

Est.  
1841YORK  
ST JOHN  
UNIVERSITY

Clarke, Matthew ORCID:

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4693-248X> and Phelan, Anne E. (2017) Policy's excess: Professional alienation and sublimation. In: Clarke, Matthew ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4693-248X> and Phelan, Anne, (eds.) Teacher Education and the Political : the power of negative thinking. Routledge, pp. 17-36

Downloaded from: <http://ray.yorks.ac.uk/id/eprint/4454/>

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version:

<https://www.routledge.com/Teacher-Education-and-the-Political-The-power-of-negative-thinking/Clarke-Phelan/p/book/9781138840744>

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. [Institutional Repository Policy Statement](#)

# RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at [ray@yorks.ac.uk](mailto:ray@yorks.ac.uk)

## Chapter 2

### **Policy's excess: Professional alienation and sublimation**

It is neither revelatory nor controversial to claim that the demands on teachers and teacher education have intensified in recent years. Over a decade ago, in a paper that made a significant impact within the academy, as well as resonating powerfully with the teaching profession in schools, Stephen Ball (2003) outlined what he described, following Lyotard, as 'the terrors of performativity', highlighting the alienating effects of this terror on 'the teacher's soul'. Since then the apparatus of neoliberal performativity has, if anything, grown and intensified. One consequence of this is high attrition rates, with teacher unions in England reporting that forty per cent of newly qualified teaching staff leave the profession by the end of their first year<sup>1</sup>. In this context, teachers see policy developments around notions such as 'accountability' as a smokescreen for blame and victimisation (Neumark, 2014), with the growing gap between salaries and housing costs in those same cities adding further fuel to teachers' sense of being undervalued and exploited (R. Adams, 2015). Further compounding the terrors of performativity are the stress and exhaustion arising from merely keeping up, let alone coping, with the steady stream of education 'reforms'. This stream has flowed with ever-increasing force in recent decades owing to a number of factors. These include education's positioning as the core site for the preparation for workers deemed capable of contributing to the success of their country in the competitive arena of the global economy and the consequent quest to subject schools and teachers to practices and disciplines originating in the realms of business and management (Saltman, 2014). In the words of this chapter's title, this scope and ambition of policy might be described as excessive; and it is against this background of policy's excess that we examine how the unrelenting tide of reform in education has contributed to the professional alienation of teachers. More positively, the chapter explores notions of sublimation, relational accountability and aversive identification as conceptual resources for resisting and countering the alienation that neoliberal policies have wrought on teachers and teacher education. But what do we mean by alienation? It is to this question that our discussion first turns.

### **Alienation: A relation of relationlessness**

As indicated above, neoliberal education policy has been described as a form of authoritarianism, operating through technologies of fear and intimidation (e.g. Giroux, 2004), particularly in relation to its effects on the work and lives of teachers (Ball, 2003; Clarke, 2013). For teachers, both those with extensive experience in schools and classrooms and those undergoing preparation in initial teacher education programmes, this intrusion extends beyond the reduction of teaching to the equivalent of painting by numbers (Taubman, 2009), troubling as this is, and involves a more insidious and invasive process of ‘psychic colonization’ (Oliver, 2004), involving the imposition of meaning by one group (policy makers) on another (teachers) and presaging a form of professional alienation.

In employing the term, alienation, we are mindful of the unease some readers may feel to the extent that it implies estrangement from some original or essential state of being, often linked to romantic notions of culture and civilisation as artificial structures that function as barriers, preventing human beings from experiencing their ‘true’ nature or meeting their deepest needs. In this view alienation is deemed to be the price paid for community, civilisation or industrial capitalism. There is also the related risk of viewing alienation primarily in terms of a psychological state divorced from historical processes, social practices and economic structures. While mindful of these issues, we believe that the long history of the term and its pervasive use in both academic and everyday discourse is testimony to the persistent experience of division and separation, with the more recent terrors of neoliberal performativity being one of its many manifestations.

We are also aware that alienation as a concept has a long, complex genealogy – Raymond Williams (1983, p. 33), in *Keywords*, describes it as “now one of the most difficult words in the language”, in part owing to its complex, and often contested, entanglements with social, economic, political and psychoanalytic theories. As an ‘impure’ term (Jaeggi, 2014), alienation is implicated in a complex and convoluted history involving philosophical, political and economic theories and, in turn, it implicates the intra-relations of the self and its inter-relations with others and with the world. As such, we cannot do justice to alienation’s complex genealogy and meanings within the limits of a chapter; so instead of attempting the near impossible task of providing a comprehensive analysis of the concept, we develop an account below that

maintains fidelity to its spirit, whilst also serving our purposes in terms of diagnosing and illuminating the afflictions of teacher education, particularly those linked to the dominant managerialist thrust of neoliberal education policy.

Drawing on the ideas of Marx, Oliver (2004) distinguishes between two forms of alienation in relation to human life and work, which we might describe as ‘primary’ and ‘social’ alienation. Primary alienation, in this reading, takes the form of maintaining the critical distance from the world and its objects that is required for the realisation of humanity’s species being, or purposeful life, something that finds expression in the forms of sociability and reflexivity unique to human being. In Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, this can be explained in relation to the way that our formation as social subjects, which occurs through our entry into language and the order of the symbolic, comes at the cost of sacrificing direct experience of the world, which henceforth is always mediated rather than *immediate*(d). This mediation brings with it a capacity for reflexivity in relation to our experience and ourselves, something which, in Foucault’s terms, makes us “a strange empirico-transcendental doublet” (1970, p. 318), both the subject and object of knowledge, neither fully of, nor outside, the world. Alienation in this sense is what affords us the space, or distance, for agentive meaning making, social relations and self-reflection to occur.

