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Book Review

Struggling for the Soul: The Politics of Schooling and the Construction of the Teacher. T. Popkewitz. New York: Teachers College Press, 1998, 159 pp., ISBN: 0807737283.

Reviewed by

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Reform movements in education seem to come and go as regularly as German trains. Each new wave of "change" and the discourse that accompanies it promises to fix "the problem" through new technique or by including previously marginalised groups. In *Struggling for the Soul,* Tom Popkewitz argues that contemporary schooling of "marginal" children has not changed significantly in a century and a half. The struggle he identifies is an ongoing moral crusade for the normalization of children and the shaping of subjectivities according to a fluid, always current roster of "normal" characteristics. Contexts change, but the essential strategies of power and subject formation remain remarkably resilient though shifting political winds. I hesitate to use the term "marginal" because in Popkewitz's poststructural analysis the most important feature of any discourse about populations is precisely to be found in which groups get set apart partly through the use of defining language. I agree that this is indeed the case.

Popkewitz' book is an ethnographic analysis of the Teach for America Program (TFA), an educational reform program initiated in 1990. TFA mobilised some 500 of the "best and brightest" of the national university graduating class of that year by training them outside "bureaucratic" university based teacher education programs to teach "urban and rural" children. These recruits were then sent into selected communities to work what he calls, "pedagogical alchemy" affecting changes in target populations. Unlike most ethnographies, Popkewitz's study is openly filtered through a priori theory. Popkewitz uses Foucault's ideas about power/knowledge, normalization and governmentality to examine the way that these neophyte teachers did the normalization work cut out for them in the moral enterprise of the TFA program. Specifically Popkewitz is interested in how "urban and rural" is constructed as a unified category of children placed in a position of educational alterity as, "historical discourses about the capabilities of children are mobilised . . . function to place the urban and rural child outside reason" (1998, p. 48).

Urban, in this context, is code for "inner city" or suburban poor, while rural is code for country backwater. In this construction, the urban and rural child is conjured as a deficient stereotype against the absent presence of the "normal" middle class child living in advantaged, affluent environments. This absent presence is the "successful" child juxtaposed against the deficient, incompetent, and unsuccessful urban/rural child. Success, in this cosmology, is having one's life set in middle class conditions.

> The successful child is one who can sleep at proper hours, study, and who is allowed to develop self-motivation and responsibility . . . The lack of English language skills stand within the grid of ideas whose normalization testified to the child's lack of competence and achievement. The students are positioned as anthropological "others" who stand against reason—they "can't study," are "just so disruptive" and are "pressured not to learn." The children occupy an oppositional space to what is "normal." The nonsuccess of the child is embodied in the normalised capacities of "being" which the child in school lacks. (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 37)

In this matrix, schooling becomes a focus for governing spaces and "rescuing" or "saving" rural and urban children from the social decay in which they are ensnared by virtue of an accident of birth. Urban and rural become code word for marginal spaces populated by non-middle class, non-white, non-affluent children in need of specialised forms of governance in order to, "discriminate, distinguish and normalise what the child is and is to become" (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 22). As Valverde (1997) comments, it is becoming more difficult to speak of deficient people, but it is becoming increasingly easy to speak of normalization spatially in terms of the need to provide special forms of governance in backward or deficient spaces. Taking up this theme, Popkewitz's timely and ground breaking book addresses what he calls the "spatial politics of education" (1998, p. 129).

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The TFA program as Popkewitz describes it is a quasi-religious crusade shot through with missionary language of pastoral care, othering and potential salvation combined with the psychologised discourse of both progressive and traditional pedagogy. Popkewitz maintains that it is this very process of constructing the rural and urban child "outside reason" that both fuels the redemptive mission of the teachers involved in the program and at the same time dooms them and the children they teach to an "internment" in the very backward spaces into which they are defined by this discourse. Popkewitz writes: "the discourses of salvation make the child an individual who is not reasonable, capable and competent but who—with the proper care and nurturance—can be saved" (1998, p. 25). Like all power/knowledge strategies encapsulated in contemporary school reform movements on both the left and the right, "the spatial politics of constructing identities remains unscrutinised" (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 120). Never does anyone ask penetrating questions about what it is that children are being saved from and how the salvation techniques and the concepts that give them meaning actually work to construct the shape of the problem.

