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Care of the self, resistance and subjectivity under neoliberal governmentalities

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Resistance is normally thought of as a collective exercise of public political activity. In this article, Ball and Olmedo approach the question of resistance in a different way, through Foucault's notion of 'the care of the self'. Neoliberal reforms in education are producing new kinds of teaching subjects, new forms of subjectivity. It makes sense then that subjectivity should be the terrain of struggle, the terrain of resistance. A set of e-mail exchanges with teachers, based around Ball's work on performativity, enable the authors to access the work of power relations through the uncertainties, discomforts and refusals that these teachers bring to their everyday practice. By acting 'irresponsibly', these teachers take 'responsibility' for the care of their selves and in doing so make clear that social reality is not as inevitable as it may seem. This is not strategic action in the normal political sense. Rather it is a process of struggle against mundane, quotidian neoliberalisations, that creates the possibility of thinking about education and ourselves differently.

Keywords: educational policy; Foucault; neoconservatism/neoliberalism; resistance; subjectivity

In this article, we want to take up a 'different' approach to the issue of resistance – one which draws on the work of Michel Foucault. We can already hear the collective groans – what does Foucault, theorist of domination and nihilist, have to say about resistance and freedom? We want to suggest that he has a great deal to offer, particularly at this point in time, particularly to the teacher. We have nothing critical to say about, and nothing but admiration for, the efforts of collective resistance based on what Michael Apple (2012) calls 'decentred unities'. However, we want to address the particular plight of the teacher who stands alone in their classroom or their staff common room, and sees something 'cracked', something that to their colleagues is no more than the steady drone of the mundane and the normal, and finds it intolerable. How do they respond? To put it simply, to the extent that neoliberal governmentalities have become increasingly focused upon the production of subjectivity, it is logical that we think about subjectivity as a site of struggle and resistance.

Nowadays, the struggle against the forms of subjection – against the submission of subjectivity – is becoming more and more important, even though the struggles against forms of domination and exploitation have not disappeared. Quite the contrary. (Foucault, 1982, p. 213)

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We focus here both on an analysis of the neoliberal modes and technologies of governmentality and these modes and technologies as points of agonism and struggle where different possibilities of the teaching subject can be glimpsed. This is an attempt to approach power relations differently, following the flows of power in the 'opposite direction'. What we intend to do is to sketch the basis of a 'new economy of power relations' and to do it in a different way, 'a way which is more empirical, more directly related to our present situation, and which implies more relations between theory and practice' (Foucault, 1982, p. 211). This 'different' approach takes as a starting point specific forms of resistance, that is, as Foucault suggests, we want to examine resistance to *practices*, and specifically the practices of performativity, and then use those *practices of resistance* 'as a chemical catalyst so as to bring to light power relations, locate their position, find out their point of application and the methods used' (Foucault, 1982, p. 211).

'Performance has no room for caring' (Ball, 2003, p. 224). In this article, we want to go back and revise that affirmation. More concretely, we reflect upon a set of cases that represent a particular type of struggle against/with the *practices* of performativity. 'The main objective of these struggles is to attack not so much 'such and such' an institution of power, or group, or elite, or class, but rather a technique, a form of power' (Foucault, 1982, p. 211). These cases consist of a small set of email exchanges between Stephen Ball and teachers (from primary, secondary, Further Education and Higher Education, UK and United States) which were initiated by the teachers in response to Stephen's writing on *performativity*, and seemed to speak to their present concerns.¹ Later, we will also briefly consider the significance of the form of these exchanges. Our aim is to open a space in which we might begin to understand the daily experiences and practices of freedom of individual teachers. These are 'normal' teachers, as they would categorise themselves, who may not feel 'different' but whose struggles 'make a difference' in the 'normality' of their classrooms. These are struggles that surface when the teacher begins to question the necessity of and think about the revocability of his or her own situation. That is, when the teacher begins to look for answers to questions about the *how(s) of power*² inside and around him or her, the *how(s)* of his or her beliefs and practices. In these moments, the power relations in which the teacher is imbricated come to the fore. It is then that he or she can begin to take an active role in their own self-definition as a 'teaching subject', to think in terms of what they do not want to be, and do not want to *become*, or, in another words, begin to *care for themselves*. Such care also rests upon and is realised through practices, practices of critique, vigilance, reflexivity, and of writing. The initial lines of Nigel's first email powerfully frame the scope and practices with which we will be dealing in this article:

I am a small rural school head teacher. My job is being destroyed by reductive specifiers and performative maniacs. I have engaged in a fight back but that just makes it worse. To think differently – that is to engage in learning rather than pseudo-measuring – is to be subjected to a totalitarian human and public relations meltdown, subjected to a public barrage of disparagement on 'leadership' (not thinking pure thoughts) and self-evaluation (ditto). (Nigel)

We are also very aware that these are not 'their' struggles, they are also 'our' struggles. These accounts enable us to visualise the gaps between power and domination and offer opportunities to think about ourselves differently.