However, Oliver describes a more debilitating form of alienation, which she labels estrangement, but which we will refer to as ‘social alienation’. This forms of alienation has at its core a relation of relationlessness, involving an impeded capacity to appropriate oneself and the world (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 1). This raises the question, however, of how we are to characterise the self that becomes alienated from itself. In particular, is it possible to posit psychic unity, continuity and agency without grounding this in essentialised notions of the self as a substance that precedes its social articulation and hence is simply given? This issue has significant implications for teachers, not so much in relation to familiar if over-simplified question as to whether teachers are born or made, but in relation to questions of teachers’ agency and the scope for variety and difference in appropriating and inhabiting the identity of a teacher. Our response is to adopt a relational-performative view of the self that emphasises the notion of appropriation as a process of incorporation and inhabitation, in which what is appropriated remains at once alien and intimate, and in which both

the appropriator and the appropriated are transformed in the process (Jaeggi, 2014, pp. 37-40). In this view, the self neither pre-exists experience, nor is constructed *by* experience, but emerges in relations to others and the world through the simultaneous appropriation, transformation and externalisation of experience as part of a multilayered and ongoing process of *becoming* (Jaeggi, 2014, pp. 160-161). In other words, the self is simultaneously (re)created as it (re)articulates and (re)performs itself as part of an ongoing process. The self is thus constituted through what can be described as a form of retroversive causality, in which the past is continually reinterpreted in light of the unfolding present. The self also comprises a minimal but ineradicable self-difference insofar as it is constituted by that to which originates beyond the self and which endures as paradoxically excessive to, yet simultaneously constitutive of, the subject (Rothenberg, 2010). In some sense, then, identity is a process in which we remain perpetual and intractable strangers to ourselves.

Yet this minimal, constitutive self-difference is not the same as alienation insofar as the latter implies not just an absence but a normative expectation of the existence of relationship. We can become alienated from our families in a way that we cannot from strangers. In formal terms then, we can define alienation, not as the absence of relations to the self, to others and to the world, but as a relation of nonrelation or a relation of relationlessness (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 25). Unpacking this notion of a relation of relationlessness further, we might say that alienation involves: 1.) a loss of meaning and 2.) domination by the forces of conformity and anonymity. In substantial terms, and in specific relation to teachers and their work, we can identify a number of possible senses of alienation (Jaeggi, 2014, pp. 4-5).

Alienation may be thought of as living inauthentically, not in the sense of being untrue to some core inner essence, but in terms of an over-reliance on approval from others and domination by their beliefs, attitudes and opinions. We can observe this, for example, when people consume 'high culture' solely to impress others; or when teachers are reliant for their curricular and pedagogical thinking on the plans and outlines of colleagues or on pre-packaged materials from policy makers or commercial publishing companies. A related, if distinct, sense of the term involves entering into relations or engaging in activities purely, or mainly, for instrumental purposes, such as individuals who select friends on the basis of their social standing

and the potential this offers for gaining status through association; or schools who see students as a means of boosting their ranking in competitive league tables. This instrumentalism may involve the commodification of people and objects, and the mediation of these things in terms of money or other quantitative systems of exchange value, in ways that undermine their uniqueness and contingency by reducing and translating them to a common currency. We see this tendency at work, for example, in the reduction of the value of education systems, schools or students to their scores in standardised assessment regimes.

The alienation that flows from this instrumental approach reflects the fragmentation of individuals and their activities into specialised functions that do not clearly relate to each other and lack any cohering narrative or purpose. Schools encourage this when they accept or adopt teleological, outcomes-based approaches to curriculum that exclude the emotions and experiences of learners (Stoller, 2015) and that fracture students' subjectivities by reconstructing the mind into a loose ensemble of reified achievement machines (De Lissoyov, 2015, p. 39). Fragmentation may also involve the inhibition or subordination of individual or local purpose by institutional or systemic constraints, with the latter assuming an independent and dominant status over those parts that constitute them. We can observe this tendency, for example, in the "inauthentic practices and relationships" among teachers that result from "the displacement of individual qualities, mechanisms of introjection, by responsiveness, external contingencies, the requirements of performativity" (Ball, 2003, p. 222), or in the militaristic and regimented programs of some US Charter School networks, which offer little scope for purposeful agency on the part of teachers or students (Ellison, 2012; Lack, 2009).

Alienation may lead to a number of consequences and can be diagnosed through symptoms such as a sense of isolation and detachment or a lack of engagement in relation to the interests, concerns and activities of the surrounding community or environment that provides a context for one's life. Examples of this tendency can be seen in students who shun relationships with peers or teachers who exist as 'lone wolves' rather than engaging collegially and collaboratively with their school's social and professional context. A further sign of alienation may be the emergence of absurdity or farce as manifestations of meaninglessness, when, for example, we describe events

as “Kafkaesque”; such as when England’s former Secretary of State for Education, was asked by the Chair of a Select Committee, “if ‘good’ requires pupil performance to exceed the national average, and if all schools must be good, how is this mathematically possible?” to which he responded, “by getting better all the time”<sup>ii</sup>.

No doubt many of the scenarios depicted above ring true to teachers and teacher educators as their work is increasingly prescribed and circumscribed by the increasing and continually shifting performative demands of audit and accountability. What the scenarios also highlight for us is the interdependence of the individual and the social-institutional layers of experience. Indeed, underlying the theorisation of alienation adopted here is an ontology involving the mutual and emergent co-constitution of the self and the world, the individual and the social. Within this ontological perspective, one overcomes potential alienation through acts of appropriation. But as we have argued, such appropriative acts do not involve the recovery of some presupposed, pre-existing, essentialised, harmonious or *a priori* relationship between the self and the world, but are constitutive acts of engagement (Jaeggi, 2014) that are at once experimental (they can fail as well as succeed), articulatory (in the dual senses of being externalising and expressive *and also* connective and relational), integrative and transformational (of both individual *and* the world). By impeding scope for such appropriation, the social alienation brought about by neoliberal performative regimes undermines, rather than offering scope for actualising, our human capacities for meaning, relationship and reflection. By positioning them in atomised and competitive relationships, audit and accountability regimes conceal and corrode potential connections between educators’ individual experience. Such regimes thus occlude what Marx described as our shared ‘species being’, i.e. our capacity to collectively shape our activities and life-world over time<sup>iii</sup>. Neoliberal audit and accountability regimes hence downgrade teaching to a mere means of survival in the face of performativity’s terrors, consequently reducing teachers’ and teacher educators’ work, along with the individuals performing it, to equal and equally substitutable – in other words, objectified and standardised – commodities in the marketplace. But not only is alienated labour estranged from its own work activity, it is debarred from the system of meaning and values as well as from any mechanism of evaluation in terms of which it and its products are to be judged (Oliver, 2004, pp. 8-13), and hence it finds itself reduced to a form of ‘bare life’ (Agamben, 1998).

