

BOOK REVIEWS

Negotiating Legitimacy: Rituals and Reflection in School

by Robert Hamm

2014 Hardback

202 pages £15.00

ISBN 978-0-9928271-0-6

Published by Robert Hamm, Sligo

Review by Russell Dudley-Smith, UCL Institute of Education, UK

There are good reasons for studying ritual-like events in school settings. Both disciplinary (subject-knowledge) and non-disciplinary teaching (norms of behaviour) may seek to produce new kinds of identity and patterns of self-evident truth other than those established in the family. Schools like to emphasise their universalistic character—the responsibility of transmitting non-disciplinary moral standards and sanctified disciplinary subject knowledges. This creates a problem: how to get pupils to become subjects of these cultural arbitrariness?

The arbitrary nature of the imposition is of course denied. Yet any historical study of schooling quickly reveals the relativity of the supposedly universal moral norms locally upheld—for a recent study see Allen (2014). And on the disciplinary side (one always rather shifting in content) in no sense could the curriculum found an apprenticeship. Pupils who learn mathematics, say, are not taught by mathematicians: they are taught (although not even always this) by mathematics graduates. If school teachers *have* engaged in mathematics research (if for example, they have a PhD) such research does not figure *in their school teaching* and it is therefore not a subjectivity for which pupils may be prepared. We do not teach mathematics in school to produce mathematicians—that can only happen where the work of mathematics takes place.

So what is it that pupils in schools are being apprenticed to? The answer would appear to be *school itself*. And school itself, through its institutionalisation, distributes identity through the practices of school of which—and for so many years—pupils largely have no alternative but to be a part. The circularity is extraordinary: selection takes place on the basis of activities that have little to do with those for which schooling is said to be required. Probably most obviously from a sociological point of view, model pupils are separated by schooling into perceived-to-be-legitimate (by those so divided, not just by those dividing) fractions of manual and intellectual labour—but outside of the context of any apprenticeship to such labour.

How then to interrogate the subjectivation of pupils in these activities of school? The sociological and anthropological literatures suggest that ritual strategies play, perhaps must be in play, in the (attempted) creation of this self-evidence. Yet the school ritual literature is

noticeably thin. Robert Hamm's book *Negotiating Legitimacy* starts by providing an excellent review of what is available. A significant and most useful feature of the book is that it includes an informative discussion of recent German scholarship in school ritual studies that is as yet untranslated in English.

The school-ritual literature in turn draws on the vast literature on ritual in anthropology; the requirement to specialise a reading is obvious. Hamm makes a Foucauldian selection, one mediated through Catherine Bell's justly influential work—thus the emphasis is on ritualization considered as strategy in social action rather than an entity “ritual-as-such.” Process is privileged over state. Hamm follows Bell by inflecting his research question towards an interrogation of the power-relations imbricated in ritualization, and the latter is recognised as encompassing far more than what one might call the “grand rituals” of school such as assemblies. Ritualization occurs in unofficial as well as official settings, and at local as well as more general scales of alliance: in the playground as well as in the classroom, in the interaction between individual teacher and pupil, as well as in group contexts.

This choice of theoretical framework raises two significant issues. The first concerns the recognition principles of processes of ritualization—if power-relations constitute the fabric of the social then there is a danger that a description of ritual process will counterfeit that truth. It is no good simply identifying *regularity of practice* through which power-relations are expressed. This is I think the case in some well-known studies of school ritual; for example, in his *Schooling as Ritual Performance* Peter McLaren sees “ritual” just about everywhere to the extent that the term is at risk of becoming redundant—in his case one might often just as well say *recognisable patterns of social action*. McLaren makes an extensive collection of characteristics of what he sees as ritual; much of what he writes is important and runs counter to orthodox interpretations of schooling. But he casts his net so widely that the richness of the empirical, rather than a coherent theoretical framework, tends to organise his description. Although more sanguine than I am about McLaren's method, Hamm is very clear on the need to avoid such empiricist eclecticism, a tendency that is ubiquitous, he notes, in both the mainstream anthropology and the school ritual literature.

