lacey, later to be my PhD supervisor; Denis Marsden was one of my PhD examiners. This was another book about me and my experiences! It was about selection, categorisation, and the machine production of failure. This was powerful stuff, a sociology that related public issues to personal troubles, as C. Wright Mills described in *The Sociological Imagination* (1959). I came to think that the intertwining of individual struggles, societal structures, and historical trends was what I wanted to do, to practice a sociology that made sense of individual lives and life experience in relation to politics and policy. I wanted to research education and use that research to change schools, make them fairer and more just. I was still young and naïve, but that is what came to pass. An MA and PhD at the University of Sussex, both full-funded by the ESRC, led to my first job in the Education department at Sussex. I embarked on a research trajectory that focused initially on the regimes of ability grouping that then prevailed in even so-called “Comprehensive schools” and the effects and consequences of these regimes for class inequality and class-related experiences of education, like my own. These regimes produced a significant proportion of working-class and minority ethnic students as school failures and killed their interest in further learning.

My Masters had two strands; the sociology of education and the sociology of the cinema. I then had the option to pursue either at the doctoral level. I considered seriously the possibility of an ethnography of film making in Hollywood. I have always had a hankering to be a film director. If I had chosen differently, who knows?

There I was, an unreflexive Enlightenment subject firmly set in full redemptive mode, bent on saving the school from itself by force of evidence. I was becalmed by the tyranny of hope and bewitched by the fantasy of an egalitarian and inclusive school. I will come back to that. All of this was set in the brief interlude of Comprehensive schooling in England. A common school, a welfare state school, but a school that did not really exist anywhere, an idea that was supported cravenly and half-heartedly by the Labour governments of the time, and a school that was in practice rarely able to escape from the weight of a history of education policy defined by labelling, ranking and exclusion. I will also come back to that. There were a few interesting outlier schools led in some cases by radical educators, but too few. Most of these were later “picked off” and expunged by Conservative governments.

Let me back up a bit. The late 1960s and early 1970s were a moment of turmoil, experiment, and possibility in education and elsewhere. This short interregnum was marked by a whole set of interrelated cultural and political events, artistic practices, and theoretical happenings. There was May '68 in Paris and sit-ins at Columbia University and protests against Vietnam, apartheid, and the functioning of oppressive institutions, all of which sought to test the limits of government and the modernist settlement. There was the Prague spring, Polish student protests, second wave feminism, The Gay Liberation movement that started with the Stonewall Uprising in New York City in June 1969. It was the time of various attempts at living differently; and the status quo and traditional values and practices were opened to question. Progressivism was at work. In education it was the moment of Illich, Postman and Weingartner, Kohl, Holt, Goodman, Reimer

and others, now sadly unattended to. This was the context of my political education.

I did not realise it at the time, of course, but it was also the end of something, a precursor to the shift from welfarism to neoliberalism, from discipline to governmentality. This point of ending came for me, symbolically at least, in June 1971. The University of Essex was the most politicised of all the English universities at the time; and there I was on the streets of Colchester megaphone in hand a steward and organiser of the protest march against then Secretary of State for Education Margaret Thatcher's legislation to abolish free milk for school children. "Margaret Thatcher Milk Snatcher" we chanted: students from the University and local schools and colleges marching against the traffic in the town's one-way streets.



I was reared as a child of the welfare state. I drank my school milk and orange juice, received free dental care—I had too many teeth—eye tests—I was colour blind—annual medical checks and had my head regularly examined for nits by the school nurse—none found, my mother made sure of that. I was not required to pay university fees, and I received a stipend to cover my living costs. Little did I know that

all of this was to go the way of free school milk. Nor did I know on that day in 1971 that 17 years later Margaret Thatcher, or rather her government, would bring about a decisive alteration in the focus and direction of my research and my career in the form of the 1988 Education Reform Act.