In summary then, we can say that social alienation involves a relation of domination by forces of conformity and anonymity; it entails the impoverishment or loss of the scope to act agentively in giving meaning to one's life and activity; and; it involves a disconnectedness, an absence of relation or more precisely a paradoxical relation of relationlessness (Jaeggi, 2014, pp. 22-26). However, while this process of social alienation is experienced subjectively, it is deeply political as well as intensely personal; for as Stewart reminds us, "politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things, not way downstream in the various dream boats and horror shows that get moving" (2007, pp. 15-16). This linking of personal experience and political enactment highlights an ambiguity that is also a source of opportunity – to return to the notion of alienation as an impure concept – centring on tensions between viewing the external, social world as the cause of alienation and seeing that same world as the source of alienation's remedy. This tension, between alienation as source of oppression and wellspring of agency and resistance, reflects the complex history of the term and its inflection, on the one hand, in existentialist philosophical line of thought associated with Kierkegaard and Heidegger highlighting agency; and, on the other hand, its articulation in a line of development in political philosophy deriving from Hegel and Marx emphasising structures. But what initially seems primarily a constraint becomes a source of possibility if we adopt the view that relations to the self and the world are both primordial as preconditions of agentive identity (Jaeggi, 2014, p. 37). After all, teachers would not be teachers, as we recognise them, if they did not work within institutions and structures in some shape or form. We explore this possibility further by drawing on psychoanalytic theory, where tensions between agency and structure, the personal and the political, come together in the notion of desire, to which our discussion now turns in order to tease out these tensions as they intersect in teacher professionalism.

### ***Teacher professionalism and desire***

Professionalism is something that is quite likely a simultaneous source of lingering attachment and growing unease for many teachers, particularly in an era in which it has been appropriated by hierarchical discourses of accountability (Moore & Clarke, 2016). This is hardly surprising, for professionalism is one of those slippery terms that can mean different things to different people in different contexts. The Oxford



English Dictionary defines professionalism in rather circular fashion as ‘the qualities or typical features of a profession’; if not particularly helpful, this is not entirely surprising either, given that professionalism is a socially constructed and contested term (Ozga & Lawn, 1981). The difficulty of pinning down what is meant by professionalism stems in part from the fact that the term is inseparable from the political and policy contexts within which it circulates as part of various discourses. These include, adding further potential confusion, the closely related status discourse of professionalisation.

One such attempt to complexify yet also to clarify the meanings of professionalism is provided by Hargreaves’ (2000) map of the ‘four ages of teacher professionalism’, which seeks to articulate a historical overview of the concept. Yet Hargreaves’ framework suggests a teleological movement through a series of stages from un-reconstructed pre-professionalism to autonomous professionalism and on to collegial professionalism and post-professionalism, thereby underplaying the inextricable intertwining of professionalism with power and politics. Ozga is more helpful in this regard, locating the shifting meanings of professionalism in ‘the fluctuating relationships between teachers and the government’ (2000, p. 36), both in England, and elsewhere. These relationships are shaped by a range of factors, including the relative strength of each party (in teachers’ case, tied to questions of supply and demand, as well as to legislation around unions); the relative emphasis placed by government policy makers on the social, political and economic purposes of education; and the wider social imaginary framing both education and politics – for example, social democratic versus neoliberal. Perceived within these parameters, professionalism emerges as a discourse concerned with the nature and degree of control by politicians and policy makers over teachers and their work. Within this discourse of control, we can identify periods of ‘indirect rule’ alternating with periods characterised by the assertion of more explicit modes of control, or ‘direct rule’ (Ozga, 2000, pp. 14-18), such as those we have experienced in recent decades.

Given this introduction to something of the Realpolitik surrounding teachers’ work, teacher professionalism and *desire* may seem like strange bedfellows; but we can gain further insights into the social alienation experienced by teachers, as outlined and discussed above, by relating it to changes in terms of how professionalism is

conceptualised of public and political life and how the shifting discourses surrounding professionalism intersect with teachers' desire. Professionalism may be, as argued above, a complex and contested term; but at its core it is possible to identify the central values of knowledge, autonomy and responsibility (P. Adams, 2014). These core values have not disappeared as a result of neoliberal performative policy regimes but they have been radically transfigured, as recent decades have witnessed the displacement of one discourse of professionalism with another. Following Evetts (2009) – and mindful that these changes have been characteristic across the public sector beyond the field of education – we can label the displaced discourse of 'indirect rule' and professional autonomy as *occupational professionalism* and the displacing discourse of 'direct rule' and diminished autonomy as *organisational professionalism*. The former, a discourse originating within the occupational group, involved knowledge that originated within the field, autonomy based on trust, and relational notions of responsibility; while the subsequent organisational discourse is based on knowledge originating in the field of management, autonomy that can be exercised only within the tightly prescribed constraints set by policy makers and managers, and responsibility defined in terms of hierarchical authority and accountability.

Of course, we need to be mindful of the need to resist romanticising the former world of occupational professionalism. To some extent, Evett's occupational professionalism aligns with Hargreaves' age of autonomous professionalism in teaching, an era which has been criticised on the basis of its individualism and for the poor preparation it provided to teachers in relation to the momentous changes that accompanied the rise of neoliberal politics – changes which included, not least, the critical scrutiny and judgemental gaze to which teachers and teaching have been subjected from the 1980s onwards (Hargreaves, 2000). Nevertheless, the relative erosion of autonomy in teacher professionalism raises a number of questions about why teachers subscribe to the new, organisational professionalism and how this new form of professionalism is linked to the social alienation felt by teachers. In seeking to address these questions, we draw on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory.

