Agency and the Discursive Construction of Crisis in Education

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*the shadow of the crisis spreads over the world*

(Michael Apple 1982, p. 1)

Introduction

This paper is the product of a journey through particular fields of theorising. While some of these fields have often been negotiated in various ways, by various persons at various times in the past, I am mindful of the difficulties created through reliance solely on others’ accounts of their travels. In short, the stories told by other travellers are never quite as meaningful or useful as the personal experiences and insights available to the traveller. This is because the stories told by others (including the story I’m about to tell) always appear more orderly and polished, more self-assured, and less divergent and contingent than the journey itself inevitably was. I am not suggesting here that my travels are complete however; this is a work-in-progress, a story-so-far. Writing this paper is effectively, for me, an opportunity to climb a tall tree and peer both back and forwards; to take stock and to make some plans for the task ahead. I am also hoping at this stage that some other travellers will wander by and share some experiences of their journeys with me so that I might learn something about both about what I may have missed, and what I may be yet to face.

The central purpose of my journey was to reach an explanation of how a theoretical framework which eschews the liberal-humanist notion of the Subject can account for agency within the context of educational crisis. My desire in this sense is to outline a way of conceptualising socio-historical epochs which avoids the essentialism and determinism of traditional (naturalist) accounts which seek to place human Agency at the centre of such events. Without denying the role of human action—I wish to avoid lapsing into a form of determinism—I aim to theorise educational crisis, and in so doing, *situate* human action in a way whereby such action is not over-estimated. In this sense, my account is in part a critique of humanistic notions of Agency.

To contextualise the socio-historical events that I am using as a practical referent for my *agency-theorising*, I begin the paper with a secondary purpose in mind: to examine and theorise crisis discourse/practices—particularly as they apply to education. This is an important step because the way I am theorising crisis (as a *network of practices*—as opposed to an ontological *a priori*) is central to my view of agency. It is thus that the following proceeds from a discussion of crises in education and the broader contexts within which these are situated; to a theorisation of crisis; and then to a reading of agency implicit in this *crisis-theorising*.

Background to crisis-theorising

I begin this examination of agency and discourse/practices of educational crisis by outlining the place of crisis in our contemporary Western neoliberal societies. Crisis is generally defined in one of two ways, either as an objective reality or as a process (Habermas 1975). On the one hand, a crisis may be represented as a watershed, a turning point in a state of affairs where a decisive change for better or for worse is immanent. On the other, it is a time of intensified reflection and problematisation in a particular field. Going further than these traditional ways of understanding crisis, Stuart Hall (1987) suggested crisis can carry a
positive dimension, signalling reconstruction as well as critique. In supporting Hall’s move to re-theorising crisis, Green argued that every effort must be made to ‘complexify’ and ‘pluralize’ the notion of ‘crisis’, and to ‘refuse its essentialisation’ (1992, p. 9). By problematising the notion of crisis, Hall and Green actively construct new possibilities for reading crisis discourse/practices.

Following Hall and Green, the purpose of my crisis-theorising is to simultaneously examine the politics of signification (Hall 1982, p. 70) associated with, and problematise the will to truth (Foucault 1972) embodied in, crisis discourse/practices in education. Of central importance here is the problem of representation: the epistemic battle-ground to which Green (1992, p. 3) was referring when he wrote:

> It is particularly important to unsettle the way the term ‘crisis’ has entered so easily into educational and public discussion, as if it were both essentially unproblematical and readily intelligible....‘Crisis’ is a highly charged term, in short, and what it means in particular circumstances and at particular historical junctures is precisely a matter of how it is made to mean, and by whom. It marks out an exemplary site of political and ideological struggle.

Hence an epistemic analysis of ‘crisis’ discourse/practices in education is necessarily an analysis of politics of representation, of struggle over meaning. So too is such an analysis, in and of itself, a manifestation of a will to truth; an attempt to impose a particular meaning, and so a quest for particular truth-effects. Further, such an attempt is inextricably tied up with particular effects of power, as I discuss in later sections of this paper where I examine ontological and epistemic dimensions of crisis.

