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Professionals, poachers or street-level bureaucrats: government policy, teaching identities and constructive subversions

ROS OLLIN

In this chapter, Ros Ollin challenges dominant notions of the teacher as victim, and explores the ways in which teachers employ subtle methods of resistance under the guise of what De Certeau (1984) calls 'la perruque': the wig. Ollin explores the ways in which these constructive subversions operate within Gramscian and Foucauldian concepts of power: a conceptual framework which sees power as two-way and relational, rather than simply as the domination of one group (in this case, policy makers) by another (in this case, teachers). This chapter offers a further exploration of the forms of teacher resistance explored by Boag-Munroe in the previous chapter, and adds another dimension to the interlocking spheres of interactions explored by Haggis at the beginning of this section, placing a firm emphasis on the significance of the individual as a locus of both power and resistance.

This chapter considers how a positive and energising discourse could be employed in discussions of teachers and their responses to bureaucratic, centralised control. I envisage this as an initial attempt to counteract a prevailing 'culture of victimhood' whereby teachers are portrayed as powerless victims trapped in a web of hegemonic power (Smyth and Shacklock, 1998). Ironically, this disempowering por-

trayal is often carried out by writers and educationalists in broad sympathy with the teaching profession who, by drawing attention to the problems engendered by managerialism and targeted accountability, may seek to spur the profession into large-scale action. I do not deny the validity of much of the research into the low morale and pressures experienced by teachers in all educational sectors. Nor do I deny the validity of any aspirations which support the rights of teachers as a body to change those initiatives which contradict their own knowledge and experience. However, I would suggest that there is a parallel perspective to be considered, concerned with the subtle and complex interplay between external factors and individual agency which operates on a daily basis throughout the education system. The ways in which writers represent teachers and the ways in which research is interpreted may demonstrate a tendency to dismiss as insignificant, if not irrelevant, the small acts of resistance and what I will term 'constructive subversions' demonstrated within teachers' working practices. By drawing on theories from a number of different epistemological and philosophical areas, I hope to suggest that the space for individual action, and its effect on policy implementation, may be far greater than is often acknowledged.

The policy context within which teachers operate has been extensively considered by writers on education. Much has been written about the increasing convergence in global government policy trends characterised by a centralisation of control, an emphasis on performativity, accountability and marketisation, communicated through a discourse of managerialism. The effect of these restrictive frameworks and government policy initiatives on the work of teachers and academics has been extensively documented (Lea *et al*, 2003; Ollin, 2002; Ball, 2001; Easthope and Easthope, 2000; Avis, 1999; Dale, 1997; Halsey *et al*, 1997; Hargreaves, 1994; Torres, 1989). This has engendered a lively and wide-ranging debate on the professional identities of those involved in teaching and, more broadly, on the nature of teacher professionalism itself (Bathmaker, 2001; Sachs, 2003; Day, 2000; Whitty, 1997). A significant feature of much of this work is the representation of teachers as being under a state of siege, as powerless victims of forces beyond their control. Ball uses comments from demoralised teachers to support his analysis of the intrusion of the 'technical intelligentsia' which 'drives performativity into the day-to-day practices of teachers' and forces them to 'play the game' in school inspections

(Ball, 2001:147). In the post-sixteen context, the lack of active mass resistance is presented as having a damaging effect on education:

In further or higher education, the passivity of lecturers and academics undermines the possibilities of revitalising what is left of the academic community. (Hayes, 2003:88)

Exhortations for action tend to concentrate on large-scale collaborative resistance undertaken by the teaching community as a whole. For example, the recent call from Sachs (2003) for symbolically ‘disruptive work’ and the need to challenge the dominant discourse of education is aimed at generating collective action rather than individual resistance. This would support a concept of professionalism which includes the obligation to speak out in public as a cohesive body (Carr, 2000). However, I would suggest that there can be many different kinds and levels of resistance which writers on education need to take into account. These can include resisting practical changes affecting working practices; resisting the *processes* by which change is implemented; resisting inroads on personal or professional identity; resistance to a general state of things by opposition to a political or ideological stance. For each type of resistance, action can take place at the micro-level (the individual and particular), as well as the macro-level (the large-scale and public), with continuous interplay between the two (Giddens, 1984). I will argue in this chapter that many theoretical perspectives on power and change acknowledge the significance of this micro-level activity in undermining large-scale structures of control.