THE MOVE TO POLICY

Fast forward again. My time at Sussex came to an end in 1985. My research interests had moved to become more focused on education policy than on life in schools; or rather they began to attend to the relation between policy and practice. And policy was done in London. A post was advertised at King's College London and I applied. At the same time, I was discussing with Ivor Goodson the possibility of founding a journal that would concern itself specifically with research into matters of education policy. It was Ivor who suggested the need for such a journal, and he had contacts at the publisher Taylor and Francis, a much different company then than now. They were supportive and generous and Issue 1, Volume 1 of the *Journal of Education Policy* was published in 1986 with papers by David Corson, John Gray, Valerie Hannon, Gary McCulloch, Patricia Broadfoot, and others. I remained as Managing Editor for 30 years. Ivor and I had fleshed out our initial proposal on a car journey from AERA in New Orleans to Atlanta, Georgia. I drove a formidable, gas-guzzling Oldsmobile Cutlass while we talked. Ivor does not drive. The editorial to the first issue asserts that we were living through "a period of policy overload and turmoil"; maybe so, but there was a lot more to come.

In my days at Sussex, I was an ethnographer and a symbolic interactionist. I was fascinated by the Chicago School of Sociology and the theoretical writings of

George Herbert Mead. I read all the classic Chicago School monographs. In my own work I drew on the research sensibilities of Howard Becker and Anselm Strauss and was lucky enough to meet both. I was enthused by the work of Peter Woods and Martyn Hammersley. But now as I write like this, still on the basis of an interest in experience, in the everyday, in the mundane, I ascribe to a very different sensibility inflected by post-structuralism and drawing on the language of discourses, power and subjectivity (See Ball, 2013)

So, what changed? What changed me? Three things together: moving back to London where I was born to work at KCL and to be closer to where education policy was being done and policy discourses articulated; confronting the full tide of Conservative education reform, viz., the 1988 Education Reform Act; and third, stumbling across the work of Michel Foucault. I cannot remember why I began to read Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1979). The book spoke to my experiences in profound ways both as a school student and as Enlightenment academic researcher, as the books of Denis Marsden and Colin Lacey. Foucault's book was about me, but in a different way. Above all Foucault required me to question and to critique. I began to see the institution of schooling and the meaning of teaching and learning as historical contingencies and thus the possibility that they are not as necessary as all that. I was beginning to shake off my Enlightenment pretensions and to abandon the niceties of progress and hope and to embrace despair; to reject the "blackmail" of the Enlightenment, as Foucault called it, and the despotism of the rationalist tradition: the totality of reason, underpinned by the positivity of scientific thinking, the concatenation of order, humanity and morality. Like him I wanted to ask, "How are we rational today, and at what cost?" As

with my research on Comprehensive schooling, my primary concern was to unpack the working of institutions which appear to be both neutral and independent and to unmask the political violence which they exercise so that this can be confronted. Over time, in these terms, I came to see the school as entirely intolerable and irredeemable; yet again I will come back to that.



King's College was different from "new" universities, i.e., Essex and Sussex. It was a markedly classed institution. Many students, from private schools, and many academic staff wore their class credentials with nonchalant ease: entitled and confident, knowing they were where they belonged, fish in water. A Professor of French Literature applauded my demotic accent, as she put it, and a dinner for new faculty with the college Principal required that I hire a dinner jacket. Lords and Ladies and Sirs were commonplace. But the MA in Urban Education, to which I had been appointed as Tutor, was different again. I was following in the footsteps of the previous Tutors the redoubtable Geoff Whitty and Gerald Grace. I would in due course replace Geoff Whitty as Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education, when he became Director. They were hard acts to follow to say the least; and as feisty and challenging as they were, they were both immensely kind and supportive over the years. The MA that required two years