It would be an oversight to proceed to these sections or to a discussion of crisis in education, however, without first giving attention to the broader context within which these reside. Of particular interest here is what may be described as a crisis in public schooling, which is more broadly situated within times of manufactured uncertainty (Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994). On the relations between schooling and broader society, Donald (1979, p. 40), refers to the ‘metaphorical currency’ of education: ‘Education is not only determined by the complex, contradictory socio-economic conjuncture: that whole pattern is actually condensed within it.’ Donald’s point is that it is impossible to read off the ‘crisis in education’ from any other ‘crisis’ and why it is misleading to identify any one development as being essentially what it is about. Understanding crisis-theorising from this perspective situates the public schooling crisis within broader socio-historical crises in society (see, for example, Apple 1993, Donald 1979, Habermas 1984, Lash & Urry 1987). For example, Green (1992) talks of the crisis in public schooling as an alibi for a broader crisis in capitalism. A crisis in public schooling, in this sense, is both symptom and contributor to broader processes of crisis. Along these lines Green (1992, p. 13) paraphrases Basil Bernstein (1975), who speaks of the crisis in education as a ‘transportation of crisis, a metonymic assertion of agency and culpability, and a particular deployment of cause/effect relations, in what is effectively a restoration of strongly defined classifications’.

I wish to suggest that while the broader historico-social context is integral to any localised set of crisis discourse/practices, what is needed is a representation of these crisis-processes which imputes an ascending analysis of power-relations. The application of a grammar of crisis which sees discourse/practices of crisis descending from society onto classroom practices, imputes a deductive logic of such process which is tantamount to an essentialisation of the free play of power relations. Some have gone beyond unidirectional models of crisis-action to a synthetic position which sees a mutual reflexivity between broader societal and educational processes. This mirror-sponge dialectic–such as that used by some in the legitimation school of crisis theorising–needs to be problematised because, I
would argue, the position arises out of a normalised and reductionist conception of power (particularly in terms of its understanding of the state and its role). And further, reliance on such a conception closes off politics to all but a particular understanding of freedom; one that falls prey to what Foucault often called ‘the blackmail of the Enlightenment’. What seems to me to be a more productive position is one that holds a more conditional and contingent perspective on historico-social practices; one which may see, on the one hand alternative spaces for and perspectives on freedom, and on the other new possibilities for social action.

Times of crisis

It is with the above position in mind that I turn now to arguments some have made to the effect that there have indeed been increasing crises, in society in general and in public schooling in particular, over the past few decades. These alleged crises are situated within and around crises in politics (both Left and Right), in society, and in our very ways of thinking about the world. One could go so far as to argue that the last three decades have signalled a progressive undermining of the epistemic foundations of contemporary (particularly Western) societies. This movement, which has been variously named using terms such as postmodernism, post-traditionism, late or advanced modernism, or poststructuralism, has led some to suggest our very society has become fundamentally and inescapably embedded within processes of uncertainty and risk (Beck 1992, Beck, Giddens & Lash 1994, Giddens 1990, Lyotard 1984). Along these lines Beck wrote of our times as being marked by a Risk Society, arguing that contemporary human existence is so permeated by notions and practices of risk that it is impossible to escape them. Further, Beck was careful to point out how the society he described has profound implications for our lives, especially within the realm of politics. For example, in his chapter The Reinvention of Politics (in Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994), he wrote:

> Many demand, and actually begin, to turn the rule system itself inside out, while it remains quite unclear (what the game will be to which the rules will be applied)….Rule-directed and rule-altering politics overlap, mingle and interfere with one another.

As Axel Honneth (1992) notes, a post-traditional condition of declining values associated with and constituted by industrial labour has been accompanied by ‘greater pluralisation of individual life forms’. Honneth (1992, p. 32) talks about members of society consuming ‘market identities’, prepackaged aesthetic substitutes for their socially depleted biographies which are a result of postindustrial ethical life. Along the same lines, Giddens (1994) talks of a retreat to ‘life politics’ and a concomitant political withdrawal by the population from public institutions. Identity becomes an aesthetics of existence, and political action becomes vocation: a point to be remembered when looking at crisis discourse/practices in education.