In contrast to dominant understandings in education policy discourses that privilege knowledge and see people as subjects of purely rational cognition and understanding,

for psychoanalysis, human beings are subjects of *desire* – that perpetual yearning that can never be satisfied. But human desire does not emerge from some deep wellspring, expressing the inner essence of our selves. It is, at least in part, structured by the social order of the symbolic, involving identification with the terms and concepts, the signifiers and discourses, that comprise this order. It is in this sense that Lacan’s assertion that “desire is always the desire of the Other”<sup>iv</sup> (1981, p. 235) can be understood: that is to say, desire involves the appropriation of the things desired by the other; but it also involves the desire to be the object of the other’s desire, to be recognised and ‘loved’ by the other (Evans, 1996, pp. 37-38). In other words, “the subject’s existence is defined by the question, ‘what does the Other want from me?’ With this question, he makes his own desire the desire of the other” (Dashtipour, 2012, p. 55). Such symbolic identification with the desire of the other (and hence, knowing and feeling secure about one’s place in the established social-symbolic order) can become even more important in terms of how we *act* than imaginary identification (how one sees/wishes to see oneself as a person, and how one wants others to see and respond to oneself as a person). In this sense, symbolic identification with the desire of the Other – for meeting performance targets, securing improved test scores, achieving a good inspection rating – can easily become a source of the debilitating form of alienation that, following Oliver, we have termed social alienation, and that, in the case of teachers, we might describe as professional alienation. A number of factors can be identified as contributing to situations of professional alienation, reflecting the shifting demands of an increasingly distant symbolic Other in the shape and form of education policy.

For one thing, as noted briefly in passing above, the discourse of professionalism – a discourse about the quality of practice – has increasingly become entangled, and even conflated, with a discourse of professionalisation – essentially a status discourse. Thus, for instance, it could be argued that teachers have consented to what amount to impoverishments in practice, such as the elevation of the pseudo-scientificity of standards at the expense of subsequently devalued factors, such as affect and intuition, as the price for purportedly accruing greater regard from the big Other (e.g. the regulatory symbolic order represented by politicians, policy makers, the media and society) in terms of perceived improvements in standing and status. In this sense, increased teacher professionalization has been something of a deal with the devil.

For another thing, we have seen responsibility for, and control over, the ‘what’ of teaching – previously something that was managed locally by teachers and curriculum advisors as a component of ‘occupational professionalism’ – increasingly being taken out of teachers’ hands in order to be reified and inscribed within officially sanctioned national and state curriculum documents, as part of a wider shift from indirect to direct rule reflecting a reconfiguration of power relations between policy makers and practitioners. As part of this shift, we have also witnessed the ‘how’ of teaching reduced to context-free, transposable ideas of ‘what works’ and limited to the ‘evidence-based’ professional standards that comprise a common currency in terms of which teachers’ work can be measured, evaluated and exchanged.

In Marxist terms, teachers have consequently been reduced to a class *in* but not *for* itself – that is to say, teachers are a social group determined structurally but not a group engaged in collective, agentive struggle. In Lacanian psychoanalytic terms, to the extent that the social order of education is increasingly structured by the symbolic policy discourses of organisational professionalism, teachers will almost inevitably (if unconsciously) align their goals and aspirations with the desires of this Other. This is likely to include faithfully implementing the prescribed curriculum in the approved manner, wanting their school to perform well in comparison with competitors in mandated tests. It may also, consequently, involve coaching students towards this end – at least those that have been deemed worth devoting resources to according to the calculative logic of educational triage (Cuban, 2008; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). In the process, teacher educators’ and teachers’ autonomy – previously a key aspect of their ‘professionalism’ that manifested in practices such as the collaborative development and implementation of contextually appropriate curriculum – has been sidelined in a professional reconstruction of the teacher as an agent of neoliberal performativity and enactors of policy makers’ prescriptions (Lo, 2012).

***Alienation as domination by forces of conformity: Policy and the ‘normotic’ teacher***

One of the most powerful impacts of the increased role of standards and accountability in professional life can be felt in terms of an increased level of pressure to be regarded as ‘normal’ in terms of meeting externally mandated standards. In

effect, the discourses and practices of standards and accountability operate as a form of moral and intellectual blackmail. After all, no one wants to be thought of as ‘sub-standard’ or to explicitly claim to be against standards to speak in favour of *unaccountability*. But in the longer term, the emphasis placed by the discourses of standards and accountability on public forms of visibility undermines, at least potentially, our capacity and inclination for subjective motivations and investments. In this context, psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas’ notion of the ‘normotic’ individual, who is characterised by “a disinclination to entertain the subjective element in life” (Bollas, 2011, p. 23), instead preferring the solidity of material objects and the reassurance of objective facts seems relevant. Indeed, such is the attraction of facts and structures for the normotic individual that they often end up identifying with and finding refuge in the objectivity of impersonal data and strive to become part of the institutional machinery of their production (Bollas, 2011, p. 24). It is possible to recognise such characteristics in cases of what Ball, Maguire and Braun (2012) refer to as ‘policy enthusiasts’, ‘policy paragons’ and ‘policy entrepreneurs’, who champion policy developments and seek to recruit others to their cause. It is not that such persons lack convictions or standards but their championship of formal and/or externally mandated policies “seem to be inherited from somewhere other than the self... what is lacking is the originating subjectivity which informs our use of the symbolic” (Bollas, 2011, pp. 25-26). We might say that in certain cases, “such an individual is alive in a world of meaningless plenty” (Bollas, 2011, p. 23). However, and quite unlike the extremes of psychotic or neurotic illness, such disturbances lie “along the axis of the normal”, indeed the affected individuals might be described as “abnormally normal” (Bollas, 2011, p. 36). Bollas’ diagnosis also seems particularly pertinent to the nature of working life and the pressures experienced by teachers and others in the era of neoliberal performativity.

Indeed, if we think about this further in relation to teachers and teacher education we can see how the overwhelming emphasis on policy documents that seek to provide objective frameworks of educational experience, such as mandated curriculum documents and professional teacher standards, induces teachers, individually and as a group, into privileging the legislative and bureaucratic reality of these policy documents over and above their own subjective knowledge, beliefs and attitudes. Rather than providing an additional resource for discussing, analysing and critiquing

locally driven practice, in effect these documents come to provide a grid of intelligibility in relation to individual vernacular attitudes and experiences, so that the latter can only be regarded as legitimate to the extent that they can be reinscribed within the official language of policy, thereby “forcing the limits of the possible to map precisely onto those of the actual” (De Lissovoy, 2015, p. 44). Individual experience and subjective belief cease to serve as credible warrants for thought and action. This brings us back to the question of voice.

