



## Expert interview: Interview with Stephen J. Ball

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## Interview with Stephen J. Ball

Roberto Serpieri\* and Emiliano Grimaldi\*\*

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Stephen J. Ball is Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education – University of London and co-editor of the Journal of Education Policy. He is one of the most distinguished and influential scholar in the fields of sociology of education and education policy sociology and has published an impressive amount of books and edited collections, together with journal articles and other publications. His works are well known worldwide and provide educational researchers with a vast array of theoretical tools and empirical insights for a critical analysis of the educational present. *The London Review of Education* (2013:11, 3) has recently devoted a special issue to ‘Inquiring into educational policies: a special issue on the contribution of Stephen Ball’. He has explored the generative tensions emerging from the combination of diverse theoretical and epistemological stances such as weberian sociological legacy, Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology and foucauldian genealogy of power/knowledge. In his empirical works, this theoretical toolbox has ‘dangerously (though fruitfully) encountered’ the art of ethnography. The main themes he has addressed in his long standing and scholarly sounding career range from the relation between education and social class to neoliberal market-like educational policy reform together with their school enactment. Recently he is also working on the educational governance shift towards heterarchy, the transformation of the education state and the prominent role played by global private and philanthropic actors/networks in the restructuring and reculturing of education.

Among his recent works: *The Routledge international handbook of the sociology of education* (2009, edited with M. W. Apple and L. A. Gandin); *How Schools Do Policy: Policy Enactments in Secondary Schools* (2012, with M. Maguire and A. Braun); *Global Education Inc: New Policy Networks and the Neo-liberal Imaginary* (2012); *Foucault, Power, and Education* (2013).

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**Emiliano Grimaldi:** We would like to open our conversation with a question about the role of social scientists and the purposes of sociology, with a specific reference to the field of education. As many critical scholars have widely argued, the social world is the site of a continual struggle around the definition of what the social world is and, within those struggles, academics' pronouncements are among the most powerful. It is likely that a social scientist claims the role of the neutral arbiter for him/herself, telling others what they must do, what is right or wrong, true or false. The authors you indicate as your main sources of inspiration have radically argued against such an 'ethnocentrism of the scientist'. Foucault identified the core of the work of a scholar or intellectual in the re-problematisation of the sets of discursive and non discursive practices that make something enter into the play of true and false. Bourdieu invited sociologists to practice a reflexive sociology that helps unearth the social unconscious embedded into institutions as well as lodged deep inside us, denaturalising the social world.

There is a complex game involving research, politics, ethics and also activism, as Micheal W. Apple would claim, in this. How do you interpret your role of leading scholar in the field of education policy analysis? What is your point of view as a sociologist, if this label makes sense for you?

**Stephen J. Ball:** I suppose I would start with the exactly opposite position. I don't think sociology has any privileged space or a privileged view from which to see the social world. Indeed the sociologist is heavily implicated in oppressions. Supplying and refining the processes which order and, in many ways, oppress the social world. Historically, the sociology of education, sociology and the human sciences generally have contributed to the management of populations, providing concepts, ideas, hypothesis and practises which have been part of the way in which the State has managed social problems. The idea of neutrality is impossible, I think. It is naïve. And also it is very dangerous. Sociology and the other human sciences are profoundly driven by unexamined normativities. There is no moral high-ground from which sociology can speak about the world. And in addition

higher education has been captured within the processes that we have often sought to describe and analyse such as commercialisation, marketization and competition. We often write about ‘others’ and neglect our own compromises and positionings. Having said that, there are two things that I think I want to try to address in my work. One is to provide people, and in particular teachers, tools for thinking about the situation they find themselves in. These are the same tools that enable me to think about the situation I find myself in. I want to offer possibilities for thinking and I very much do not want to tell teachers what they *should* think. I start from the position that teachers are intellectuals - public intellectuals - and should be treated as such and should be addressed as such. Then one would expect and hope that they would become engaged in issues and debates in that way. As a sociologist one can offer possibilities for teachers to think differently about how they may act in their own social world in relation to children and colleagues and communities but I wouldn’t want to dictate, or prescribe what those constructions should be. The other task, or the other main task, for a sociologist is to record the world, to record the oppressions and the injustices that are apparent in the world and to present those back in accounts of how education operates as a way of constantly remanding people that oppressions are fundamental to the education process and to make them intolerable. So those are the two tasks that I set to myself. There are other things I want to talk about, but I think those are the things that are most important to me.