It may be useful here to explore briefly different notions of power and their relationship to resistance, as inherent in the notion of resistance is the notion of power – power that is resisted against or power that is exercised to overcome resistance. However, the concept of power is in itself problematic, characterised in different ways depending on which ontological stance prevails. I would suggest that, broadly speaking, power can be conceived as either hegemonic or organic. In Marxist philosophy, power is hegemonic, characterised by centralised political and economic control and the presence of a dominant discourse which ‘normalises’ potentially contestable sites (Gramsci, 1971). The relationship of the ‘resistor’ to the source of power is conceived here as a duality consisting of the monolithic dominant and the rebelling subordinate.

An alternative notion characterises power as an organic entity, located not in one space but endlessly formulated and reformulated within socio-cultural networks and social relations (Foucault, 1997). Power here may not be overtly represented, but becomes covertly internalised and normalised within the practice of individuals and groups. Of significance to this chapter is that the Gramscian hegemonic and the Foucauldian relational concepts both acknowledge the potential of individuals to exercise resistance. Far from characterising people as victims, Gramsci has a liberating notion of the power of individuals to think and to question social and political norms – the development of a social consciousness which he argues is not something that can be imposed upon people, but arises from their own working lives. He further suggests that any contradictions between the results of political ideology and the lived experience of the individual should be seen in terms of an ideological struggle. Interestingly, Gramsci suggests that although resistance may occur as an overt ideological struggle, it also may be construed as an ideological *struggle even if those involved are unaware of this*. I would suggest that this viewpoint could indicate a caveat to those writers on education who dismiss individual acts of principled assertion as ‘mere’ resistance (Moore *et al*, 2002) as it places those acts inevitably in the public and ideological domain, even though the individual intentionality derives from the private domain of personal principle.

Although the hegemonic concept postulates a binary relationship of power and resistance, Foucault’s notion of resistance is of a far more fluid and elusive nature, weaving through different social fabrics and taking coloration from the surrounding context or circumstance. It functions through a knowledge of the rules of a particular environment, its regulatory systems and how its discourse is employed. This knowledge can then be used by individuals as a basis for developing the tactics which will enable them to survive in complex and sometimes hostile environments. This idea of tactics is given a more active and empowering slant by De Certeau (1984) discussed later in this chapter.

So far, I have considered briefly two different philosophical and political conceptualisations of power and have argued that both notions allow for the significance of individual agency. I will now consider a different theoretical field altogether, that of strategic management and

change. I will suggest that, within the conceptual framework of management theory, government policy developments and implementations can be represented as large-scale change strategies, exemplifying, according to the theoretical base, either hegemonic or Foucauldian notions of power. Classical planned models of change, linked to Taylorist models of control (Taylor, 1911) are underpinned by what could be termed a hegemonic ontology where power is located in one place – the top – and with that power being used to force, coerce or persuade groups or individuals into compliance with the change required. This compliance model is consistent with the normative motions of an authoritative policy hierarchy (Brodkin, 2000) and can be found in the coercive discourse of some government members, such as Charles Clarke, the current UK Secretary of State for Education and Skills. It can also be found in the policing-oriented inspectorial system exemplified by the ruthless and punitive approach adopted by Chris Woodhead, the former UK Chief Inspector for Schools, who resigned in November, 2000.

More recent theorists on strategic management reject the rather static and simplistic notions of power inherent in classical management theory, and acknowledge the complexity and instability of the change process (see, for example, Fullan, 1999). This thinking is reflected in contemporary management theories related to processual, cultural models of change. In these models, power is no longer seen as located in one particular space, but functions as a set of fluid and evolving relationships which form as a result of different sets of alliances or circumstances (Dawson, 1994; Fullan, 1999). This is far closer to Foucault's notion of power as organic, residing not in one place or person, but within networks of relations of power (Foucault, 1997). Important to the theme of this chapter is that strategic management theory using a processual approach recognises the *micro-* as well as the macro-political and cultural dimensions of strategic policy change and also, the importance of acknowledging different loci of power in the implementation of policy initiatives (Dawson, 1994).