### **Alienation as loss of meaning: Silencing voice by supplanting subjective judgement with objective expertise**

As a result of neoliberalism’s reign of performativity and the professional estrangement it has induced, teachers are not only cast into an educational world that is not of their own making but they are positioned therein by policy makers as incapable of making meaning – which is not, of course, to say that they have lost the capacity, or ceased, to make meaning in practice. Consequently, those wishing to advocate and practise alternative models of education to the test-oriented world of standards and accountability, or to articulate ‘other’ educational discourses that run counter to the dominant discourse of performativity, are increasingly silenced or reduced to ‘murmurings’ (Ball et al., 2012, p. 68). In other words we would argue that we are witnessing a progressive silencing of teachers’ voices, where voice is understood, “not just the process of giving an account of oneself, but also the value given to that process, the process of *valuing* voice appropriately” (Couldry, 2010, p. 143, emphasis in original). As a result of this silencing, teachers’ voices are relegated to a zone or space of what we might describe as ‘political unconscious’.

The political unconscious is not a thing waiting to be identified; it is not a natural entity. It is an effect of processes; failures to sublimate well, desires unarticulated, voices kept silent, repressions re-enacted without acknowledgement of their origins. The political unconscious is a contingent effect of power relations and harms that have not been tended to (McAfee, 2008, p. 12).

A key point to bear in mind in relation to the process of relegating ideas, beliefs and commitments to the political unconscious is that they do not conveniently disappear

but remain present just beneath the surface, often returning to influence events in unanticipated and uncontrolled ways. Hence, attending to the power relations inhering in neoliberal education policy in relation to teaching and the preparation of teachers – in other words, highlighting and foregrounding the pervasive presence of the political in relation to teacher education – in order to identify vocabularies through which, and spaces in which, teachers’ voices, both novice and established, might be heard rather than silenced, sublimated rather than repressed, takes on an additional degree of significance. This requires attention to the concept of voice and consideration of how the voices of teachers and teacher educators might be (re)valued.

In seeking to value voice it is important not to conflate this notion with the fully autonomous, rational and self-knowing agent of liberal philosophy. Such a view all too easily lends itself to accounts of the social as an arena that is merely the aggregate of individuals’ experiences and preferences, governed purely by logics of atomisation and competition. The view we articulate here, by contrast, rejects “the stupidity of individualism” (Gilbert, 2014, p. 33) and deems the methodological individualism governing neoliberalism’s individual-social dichotomy as wholly inadequate in relation to the biological, cultural and political complexities of human existence. From our perspective, voice is not something that neatly and unproblematically reflects the rational preferences of a unified, pre-social individual, but is constituted through social action (Arendt, 1958) in an ontological context of ‘infinite relationality’ (Gilbert, 2014, p. 112) and thus involves “a continuing process of reflecting back and forth between actions, experiences and thought, an open-ended process of giving an account in which each person is engaged” (Couldry, 2010, p. 9). Such accounts, grounded in shared material resources and social experiences that are never fully transparent, reflect the process of seeking to make sense of those experiences in order to generate meaningful narratives that can be exchanged across spatio-temporal dimensions, with others and with ourselves, as a form of responsible and reflexive, if complex and ambiguous (Ahearn, 2013), agency.

These narratives warrant serious recognition, partly on the basis of their origins in shared existence and partly because each is utterly distinctive, reflecting each individual’s unique embodied and situational exposure to multiple dimensions of the world. We know, for instance, that each university’s or school’s context, each

classroom, and each of the students therein, individually and collectively, for all they share with others, are also to some degree utterly unique. We would argue that ethical practice requires openness to cross-fertilisation between the voices emanating from these contexts – between the voices of individuals and groups; between voices from different contexts and domains – so that, for example, someone’s experience as a democratic citizen, as a parent, or as a learner, is recognised as relevant to the articulation of their voice as a teacher and vice-versa. When such cross-fertilisation is blocked or deemed illegitimate, when institutional decisions fail to recognise the validity and relevance of individual experience, or “when societies become organized on the basis that individual, collective and distributed voice need not be taken into account, because a higher value or rationality trumps them” (Couldry, 2010, p. 10) then voice is undermined. This seems an apt characterisation of the way that the objective ‘expert’ knowledge embodied in policies around curriculum, pedagogy and assessment have marginalised the voices, experiences and subjective judgements of teachers and teacher educators.

Indeed, to the extent that it seeks to subordinate all areas of life – regardless of their distinctive purposes, qualities and characteristics – to the overarching rationalities of the market, governed by logics of competition, neoliberalism undermines voice and hence depoliticises human social life. Increasingly, neoliberal policy places increasing importance upon the production and circulation of expert knowledge – valorised and justified in the case of education through the catchcry of the ‘knowledge economy’ that surreptitiously conflates education and economics. This, in turn, entails the gradual displacement of subjective judgment by objective knowledge, of politics by bureaucracy, and of sovereign rule over people by the management and administration of processes (Boucher, 2006). These shifts are reflected in what Lacan refers to as the discourse of the university, a discourse which involves educating and interpellating subjects, promising them direct access to satisfaction through expert knowledge. Critically, the discourse of the university is not limited to the institution of the university but describes the workings of any organisation or domain that is characterised by claims to the higher rationality of expertise, as we find in the governance of education in the neoliberal era, with its reliance on notions such as ‘evidence-based policy’. Such developments entail the displacement of normative rationales, involving ethical and political judgment, by the purely technicist pursuit of



‘what works’ (Biesta, 2007, 2010). The resulting evidence-based and expert-informed policy formulations articulate suitable aims, embracing education and society in a common economic vision and prescribing appropriate aspirations to shape the conduct and behaviour of individual schools, teachers and students in line with this vision through the provision of targeted incentives and disincentives. Consequently, “no provision is made for individual subjects and their desires and idiosyncrasies” that do not fit within the predetermined limits of the system (Bracher, 1994). In other words, neoliberal education policy, as a manifestation of the discourse of the university, addresses teachers only in terms of their object-like qualities – as implementers of state or national curricula or as enactors of professional standards – rather than as agents capable of identifying and articulating their own purposes and speaking with their own voice. Again, subjective judgement is replaced by ‘objective’ expertise.

