

## **(B)othering Education: An Autobiography of Alternatives**

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I need to come clean. Having been invited by the Editors to help launch the journal with a piece about Summerhill School, I was delayed by another journal article whose timely publication would aid our Research Excellence Framework submission. Thus was I once again brought low by the Audit Culture. It's a true story, but also a parable - progressive intentions subverted by a reactionary regime, but for whose "self-regulating" efficacy I have to take responsibility. In an accountable world, we are all our own worst enemies: it's not our fate so much as it is our duty. And eventually our identity as well? I was reminded of Soar's comments on the parallels between Edgar Allan Poe's short story, *The purloined letter*, Lacan's commentary on it, and the hidden things revealed by the Leveson Inquiry. He pointed to the secrets somehow missed by the regulators. Soar concluded: "[t]he secret hidden in plain sight is that there's nobody who isn't compromised" (Soar, 2012, p. 22). But at least I am confessing that *my* purloined letter is now "hidden in plain sight."

So having made my excuses to Helen Lees and begged a reprieve for the missing piece, I now find myself persuaded by her at least to offer something, a more personal commentary on the missing message, that "purloined letter."

On my bookshelves, in a far corner that I seldom consult, are a number of books with yellowing pages. They belong to the end of my school teaching career in the 70s, and to an unanticipated career change brought about by doing an M.Ed. at Bristol. They include Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972), Illich's *After deschooling, what?* (1976), and Illich & Verne's *Imprisoned in the global classroom* (1976). A.S. Neill's *Summerhill* (1968) is also there, alongside John Watts' *Towards an open school* (1980). I had a progressive moment then, as well. It too was suppressed. The books next to it reflect the contract evaluator's concerns - vocationalism, transition from school to work at sixteen (*How quaint!*), various dour Scottish education reports, profile assessment, basic skills tests (*Lord, forgive me, I knew not what I wrought...*). I begin to feel the parallels between this confession and the one in the first paragraph - a progressive orientation rudely

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steered towards conventional concerns with schooling outcomes in terms of standards and relevance. A contract evaluator does not decide the focus of his research, especially if he's got a mortgage, three kids, and a series of one-year contracts. But it does begin to look as if we have here a case of the purloined bookshelf rather than just a letter.

There is, however, a further progressive and alternative moment. The PhD I started around then had as its first title, *Social reproduction theory and the education of the "less able"*. I did a lot of the reading – Marx, Althusser, Durkheim, Gramsci, Wright, all of Foucault, and nearer to home, Willis – but none of the writing. Worse, the reading leaked into the day-job to an extent that my contractual employers did not like at all. School-to-work projects became, at least as subtext, acts of “cultural reproduction” and “liminal ritual.” Strathclyde Region and the Scottish Education Department were, likewise, strangely resistant to notions like Pressman & Wildavsky's “innovation without change.” And now that I had become radically progressive *In Theory*, I was insulated from the cruder encroachments of power: being radical in a doctoral space was easy enough. But only in theory. In practice, I was no longer employable as a funded evaluator in Scotland, not a “safe pair of hands,” and so I fled to England and the security of a tenured post at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at UEA. Then came Audit in the form of the Research Assessment Exercise, treated by most of us initially as some kind of stupid Thatcherite joke – until the financial penalties for “poor performance” became more obvious. Now Power came in the back door, claiming that since He owned the house there would have to be regular inspections. Once again, my alternative and progressive world was invaded by external power and the internal rewriting of my “regulated self.” So, really, which of me writes this? I am reminded of Borges, writing about himself as a “writer,” rather than the “written”: “my life is a flight and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion or to him... I do not know which of us has written this page” (2000, p. 282).

Every move I had made seemed in turn to offer new choices and alternatives, but then to be subverted by an increasingly omnipresent world of audit. What I had hoped to be radical moves and alternatives had turned out to involve moving from cell to cell in the panopticon. And calling it “progress.”

A number of things follow from that self-storying. The first is that it is relatively easy to think up, read about, and propose alternatives. The second is that the alternative is not worth thinking about outside the context of power in which it is immersed, and against which it makes its proposals. Such contested boundaries are crucial to understanding success and failure, and sorting the radical from the merely utopian. I end by briefly mentioning one such contested boundary – that between the philosophy and practices of Summerhill School – the alternative school *par excellence* – and the English state. Summerhill is an enduring and exemplary case – in itself, as a “child democracy,” but also in its contest with the English authorities,

whether Ministry, HMI or OfSTED. In 1999 the UK audit regime sought to close down the school – its philosophy was inadmissible, its practices abysmal. In 2007, it had improved remarkably, and was now “good” in some of its features and adequate elsewhere. In 2011 it was outstanding in several areas and good in all others. That may seem a simple if dramatic tale of “school improvement” but such a conclusion *hides a different message*. The 1999 verdict was overturned after a counter-evaluation had severely criticised the focus and integrity of the inspection, and after a Tribunal case that resulted in the judges stipulating that future inspections would be “chaperoned” by an outside expert appointed by the school. I agreed to police the police, as it were, having led a “counter-evaluation” of the School as “expert witness” for Summerhill in the Tribunal case. The Ministry then entertainingly insisted that in which case, to be fair, they ought to have their own expert to inspect the inspector of the inspectors. It could have got tedious, but the farce stopped there. Over the next decade I accompanied the OfSTED inspectors and observed their inquiries. The chaperoned inspections turned out, coincidentally, to be the two best inspection results that the School had received in 80 years of surveillance by the authorities. The Ministry currently proposes (July 2012) to end the supervised inspection process that the Tribunal set up (on the grounds of conformity with procedures elsewhere, and hence fairness). The contested boundaries are everywhere – this is no tale of “school improvement.” Not least because it is the same school, with the same aims and procedures, doing things in the same way and with the same results. It is the inspectors who have changed, not the school, although there is no doubt that the School has learned how to play the audit game. A final aspect of the “contest” is that the 1999 inspection was all over the media. The media loved the “school for scandal,” even if it was their very own invention. The second inspection had limited coverage in teacher-oriented publications. The third inspection – the first glowing account in its 80 years of inspection – was totally ignored by the media. Good news is no news. But, stronger than that, Good news is Bad news – no-one wants to acknowledge and publicise the successful working of a “child democracy.” So we have another purloined letter. And whatever next! A democratic House of Lords?... We promise to say a lot more about the Summerhill case, and its ‘contested boundaries’ in a future article, peer review permitting!

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