By focussing on particular cases of struggle we hope to address some of the questions that guided Foucault's thinking in his later work. That is, he was interested in the modes by which 'human beings are made subjects' (Foucault, 1982, p. 208). He asks: 'How are we constituted as subjects of our own knowledge? How are we constituted as subjects who

exercise or submit to power relations? How are we constituted as moral subjects of our own actions?’ (Foucault, 1997a, p. 318).

Teaching subjects

Let us clarify some concepts that we will be using here and, particularly, the terms *subject* and *teaching subject*. For Foucault, the word subject has two meanings, both of which suggest ‘a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to’. On the one hand, subject relates to the state of subjection ‘to someone else by control or dependence’; on the other hand, it refers to the self-configuration of an identity ‘by a conscience or self-knowledge’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 212). Furthermore, in an interview in 1984, Foucault suggested that he saw the subject not simply as a *substance*, but as a *form*. The latter rests on the idea the subject ‘is not primarily or always identical to itself’ (Foucault, 1997a, p. 290), and he clarifies:

You do not have the same type of relationship to yourself when you constitute yourself as a political subject who goes to vote or speaks at a meeting and when you are seeking to fulfil your desires in a sexual relationship. Undoubtedly there are relationships and interferences between these different forms of the subject; but we are not dealing with the same type of subject. In each case, one plays, one establishes a different type of relationship to oneself. And it is precisely the historical constitution of these various forms of the subject in relation to the games of truth which interests me. (Foucault, 1997a, pp. 290–291)

The subject is the result of endless processes of construction of identities that are to a greater or lesser extent, but never completely, constrained by the contingencies of the particular historical moment in which they are inscribed. As suggested elsewhere (Ball, 2012), this perspective allows us to approach the idea of subjectivity as *processes of becoming* that focus on *what we do* rather than on *what we are*, that is to say, the work of *the care of the self*. The point here is that there is no individual, no self, that is ontologically prior to power. There is no subject that is already formed. In this sense, the self is not only a constant *beginning* but also a constant *end* (in the double sense of the word, both as consummated entity and envisioned objective), or, as McGushin puts it, it is ‘the real basis of the self as both agent and object’ (2011, p. 129). The subject is then governed by others and at the same time governor of him/herself. It is within this paradox that the idea of resistance becomes a central aspect in the analysis of power relations: ‘In power relations there is necessarily the possibility of resistance because if there were no possibility of resistance (of violent resistance, flight, deception, strategies capable of reversing the situation), there would be no power relations at all’ (Foucault, 1997a, p. 292). The power/resistance paradox is unresolvable. As Dean neatly puts it, ‘our understanding of ourselves is linked to the ways in which we are governed’ (2010, p. 14). The constraining historical, political and economic contextual factors are therefore central to the understanding of the limits of the horizon of possibilities and practices through which the subject actively constitutes him/herself, including the practices of resistance: ‘These practices are nevertheless not something invented by the individual himself. They are models that he finds in his culture and are proposed, suggested, imposed upon him by his culture, his society, and his social group’ (Foucault, 1997a, p. 291).

We are interested here in what could be termed the *teaching subject*, the teacher as a subject that has been constituted and that has constituted him/herself through certain practices of power and games of truth in a particular epistemological context. In our case, we want to disentangle in this context the mechanisms put into play by neoliberalism as a new

regime of truth. Though it shares certain principles with classic liberalism, neoliberalism differs from the previous iteration replacing the logic of exchange with that of competition (Foucault, 2010a). This represents a broader epistemological shift that involves changes in the form and functions of the state, or a move from government to governance, from hierarchies to heterarchies (Jessop, 2002), and also a ‘new anthropology’: the *homo aeconomicus*, characterised as being an ‘entrepreneur of himself’ (Foucault, 2010a, p. 226).