While both classical and processual theories include the possibility of resistance to change, however, conceptualisations of resistance differ among different strategic management models. In the classical planning model, resistance is seen as entirely negative, to be preempted, beaten down, appeased or managed. Resistance in this model

means that the power at the top is directly challenged by those on whom the power is enacted. The confrontational nature of this power-resistance binary lends itself to large-scale public challenges to those in control of policy by groups of people such as professional bodies or trades unions, or to large-scale inertia such as that demonstrated by many teachers in response to policy changes (see Boag-Munroe in this volume). However, resistance is characterised differently in the more contemporary processual, cultural change models. Here resistance, in the form of disagreement or conflict, is seen by some writers as a means of ensuring that the change takes into account the multiple perspectives of those involved, with the possibility of reaching a level of compromise about the nature of the changes to policy or practice to be enacted (Fullan, 1999). In the latter model, power is recognised as being located at *all* levels within an institution, at practitioner level as well as at management level. Of significance to the theme of resistance is that processual models of strategic management acknowledge a very real possibility of individual practitioners changing the content or process of a policy enactment. As Fullan suggests:

The individual educator is a critical starting point because the leverage for change can be greater through the efforts of individuals (1993:12)

So far in this chapter, I have tried to indicate that different theoretical fields all recognise that there is space for resistance at the level of the individual, as well as through the collective public voice. I have also suggested that it is possible for individual resistance to have an impact on policy. I will now look at this theme in more detail through the work of Michael Lipsky on street level bureaucracy and then move on to discuss an empowering version of individual agency through looking at Michel de Certeau's writing on poaching and *la perruque*.

The research of Michael Lipsky (1980) presents a useful challenge to the notion of passive acceptance and the portrayal of individuals as powerless in their enforced enactment of government policy. His concept of the 'street level bureaucrat' encompasses those public sector workers who interact directly with the public and can exercise considerable discretion in how they work. He includes teachers among the list of public sector workers to whom this analysis applies. Of relevance to this chapter is that Lipsky's research attributes a signi-

ficant amount of discretionary power to street level bureaucrats, including the power to interpret policy according to their own capacities to carry out the work and control what and how they choose to implement. Lipsky identifies that common environmental features of public sector employees operating at street-level are the significant resource constraints and heavy workloads under which they must function. These affect the strategies they use to cope with their job, which display a number of features comparable to research on teachers' coping strategies (Moore and Edwards, 2003). Lipsky sees the street-level bureaucrat as essentially self-determining, with considerable power to interpret and enact the job in the way that they choose. He suggests that the demands of accountability, which seeks to increase congruence between worker behaviour and management policy through administrative controls, have little effect on the street-level bureaucrat who will find ways of producing the minimum required. Although Lipsky's representation of the street level bureaucrat devising individual coping mechanisms under stress is, in one sense, a depressing view, in terms of the notion of resistance to a managerialist environment, there is some cause for optimism. Although he recognises that the idealism and commitment of many practitioners is affected by the pressurised context of work, he does see them as exerting very substantial power over their own work practices. This autonomy can also have the far more wide-reaching effect of changing government policy at street level. Hence by individual interpretations of policy, that policy is transformed. The effects of policy transformation from the 'top to the bottom' have been researched elsewhere and represented, for example, in what Reynolds and Saunders term '*the implementation staircase*' (Reynolds and Saunders, 1987).

However, although Lipsky writes about the power of the employee, he does present their resistance to policy initiatives in terms of the coping strategies of a beleaguered workforce. Hence, to a certain extent he still contributes to a representation of 'victimhood'. De Certeau (1984) has a far more empowering notion of resistance, captured in his work on the everyday practices by which ordinary people reclaim their own meanings from those presented to them through the processes and products of mass enculturation. He distinguishes between strategy and tactics, where strategy is determined by those with 'will and power', delineating a space from which influence can be exerted over external targets or threats, and tactics – 'the art of the weak' –

operating within a space that is not their own. In other words, tactics comprise a 'set of practices that strategy has not been able to domesticate' (Buchanan, 2000:89).