As a result, teachers’ voices are relegated to the realm of what was described above as the political unconscious of education policy as the terrors and technologies of bureaucratic performativity make increasing inroads into the teacher’s soul (Ball, 2003). However, this relegation does not mean that teachers’ voices can be ignored and forgotten, left to simply wither away.

The political unconscious is not something separate from a political entity; to the contrary, it is part of the very soil and foundation of the political, an absent presence, a periphery that continually seeks entry, a source of energy and undoing, a doing that threatens to undo what is overtly present (McAfee, 2008, p. 55).

The challenge for teachers and teacher educators lies in how this energy can be channelled and exploited in expressive and constructive, rather than merely repressive or destructive, ways. That is to say, while it is important to repudiate the undesirable aspects of performativity that, in Couldry’s terms, are undermining teachers’ voice, this critical move needs to be followed by a generative one if negativity as theorised in this book is to fulfil its potential as a destructive-creative force. It also requires recognition of the common challenges facing schools, teachers and students, something that the competitive discourses of standards and accountability continue to

undermine. One of the critical issues at stake here is the *nature* of the accountability regimes teachers are subject to in their work.

### **From hierarchical to relational accountabilities**

As we have argued above, education and the preparation of teachers, is increasingly viewed in terms of the mastery of expertise-derived knowledge. Such knowledge is deemed to be objectively represented in policy documents, such as teacher professional standards, curriculum documentation or the teacher knowledge tests that candidates for qualified teacher status are increasingly required to complete. This encourages a mechanistic and hierarchical approach to accountability in terms of checking off performance against descriptors and statements, providing a fantasy of clarity and certainty to ward off the unsettling spectre of knowledge as something inherently ambiguous and uncertain (Lapping, 2013). In this way, accountability regimes in education (and in other social and professional domains) remove teachers and teacher candidates from the rich social contexts within which their work assumes meaning, while reducing the complexity of their professional activities to a series of easily identifiable, measurable and comparable indicators. Such regimes reflect “the bareness and restricted potential of exclusive technical approaches” to accountability, which can be distinguished from ‘relational’ perspectives, particularly in the way that “technical apolitical approaches portray accountability as a fixed state of affairs that can be aimed for and achieved through conjuring and deploying the right mix of performance inducing, reporting and sanctioning mechanisms” (Moncrieffe, 2011, pp. 44-45). The institutional and bureaucratic nature of the technical approach to accountability takes little, if any, account of the individual embedded within social relationships, and is grounded in asymmetrical, atomising and hierarchical relationships of power. Consequently, it is liable to produce alienation, rather than generating wholehearted engagement, as the testimonies in Ball (2003) so starkly reveal.

By contrast, and starting from the premise that human beings are fundamentally social creatures, relational approaches to accountability “recognize that wellbeing, freedoms, capacities, willingness to act as well as the quality of political involvement also depend on social relationships” (Moncrieffe, 2011, p. 171), not just on targets and indicators or policy, protocols and procedures, important as these are. In other words,

our moral (and professional) responsibility derives from our capacity and obligations for relational responsiveness to the other (Sparti, 2000). For, “relationship is how the pure freedom that resides in the human psyche – for ethical choice, creativity, or original action of any type – can be brought into the structured world of human social relations without damaging or destroying it” (Harmon & McSwite, 2011, p. 6). Relationship achieves this by shifting the focus “away from the ‘legislating voice’ to a conversational voice in which community is invoked” as part of a ‘third space’ forged between self and other (Norval, 2007, p. 172).

In other words, to move beyond the asymmetries or hierarchies that typify technical, bureaucratic and ultimately alienating approaches to accountability dominating teachers’ work in recent times, what is required is the creation of ‘the shared third’ of communal conversation on matters of common concern within which individuals can consent to agree or disagree. This involves constituting a space that is paradoxically distinct from but created and shared by the traditional doer and done to of accountability. It is a space “in which both partners follow a structure or pattern that both of them simultaneously create and surrender to, a structure enhanced by our capacity to receive and transmit at the same time in nonverbal interaction. The co-created third has the transitional quality of being both invented and discovered” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 18). Consent to engagement in this shared third space brings with it the responsibility to speak politically by taking a position and thus offering an alternative self to others. Critically, the alternative to political engagement in this shared third is not speaking privately but not speaking at all and thus having nothing to say (Cavell, 1979, pp. 27-28).

If we think about this idea in the context of two predominant technologies – described by Webb (2007) as two ‘axes of terror’ – for imposing accountability on teachers, i.e. the macro-level collection of performative assessment data on the one hand and the micro-level surveillance of classroom and/or school inspections on the other, it is clear that neither of these comes anywhere close to measuring up to the notion of relational accountability grounded in a space of third-ness. Instead, these technologies are based on strictly hierarchical asymmetries that reduce social existence to a competitive, zero-sum game in which “everything is mine or yours, including the perception of reality [in which] only one person can be right” (Benjamin, 2004, p.

22). By relying on extrinsic factors of fear of mistrust and not recognising that “it is the knowledge that they are being trusted – as fully trained and qualified professionals – to do their best work that provides intrinsic motivation” (Mortimore, 2014, p. 230), these accountability technologies simultaneously objectify, infantilise and pathologise teachers, leaving them demoralised, divided and alienated. As an initial step towards resisting these alienating technologies and facilitating more relational forms of accountability, we need to consider how teachers’ individual and collective voices might be legitimated. The psychoanalytic notion of sublimation, particularly when given a social and political inflection, helps us think about how this might be realised.