The second issue is that if a theoretical framework is made clear (as Hamm does in relation to Bell and Foucault) then it must still be operationalised. To achieve this, Hamm extends his analysis by adopting a Reflection framework. Again, there has to be severe selection. Such a framework aids operationalisation because in the text of Hamm's teacher interviews there is considerable reflection on practice; but as produced in the text of the interview this is a quotidian concept and highly polysemic. The issue then is to discern what is going on from the point of view of social research. Hamm develops a reflection coding-schema of processes of negotiating, explicating and demarcating in terms of contested subject-positions in different contexts. These are clearly defined, properly Foucauldian, and presented with numerous examples from Hamm's data; they serve to delimit the scope of the enquiry well.

A great strength of the book—again also demonstrating the productivity of Bell's work—is its emphasis on *practice* rather than discursive transmission in ritual. “Get on your knees and pray and you *shall* believe”—but the well-known recontextualisations of Pascal in Althusser (1971) and Bourdieu (1992) are not mentioned in Hamm's discussion. This is

perhaps a pity because it might have increased the power of his commentary on what he, following Wulf et al.'s (2010) *Berlin Study of Rituals*, describes as a *mimetic* process—see also Wulf (2013). The sociological question then concerns the structuration of the resulting embodied identification—the way in which ritual practice establishes habituated subject positions through which power-relations are expressed.

The empirical settings that Hamm considers are commendably comparative and not previously interrogated in the Anglophone school-ritual literature. He describes data from Irish primary schools, German free alternative schools—where at least *visibly* there is greater potential for negotiation of power relations than in the former—and, as a useful cross-check on intra-national cultural variation, German mainstream primary schools. The latter are more differentiated (by the policies of each German state) than the Irish mainstream schools and are also more “dominated by an ideology of abstract performance (p. 63).” The word “ritual” is routinely deployed, he reports, in the language of school teachers in Germany; and hardly at all in Ireland – although teachers there, he reports, can of course discuss the ritual aspects of their work such as religious services when asked. In the former, ritual is often explicitly identified as a technique for the maintenance of order in the classroom: this discursive self-evidence then a strategy of a regime “to prevent any (further) critical questioning (p. 75).”

One of the ritualizing activities Hamm examines is “lining up” in pairs. This seems ubiquitous in primary schools in both countries (and as Hamm observes, more generally). Of course, such lines are contested: pupils rarely simply fall into and maintain the order required (it would be interesting to know how the stability of the practice varies across settings). Hamm views such lines through the lens of *Discipline and Punish*:

It is quite obvious that the patterns which we find in the line of pairs are hardly symbolic of self-responsibility, self-esteem, equality, or other attributes that are in fashion in present day pedagogy. They are rather closely linked to the subordination of the early days of pedagogical treatment, rooted in a military aesthetic, aiming at order, regularity and obedience as its highest achievement (p. 92).

One recognises the picture—teachers these days of course might claim this is simply a technology of paramount safety; but pupils are often lined up where order seems to be the only objective and they were lined up in this way well before safety narratives became so dominant. As Hamm documents, this imposition of control is contested: the absolutely docile bodies of pupils remaining a dream, rather than a reality, of order. If pupils these days *are* ever-more docile (one fears this might be the case) the (as Foucault would put it, gentle and humane) techniques of the body concerned in achieving this are not uniformly agreed upon by teachers and not received (yet) with total acquiescence. The twist, of course, is that ritual action of this kind *structures the possibility of dissent*: those who move “out of line” providing the moment of its (potential) restoration.