**E.G.:** The second question somehow is related to the first one because it is about the role of theory. As you have stated several times, theory is a crucial component of your work. You have defined theory as both exciting and dangerous, constructive and destructive, invigorating and violent. You have interpreted it as a set of possibilities for thinking with, adopting in your theorizing and researching the logic of the toolbox and exploring the tensions emerging from the clash between ontologies and epistemologies, from thinking simultaneously neo and post, as Apple invites us to do. What

are the reasons underlying this choice? What theories, theorists and methodological stances have mostly influenced your social scientific practice?

**S.J.B.:** I searched for a long time when I was a young sociologist for a clear theoretical identity, like others, I felt that I had to be a *something*, to be a symbolic interactionist or to be a Marxist, or to be a post-structuralist or whatever. But I was never quite comfortable with anything that I might have been. There were important influences which I absorbed. Weber was quite important to me when I first started getting into sociology seriously. Then, for a time I was very involved in and interested in symbolic interactionism and in the work of George Herbert Mead and both Mead and Weber continue to be very important to me in terms of methods of research, and the ontology of method. But I eventually realised, and I think partly when I started reading Foucault, that actually I didn't want to be a *something* and that being a something actually meant closing off all sorts of possibilities. The world is an amazingly complicated and complex place and no single social theory can make sense of it for us. If you start from a Marxist position then you focus on issues of social class in relation to the ownership of the means of production, then immediately you begin to devalue or discount the role of gender and the role of race and racism in society. And capitalism has a close historic relationship, a dependence upon race and racial oppression. The first form of global capitalism, was the movement of human bodies, of black bodies around the world. Yet Marxism has not provided us with a way of thinking about those things. Sociology has also pre-occupied itself with the relationship between structure and agency as though they were distinct. And yet if we are going to relate structure, social relations and the reproduction of inequality together or if we are going to try to understand the flows and the impact of neoliberalism, we need to understand these both as global processes but also as parts of the everyday life of individual actors, as part of their subjectivities, as part of their social interactions, as part of the mundanity,

the everyday normality of social life. I think we need a tool box, we need more than one theory, rather than neat theoretical solutions. We need to live with paradox. So having given up being a *something*, I found that quite freeing. Foucault himself moved and changed and developed every time he was often reinterpreting and reimagining his previous work, often pointing on the inadequacies of his own analyses, taking up new problems refining his 'methods'. Both Foucault and Bourdieu, in different ways, have contributed to my sense of scholarship as nomadic, responsive and experimental. Bourdieu with his emphasis on the importance of reflexivity, Bourdieu also in terms of the way in which he has shifted his ontological position over time. People are sometimes critical of Foucault and Bourdieu for being unstable in terms of the way in which they define their key concepts or operationalize those concepts within their work. But I see that as a development rather than instability. I see the role of theory not as a way of reaffirming the way you see the world, not as a way of closing down and providing a sort of ready made perspectives but rather a kind of provocation and disruption to thought, a way of always underlining the inadequacy of wherever it is that you have got to and the need to move on and to do more. It is a way of pointing out the limitations. So I see my research and analytic practices as a set of openings, a set of possibilities which are always at the same time marked by their limitations. But also that has led me in the most specific areas of work that I have done to want to find some different ways to speak theoretically about the issues that I have been engaged within. When I was trying to understand the school organisation I found existing organisational theory inadequate and I tried to develop different approaches based on micropolitics as a way of thinking about how schools are run. And then in relation to policy, again I found traditional policies analyses inadequate, not up to the task, either to explain big policies and how policies were constructed, or small policy in the sense of how policy was done – enacted - within schools. I tried to develop another position through the idea of the policy cycle and I worked on the different perspectives of policy as discourse and policy as text. Theory has provided me with a way of distancing myself from simple rationalities and neat resolutions and encouraged me to work in the spaces of contradiction.

In relation to issues around social class I have also tried to think about the relation between education and social class in different ways. So I suppose my work is based always on a constant sense of dissatisfaction, dissatisfaction with what was there but also dissatisfaction with what I have been able to do. But dissatisfaction fuelled by theoretical provocations.

**Roberto Serpieri:** In your works on education policies you have argued against the managerialist discourse and its devices and technologies. Such a critic has concerned also the processes of subjectivation of some special kind of social actors as ‘heroes’ to be imported from non educational fields, such as ‘the manager’, ‘the entrepreneur’, ‘the leader’. The managerialist faith, a travelling one that Italy is nowadays borrowing, has pretended to condense the three of them in the same role: the headteacher as the principal lever of change and improvement in schools. Your critic shows two relevant sides: in the first one you started from a focus on micropolitics and their interpretation by the school leader and, through many empirical works with your colleagues, it seems to us that you have progressively de-centred the subject: the leaders become the dramatic catalysts and mediators of the discursive mix. The second one refers to the process itself of subjectification that has allowed you to discuss leadership as one of the managerialist tyrannies, such as performativity, accountability, testing and so on. The education debate develops along two main streams. The managerialist one that develops its discourse through the ‘invention’ of adjectival leaderships: distributed, creative, system and so on. A critical perspective that explores the ‘greedy work’ of headteachers and the potentials for a democratic governance of schools. In your opinion, does it make sense to carry on such a critical search on schools organising?