Clearly, according to these accounts we are looking at a contemporary social ‘order’ which escapes our traditional ways of understanding society and politics. Highlighting the importance of historically and socially situating politics, Lash and Wynne wrote in the introduction to Risk Society:

> Habermas’ benchmark theses on the public sphere were published thirty years ago. If critical theory had to operate in the heyday of the Keynesian welfare state in terms of the fulfilment of the Enlightenment project, times have changed. Today critical theory can no longer proceed on those terms. To operate in a transformed political culture which is at the same time localized—the world of the new (post-traditional) communitarianism, engaged in a seemingly ecumenical, though hopefully pluralist, process of globalisation—a new critical theory is needed. Such a theory—if it is to help
realize some of the aims of the Enlightenment–must be reflexively critical and disruptive of the assumptions of the very project of Enlightenment. (in Beck 1992, p. 8)

If we accept this line of thinking, it follows that any investigation of crisis in education needs an understanding of education, as a set of historical, social and institutional practices, that responds to these changing times. Before moving to an attempt at crisis-theorising, however, it is worth first establishing that a range of discourse/practices in Australian society over the past several decades have indeed pointed or appealed to various states of crisis in education.

Crisis and education

A significant body of literature, during the period from the late seventies until the early nineties, referred to a crisis in public schooling. Much of this literature stemmed from criticisms of Thatcherism in Britain, a conservative yet radical political rationality and governmental programme which Stuart Hall (1983, p. 2) described as 'one of the most regressive educational offensives ever unwrapped in this century'. There were a whole raft of concurrent discourses about education in Australia: complaints about declining standards; calls for 'back-to-basics' methodologies; concerns about changing enrolment patterns—including the flight to private schooling; challenges to school funding; problems with authority and discipline; questions of the relation between schooling and vocation; questioning of the regulatory relations among schools and their associated governmental departments; discussion about the effects on youth of changing technologies; and concerns about the psychological status of the teaching profession. It could be suggested that an industrial crisis network–a 'crisis industry'–has emerged across various sites: the media, government committees, reports and policy, educational research, teacher associations, parental groups, and so on.

Of particular concern during much of this was what was seen as an ideological shift that developed through the late eighties, and has continued unabated into the nineties, to corporate managerialist and economic rationalist political rationality and governmental strategy. According to Michael Apple (1988, p. 174) this shift is normative in the sense that, 'the terrain of the debate shifts from a concern with inequality and democratisation to the language of inefficiency, standards and productivity'. In other words, productivity-consciousness accentuates and marginalises forms of resistance and acts to undermine them.

To understand why schooling should be so susceptible to the sorts of crisis discourse/practices mentioned above, it is important to understand that education is underpinned by what Valerie Walkerdine (1997) called a transformative logic; in other words, schooling is generally constructed as schooling for difference (Green 1996, Lee & Green 1997). As Green (1992) explains, schooling is inextricably tied up with emotional and symbolic investments:

Education's association, by definition, with the care and preparation of the young, for life and for work—itslself a significant if no longer necessary or inevitable equation—, and for the maintenance and renewal of culture and tradition, means that it assumes a special significance as the principal means of negotiation and mediation between 'adulthood' and 'childhood'. (p. 8, my emphasis)

Important in Green's point is the emotional and symbolic character of change, namely that change is inherently dangerous: as Green puts it, 'youth represent an ever-present
possibility of disruption, interruption and radical rupture’. Schooling then becomes a dangerous activity, and understandably is a site *par excellence* of moral panic in society.

**Theorising crisis**

Having mentioned the general character of crisis in contemporary society, and in public schooling in particular, I move now to look more closely at crisis-theorising *per se*. In the following two sections, I attempt to theorise the ontological and epistemic dimensions of crisis in a way which acts, as Green proposes, as a ‘necessary antidote to the refusal of difference’ (1992, p. 9).

**The ontological crisis?**

When James Donald (1979): posed the question ‘What crisis?’ he was trying to point out how easy it is to forget that what is at issue here is a cultural and historical phenomenon, and not a ‘natural’ one. Donald argued:

> In this hubbub of theoretical debate and political struggle it is difficult to stop and ask the quiet, outrageous question: what crisis? I’m not saying that there haven’t been some fundamental changes; some basic contradictions are now clearly having their effects. The trouble is that ‘crisis’ is such a loose and baggy notion that it can hold a whole range of undifferentiated changes. That is why I want to ask which things have changed, and how and why (1979, p. 13).

To seize and extend Donald’s argument, the question of whether there actually is a crisis is irrelevant for this paper. I am not pursuing an ontological account of the *essence* of crisis in education; nor am I seeking the *origin* or *return* of critical periods. It is of little significance for my thesis where a crisis began, or who or what resided at its inception. It is a point of debate whether such questions are indeed relevant, let alone answerable. In short, I am not concerned with the ontological status of a crisis in some aspect of Australian education at a particular time. Rather, I am seeking to show how complex, multiple and heterogeneous texts of educational crisis—which in themselves are historical and material, therefore possessing a certain *a priori* ontological status—(re)produce *effects of power*. The important point here is that, while the ontological status of crisis may be undecidable, the existence of texts of crisis and their material *effects* are both undeniable and important.