Neoliberalism is therefore both ‘out there’ and ‘in here’ (Peck & Tickell, 2002), it is realised and constituted within mundane and immediate practices of everyday life (Ong, 2007). It ‘does us’ – speaks and acts through our language, purposes, decisions and social relations (Ball, 2012). Altogether it sets the cultural and social limits to the possibilities of the care of the self but, at the same time, opens new spaces for struggle and resistance, as Rose (1996, p. 58) suggests: ‘the reconfiguring of the subject of government confers obligations and duties at the same time as it opens new spaces of decision and action’.

Irresponsibility as resistance

In what follows we will focus on the specific practices of resistance and *self-overcoming* of a group of individual teachers who directly confront the discourse and enactment of neoliberalism and its technologies. In particular, the practices of performativity that impact upon the ways in which they are governed and are *able to be* in their classrooms and their schools. We understand the concept of government here not only in relation to ‘political structures or the management of states’, but more generally, in Foucault’s sense, to designate ‘the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 221). This relates to Martin’s experience. He struggles with performativity as it works to define what he does and what he does not want to become. This is a ‘fundamental challenge’, as he puts it:

I find that one of the most fundamental challenges of my job is trying to avoid becoming incorporated into market modes of thinking. Of course, the more time you spend at work trying to please your superiors, the more you use the language of performativity and begin to believe in it yourself. (Martin)

Neoliberalism requires and enacts a ‘new type of individual’, that is a ‘new type of teacher and head teacher’ formed within the logic of competition. The apparatuses of neoliberalism are seductive, enthralling and overbearingly necessary. It is a ‘new’ moral system that subverts and re-orientates us to its truths and ends. It makes us responsible for our performance and for the performance of others. We are burdened with the responsibility to perform, and if we do not we are in danger of being seen as irresponsible. ‘There are two technologies at play here turning us into governable subjects – a technology of *agency* and a technology of *performance*’ (Davies & Petersen, 2005, p. 93). We are produced rather than oppressed, animated rather than constrained! This is Martin’s experience:

My participants³ see no problem in their focus on impression management. They proudly see themselves as promoting their institutions – and one could hardly blame them as they must compete for funding, for student enrolment, for allocation of resources within their districts, etc. The neoliberal or marketized environment has certainly created a new sort of principal. And one of the most interesting points is that many of them claim to reject the system of rankings/comparisons that has become the dominant mode of governance. Frequently, the school principals’ own language says the opposite. (Martin)

These techniques of regulation and self-regulation are creating a new episteme of public service through a 'reshaping of "deep" social relations' (Leys, 2001, p. 2) which involve the subordination of moral and intellectual obligations to economic ones (Walzer, 1984) so that 'everything is simply a sum of value realised or hoped for' (Slater & Tonkiss, 2001, p. 162). Martin continues:

Since practitioners (like me!) have become normalized into the discourse of 'constant improvement' and instrumentality/usefulness, it is difficult to see outside of this paradigm . . . Every principal I interviewed was interested in constant or continuous improvement – and I'd be hard-pressed to find someone who didn't think this was a reasonable goal of the educational institution.

The rationality of performativity is presented as the new common sense, as something logical and desirable. Indeed, performativity works best when we come to want for ourselves what is wanted from us, when our moral sense of our desires and ourselves are aligned with its pleasures. Resisting performativity at a discursive level implies problematising the essence and 'raw material' of our own practices. It requires the deconstruction and recreation of the self and a certain capacity to examine ourselves critically. This is exactly what these teachers are doing throughout their correspondence:

For example, when each of my participants says that his/her goal is to make sure that each student is college/career ready, it seems like a perfectly rational thing to say. Of course we want that for our students! But, would you say that this is something that should give me pause? Is this yet another example of performance accountability at work? Have the principals simply been normalized (as Foucault might put it) into using the discourse of the discipline? 'College/Career readiness' is, after all, the language of government documents, politicians, and state curriculum standards. I guess my issue is that it's difficult to get people to see that making such statements is problematic – that it leaves something out of schooling. (Martin)

Martin unsettles the mundane and rational truths of neoliberal education and questions the *obviousness* of things. Such questions fuel processes of introspection and allow the teachers to expose the power relations in which they are immersed. Walter is also troubling the inner logic of performativity. In a letter attached to his school's annual staff questionnaire, Walter confronts his school's new policy on internal evaluation. The new regulation consists of the introduction of termly lesson observations using the Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education] grade system.⁴ While not rejecting the need for the evaluation of teachers' work he distinguishes between constructive and collegiate forms of feedback and those that he understands as 'beguiling but harmful' practices:

Feedback must be a dialogue . . . From a top-down perspective the requirement of termly judgements and re-judgements makes sense and is helpful as it produces reassuring spread sheets of data and hard evidence of 'Teacher X' moving from a 4 to a 3, a 1 to a 2 and so on. From the ground up however it looks and feels quite different. It is, for a number of teachers, demoralising, depressing, frustrating and very stressful. The judgement is made and without any dialogue there is no way to state your case; to draw attention to the shortcomings of the observations themselves, that is to shine a light on the limited perspective of the observer. (Walter)

These teachers are uncovering the often misleading and controversial line that separates practices of power from those of domination. Walter might be using different words but he is contextualising what Foucault says when he explained that 'power relations are not something that is a bad thing in itself' (Foucault, 1997a, p. 298). Power becomes a problem when

‘an individual or social group succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement by economic, political, or military means’ (1997a, p. 283). These situations are what could be termed *states of domination*, and they imply the almost total impossibility of developing practices of freedom. Foucault illustrates this idea more graphically as follows:

I see nothing wrong in the practice of a person who, knowing more than others in a specific game of truth, tells those others what to do, teaches them, and transmits knowledge and techniques to them. The problem in such practices where power – which is not in itself a bad thing – must inevitably come into play is knowing how to avoid the kind of domination effects where a kid is subjected to the arbitrary and unnecessary authority of a teacher, or a student put under the thumb of a professor who abuses his authority. (1997a, pp. 298–299)

The effects of such impositions are experienced at symbolic and physical levels by many teachers. ‘Demoralisation, depression, frustration, and stress’ are tropes of experience that recur in the email correspondence quoted here. These are also signs of what Foucault (1982) understands as ‘processes of confrontation’, often not fully recognised by the actors but already on-going. This is resistance *to practices*. In these examples, neoliberalism is experienced and perceived in the classroom and in the soul, which confers a sense of ‘immediacy’, both in temporal and spatial terms. It is precisely at this level where ‘people criticize instances of power which are the closest to them, those which exercise their action on individuals. They do not look for the “chief enemy,” but for the immediate enemy’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 211). Here, critique of externally imposed regimes of truth, represented in this case in the Ofsted inspection, is put to use not so much as a political tool in the usual sense but as a means of self-formation. This makes it more difficult to act and think ‘as usual’ and makes it possible to rethink our relationship to ourselves and to others, and our possibilities of existence, differently from what is expected.

The critiques of these teachers represent an attitude of ‘hyper and pessimistic activism’ as Foucault (1997a, p. 256) called it. They are uncovering in their everyday practices what Lazzarato (2009, p. 111) identified as the core strategies of the ‘neoliberal transformation of the social’, ‘individualization, securitization and depolitization’ (p. 109), all embodied in the enterprising subject. But, as Walter suggests, there is more to it than that. It is more than *simply* understanding the teaching subject as the ‘entrepreneur of him/herself’. Performativity implies also accepting that ‘these are things that we do to ourselves and to others’ (Ball, 2003, p. 224).

The ‘Ofsted-style’ grading is divisive and unhelpful. It’s wrong for Ofsted to do it every few years and it’s even more wrong for staff within a school to do it to each other every term The observer should not be jury and judge. It might make good TV like *The Apprentice* but it’s no way to build morale and build a team. (Walter)

At the same time as it isolates the subject through processes of individualisation, performativity introduces a routine of constant reporting and recording of our practice. It installs a set of informational structures and performance indicators that become the principle of intelligibility of social relations. The latter become increasingly ‘ephemeral, disposable, serial, fleeting’ (Ball, 2004, p. 21), and are ‘replaced by judgemental relations wherein persons [here we would include teachers and also students] are valued for their productivity alone. Their value as a person is eradicated’ (Ball, 2003, p. 224). Another teacher explained it this way:

The whole thing is so weird. I obviously haven't found a resolution or I wouldn't be harping on about it. Just before Ofsted, County [the local education authority] wrote about seeing me as an 'outstanding teacher with my training and workshops I do in schools etc – they were full of praise and my head was full of nothing but praise – and I was really enjoying my work. Then in one fell swoop, Ofsted said that I had come into the school with 'my ideas' and was limiting progress in all pupils and gave me a 'satisfactory'. Then nobody believed anything I said about music and the rest is history. (Sarah)

In the realms of performativity, as Peters puts it, 'value displaces values' (2001, p. 17). Results are prioritised over processes, numbers over experiences, procedures over ideas, productivity over creativity. Furthermore, the technologies put in place here are a manifestation of 'dividing practices' that work to identify, valorise and reward successful and productive subjects (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 98), and target for exile or for reform, the 'irresponsible', those who fail to re-make themselves in 'the image of the market' (Gillies, 2011, p. 215).