of part-time study was recruiting each year a small cohort of London teachers, all from state schools, many with experience as Union activists, everyone committed to making education just and democratic. Meg Maguire was one of my early students. The course was taught in the evening, and the students came directly from work twice a week for three-hour sessions plus individual tutorials for essay and dissertation support. I would begin each year by leading a walk around the local area, Waterloo. We looked at the Victorian Board schools, the Laying-in hospital, the Peabody Public housing. On this walk we witnessed the foundations of the modern State, the urban grid of power in all of its materiality. These were the institutions and technologies that were created to manage the burgeoning urban working-class population in the 19th century—the “carceral archipelago,” a world of confinement and control as Foucault called it. These were also the edifices of the Welfare State, and they were about to be “reformed”—privatised, incentivised, compared and ranked, commercialised, made to compete. Overload and turmoil indeed; they were to be made neoliberal. As was I.

Paradoxically and uncomfortably, the neoliberal reform of education was to provide the focus of and fund most of my research for the next 30 years: school choice, privatisation and commercialisation, the participation of new voices and new players in the work of government and governance, policy networks and heterarchies. These reforms served up research questions for a series of 11 major research studies. In effect the shift I have been describing became my intellectual preoccupation. I wanted to understand and interrogate the effects and consequences of neoliberalism: who benefits; who are its proselytisers: how do they get their message across? While I did not think it through

properly at the time, I was building my career on the ruins and remnants of welfare education and the toil and travails of welfare professionals. This line of research began with the ERA itself and an interview study of 54 actors directly or indirectly involved in the Act (Ball, 1990). It was possible to think that I was getting closer to policy, but of course I was not. I bought a suit to wear to the interviews.

These studies also initiated a series of collaborative relations which enriched and sustained me. Initially I did research with Richard Bowe and Sharon Gewirtz, then Meg Maguire and Carol Vincent, Carolina Junemann and Agnes van Zanten, and later with Antonio Olmedo, Patrick Bailey, and Bronwen Jones, Francesca Peruzzo, and Emiliano Grimaldi, and Jordi Collet-Sabé. In each case, I was made to think better and made very good friends. I was also able to borrow ideas, offer some of my own, and develop some useful syntheses as a result. Many of my 55 research students were also contributors to the development of my sociological imagination, and with some I wrote papers and books: Maria Tamboukou, Marina Avelar, Jin Jin, and Diego Santori to name just four.

At one point in the mid-1990s, I was involved in four overlapping research projects and beginning to travel regularly around the UK, to Europe, the US, Australia, and Latin America. Heathrow airport was starting to seem like a second home, and I remember on more than one occasion sitting in my aircraft seat waiting for take-off wondering “Why am I doing this?” I paid little attention then to my contribution to greenhouse gases. But I met and got to work with a lot of good people on my travels. And my Latin American travels led me to take on several PhD students from Chile, Argentina, and Brazil and for several years I taught a Masters module at San

Andres University in Buenos Aires. (Jefferson Mainardes, from Brasil, with whom I have also written, has translated and published my work in Portuguese). In the midst of all of this, in a move which would now be unthinkable, my Head of Department at KCL, Margaret Brown, aware of the stresses I was experiencing, offered to appoint a Research Associate to work with me across the different research projects. The person appointed was Diane Reay. Amazing.

On reflection though, at that time I was writing too much and thinking too little. The hectic schedule of international academic life, conferences, book chapters, journal submissions, project reports, funding applications and deadlines of many sorts was stimulating but also deadening. It was also at this time that I made perhaps the biggest mistake of my intellectual life. I received a card from Pierrie Bourdieu asking if we might become involved in his multi-person study of the plight of young people, what was to become *La Misère du Monde* (1993). I said no!

In 2001 I moved from KCL to the Institute of Education (IOE), then a constituent college of the University of London. I was appointed Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education and soon after I was the beneficiary a three-year ESRC Research Fellowship that bought me out of my teaching and administrative responsibilities. Suddenly I did have time to think, and I used this to begin examining in earnest the emergence of the education business sector in the UK (see Ball, 2007) and to explore the method of network ethnography. However, by the time I returned to normal working, higher education generally and the IOE in particular were different.

A HIGHER EDUCATION?