### **From silence to sublimation**

If the authoritarianism of neoliberal performativity represent an adverse force that restricts and undermines the knowledge and autonomy of teachers, stifling their voices and alienating their identities, then sublimation can be viewed as a counter force representing the negation of negation and involving creative efforts at symbolic restructuring of the sort we see in political practices such as witnessing and testimony (McAfee, 2008; Oliver, 2004; Ruti, 2012; Vighi, 2010). In this sense, the capacity for sublimation goes beyond the policy-driven challenges currently facing teachers: “sublimation is the origin and operator of all that we know as human. Sublimation is what makes us human beings” (Oliver, 2004, p. 125). These are powerful and substantial claims; but what does Oliver – and what do we – mean by sublimation?

Sublimation may seem to be more pertinent to aesthetics than to questions of professional alienation among teachers and teacher educators, as suggested by the commonplace understanding of sublimation in which, by channelling sexual energies into more socially acceptable avenues and pursuits, it serves as a defence mechanism for the social subject. That is to say, sublimation is typically conceived in Freudian terms as referring to the re-channelling of ‘base’ sexual desire into more elevated and acceptable forms such as literature or art; but for Lacan sublimation was less about deflecting sexual drives and more about the elevation of the object of the desire.

Critically for our purposes, sublimation, for Lacan, is linked both to desire and to ethics – hence its prominent place in his seventh seminar (1992 [1955]), *The ethics of*

*psychoanalysis*. In order to serve as a beneficial psychic process, sublimation has to navigate between, on the one hand, the twin perils of the potential violence and perversity unleashed by the unfettered operation of the drives and, on the other hand, the neuroses and scapegoating that can arise in the wake of repression of those same drives. In a sense then, sublimation involves a philosophy of values, insofar as it is concerned with questions as to which ideals – themselves products of the process of sublimation, understood as a way of raising things to an elevated yet elusive status within the psyche – are worth holding dear and which repress and tyrannise our psyches “with the ferocity of an ‘ascetic ideal’ made sovereign”, and should hence be dispensed with (Themí, 2014, p. 27). But at the same time, sublimation is a creative act in that it is not about recognising and sanctioning objects and established ideals that are already accepted, “but rather about retaining a slippage that will continue to prompt subjective production whilst offering satisfaction and promoting responsible agency” (De Klerk, 2009, p. 129). Sublimation as a creative process is related to constitutive absence or emptiness at the core of subjectivity and hence to bringing something to life from the void of being, a process Lacan (2007) likens to the potter (p. 121) or the architect (p. 126) creating forms around an absence. As he goes on to assert, “in every form of sublimation, emptiness is determinative” (p. 130). But the creativity suggested by the process of sublimation is not just about the construction of a new object; it is also about the dethroning of idealised or tyrannical symbolic or imaginary objects (McNulty, 2014). This has important implications in terms of how teachers and teacher educators might respond to the alienating effects of policy in relation to teaching and teacher education through practices of sublimation.

In considering the agentive potential of sublimation, Neill usefully points out the Latin root of sublimation, *sublimationem*, implies purification and goes on to argue that “sublimation, in Lacan’s understanding of the term, does not, then, mean that the object [of desire] must be changed or mutated. It means, rather, that desire can only be experienced when the object is no longer confused as or with the true source of satisfaction, when, that is, the object is no longer assumed to be the cause of desire... the process or act of recognising desire, the sublimation of desire, is a creative process” (Neill, 2011, p. 243). Specifically, desire can only be recognised by being named and worked on within the symbolic order of language and meaning and as such is coterminous with the emergence of the subject as an ethical agent. In this

sense, the sublimation of desire involves a traversal of the fantasy that the Other is the object-cause of subjective desire and a correlative assumption of responsibility on the part of the subject as the cause of its own desire. In this regard, the prescriptions of policy – what we have described in this chapter as policy’s excess – may offer particular rewards and satisfactions that are at once aligned with and limited to conformity with its contours; but no matter how forcefully policy insists on completion or totalisation (and here, the English government’s (2016) White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere*, comes to mind – a document we revisit in detail in the final chapter) it inevitably fails to account for that which lies beyond it. In particular, such formalised knowledge can neither fully account nor provide for that which exceeds its limitations (Neill, 2011, p. 247), namely the subjectivity and the desire of the teacher, whose *responsibility* lies in her or his *response* to that which exceeds the limitations of systemised knowledge. This, in turn, entails that in the assumption of subjectivity – an assumption that is not a once and for all occurrence but one that must be repeated and re-achieved on an ongoing basis *as if* for the first time – the teacher as subject finds her- or himself confronted by the fragility of knowledge and the necessity of politics and ethics.

This potential for agentive self-shaping through the assumption of subjective responsibility is emphasised by Ruti (2012), for whom sublimation offers a way of thinking about how individuals can draw on the energies of the Real – that elusive, mysterious and terrifying site of vitality, chaos and indeterminacy – as a way of enlivening the signifier and hence serving as a counter to the dominating influence of the Other as mediated by symbolic systems, such as standardised curriculum and assessment regimes. In this view the symbolic, the locus of teachers’ tethering to the demands of sovereign law in the form of policy prescriptions, is also the site of potential transgression and transcendence beyond sovereignty’s limits (McNulty, 2014; Ruti, 2012; Santner, 2001). The result of such re-appropriative transgression is a paradoxical singularity that, on the one hand, entails subjective destitution as it resists incorporation into existing categories, whilst, on the other hand, also giving expression to an impossible unity whose stubborn endurance requires a new ethico-politics – a politics that is *neither* centripetal, or condensing, *nor* centrifugal, or expanding, but both at one and the same time (Jameson, 2015). Such a view reminds us that the etymology of the word ‘professional’ includes, not just mastery of

particular sets of knowledge, skills and techniques, but notions of ‘professing’ certain deeply held beliefs (Palmer, 2007, p. 212). But critically – and hence sublimation needs to be conceived as social sublimation – this singularity arising from such professing can only be achieved as part of the invocation of a community in which I recognize others and they recognize me. On this point it is important to note that a common characteristic of dominant discourses of teaching and teacher education – including the heroic individual venerated in Hollywood films such as *Waiting for Superman* (Guggenheim, 2011) and *Dead Poets’ Society* (Weir, 1989), the competent craftsperson idealised by neoliberal policy makers and the reflective practitioner promoted in many teacher education programmes – is their individual rather than social and collective conceptualisation (Moore, 2004).