I am currently working in a failing college context – where values/ethos are highly disregarded because they are 'soft' concepts and not quickly translated into measurable impact, and where instead, monitoring at every level is preferred (internal and external) amid a deep seated lack of trust (from a leadership perspective). (Alice)

Resisting what works!

This group of teachers is struggling to produce identity and meaning within the structural and discursive limitations of their everyday practice. For instance, as one of the head teachers acknowledges, one of the mechanisms by which these limitations are enacted in classrooms is what he identified as 'the audit-managerial monolith' and which he portrays as functioning as follows:

The effects are dire – harming the real job to an extreme degree, and undermining confidence in the service so that parents are at our throats. They are confused by a mismatch of rhetoric, reality and expectation and here it is descending into a mire of confusion and despondency. The work overload of drowning in specificatory garbage to irrelevant notions, which ever-change and for which you are damned for the impossibility of keeping up, dealing with damage and somehow trying to find the space for real work which 'they' are not in the slightest bit interested in, is exhausting. How to break out? (Nigel)

In the midst of these cold, machinic, calculative techniques, 'we become ontologically insecure' and 'uncertain about the reasons for actions' (Ball, 2003 p. 220). Teachers are no longer encouraged to have a rationale for practice, account of themselves in terms of a relationship to the meaningfulness of *what they do*, but are required to produce measurable and 'improving' outputs and performances, what is important is *what works*. We are in danger of becoming transparent but empty, unrecognisable to ourselves – 'I am other to myself precisely at the place where I expect to be myself' (Butler, 2004, p. 15).

What is being called into question here is what Foucault calls the '*régime du savoir*', that is 'the way in which knowledge circulates and functions, its relations to power' (Foucault, 1982, p. 212). Below Paul highlights the need to question the truths of education and those of the teaching profession and to rearticulate the teacher as a pedagogical subject whose responsibility, as Foucault suggested, is 'to keep watch over the excessive powers of political rationality' (1982, p. 210).

Perhaps the years of SATs and National Strategies [literacy and numeracy], the colonisation of state schooling by neoliberal definitions and values which have ousted those of public service (as Stephen Ball has made clear) and the huge increase in central government reach and diktat have re-shaped what education-in-schools means fundamentally, so that certain (oppositional/submerged) discourses have become unintelligible. (Paul)

This re-imagining of power involves bringing the teacher back into the sphere of the *political*, as an actor who takes up a position in relation to new discourses and truths and who looks critically at the meaning and enactment of policy. It implies an analysis of the structural conditions of the educational system alongside a critical scrutiny of our own practices and beliefs:

The data-drivers, or the engine of hyper-accountability now, is mainly to do with tracking each student's progress through the levels, and expecting everyone to make 3 levels' progress across secondary school. There are ways this can be presented as positive, though I'd maintain it directs teachers to teach-the-test and is reductive of both students and a notion of education. (Paul)

Two regimes of truth are in opposition here, two systems of value and values. One produces measureable teaching subjects, whose qualities are represented in categories of judgement. The other is vested in a pedagogy of context and experience, intelligible within a set of collegial relations:

I have known staff to engage with the most challenging and disaffected children, and gain their interest, respect and productive engagement (some of the time). Walk into the room and nothing leaps out as 'excellent'. But get to know those pupils, and those staff, and you will find they have genuinely excelled themselves in what they have achieved, over time. (Nigel)

Nigel here refuses the credibility of external metrics and judgements that tell the teacher what he or she is, including both internal procedures in the form of observation protocols developed within the schools, among colleagues, and external inspections and evaluations. Neither relate to what Nigel understands as the central and defining aspects of the work of the teacher. More fundamentally, these struggles have to do with the right to define ourselves according to our own judgements, or, in other words, to develop a particular *technology of the self* according to our own principles, an aesthetics of the self (Foucault, 1992, 2010b), which are focused on the question of *who we are* and *who we might become*, that is on *askesis* and 'the labour of becoming' (Venn & Terranova, 2009, p. 3). As Foucault points out, they 'revolve around the question: Who are we? They are a refusal of these abstractions, of economic and ideological state violence which ignore who we are individually, and also a refusal of a scientific or administrative inquisition which determines who one is' (Foucault, 1982, p. 212).