It is my contention that crisis discourse/practices cannot be resolved to a single overriding process: concepts such as base and superstructure, ideology, habitus, actor-network or field of symbolic control may be useful for examining crisis discourse/practices, but none is *necessarily* better than another. Hence, the adoption of one or more of these frameworks becomes a matter of politics, rather than of ontology. This particular paper seeks a framework which may identify the various processes and groups (of people, of institutions, of technologies etc.) in crisis discourse/practices in Australian education, and to also explain the various alliances they form in the context of a range of particular socio-political, technical and institutional projects. These alliances are perceived as often shifting and unstable, and rarely conforming to a unitary logic. This perspective entails a framework which insists such alliances may only be traced from their extremities: they cannot be arrived at by seeking a particular logic and deductively following its contours. This sort of framework would insist any naming of alliance is always imputed *after the fact* and provides an illusion of order where there are only multiple, materially heterogeneous process of *ordering* (Callon 1991, Law 1994, Latour 1991).

This is why particular care is needed, not simply to accept at face value the knowledge about education—the ‘work’—being produced via those circulating through discourse/practices
of crisis, particularly that performed by government policy statements. It is important to read *against the grain* (Simon, 1992), to place discourse/practices of crisis under *erasure*, in order to situate them as *positioned* discourse/practices and to capture their heterogeneity and complexity. In particular, this involves recognising that ‘crisis’ is first and foremost a discursive category, a concept, and that it is of utmost importance to distinguish between concept and object in (theoretical) discourse:

The distinction between concept and object is axiomatic. To assume that [crisis]—one component in a theoretical discourse, significant only in relation to a set of other concepts like [standards], [discipline], [literacy] and [education]—is identical with or simply reflects the actual existence of schools easily leads to confusing about what is being studied (Donald 1979, p. 14).

Donald’s point here is instructive, and strikes at the heart of my analysis. Understanding crisis as a *discursive category*, and as a realm of *practice*, helps us to understand the ways through which educational crisis may be *produced*, rather than simply *reflected*, in and through discourse. It also emphasises how this discursive production of crisis has material effects at the level of classrooms and school practice. Further, in helping to see how concepts such as ‘crisis’ work politically, as ways of mobilising and organising human action, it enables us to see the value in ideological struggle and discursive politics—what Ira Shor (1986) called ‘culture war’. In doing so, it suggests the possibilities associated with appropriating the concept ‘crisis’ with a view to using it more deliberately in the service of radically-progressive and socially critical education.

The key point to all of this is one born in poststructuralism: ‘what are thought to be effects in the classic theory of representation can be causes; representations can create the substance they supposedly reflect’ (Ryan 1988, p. 560). As Green (1992, p. 33) claims, crisis is not simply a ‘precultural substance’ merely reflected in discourse, and which exists more or less unproblematically in the Real; rather it is also constructed in discourse. Green suggests ‘a complex undecidability characterises the relationship between cause and effect, ‘inside’ and ‘outside’’ (1992, p. 33). Green’s point is particularly important strategically as well as rationally because certain areas of educational research have ‘traditionally been all too ready to distinguish between representation and material practice, and accordingly downplay and misrecognise the complexity of representation and its importance in shaping and forming the social [and hence material] world’ (1992, p. 33). As an example, Green (1992, p. 7) elsewhere cites Wexler and Grabiner, who suggest there is a general preoccupation in academic commentary on identifying indicators of crisis, and little emphasis on the ‘*social meaning*’ of these indications. The waging of this academic struggle over signification of crisis for a large part ignores, and in some ways actually contributes to, an ongoing attack on the liberal democratic state: an attack which Wexler and Grabiner suggest includes as a key element, a major ‘restructuring’—if not ‘dismantling’—of public education.

The important point here is that while the *causes* of crisis discourse/practices may prove elusive and constitute a field of academic debate, their very existence and their material *effects* are both undeniable and important.