Hamm also gives considerable attention to “circle time” in German primary schools. Here the overt aim of teachers in free schools is to allow pupils to express themselves and participate in decisions, in mainstream schools to sit quietly—only to speak when they have

the *skeptron* (the conch is often a ball)—and listen to others, with the appropriateness of narrative controlled by teachers. In both cases, the potential for canalising aggressive feelings of collectively targeted shaming at those who “step out of line” is all too obvious. Hamm’s Foucauldian approach works particularly well here (and could perhaps be productively supplemented by a Bernsteinian commentary on the significance in school of *invisible* versus visible forms of control).

Given its objectives the book has no space for other approaches to school ritual. There is then a need to complement Hamm’s findings with those from other theoretical frameworks. The significant work on ritual that was opened up by the original dispute between van Gennep and Durkheim—see particularly Thomassen (2014)—might be a productive contrast. Hamm does not discuss Victor Turner (although there is a clear implicit influence via the important work of Richard Quantz which he does consider). Turner’s recontextualisation (heavily influenced by Mary Douglas) of van Gennep to focus ritual studies on liminality—moments of extreme impurity when subjectivity is at the threshold of transition—is certainly highly influential in general anthropology. Turner’s work itself eventually moved away from Durkheim/Douglas towards narratives of performative re-enactment; but the emphasis on strategic action provided by Hamm is certainly a good starting point for a discussion of the transformations of subjectivity in the social action of school. This would require emphasis on the *de*-stabilisation of alliance that takes place in many school practices, beyond Hamm’s consideration of the so many (contested) ceremonies that constitute modern school.

Ritualization might even become to be seen as the most urgent current question in education. Let me be more speculative: a good definition of evil is that it occurs when a subject assumes, to use Althusser’s distinction, an institutionalised Subject position; as if the subject could totalise the practice in which their possibility is constituted. This then tends to entail what Dowling (2009) has called a *myth of certainty*: where the regard of the social activity on some other practice is held to hold the principles *of that practice*. The totalising subject feels legitimised to totalise all practices as instances of its own regard. Contrary to this, the process of assumption to the truth of identity involves what one might call the self-recognition of the relativity of the subject institutionalised: its predication on a social alliance it cannot (unless it is seduced by evil) hope to totalise as Subject. Ritual grants potential subject positions, establishing power-relations in a recognition that self is predicated on distance from other, on the self-reference and separation involved in true sociality. Yet in our times the myth of certainty, the collapse of the recognition of sociality, seems to be spreading with horrific consequences, where I the subject *am* the truth. What are the practices, *and absence of practices*, that allow such a collapse? How might schooling and thus the model identifications of pupils—be redesigned to address this?

References

- Allen, A. (2014). *Benign Violence: Education in and beyond the Age of Reason*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Althusser, L. (1971). *Lenin and Philosophy*. translated by Ben Brewster, New York: Monthly Review Press

BOOK REVIEW *Hamm, Negotiating Legitimacy*

- Bourdieu, P. (1992). *Language and Symbolic Power*. translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson, Cambridge: Polity
- Dowling, P. (2009). *Sociology as Method: Departures from the Forensics of Culture, Text and Knowledge*. Rotterdam: Sense
- Thomassen, B. (2014). *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate Publishing
- Wulf, C. (2013). *Towards a Historical Cultural Anthropology of Education: The Berlin Ritual Study*. in Anderson-Levitt, K. (ed.) *Anthropologies of Education: A Global Guide to Ethnographic Studies of Learning and Schooling* New York: Berghahn Books
- Wulf, C., Althans, B., Audehm, K., Bausch, C., Göhlich, M., Sting, S., Tervooren, A., Wagner-Willi, M. & Zirfas, J. (2010). *Ritual and Identity: The staging and performing of rituals in the lives of young people*. London: The Tufnell Press

Reviewer details

Russell Dudley-Smith is a post-doctoral student in the sociology of education at the UCL Institute of Education, University College London, UK. He is a member of the *Social Activity Method* group under Paul Dowling. His interests are currently focused on the role of ritualization strategies in the formation and stabilisation of elite school identities. Contact E-mail: russelldudleysmith@outlook.com



This work by Russell Dudley-Smith is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/)