But what about those teachers judged 'good' or 'outstanding'? Firstly I'm not convinced that the best teachers ever think of themselves as 'outstanding'. You are a teacher, always learning. More importantly where does a teacher go who is labelled 'outstanding'? This label may well be applied within the first year or two of a teacher's career! Can you be 'outstanding' after 2 or 3 years teaching? I think you can but only if 'outstanding' is defined as the possession of a limited set of skills combined with the ability to comply with your individual school's lesson protocol. The minority of inadequate teachers can be dealt with, and the few outstanding teachers, and it is a few if this term is going to have any real meaning, can be led towards Advanced Skills Teacher (AST) status or similar. This leaves the vast majority of teachers on a level playing field – your goods and adequates – working on their skills/knowledge/expertise in a mutually supportive environment. (Walter)

Walter is undertaking a 're-problematisation' of the present that 'dismantles the coordinates of his or her starting point and indicates the possibility of a different experience' (Burchell, 1996, p. 31).

All of this relates back to and rests on Foucault's efforts at making the subject historically mutable and thus the possibility of 'making ourselves open to transformation' (Taylor, 2011, p. 112). As he said in an interview: 'My role – and that is too emphatic a word – is to show people that they are freer than they think' (Martin, 1988, pp. 10–11). These words seem directed to Walter:

A new curriculum direction sprang to the fore here – the ill named Curriculum for Excellence, and our control system set about subverting it, not from the outside by opposing it, but by undermining it conceptually, procedurally and linguistically, from the inside Somehow I can 'see' this. But not hard when you live it, since they swamp you with performative goo. If you resist they add thickening agent,⁵ . . . And all I wanted was to do my job! (Walter)

Walter's apparent pessimism could be seen from another perspective as a calculative process of decision-making. It represents a strategic recess, a pause for assessment – he is aware that the risks of 'truth-telling' (Tamboukou, 2012) stand over and against the costs of silence (see below). This exercise sets the basis for ethical responses which are founded on the existence of practices of freedom: 'Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection' (Foucault, 1997a, p. 284). The practices of resistance apparent here are about deciphering, understanding, unravelling and retranslating.

We as a University have a great reputation of drawing in students who are often the first in family to go to Uni, who live in the local area, who have families, jobs etc and who come to us because they know we have a great reputation for student support, valuing diversity focus However our Uni's aim is to be in the 1st quartile of the league tables and I am not sure the two things can actually co-exist. I want to work in an organisation known for the difference it makes to the local community as much as the international community, increasing entry tariffs has already seen a shift in the backgrounds of the students that come to us. (Natalie)

A conclusion in becoming

Resisting the flows of neoliberalism is different from past struggles. For now it also encompasses resisting our own practices, it is about confronting oneself at the centre of our discomforts. If one follows the logic of critique we end up finding out that we are precisely the ones to be blamed. Resistance to dominant discourse(s) and the technologies in which they are shaped, implies that we must change our understanding of what being a teacher is all about. All of this involves constant and organised work on the self, that is, the 'establishment of a certain objectivity, the development of a politics and a government of the self, and an elaboration of an ethics and practice in regard to oneself' (Foucault, 1997a, p. 117).

We said at the beginning that we would say something about the form of these cases. They are all drawn from email exchanges initiated by the teachers. The emails, we would suggest, are part of the process of struggle against, of critique, of making things intolerable, of 'unsettling' and the struggle to be different. 'One's idea of what one is struggling against has a direct impact on what one becomes as one struggles' (Blacker, 1998, p. 357). The emails provide a way for these teachers to articulate themselves and their practice differently by opening up spaces of doubt. Foucault saw writing as a key technique of the 'arts of the self', and a means for exploring the 'aesthetics of existence' and for inquiring

into the government of self and others (Foucault, 1997b). He presented self-writing as a deliberate, self-conscious attempt to explain and express oneself to an audience within which one exists and from whom one seeks confirmation (see Peters, 2000). The email may be understood as both part of an attempt to 'mark out an ethical space' (Burchell, 1996, p. 34) within which the teacher might teach differently and ways of exploring the possibilities and impossibilities of transgression.