Having given attention to theorising ontological dimensions of crisis, I now move to the relatively more important arena of crisis-theorising: to examine, not for whom there are crises, or from whom crises emanate (this paper, and the study from which it is derived, is not concerned with apportioning blame), but to identify, describe and problematise *subject-positionings* associated with crisis discourse/practices.
The epistemological crisis

Rather than ask what crisis in education means, this paper and the broader study within which it is embedded, ask how crisis discourse/practices in education are meaningful. Implicit in this concern are two tasks: to examine the way in which the discourse/practices actively construct positions for their own intelligibility, consumption and effect (Green 1992); and to interrogate how different individuals and social groups position themselves in relation to this internal subject-regime (Gore 1993). It is through such analyses that education in crisis may come to be seen more clearly as education politicised.

An examination of subjectivities of crisis draws on the profound and deeply entrenched connection between social identity and crisis-thinking in our contemporary Western neoliberal societies. On this point, Frank Kermode (1967, p. 94) suggested: ‘crisis, no matter how facile the conception, is inescapably a central element in our endeavours to make sense of the world.’ Kermode sees crisis-thinking as a basic human preoccupation, a way of fixing, or defending, identity and meaning. Tied up in this ethical practice is what Kermode (1967) calls ‘eschatological anxiety’. In other words, crisis-thinking is always an expression of a certain desire: a desire for change, whether this change adhere to politics of Left or Right. Both political positions entail a problematisation of the present in the name of a specific future; a condition which Ian Hunter (1994) has critiqued in the context of schooling. On the same point Habermas (1984, p. 134) wrote,

Crisis suggests the notion of an objective power depriving a subject of his [sic] normal sovereignty. If we interpret a process as a crisis, we are tacitly giving it a normative status. When the crisis is resolved, the trapped subject is liberated.

If we follow this line of thinking, implicit in the sense-seeking of crisis discourse/practices is a will to control. Further, such attempts may be seen as symptomatic of relations among the always unstable alliances of views about education; alliances comprised by a loose and always shifting assemblages of various interest groups, political rationalities and projects, technologies, techniques, strategies and tactics.

It should be clear here that what I am talking about is a view of crisis as practice, or, as Green (1992, p. 23) puts it, as ‘work’: ‘a movement which is also a struggle, involving an ever-shifting play of meanings, emphases and effects, and a complex connotative process of combination and equivalence, substitution and association, and condensation and displacement’. Green suggests that there is a need to critically study the nature and specificity of the sorts of rhetorical work undertaken by crisis discourse/practices—particularly, for him, as they apply to the educational Right. According to Green, ‘this will involve accounting for its metaphorical and metonymic features, as well as the paradigmatic and syntagmatic deployment of specific textual effects’. The textual ‘expression’ of crisis—how it is spoken and written about, how it is discussed, debated and developed and denied—needs to be studied very closely then. This is not simply so as to understand it, although this is crucial; the point is to engage it, to intervene in the circuit of its production, reproduction and dissemination, and so to contest it (Eagleton 1983).

To understand the way I have been theorising crisis in education, and in so doing to follow Eagleton’s lead, it is necessary to decentre and situate the notion of Agency. It is with this need in mind that the following sections are a problematisation of the historical relation between ‘Agency’ and ‘the Subject’. I acknowledge these concepts initially in order to use them strategically; to ultimately demonstrate that the particular representation I wish to construct may be seen from outside of the agency/structure dualism. My approach in these sections, then, is one of refusal, of transgression of the traditional ontological distinction, or,
in Derrida's terms, to place the notions (of Agency and Structure) under 'erasure' ('sous rature').

**Agency**

The debate over free will and determinism which has led, amongst other things, to the fracturing of theories of human action into two diametrically opposed camps—one appealing to structure, where human actions are considered to be the outcome of structural constraints or social forces; and the other to agency where human actions rise from the self—is counterproductive. What is needed is a range of alternatives which get outside of this debate. There have been numerous attempts in the past several decades to do so (particularly by feminist scholars, an area from which the most significant alternatives have arisen), but too many have unfortunately only found a way out of the argument either by collapsing one category into the other, or alternatively by pretending that a (re)solution lies in retaining the distinction while denying any relevance in the argument.