We have changed and been changed together; higher education and I and are still changing. I began work in a system that was relatively small, somewhat elite, quite autonomous, and predominantly scholarly. Teaching at Sussex was innovative, adventurous, and experimental (see Malcolm Bradbury's 1975 novel for some examples). And for the first few years, each student generated an hour of tutorial time per week, and I received a termly allowance for sherry. I now find myself in a very diverse, competitive and segmented mass system that recruits, or did, large numbers of overseas students, primarily to generate income rather than to educate. Higher education institutions are now businesses and growth and income generation trump scholarship a lot of the time. Institutions are "managed" by specialist "leaders" and spaces of democratic decision-making and opportunities for dissent have been minimised or erased entirely. When I began work, almost all academics were employed full-time. Now more than a third of all UK academics work on casualised contracts.

In November 2007, my departmental colleagues at the IOE and I were required to attend a redundancy interview, i.e., a consultation meeting to discuss at-risk roles and a process to identify people for redundancy. The Institute needed, or wanted, to save money. In many ways this was the symbolic and emotional moment of my induction as a fully-fledged neoliberalised academic. While it was not conducted in clear terms, the decision-making behind the interview focused attention on the productivity—number of students, work load, administrative responsibilities—and direct and indirect income generating capability of each member of department. We were rendered into cost units. The experience was an

emotionally disturbing one for everyone. We were caught up in “the micro-politics of little fears”—neoliberal affects. While I knew that my record of publications and research grants would make it unlikely that I would be identified as surplus, there was always a possibility that my high salary would be viewed as a potential source of savings. News of the IOE process soon became widely known, and within days I had received a job offer from another university and serious interest from two others. As it turned out, the IOE management changed its mind and abandoned the idea of making redundancies, at least at that time (see below). And I was awarded a pay rise. But I recognised that I now sat on the other side of the shift from the welfare episteme to the neoliberal episteme, not as a detached researcher but as a social subject. It was not just other educations that were being subjected to the creative destruction of neoliberalism but higher education as well. What it meant to teach, to do research and to write in higher education was changing or being changed, and the speed of change was increasing. The neoliberal disposition of higher education reform has reconfigured the labour process of academic work and drastically modified the sense of self of the worker. When I began teaching at IOE, a Masters module consisted of 12 students, most of whom were locals, almost always London teachers. By the time I retired at the end of 2019, those modules were capped at 85 students, and the overwhelming majority were Chinese. In terms of pedagogy, social relations, and workload, the experience of working in higher education was completely remade. Again, within all of this there was both more research to be done and more research income to earn—and some opportunities to confront neoliberalism, the “sloughing beast.” That research then generated further journal articles and thence

more citations and downloads. What a paradox! Publications are the currency of academic careers and an indicator of our systemic insatiability for scholarly distinction.

A most peculiar form of authorship is hailed and formed within all of this—now realised as a dual self, a hyperreal self, a self that comes into existence within various indexes; in some kind of awkward relation to the shadow of another self, a more mundane everyday self that is preoccupied with teaching ridiculously large classes and marking extraordinary numbers of essays.



In the formulation of this simulated self, our writing becomes transformed from text to number and is rendered into calculable units, which are compiled, classified, compared and stored in complex data bases and heat generating, energy sapping data storage units, and which are subject to appraisal and data analytics. Very much a political economy of writing. These data both magnify and reduce aspects of academic working life. The metrics of publication are what count, and they form the basis of our algorithmic identities. The numbers 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 fulfil our needs and desires. We are constantly expected to draw on the skills of

presentation and of self-inflation to write ourselves and fabricate ourselves in ever lengthier and more sophisticated CVs, annual reviews, and performance management audits. The danger is that we become transparent but empty, unrecognisable to ourselves in a life enabled by and lived against measurement.