> Unscrutinized are the norms that differentiate children and make it possible to identify children who "lack" important qualities, or who have a "limited fund of knowledge" to learn what is prescribed in schooling. (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 115)

The power of discourse facilitates the simple, unquestioned foundational assumption that urban and rural places are environments in which children cannot grow and learn properly. The solution is to change not the environments, but the children living in them. But the irony is that these children cannot be changed, they are deficient and incompetent because they are part of a population that inhabits a deficient space.

> Within this space the best these children can hope for is to become like the *normal* (emphasis in original) person . . . they learn to renounce a set of populational characteristics ascribed to them as personal psychological characteristics. (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 68)

In practice, the discourses of salvation, redemption, and rescue are translated in "practical" terms of pedagogical strategy in what Popkewitz calls a "psychological register" individualising both problems and solutions. Normalization practices can do little more than this; their historic focus has always been upon finding the right set of technologies to effectively transform what Donzelot (1979) called "children in danger/dangerous children." As Popkewitz comments, ". . . the rules of power remain the same as those of the last century" (1998, p. 115). The only difference is the quality and character of danger. The present danger is constructed in terms of the potentially dangerous, streetwise, unchanneled, unredeemed urban hood. Predictably, the young missionary teachers are hardly up to the challenge. What results is a lot of teacher frustration and a retreat into compensatory and remedial pedagogical strategies from those tried and true normalization technologies: Deweyan pragmatism which seems usually to fail; and behaviourism which seems to usually work, even if the results are defeating and disappointing to the young teachers forced to "fall back" on rewards and unchallenging rote learning.

In the end, Popkewitz describes and analyses how the young teachers in TFA learned to create a "space normalised for the 'urban' and 'rural' child" (1998, p. 86). He concludes that this spatialization is a moral order in which the foundation of pedagogy is not school subjects or the transmission of content knowledge, but rather the inculcation of a set of perceptions about the self and about the urban and rural spaces in which targeted children live. This inculcation is represented by the very presence and self-governing agency of the teacher as, "the social space of the urban and rural teacher produces a moral order. The moral order establishes not only 'the good' but its opposite" (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 97). The teacher and the space s/he inhabits become a normalising space inside the child's lifeworld, sitting there, setting example, but not really transforming either the child or the world, but rather, both containing ("interning" in Popkewitz's language) and helping the child to see how messed up his own space really is.

> The program was intended to help the child develop a knowledge of the "self." That knowledge inscribed global behavioural characteristics in the children's homes and communities as dysfunctional. (Popkewitz, 1998, p. 70)

While he criticises both left and right wing reform programs because of their similar missionary normalization focus on, "governing and saving the soul through the construction of individuality" (1998, p. 120), Popkewitz offers little in the way of a reform agenda. He argues that educators and policymakers need to go deeper and question the way discursive categories are used to sort out educational practice, spatialize deviance, generate individualistic solutions, and create binaries and oppositions which provide a space for governance. In other words, we need to look carefully at the way we shape and construct the very problems we propose to be addressing. For Popkewitz, there seem to be no more or less desirable or progressive forms of governance, only different structures of power/knowledge that struggle to supplant one another in the position of moral authority to define the regime of

truth of the moment. Because of the importance of this process of describing the "architecture that disciplines, interns and encloses the individual," Popkewitz professes little interest in resistance which he sees caught in what he calls a sovereign notion of power (1998, p. 131).

There is no doubt that this is a ground-breaking work. Popkewitz is one of the first researchers I've read who makes a serious effort to take poststructural theory into his research practice. The results are interesting and stimulating. The TFA program is exactly the kind of ideologically driven initiative that needs to be taken apart and examined in terms of the kinds of subject and conceptual space it works to produce. However, I want to address what I see as four problems in *Struggling for the Soul* from the point of view of a researcher interested in educational normalization in rural contexts.