One series of representations to which I wish to give particular attention are the synthetic or dialectical approaches which fit most closely to the latter category mentioned above. These theories attempt to avoid the pitfalls of prioritising one side over the other, and in so doing, situate the subject in the unoccupied middle ground between the binary. In other words, the subject mediates structure and agency, never fully self-determining, never fully structurally determined. Most notable here is the work of UK sociologist Anthony Giddens, whose theory of structuration has proven most influential. Often those who take up Giddens' lead do so in reaction to a (usually) misdirected critique of the poststructural decentring of the subject. Most often, the claim is that poststructuralism (a term often applied in this regard to French philosopher Foucault) has simply abolished agency and replaced it with a form of structural determination. Whilst I wish to avoid descending into an argument to that effect that I see this as a false antithesis, and moreover unproductive grounds for legitimating a dialectical approach, it is worth noting the degrees to which such theories have been threatened by Foucault's 'position'. More importantly for the notion of agency, is the suggestion I wish to make that synthetic theories tend to reinforce the structure/agency dualism, rather than destabilise or expose its binary logic. The reworking of the structure/agency dualism in such a way so as to suggest they dialectically act as a mutually interdependent 'duality' is premised on a preservation of the concepts of structure and agency, concepts themselves rooted in the tradition of the Cartesian subject.

What this paper seeks is a path toward a theory of historico-social action—particularly as it applies to educational crisis—which acts as a more careful negotiation of the theoretical and political limitations of the dualist position. This may only be achieved by problematising and displacing the structure/agency opposition, by transgressing its logic and seeking a non-modernist position. Some poststructuralist notions are useful in this regard, particularly those that drive a wedge between agency and subjectivity. Subjectivity should not be equated with Agency: rather than seeing subjectivity as being constituted by a unitary rational consciousness, it might more productively be seen in the Foucauldian sense as a discursive site for the negotiation of differences. In this sense, subjectivity is constituted, negotiated and contested in discourse. It is a site characterised by multiplicity, contingency, contradiction and fragmentation, and is in a state of constant flux. Further, it is a site conceptually, but not practically removed from sites like the body, the self, or the material context. By dislocating the traditional liberal humanist notion of subjectivity, Agency shifts from lying in equation with the Subject, to being a discursive product, an effect of a range of discourse/practices associated with particular subject-positionings. In this understanding, the proper noun ‘Agency’ is no longer appropriate, and it might be more productive to think of an agency-effect.
An understanding of subjectivity, then, might be seen as integral to any investigation of agency. Useful for an understanding of subjectivity is Foucault’s notion of ascesis or practice of the self. In short, subjectivity may be viewed as being centrally about transgression or difference. The purpose of subjectivity is to think the self differently, to permanently detach one’s self from one’s beliefs, ideas and practices. This is clearly an embracing of a form of reflection and reflexivity that is inherently devoted to otherness. What I seek then, is not a ‘new’ theory of agency, but rather an outline of how we can understand, as Mitchell Dean (1998, p. 395) explained it, ‘past and present, local, domain specific, problematisations of conduct, lives, selves, persons, and identities, and the governmental and ethical practices that form the horizon of these problematisations.’ What is at issue is not the production of a new regime of truth (Gore, 1993) about Agents but to explore how discourse/practices of educational crisis seek to ‘enfold’ (Dean 1996) different forms of authority, to carve out discontinuous surfaces and spaces on which and in which we find evidence of what would appear to us to be Agency. To this degree, I am interested in how, through discourse-practices of crisis, human beings in education fields have attempted to turn themselves (and others) into subjects. In other words, I am interested in the multiple, heterogeneous and local problematisations of rule—what Dean (1995) called ‘govern-ontologies’—that are revealed when we move beyond the humanist/antihumanist binary. Subjectivity in this context is not fixed, or singular. It is not, for example a required concept because the thing which distinguishes ‘men’ from ‘beasts’: such pretensions should remain in their colonial, patriarchal archives. Subjectivity is, however, a concept that can be usefully problematised and pluralised to show its multiple, heterogeneous, fragmentary and shifting discursive moments, and to situate the heroic politics which tend to attach themselves to more traditional notions.

What exactly is negotiated in these discursive spaces is not a thing in the materialist sense but a position, a mode of ordering (Law 1994). However, we must be careful to remind ourselves that this position is not a closed position: To identify a subject-position is to recognise a complex interplay of discourses and subject-effects. And moreover, it is to recognise that such an identification is a momentary fixing, a fiction in this sense, constructed for particular purposes. For it should be remembered that we are not afforded the convenient luxury of a unitary subject position in such an understanding, but rather multiple, intersecting moments of subject positioning. On this point, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, p. 115) suggest ‘As every subject-position is a discursive position, it partakes of the open character of every discourse; consequently, the various positions cannot be totally fixed in a closed system of differences’.