From 2003 on, in writing about performativity, I was again writing about something “cracked” in my own experience. The “Teacher’s Soul and the Terrors of Performativity” is my most cited paper; 38,653 “Reads” according to Research Gate as I write. Maybe its popularity is because it speaks to the experience of neoliberalism for many practitioners in education. After a talk I gave based on the paper to a teacher union meeting one woman came up to me and said: “Thank you, I resigned my job six months ago. Now I know why I resigned.” A myriad of techniques of measurement, evaluation, and visibility have been put in place by neoliberal education reforms: “small theatres” of power. These are a set of “grids”—appraisal, impact, student satisfaction, etc.—through which school and academic work must now pass. They bring about the normalisation of categories, expectations and taken-for-granted judgments that shape institutional practice. This is part of a general change in the contemporary form of government as applied to higher and other educations. That is, a tying of higher education generally and research and writing and teaching and learning in higher education to the needs and purposes of the state and the economy. Research is being made increasingly utilitarian and productive in relation to the priorities set by governments and their funding agencies, the move that Brian Fay described as from policy scholarship to policy science. Constant change and constant visibility produce concomitant anxieties and insecurities. Once in the thrall

of the index, we are easily reduced by it to a category or quotient. Our humanity and complexity are abridged. We come to “know” and value others by their outputs rather than by their individuality and personal and intellectual qualities. Indeed, friendship and collegiality are increasing scarce in higher education. We lunch with our computer and increasingly rely on or seek companionship from various bots. In relation to all of this, some locations are fully exposed to the vicissitudes of reform and others are more sheltered or may indeed benefit—as are different people in any one setting. More than 100 UK universities are current ‘restructuring’ and seeking to make redundancies; 38% of all UK universities have announced compulsory redundancy schemes this year. The neoliberalisation of higher education means precarity and overwork for some, and hourly and short-term contracts and high salaries and job security for others. All of this is beset with tensions, paradoxes and dilemmas.

Faced by and entangled in all of this, I, like most others, have been increasingly discomfited and reluctantly complicit. The young man with the megaphone has been replaced by the older man clutching his h-index (Hirsch index). I am caught up in our human readiness to adapt ourselves to neoliberal imperatives, our “affective subjectification”, i.e., the processes by which academics are inclined to turn themselves into manageable subjects within the context of a precarious academic life beset by an insistent individualism and a loss of joy. Susceptible, as I am to the guilty pleasures of the h-index, annual best paper or book awards and the latest Stanford Top 2% rankings, I know that disappointment and shame are lurking to engulf those who fail to measure up. There is the constant ambivalence between anxiety and ambition and pride and guilt. The changes ongoing here are conceptual, existential, ontological,

and corporeal. They are, in other words, profound. They act upon the higher education body prioritising output over the well-being of staff and students. In many settings, and certainly in the UK, higher education systems are in crisis, and we are witnessing a barbaric dismantling of the intellectual fabric of academia. Disintegration is the logic at work here, in good part the consequence in one sector of the “fatal conceit” of neoliberalism.

HOW I WRITE AND WHY I WRITE

It is difficult to know whether we develop ways of thinking over time or bring our pre-established modalities of thought to bear on the tasks at hand. I tend to think best when I disagree and my impulse to write is almost always some kind of discomfort, when I find something “cracked” as Foucault put it. This often starts with a discomfort about the way in which issues are being formulated and presented discursively in research and writing. How they are problematised and conceptualised within academic and political discourses, and why some things become “problems” and others do not. The operation of power is very effective when it eschews or ignores or silences. Silence is not the opposite of discourse but rather a component that functions within it, shaping the limits of what can be said and how things can be said. It is from such starting points that I find myself most writing against. That is, I begin to think in relation to the inadequacy of or misrepresentations inherent in an established approach or the misconceptions perpetuated by orthodoxy—the doxa. Two of my research students – Felipe Acuña and Fran Salinas dubbed me a contrarian.