1. Popkewitz does not differentiate between rural and urban. I think he does this deliberately because he wants to show how in the rhetoric around the TFA program, urban and rural are constructed as an unilateral opposition to the absent presence of the well governed space of the middle class family. By making this move Popkewitz displays an urban centric bias that has been a central feature of sociological discourse since Wirth (1938) claimed that ascendant urbanism is equivalent to modernity in the 1930s. The general thrust of this argument is that rurality has been effectively subsumed as a distinct sociological category of any significance. This perspective has been critiqued by Bonner (1997), Creed and Ching (1997), and by Young (1996), and so I will not repeat their arguments here. By folding the very different kinds of pedagogical governance issues found in rural and urban places, Popkewitz obscures particularly the rural dimension of the study. In this account, an identifiably rural space is missing, and this is done precisely because Popkewitz is most interested in discursive formations. He is interested in the places where discursive strategies emerge only in the sense that rural and urban places are constructed as educational trouble spots. The analysis, on occasion, does identify specific kinds of urban "danger" and potential trouble against which the missionary work of the teacher and of the school is aimed. But a similar kind of analysis of the way the rural community is problematised in the discourse of normalization mobilised in TFA is not evident to this reader. In fact, specific sites, whether they be schools or communities are abstracted out of sight in this ethnography.

2. If children live in problematic spaces, what kinds of messages are they given about what to do about those spaces? If they are being saved or rescued, where is it that they are supposed to end up? This is not entirely clear in Popkewitz analysis. I'm thinking here about the liberal ideology of schooling so nicely analysed in the context of rural schooling by Paul Theobald (1997) and Alan DeYoung (1995). These analysts argue that, in the case of rural places in particular, an exclusive emphasis on liberal values of self improvement lead to the denigration of communities. In my own emerging research in rural schooling, I argue that this liberal core of rural school normalization efforts lead to what I am calling a migration imperative. In other words, in the language of salvation that is presented to rural children in the course of their schooling, the implicit message is that the rural community is a place to be abandoned in favour of better personal opportunities and options elsewhere. This migration imperative is met with a form of resistance that it rooted in an attachment to place. Thus, the rural school becomes a point of struggle which is played out in the lives of young people who must make key life choices and fateful decisions, not only for themselves, but also for the community.[1]

It is fairly clear in *Struggling for the Soul* how children are normalised through discourse, but it is less clear where salvation is supposed to lead. The missionary language of schooling Popkewitz describes seems to be focussed on training the child to live as a "normal" middle class person in the social space of the urban/rural community. The training is focussed on teaching them to be different in their own urban/rural space and the social space represented by the teacher is an island of normality in the sea of community deviance. There is no spatial emancipatory intent in the entire enterprise. In the history of rural education, it is my view that emancipation has typically been envisioned as leaving. If there is a migration imperative in the salvationist discourse as many rural educational researchers suggest, it is not made evident in Popkewitz's account. This is perhaps one of the chief lines of distinction between governance on the rural margins and on the urban margins.

3. In the end, it seems to me that such an ethnography ought to have something to say in practical terms about the problems and life world of the principal participants (i.e., rural and urban students), and I do not think this book does so. Even if it is designed to critique the way that "urbanness" and "ruralness" are constructed as pedagogical and governmental categories, I do not think it is good enough to ignore the many dimensions of real social problems/ struggles in marginal schools. I think Popkewitz's deliber-

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[1]In rural communities education sits in a particularly ambivalent position because higher education particularly typically implies out-migration. The problematics involved in leaving home and in rural communities have been well documented in the United States (Beggs, Haines, & Hurlburt, 1996; Brandau & Collins, 1994; DeYoung, 1995; Elder, King, & Conger, 1996; Gibbs, 1995; Hektner, 1995; Howley, Harmon, & Leopold, 1996; Ley, Nelson, & Beltyukova, 1996; Pollard, Oltare, & Berg, 1990; Seyfrit, 1986, 1998; Theobald, 1997), in Canada (Looker, 1993, Looker & Dwyer, 1998), and in the United Kingdom (Jones, 1995, 1999a, 1999b).