Equally critically, however, this community is not given, or *a priori*, but is invoked through the articulation of claims and demands and hence requires continual (re)articulation, as part of a process whereby I speak for others and they in turn speak for me in a context of mutual respect for individual differences, all of which entails risks, including rebuff and dissent (Norval, 2007, pp. 174-178). In other words, this articulation, in which connections, community and commitments are simultaneously invoked, is a form of the political. We refer to this notion of political engagement as a politics of articulation. This may cause disquiet among those for whom the meaning of the political is tainted by its association with the compromises and corruption of business-as-usual party politics; but as Cavell notes, the alternative to political speech is not private speech but silence.

Thinking about this further in relation to the challenges facing teachers and teacher education in an era of excessive policy we can think about the mandates and requirements of policy in terms of ‘things’, while what Palmer refers to as the ‘heart’ of a teacher, involving a linking of professional identity-voice and integrity-ethics as they come together in “the place where intellect and emotion and spirit and will converge in the human self” (2007, p. 11), suggests a teacherly notion of what Lacan, following Heidegger, refers to as ‘the Thing’ – that purportedly lost object that represents our lacking status as subjects and functions as the object-cause of our desire. In this theorisation, the teacher’s deeply held beliefs and values are endowed with particular potency and power owing to their elevation through sublimation, and

as such they offer a counter source of allegiance to the sacralisation of officially sanctioned, but nonetheless contingent, practices, protocols and procedures in policy. The ongoing challenge here is to resist the collapse of the one into the other – to refuse seduction by either beatific fantasies of grandiosity involving visions of saving the nation’s economy and rescuing (potentially) wasted lives *or* horrific fantasies of worthlessness as a result of assuming responsibility for falling educational standards and the loss of economic competitiveness (Taubman, 2009) – but rather to maintain both in a state of productive dialectic tension. Within this space of tension, the teacher’s identity is recognised as a necessary fiction that critically remains open to reinvention through articulation and sublimation. To achieve this it must carefully navigate between the Scylla of docile compliance with the exhortations of the symbolic other, as manifested in policy requirements around curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, and the Charybdis of fantasmatic pursuit of a totally coherent, self-sufficient and fully agentic imaginary vision of the teaching self that pays no attention to mandated policy and practice. This means being aware of the need for structures, policies, protocols and procedures yet all the while maintaining a keen awareness of the contingency and fragility of these creations so that they are not allowed to dominate and control their creators, thereby alienating ourselves as teachers and teacher educators by severing our connections to the drives, passions and energies of embodied life. This requires a constant willingness to engage in the negation of negation:

If negation is necessary for autonomy and if it is the root of human experience, this is only because it gives rise to a negation of negation: the negation of representation’s negation of things. This negation of negation is a reunion with the world of things, sensations and affects – the world of the body – through affect (Oliver, 2004, p. 145).

In other words, if neoliberal education policies and the practices they spawn represent a force of negativity in one sense, there is another sense of negativity as the negation of negation that we can draw upon productively as a counter to the repudiation of experience and singularity highlighted above – the notion of negativity as a creative-disruptive force that runs throughout this book – that offers possible alternatives to current scenarios of alienation. This has implications for the formation, substance, tenor and mode of teachers’ professional identities.



### **Conclusion: From alienated to aversive identities**

We want to argue for an alternative notion of teachers' identities as a counter to the compliant view of teachers inherent in much education policy – not least the highly prescriptive curriculum and painstakingly detailed teacher professional standards that have proliferated in a range of contexts in recent years. This alternative involves viewing teachers' professional identities as something that have to be appropriated as part of an ongoing project rather than as something given (MacLure, 1993; Sachs, 2003); it involves viewing teachers' individual and collective identities as comprising a political, as well as pedagogical, community; and it involves recognising the place of dissent as well as assent, contestation as an alternative to compliance, relational rather than hierarchical accountabilities, and active critical and creative engagement with practice rather than the passive and formulaic enactment implicit in much recent policy.

This perspective views the formation of teachers' identities as an ongoing and always precarious achievement that does not end when teacher candidates meet a prescribed set of standards or with their attainment of qualified teaching status. Our view of teachers' identities emphasizes the need for perpetual cognisance of the possibilities for different ways of doing things, novel modes of thinking and alternative teaching selves. It is this perpetual awareness of and openness to alternatives, as a counter to policy-led pressures to conformity and compliance, which we seek to capture with the notion of aversive identities. This notion of aversive identity involves recognition of the ongoing and ever-present responsibility to define oneself, one's activity and one's community as part of a political practice of negativity. Such practice seeks to prevent a sclerotic sedimentation of the way things are now, or the way we do things here, into the way things have to be. It seeks to disrupt barriers and transcend limits, replacing these with horizons that serve as guides rather than grids. But it also seeks to connect language with creativity, passion and commitment through ethico-political practices of sublimation that de-sanctify knowledge, thus infusing our work and our lives with sublime meanings that resist the tyranny of the reality principle and the consequent banalisation of the world (Ruti, 2012; Zupančič, 2003). Critically, from the perspective offered in this chapter, such banalisation includes the reduction of

teaching and teacher education to the technical level of methods, routines and techniques. Against this, our reading of teachers' identities as aversive contains possibilities for moving us as teachers and teacher educators beyond the alienation that has been a recurring theme in this chapter. It challenges us to rethink the nature of knowledge beyond its objectification in curriculum and standards; to reclaim the disavowed politics obscured by notions like 'evidence-based' and 'best practice' and to embrace the ethical responsibility that comes with the assumption of teacher identity. These challenges are each explored in subsequent chapters.

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/11505837/Four-in-10-new-teachers-quit-within-a-year-union-warns.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmeduc/uc1786-i/uc178601.htm>

<sup>iii</sup> Although it sounds biologically deterministic, Marx intended to emphasise the historical plasticity of trans-individual existence and social life in developing this concept (see, for example, Dyer-Witheford, 2009).

<sup>iv</sup> In Lacanian theory the big Other of the symbolic order is distinguished from the small other, or *objet petit a*, the object-cause of desire comprising a projection within the imaginary order of the ego (Lacan, 1991, p. 236; see also, Evans, 1996, pp. 132-133).