One obvious example is the book *The Micropolitics of the School* (1987). My first teaching duty when appointed lecturer in the Education department at the University of

Sussex was to teach a Masters module on the school as an organisation. To assemble a course outline and a reading list I read everything I could find in organisational theory that bore upon the life and workings of schools. None seemed to fit with what I had experienced during my three years of fieldwork for my PhD and time spent in other schools. None of the neat charts and worthy concepts that I encountered captured the dynamic disorder and nascent and not so nascent conflicts that were the everyday stuff of life in the schools I had researched. Everything was too straightforward, too orderly. I set out to provide a different set of tools for thinking about the way schools operated as organisations: micropolitics. Jo Blase ploughed a similar path in the US. It is clear now that *Micropolitics* in many respects is a pre-shift version of school life. Schools have been de-politicised in several senses. The way that they operate as organisations now requires a very different conceptual toolbox (Ball et al., 2011).

Writing against became a method you could say, and reappears in other sequences of research and pieces of writing. My work on policy discourses was written against the empiricist/descriptive orthodoxies of education policy analysis (Ball, 1993, 2015); policy sociology explored a language and concepts to make sense of policy differently; the research on enactment was written very directly against the authoritarian fantasy and partiality of “implementation”—we intended to erase the word from the lexicons of policy makers and educational researchers. My stance on critique and refusal against the redemption mode of the sociology of education is another case in point. I argued that the sociology of education teeters perilously between a romantic modernism—we just have to get it right—and a pragmatic neoliberalism—it needs improvement—both of which tie us, in different ways, to the tired but resilient fantasies of education

policy (Ball, 2020). In a different sense, performativity was written against neoliberalism. And *Against School*, was written against school (see below). One of several underlying themes in this method was also writing against the tyranny of order, reason and rationality, as in *Micropolitics* and my attempts to address the absurdity and incoherence of policy (Ball, 2021). As researchers, we all too often import rationality into our analysis. In our efforts to make sense of the world, we tend to take it to be sensible and orderly or ordered in some way by underlying mechanisms. We thus underplay or neglect the disorder, chaos, serendipity or sheer stupidity, which are key components of many spheres of social life, especially policy (see Alexander, 2022).

One way for me to make some sense of this ethos or attitude of being against—the duty of frank speaking—is reading and re-reading Michel Foucault—he is different every time. I am not a Foucauldian scholar. I am not interested in determining what Foucault “really” meant or whether he was right or wrong philosophically speaking. Rather what I value is that he requires me to think and provides some tools to think with. He unsettles, discomforts, provokes. His writings on critique, on limits and transgression, help me make sense of myself and provide some support in the effort to establish an ethics of intellectual work for myself. He makes it necessary to do work on my relation to myself, and to others, and to the planet. And he saw writing as one way to attempt that work. Foucault counsels a stance of self-detachment but not one of academic abstraction. The work on limits is both intellectual and practical. This is an ontological politics set within and over against networks of power, modes of subjectification, and government. Perhaps though that sounds too grandiose as an account of my mundane practices of

intellectual labour. But the struggle against what one has become is a form of freedom, not as an end state, not as an escape from power but a form of “pessimistic activism” that is both playful and very, very serious. The point is both to understand the “present” and to violate it. The will to know is the will to be different, a critical relation to one’s present and a working toward a different “ethics of existence.” In other words, the purpose of writing in this way is to make what is obvious, what is commonsense, our “silent habits,” open to question. At the same time critique must turn back on itself and think its own space of emergence. Bear in mind, as I am sure you have, that I write this now from the privileged position of retirement, a pension, and more time to think. To think against and think differently means to attempt to detach oneself from the simple comforts of an hermeneutic self and instead confront one’s ontological contingency. This requires a strenuous artfulness; it is an ethics based on renunciation; it is not a search for positive values or for alternatives.