When we act, we mobilise discursive fields, fields which are socially, technologically and historically mediated by various discourses, technologies, strategies, architectures, bodies and embodiments, desires, etc. By acting, we move both within and through these fields, and in so doing, create opportunities for the identification/naming of various subject-positionings. The process of identification/naming is inherently a strategic one—and all strategy is, of course, inherently political. What is needed is not a denial or rejection of interrogations and deconstructions of subjectivity—that would be tantamount to the disabling of a whole range of political interventions capable of opening up spaces for freedom. Rather, a position is required which acknowledges the contingency of such investigations and their techno-social, historical and political situatedness. This is necessary because, if we accept the Foucauldian line that power is productive, we come to understand that all attempts at truth-telling about subjectivities are potentially productive of new or altered subject-positionings. And, as history has unquestionably shown us, not all subject-positionings are entirely desirable.

An important point here lies with the positive notion of power. Rather than seeing subjectivity as disabling, constraining or constrictive it might be better understood as enabling or
productive of human action—action which may only be judged according to particular socio-political criteria. To say subjectivity is productive or enabling, is not to say all subjective-positionings are ‘good’ or ‘desirable’. Nor is it to say that we are wholly constructed and constituted through discourse—the position I am outlining is most avowedly not a structuralist or determinist line of thinking. But if subjectivity is a concept, and moreover resides in the realm of the discursive, how is it possible to interrogate subjectivity? The position I have outlined would suggest that subjectivity is only identifiable by observing circulation through, and actions in, these positionings. By tracing and interrogating the play of effects revealed by human action, it becomes possible to impute subjective orders, and through this ordering, reflectively and reflexively interact with these positionings. The aim is not to know the subject—the position I seek explicitly rejects the finitude of the subject—but to deconstruct subject-positionings with a view to identifying the spaces for freedom, a process inextricably bound to political economies of knowledge production.

This discussion leads us back to the traditional claim that ‘Agency’ is an effect of techno-social relations. Agency is inherently linked to the notion of the Subject, both of which, I have argued, are the result of over-zealous interpretations of subject-positionings. This is not to say that there are not examples of human action which look suspiciously like Agency—or other overdetermined ‘structures’ and concepts such as gender, race, class, culture, ideology, hegemony, oppression—it would be foolish to deny that certain types of human action seem to possess a sort of grammar, or worse that their effects are illusory or unimportant. Rather, it is to suggest that these should not be accorded the status of ontological a priori, but should be openly and strategically mobilised as attempts at ordering (themselves the products of other attempts). This does not mean I represent a nihilistic or apolitical position, it means that I consider the matter of expounding my politics to be a conceptually different matter to that of theorising subjectivities. While I am the first to admit that an analysis of my politics is inherently an analysis of the relation of my actions to my various subject-positionings, that is not the same as to say that my intellectual practices signified in this paper are a closed and complete representation of my politics. The theorising in this paper is unequivocally strategic, and hence political, but it is misleading to impute to it a fixed Politics, just as it is dangerous (both theoretically and politically) to rely on the notions of Agency. As Judith Butler suggests, to insist on a stable notion of the subject as necessary for politics, and in so doing to close it off from interrogation is ‘to foreclose the domain of the political’ (1991, p. 150).

Excursus: The historical relation between Agency and Politics

My concern with politics in the above section is important given the theorising I have undertaken. I have argued in the previous sections that traditional heroic understandings, which situate agency as a universal pool of latent control, fail to appreciate the relations of power inherent in the socio-historical processes within our contemporary late neo-liberalist societies. What has been at issue here is the traditional enlightenment notion of emancipatory politics. That is to say, it is important to ask what happens when the singular universal rational subject becomes problematised in the name of multiple subject positionings. As Anna Yeatman (1994) puts it, what becomes of a pragmatics of self-determination when there is no self in question, only selves who are positioned in different ways? According to Yeatman (1994, p.5)

If there is no singular, universal subject, then the business of emancipation itself has no self-evident warrant in a theory of what it means to be human (philosophical anthropology). Such theory turns out to be the specific self-interpretation of the modern West. (see also Derrida 1982)
According to Yeatman, the mistake made by rational theorists is to confuse action with agency, a confusion which is a social and historical artefact.