De Certeau's (1984:18) idea of resistance is in the form of 'subtle, resistant activity' and includes 'innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other's game... that is, the space instituted by others'. However, although he seems to almost suggest a kind of guerilla tactics here, in which the resistance is a negative, if playful act, elsewhere he indicates ways in which people take positive action to transform existing spaces and, through making their own space within them, affirm their sense of self. They do this through their discourse – stories which affirm an alternative way of viewing the world, which refuse to legitimate a dominant ideology. They also do this through their own practice, in particular what De Certeau (1984:24) refers to as *la perruque* (the wig) which is 'the worker's own work disguised as work for his employer'. De Certeau (1984:25) suggests that this practice is prevalent in most places and that by doing this, the worker actually 'diverts time... for work that is free, creative and precisely not directed for profit'.

I would suggest that the power of De Certeau's analysis is in the representation of the capabilities of individuals and small groups caught in larger systems to retain those things that are important to them and co-exist with, whilst refusing to legitimate, systems of dominance and control. The discourse he uses is of play, joy and creativity – an essentially liberating discourse about the practices of ordinary people. I would suggest also that much research on teachers marginalises the capabilities of individuals and small groups caught in larger systems to retain those things that are important to them and to co-exist with, *whilst refusing to legitimate*, systems of dominance and control. This corresponds to various research findings about teachers' resistance to relinquishing what they consider to be important to good practice (Smyth, 2001). I would further suggest that De Certeau's concept of *la perruque* might be adapted to include the possibility that an individual's notion of their own professional identity might cause a particular type of 'poaching' from the employer's time. This poaching would involve the worker taking time to engage in the types of practices which satisfy them that they are behaving in accordance with their own notions of personal and professional identity. The worker's

own work here is the professional practice they define as good and appropriate, and ‘disguised as work for the employer’ represents a ‘strategic compliance’ (Shain and Gleeson, 1999, in Bathmaker *et al*, 2003) with external managerialist demands.

My point here is that there are many ways in which resistance to government ideologies, represented through policy, can take place, and that many of what I will term constructive subversions can take place. These are acts which may take place at an individual or small group level, but can have the effect of subverting policy intentions and even transforming policy itself. They are constructive for this reason, but constructive also because they serve to reinforce a positive and empowered notion of teacher identity rather than the besieged victim too often portrayed.

It has been suggested that a culture of pragmatism has effectively depoliticised teachers (Moore *et al*, 2002). It has further been suggested that active subversion of policy only exists at senior management level (Moore and Edwards, 2003) through what has been termed strategic pragmatism. However I would suggest that there are many examples of these tactics being used by teachers at the ‘street level’. A significant number of research findings which present teachers as compliant and powerless are currently predicated on large-scale challenge as being the only means of countermanding government policy. However, a closer look at how the teachers are actually undermining policy by their small-scale acts of principle might support a different reading of some of the research evidence. A recent book researching teacher’s lives warns against underestimating individual teachers:

Beware of making judgements about teacher technicisation which underestimate or do not take into account the power of local, institutional and personal professional contexts. (Day, 2000:126)

Day further states:

The teachers in this study had clearly adapted and during the transition from initiation to internalisation of change had reasserted their autonomy. (*ibid*:126)

Let me state clearly that I am not suggesting that writers on education should adopt any simplistic, propagandist view of teachers happily implementing government policy as portrayed in much of the government-inspired literature. I am proposing that, in its desire to take a

critical viewpoint on centralised policy, educational research does not neglect or minimise the capability of individuals to retain what they consider is important, and by so doing resist, to some measure at least, the external pressures for them to act otherwise. I would suggest that the constructive subversions that many teachers engage in on a regular basis represent a principled version of *la perruque* where the tactics of the ‘weak’ have the potential to form a powerful alternative framing of what is important in education. A number of commentators on education have called for large-scale public actions to produce an assertion of teachers’ identities and professional practices. I would argue that there is room for both this overt activism and for less public, but nevertheless, constructive subversions. Both have an important part to play in the development of an alternative discourse which removes teachers from a position of victimhood. I would suggest that it is important for both teachers and those who write about teachers to be aware of the frames (Schön, 1993) within which their discourse is created, and to become aware of the possibilities of reframing towards a more positive and empowering vision of teachers’ potential to bring about change.

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