Nonetheless, writing is always a social act, a complex interplay of our relation to ourselves and others, a relation which is systematically distorted by the techniques of enumeration. Writing can enable the opening up of ourselves to different possibilities, to a proliferation of meanings and experiences, a re-writing of ourselves and our social relationships and responsibilities, or it can close down those possibilities. It can be a stepping over the limit, and a way of seeing the arbitrary in the essentia—a realisation of freedoms we already have, those murmurs that speak incessantly through the fissures of power or an abdication, a passive acceptance of the obvious and necessary. It can be a space and a practice within which one might become different; a re-shaping of the will that requires us to experiment with choices and

new forms of experience, a constant grappling with the problem of finding oneself not knowing what and how to think or an un-reflexive practice within the limits and determinations of prevailing discourses.

In trying to think and write in this way, I have come to realise that, somewhat paradoxically, I am indebted to the epistemic constraints adumbrated earlier and their conditions of possibility. They constitute my possibility of being and made me what I am. I have come to see what I might yet become over and against those possibilities, which is freeing and at the same time somewhat frightening and challenging. Some of my need to write has been displaced into a series of politically inflected detective stories. Most recently *A Lie Cannot Live* (Ball, 2025) set in Atlanta, Georgia.

AGAINST SCHOOL

So, where have these uncertainties and my acquired wisdom got me? In some ways I have come full circle. From good student, to alienated failure, to hopeful researcher/saviour, to disillusioned scholar. The resolution of this journey of subjectivities is my clear view that the school is intolerable and dangerous. The school does what it was created to do: manage the population. It is a modernist machinery of normalisation and exclusion. That is what it does, that is what it is for. It cannot be saved; it cannot be improved or reformed.

Indeed, the failure of reform is grist for our research mill. If reforms did work, we would be out of a job.

Reforms always fail as school reverts to type, but we hold onto our foundational fantasy that school is basically a good place or might be made into a good place if we are clever enough. And we as education researchers have a vested interest in maintaining that fantasy, it fuels our research. Indeed, the failure of reform is grist for our research mill. If reforms did work, we would be out of a job.

Perhaps part of the problem is that as educationists we view school through our own successes and when we do what we do, we do not normally think about what we are and where we come from. This lack of reflexivity underpins and feeds our policy optimism. We made it through and flourished, so why cannot others? We are happy with our intelligibility. But we conflate education and school and find it nearly impossible to think of education without thinking of school. We forget that our success only means something in relation to the “failure” of others. We forget that as human scientists our expertise is integral to biopolitical strategies and governmentality.

The school is one node in a network of intolerable institutions—part of the carceral archipelago of modern society; as such it is irredeemable and irreparable. The school has become established in the modern social/colonial imagination as a universal good/right, the very epitome of modernity and humanity, and the concept of the “right to education” (read “school”) and concomitant notions of justice, equality and inclusion do impressive discursive work in fixing the school as a “site of salvation.” The school is part of the ensemble of rights that make up the modern state; but a compulsory right in many places. The idea of the right to education is for the most part unexamined. But whose right? The right to

what exactly? Who determines what our rights are?

The school is an archetype of the absurdity of rational despotism. It entraps us in its tender promises of “an education” but at the same time serves as a vehicle for the enforcement of limits to thought and fundamental epistemological and ontological divisions. The school is a brutal enclosure that both extracts labour and delivers social order. It is a place where possibilities are fostered and individual liberties are lost. It is central to our Western liberal autobiography, a material expression of rationality and its co-conspirator reason that inform and empower modernity’s project of unfreedom, namely, domestication and colonisation.

The school is also one site, and a key one, where a particular version of humanity is enacted and reproduced as what Sylvia Wynter calls the sovereign figure of Man2: the presumptive masculinist, prototypically White, Western bourgeois, Enlightenment subject. Schooling is a form of violence that acts on our relation to ourselves and to others, our self-recognition, and intelligibility, in and through our subjectivity. And that subjectivity is an unsustainable one. It is set over and against nature, against the planet, against our survival as a species. Climate change education, if it appears at all in the school curriculum, is mired in denials and associated fantasies that stem from the continuity of inherently harmful and unsustainable habits of being and an education system not just unable to respond to the climate crisis, but one that actively reproduces its conditions. The school curriculum is backwards facing and stultifying. It offers little or nothing by way of skills and sensibilities that might enable young people to deal with the challenges of a precarious future. Indeed, it produces

unsustainable subjects who are systematically detached from their collective fate and are rendered into social/economic rather than natural beings. A fundamental division between culture and nature is maintained.