I wish to argue that contemporary understandings of Agency are an assemblage, in part, of a Christian pastoral political rationality and neo-liberal governmental strategies. Freedom to be an actor in this understanding, is the freedom to be one’s own agent, to control one’s self and property, and to be free from interference with such control by others. This ‘natural right’ model of freedom sits at the base of neoliberal forms of governance—the role of State intervention in neoliberal governance is, rather paradoxically, to maximise individual freedom—which is in this model, of course, everyone’s natural right. In this form, the right of self-action takes on the appearance of a transcendental universal: It sits prior to and outside socio-political arrangements. Importantly in this, the appeal to a concept of ‘nature’ as a base for legitimation indicates that, at the outset, the modern culture of action ‘could stake its claims only through dispute as to how the divinely created constitution of human nature and its external environment required human nature to be expressed (Yeatman 1994, p. 59). In other words, the comportment of contemporary theories of human action (Agency) find their genealogy, and their legitimation,—at least in part—in Christian conceptions of life as a rational and industrious agency, of humans becoming agents of their own ‘worldly’ fate (Yeatman 1994). As Locke (1965, p. 293) suggested, ‘Action [becomes] the great business of Mankind [sic]’. Natural right of personal self-direction, then, is conceived within a model which places humans in subjugation to a higher authority (be that God, or more recently and in addition, a monarch, the State, the Corporation, the Institution). This conception of power relations places the rational, autonomous self at the centre of resistance to the oppression of these unidirectional power relations. Furthermore, as with the traditional Christian pastoral practices of action on the self, self-governance is an integral component of contemporary understandings of human action and agency.

Conclusion

In this paper I have attempted to articulate a theory of human action which refuses agency-as-foundation. In pursuing this understanding, I have argued for a view of empiricism (the assumption that there is a reality about which we can all agree) as an effect rather than as a cause. I have attempted to place the notion of agency-as-foundation under erasure, to refuse the traditional, convenient hegemonic attribution to history of some inevitable, normative structuring quality. I wish to make clear in this concluding stage, that at no point have I suggested what I have produced is in any way ‘new’. Rather, I have been seeking an articulation from a range of positions which suits my desire for a non-modernist reading of crisis discourse/practices in education. Importantly, in this regard, I have not contested the empirical existence of crisis discourse/practices in education. I have argued that what any reading of societal processes must resist is the imputing of a normative logic (such as revolution, Enlightenment or domination) or the reification of particular processes (such as Policy, Government or Agency). Such a reading must deny the trend to suggest a logic, theme or trait attributable ex post facto held a priori importance and was the organising structure for the entire set of events. This modernist agenda to (dis)cover the social order in the name of an all-encompassing and unifying theme is forever being exposed for the grand illusions it inevitably produces: the foundations upon which such houses of cards are assembled often take on the illusion of solidity, and the structures themselves the look of stability and cohesion. Further, the desire for imposing a particular reading of such events is always inevitably revealed as a political practice, not—as many would have it—because the telling of ‘truths’ is a direct exercise of power, but because doing so always involves effects of power; effects which are always less predictable and orderly than these sorts of deductive models of naming would suggest.
If we are to follow this, my theorising of crisis discourse/practices in Australian education, then, has necessarily involved a naming of these processes—a naming which, when investigated, reveals a political purpose. As I have tried to make transparent from the beginning, this political project has, at the broadest level, been one of problematising existing representations of social processes in order to undermine the self-evidence some of these tend to assume: to open up the spaces for thinking (and acting) closed off by other forms of crisis-theorising. Specifically, it has been to show how a reading which refuses modern(ist) and structural(ist) representations of crisis discourse/practices in education can account for a concept such as agency without feeling forced to defer all importance to this or other such log(ist)ics. In so doing, my intention has been to expose the shallowness and convenience some readings made of this sort of theorising.

Finally, to analyse discourse/practices of crisis in education, it is important to discuss the work of persons clearly identifiable within them. However, this is not to suggest that their involvement is any more than one interesting focus for sociological investigation: it is not to say that the role of these individuals—or indeed of individuals *per se*—are of any sort of central or privileged importance. It is necessary to be mindful in such investigations that the assigning of importance is a matter of representation and therefore may only be attributed on the basis of politics. That is why I follow the lead of Green (1992), and Popkewitz and Brennan (1997) in arguing for a rigorous investigation of the politics of signification associated with, and the will to truth embodied in, sociological representations of techno-social historical processes in education.
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