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‘Book Review: Stephen Ball (2007) Education PLC: Understanding Private Sector Participation in Public Sector Education’

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Book Review

If ever Marx's famous line "all that is solid melts into air" had resonance, it is in Stephen Ball's very detailed account of 'education plc' – a story of fracturing, dissolution, new imaginaries, inventions and performances. The solidity, certainty, even transparency of what once was—the post-war welfare state in the UK, has given ground to a much more fragmentary, uncertain, opportunistic and often opaque set of linkages and interconnections that now makes up the state and education. And, as Ball shows, this new entity that is emerging – 'Education plc' - represents a profound change, not only in the structure of the state and the categories we use to talk about education, but the very ethics of the enterprise.

This is a very important and (mostly) well crafted book. It begins in a fairly familiar way for those who know Ball's writing; we are introduced to policy sociology – as being an approach that critically analyzes policy, policy technologies and policy regimes in the UK. The familiarity here is Ball's insistence on self-consciously developing a methodological framework that is "both ontologically flexible and epistemologically pluralist" (p. 1) – a toolbox approach that tries to have its cake and eat it too. I'll return to this insistence on methodological ambivalence at the conclusion, but first, let's look more closely at what Ball is trying to do and to argue.

The first clue is in the title – the juxtaposition of words that, until more recently, have been unusual traveling companions – education plc. Their proximity signals the book's arguments, that education/public is in the process of being transformed into something else. The book, however, is not just an exploration and analysis of the move of big business corporations into the education sector. It is a well researched, highly nuanced account of the multiple, subtle, unpredictable and inventive ways in which actors – public and private sector - now meet in an arena called education that is itself being reconstituted.

The first chapter introduces us to the tools and framings for the study, methodological, theoretical, conceptual and ethical. We are reminded of the importance of discourse, the usefulness of the idea of the competition state (via Bob Jessop's analysis of an emerging Schumpeterian Workfare State though somehow the Post National Regime dimension is ignored), the importance of identifying actors that propel both discourses and enact them, of the need for the clarification of concepts like privatisation as being plural practices (privatisations), and some reflections under ethics of locatedness, values and taking a position. This chapter then sets the scene; of an array of new accumulation strategies, state projects, and hegemonic projects that are unfolding and constituting new social formations and subjectivities.

In chapter two, Ball introduces us to the history of privatisation(s). Quite rightly he argues that while private sector activity in education is not new (note Compulsory Competitive Tendering, City Technology Colleges and so on under Thatcher), this most recent phase has largely been ushered in over the past 10 years under Blair's Third Way project. Under Blair, markets, new managerialism and performativity were not only ratcheted up, but as chapter three reveals, the scale and scope of the penetration of private sector interests into education now make it a very complex services industry with very big and sometimes little profits to be made. This is a particularly meaty chapter; lots of detail and insights revealing the very different ways in which the industry works – short and long contracts to outsource services – such as Local Education Authority work and building schools; funding of large programmes such as management systems; services such as exam marking; indirect selling of goods and brands, the list goes on. It is a billion dollar business that is dynamic and fast changing. There are a number of box inserts throughout the book and particularly in this chapter that are useful for the reader. The boxes provide the necessary detail to convey a strong sense of the complexity of relationships that are now being constructed, as do the networks that are traced out in chapter five.

In chapter four we meet the actors involved in the education services industry. Many (mostly men) began their careers in the days when education was a public sector. Their move was either the result of seeing better opportunities in the private sector or as a result of the public sector being restructured in ways their job did not exist or, if it did, it was not worth staying for. It is somewhat ironic, then, that these education entrepreneurs use their public sector knowledge and claim to a higher public service ethic to broker the deals for the 'other side'. We have then a claim by Ball that a new governance regime now constitutes the education sector; an unstable hybrid made up of new and old cross-crossing networks, new and old forms of hierarchy in a rainbow of partnerships. It is here, Ball claims, that we see a complex multi-dimensions interpenetration of education and business, in and through which policy develops and secures a particular vision of the future and the present. This vision or imaginary, as chapter six details, is one committed to innovation and improvement, from coaching and performance management systems to new ways of doing leadership to transform schools. This is the stuff of performativity; of continuous self *and* social improvement. These strategies trade on locale and place, while entrepreneurial localities become exemplars to others. Chapter seven provides a sobering account of the hard edge of this business through an analysis of the activities of firms Jarvis and WS Atkins. What gets revealed here are the controversies and conflicts that now confound 'education plc'. As Ball points out, the issue here is one of profit, responsibility and market failure. How can firms be held to account when things go badly wrong? The nub of the problem is that while these firms are happy to skim of profits through clever financing and refinancing schemes, they are less than keen about staying in the business or honouring their contracts when profits are thin pickings.

In the final chapter Ball faces the inevitable what now? What are the big and deep conversations and considerations we must engage in now that we are 'in the know'; that the 'public' decommodified nature of education has been transformed by private, for-profit interests. There are two issues that I want to raise. The first concerns Ball's ambivalences. Conclusions, Ball reminds us, are modernist ideas. Maybe. However, in my view, conclusions (should) also involve reflexivity. They are simultaneously arrival and departure points, not end games or intellectual cul-de-sacs. Nevertheless, Ball does come to the conclusion that what we are witnessing is a major rupture/dislocation that is transforming the very concept of education. In his view a new episteme is emerging that involves changes in both the meaning and experience of education. This, for Ball, raises important ethical issues. He might well ask: what do we do about a society that is in the making whose moral environment is a form of 'commercial civilization'? But he hesitates to go that far. Despite claims to 'ontological flexibility', it seems to me that Ball's reflections *are* anchored in some kind of tentative ontological concern, about the kinds of conditions/contexts which might nurture just and ethical behaviour in and through education. However, there is a shadow in the background of Ball's introduction and conclusion; the spectre of post structuralism that (rightly) struggles with the idea of master-narratives but ends up either voiceless or at best ambivalent about questions of social justice, ethics and so on. Surely recognizing complexity and plurality does not mean we cut away the ground for reflexivity and ethically-informed action. If this is not what we want as a society, then how can we change it? What alternative imaginaries can be mobilised, materialized, institutionalized? My second issue relates to being able to discern the contradictions in this new social formation, and which is promised in the heavy theoretical use of Bob Jessop. As a critical realist, Jessop is concerned in his strategic relational approach to identify the fundamental contradictions of capitalism (see Jessop and Sum, 2006), and which continue shape the state and education relation (Dale, 1982). With education entering more and more into the realm of sphere of commodified social relations, as Ball so skillfully reveals in this book, what form do the structural contradictions and associated strategic dilemmas take? Transformation occurs under two conditions: structural crisis as a result of contradictions and the advance of potentially hegemonic imaginaries. Bringing these two together, discourses and structures, would provide a more robust, even hopeful account of change and enable us to see where the fracture lines might emerge in this new, fragile, spatio-temporal fix.

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