However, there are *costs* to be considered here, the costs of constant vigilance, the costs of a commitment to a kind of 'permanent agonism' (Burchell, 1996, p. 34), the possibilities of ridicule and precarity – what Lazzarato calls the 'micro-politics of little fears' (2009, p. 120). Over and against these there are the costs of silence, and who bears them – in what is nonetheless an increasingly one-sided 'parrhesiastic game' (Foucault, 2001, p. 13). If we take Foucault seriously we must confront the problem of standing outside our own history, outside of ourselves, and do ethical work on ourselves.

We are not suggesting that the analysis we have laid out above is clear-cut, or indeed that the tensions between domination and freedom in Foucault's later work were ever fully resolved; their development was ended by his death and taken up by others. But Foucault's work provides a way of thinking about resistance and freedom which focuses on subjectivity, transgression and possibility that does not rely on the mobilisation of grand narratives, or simple normativities, but rather recognises the courage displayed in refusing the mundane, in turning away from excellence, in unsettling truths – or the 'activity of self-overcoming [that] is constituted through transgressing social practices' (Owen, 1994, p. 205). It is an invitation to the practice of 'concrete liberty', which is localised and flexible, a liberty which is created in and through acts of resistance and processes of self-definition. We write here in part as audience, but also as fellow strugglers, to validate these attempts at self-overcoming, as we at the same time attempt our own. These attempts may also have more general significance in helping to distinguish 'between those elements of present social reality which remain necessary and unchangeable from those which are open to change' (Patton, 1995, p. 357). All of this involves recognition of the possibilities of power, the fragility of freedom and the limits of contingency and domination, while seeking a space within them. The focus of our analysis and discussion has been on individuals and their struggles to recognise different possibilities of power. One such possibility is clearly offered in relations with others who share the same discomforts. These others might not be available in the staffroom but they may be within everyday social relations, union meetings or on social media sites. That is to say: 'It is not that a politics informed by aesthetics would necessarily eschew or discourage social consensus and solidarity' (Pigantelli, 1993, p. 426). There are already examples described by the teachers in the email exchanges of campaigns, discussions and meetings in which singular struggles are shared and common experiences recognised. The point is that these commonalities are not established from a priori political positions but through work on and over and against practices and on what it means to be a teacher, what it means to be educated, and what is means to be revocable.

Notes

1. The teachers quoted in the text initially contacted Stephen to indicate ways in which his writing on performativity 'spoke' to their experience and aligned with their sense of fear and anger. It was later that the ensuing exchanges were recognised as offering a way of understanding situated struggles over subjectivity. The interlocutors were asked whether their emails could be used and quoted in a paper and all were willing and interested. Pseudonyms have been used. There is no 'method' involved here apart from a careful reading and re-reading of the email texts.

2. Foucault explains his particular use of the article *how*: “‘How,’ not in the sense of “How does it manifest itself?” but “By what means is it exercised?” and “What happens when individuals exert (as they say) power over others?”” (Foucault, 1982, p. 217; emphasis in the original).
3. Michael is a primary school head teacher doing a PhD. He is in the process of analysing his interviews with a group of fellow head teachers.
4. The Ofsted evaluation system is compounded of four grades, defined as: 1: Outstanding; 2: Good; 3: Satisfactory; 4: Inadequate (for more information about Ofsted evaluation scheme see: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/schools>).
5. From this Autumn, Ofsted inspections in England will be carried out without the need to give notice to schools prior to the visit of the inspectors. According to Sir Michael Wilshaw, HM Chief inspector, this measure will allow inspector to see the classroom ‘as they really are’ (Wilshaw on The Guardian, 01/10/2012). Alongside, the House of Commons Education Committee released on May 1st, its Ninth Report of Session 2010–2012 entitled: ‘Great teachers: attracting, training and retaining the best’. The title itself summarises many of the aspects and relates to the technologies referred to in our correspondence with the teachers. The Committee openly suggests that: ‘No longer should the weakest teachers be able to hide behind a rigid and unfair pay structure. We believe that performance management systems should support and reward the strongest teachers, as well as make no excuses (or, worse, incentives to remain) for the weaker’ and a bit further summarises, ‘We further recommend that the Department develop proposals (based on consultation and a close study of systems abroad) for a pay system which rewards those teachers who add the greatest value to pupil performance’ (House of Commons Education Committee, 2012, p. 47).

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