ate avoidance of the notion of resistance contributes to this problem. A central problem of this book is the virtual absence of the very urban and rural children and youth who were targeted by the TFA Program. These children are silent in Popkewitz's ethnography, and for this reason, I think it was a great deal easier for him to make a case for the normalization he saw at the heart of the TFA enterprise. But what about the rather obvious problems the teachers in the ethnography had in realising any of their missionary aims? They were, it seems to me, resoundingly unsuccessful in their own terms, and in the terms of the discourse in which they were trained. Many of them were forced to adopt strategies they found repulsive. Why is this so? Isn't this a problem of resistance to the normalization thrust or the attempt to institute and maintain a governmental space? Popkewitz spends the entire book concentrating on how these teachers construct *their* mission and constitute *their* practice. The urban/rural students with whom they were supposed to be dealing are wallpaper in this account. The teachers were, especially at first, immersed in abstract, idealistic, ideologically driven, missionary normalization rhetoric and training, but when they confronted their "other." It is through the resistance of this other that the whole enterprise changed. Popkewitz tells nothing of this negotiation, nothing of the rather obvious and important struggle, and nothing of the interface between the normalising strategies of the teachers and the resistant "tactics" of the students to use the language of DeCerteau (1984).

How can the normalization efforts of the teachers in TFA be separated from the resistance of students. Power/knowledge is constituted not simply in the panoptical strategising of omniscient and omnipotent teacher/wardens, but in the active exchange between people in spaces of governance like the public school. It is not as though one group has total normalising power and the "other" are it's objects. Power is an exchange in Foucault's later writing particularly, a dance of differences and oppositions in which one partner meets the other with self-knowledge, strategy, and tactics. Strategic normalization efforts on the one side are met by tactical resistances and accommodations on the other, and in the process, selves are formed and re-formed. The variety power exchanges, and the multiple forms of experience they describe are what make ethnographic accounts informative and interesting, if not useful. It is also this variety that provides the raw material that is fed back into the normalization mill to allow teachers and their mentors to develop ever changing governmentality skills. It is not the uniform deviance of categories of students that supports contemporary normalization efforts, but rather the multiple identities and resistances found in contemporary "backward" spaces an in the individuals they routinely produce. The uniformity of the urban/rural construct does bring the larger enterprise of the teacher in TFA into view, but it also obscures the always contextual play of difference that ethnography can elucidate. The only agents in Popkewitz's account are the young teachers and a few largely unseen others who define categories like urban/rural, and strategy like the pedagogy in the psychological register, and mobilise the troops. Who is behind this normalization effort? Why were these particular strategies of spatial governance used in the first place?

4. I am very interested in how the students in urban and rural school responded to the TFA recruits. Absent from Popkewitz' account are the children who sit behind the teachers' reports of the difficulty of teaching in marginal spaces. I have to wonder how well ethnographic methods sit with poststructural theory as Popkewitz uses it, principally because I believe the account is unfortunately one-sided. Foucault's vision of power is clearly situated in the discursive relations between institutional "strategists" and resistant "tacticians." Furthermore, the key driving force in power relations, for Foucault was resistance, a point Popkewitz misses entirely.

> You see, if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience . . . So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with resistance. So I think *resistance* is the main word, the *key word* in this dynamic. (Foucault in Rabinow, 1997, p. 167; emphasis in original)

Even though I understand Popkewitz's reason for producing a truncated account of TFA, I'm still uncomfortable with the picture that emerges. I don't agree with an older generation of resistance theorists who argued that in resistance, we may find the seed bed of revolution. The analysis of resistance may not settle any fundamentally political questions about how urban and rural children may be emancipated, or from what? I also agree with the importance of understanding how categories and oppositions constructed discursively work in contemporary institutions of normalization to problematise the lives of some people. What a resistance sensitive analysis can show is the complex interaction of attempts to impose what Popkewitz describes, drawing on Bourdieu, as the normalising habitus of the middle class and the urban/rural bases habitus of the children inhabiting backward spaces. Popkewitz's analysis foregrounds theory, and in doing so he not only privileges the accounts of the ideologically driven teacher participants in his research venue, he also defines the practice of everyone involved in terms of a lopsided discourse where agency serves what ends up looking like structural theory.

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