So, should we give up on our reliance on and relation to school and schooling?

Absolutely. What we need to do as a matter of urgency is to begin to think about the possibilities of education without the school and break out of the constant cycle of hope and disappointment of progress and defeat, of challenge and incorporation—into which education research and the sociology of education have become locked. We need to walk away, to admit defeat and move on, to think education differently in the space created by the erasure of the school. That is my challenge to myself, my students and those who read and make use of my work.

BEYOND SCHOOL

When I speak about these things, as I did again yesterday in Barcelona, almost always the first question that is asked is “What is the alternative?” It is a question that I refuse. I refuse the tyranny of alternatives. An alternative is almost always a different version of what already exists. What we need is a space that is cleared of history and common sense and what is obvious and

necessary in which we might begin to experiment, take risks and think differently. What might ‘thinking differently’ look like? Truth does not reside in a set of propositions about how things should be, but in a practice that critiques issues and problems in a manner that opens up new possibilities for action. An analysis of what we have become defines the limits of our possibility but also then creates the possibility of going beyond those limits: disidentification. The point is that things can be unmade as long as we know how they were made. We must not take for granted the relations entwining power and knowledge, but rather those relations need to be explored in every case. Over and against this, thinking and writing can become a liberating experience, an escape from the grip of discourse, enabling inquiry into the trajectories of our own formation as “knowing” subjects; a life method, a way to undo fixity and identity. All of this then requires a willingness to criticise, not just social conditions, but oneself, indeed especially oneself.

I tried out some of this practice and these ideas in *Foucault as Educator* (2017), and more recently, with Jordi Collet-Sabé, in *Against School* (2025). We adumbrate in *Against School* a version of education beyond school that draws on and relates together commoning and care of the self. Commoning is a collective line of flight that offers the possibility of a different relation between nature, society, and the individual. Using the long tradition of critical thinking about natural and social enclosures, we suggest an understanding of the establishment of state schools as a form of enclosure—enclosure of knowledge and minds and bodies. Against this we propose a rethinking of education as a common good and as a commoning activity. We conceive of education as a developing and testing social practices and norms for self-managing natural and human resources that operate for

collective benefit. Rethinking education as a commoning opens the possibility of reimagining our subjectivity and forms of relation to ourselves, others, the community and the planet. In the book we link and relate commoning to the idea of care of the self—the work of self-formation outlined above. This is the formation of an art of living; both taking a delight in oneself and the achievement of self-mastery. Education as commoning can be thought of as an active and engaged process, based on learning from the immediate and quotidian, forming and testing at the same time; a dynamic and continuing activity rather than an adherence to a system of moral codes and principles. Rather than being a lonely and selfish process, self-care fosters generosity and solidarity, enables stronger and more meaningful ties with others. This is the activity of the subject within a field of constraints, crafting or re-crafting a relation to oneself and to others.



So that is where I have got to so far. The question remains is this me on the page? Am I revealed, represented, made authentic, coherent. Perhaps not entirely. To think otherwise would be just another fiction. What we have is a mass of contradictions, tensions, and unresolved dilemmas, a set of uncertainties and a decisive incompleteness. “Aun aprendo”—as Goya said in old age—“still learning.” Nonetheless, I take comfort in my incoherence. Writing this piece seemed at the outset to be an indulgence but

maybe now I understand myself a little better—not exhaustively or comprehensively but more adequately? And I insist on not remaining the same. As

Foucault (2000) put it: “When I write, I do it above all to change myself and not to think the same thing as before” (p. 240).

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