**S.J.B.:** In the history of education, I think, the role of school leaders is an interesting trajectory and that is something that nobody has analysed very

systematically. Over time the nature and role of school leaders and their relationship to other teachers has changed quite markedly and in a way over time it has become more and more significant. In recent times, as you describe, leadership has been a key organising principle for the way in which we think about how schools could and should be organised. Currently, leadership is one of the key condensates of contemporary social and economic practice. At the moment I think we are moving into a period of ignominious hegemony in terms of the way in which we think about organisation, we think about social relationships, and we typically name hegemony as *neoliberalism*. Within that there is just one model for the social practice of organisation and leadership, and that is the firm, the company, the business. Educational leaders have been transformed into chief executives and much of the literature that now conceives and constructs leadership is actually a re-articulation of writings from the sphere of business management. Certainly, in England, the latest iteration of school leadership is one in which the school leader is an archetypal neoliberal subject, an enterprising subject, an entrepreneurial subject, a boundary crossing subject, a subject who makes a project at him/herself and who takes on the role of re-culturing institutions as business-like. So we all talk about transformative leadership, as you mentioned a “hero leader” who has the role of transforming their organisations and transforming social relationships within the organisations in the image of the firm. They stand for and embed a new kind of subjectivity and they are the intermediary between government and governmentality. So I think the point about leadership is that one can use it in a foucauldian sense, to construct the history of the present of schooling, to look at the way in which leadership has been produced differently and in different points and time, in relation to more general changes and trends within the political economy and the basic organising principles of society. And you can also suggest I think that the emphasis given to leadership, as a new kind of professional practice and knowledge is related to the lessening of emphasis given to the professionalism of others in the organisation. So the leader becomes over-professionalised in some ways. They have these varied discourses which impact upon them or act through them, the discourse of



management, the discourse of entrepreneurship, the discourse of inspiration, the discourses of pastorality, they have these multiple relationships which are all in different ways related to the flexibilisation of the rest of the work force. Now there is a diminution of the professionalism of teachers, the introduction of not qualified actors or less qualified actors into education, the integration of education with other kinds of activities, the increased used of ‘blended learning’ and digital portals. So I think perhaps we need to think more about leadership as a generic category that has no special relationship to education anymore, so it is now possible indeed to have all sort of people that become school leaders. Education become a commodity like any other that much be delivered efficiently at the lowest cost.

**R.S.:** we noticed that in the recent Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Education you edited with Michael Apple and Luis Armando Gandin there is no chapter about leadership and we were thinking about how it could be impressive for a head teacher to look at the handbook and not find any chapter on this issue.

**S.J.B.:** I think at the moment the best person who is writing about the school leadership, certainly in English, is Helen Gunter but apart from Helen’s work I think it goes back to where we started that much of the work about leadership is actually captured within the discourses of organisation, the discourses of neoliberalism, the discourses of management. Much of the work of school leadership training seems to me to be banal for the most part from a sociological point of view. So I think is an area where there is an incredible amount of work that needs to be done.

**E.G.:** In the last decades, along with the raise on neoliberalism and the Third way discourse, the issue of social class has been elicited from the ‘mainstream’ public and academic discourse on education. Such elision has had significant consequences in terms of policy-making. The studies on social class have a central role in your work. You have continuously worked to relate the field of education to general social theory and class analysis, exploring the complex relationships – these are your words – between social class and social justice in contemporary education. However, we feel that you have proposed a peculiar and somehow innovative way to study social class and to relate it to the production of social inequalities in the field of education. Could you explain why social class is so central in your work? How have you used the concept?

**S.J.B.:** I should say that the simple answer to the first part of your question has to do with my own history, my own experience of education as a student that was very much mediated by social class, by my social class encounters with other forms of education as a working class boy who went to a selective school and found himself in a alien territory, in a world that I found very difficult to recognise and a world that found it very difficult to recognise me. So there are certain kind of painful experiences which underpin my preoccupation with social class. But in some ways I should not be preoccupied with social class because it is not only neoliberalism that erases class as an issue but also in some ways post-structuralism has sought to erase class as an issue. Zygmunt Bauman talks about social class as a “zombie” category, one that is walking around but is actually dead. But I am not so sure that is the case. It seems to me that the history of education, certainly the history of education in the UK only makes sense in relation to social class. In the origins education in the UK and elsewhere was a response to the problems of the management of urban populations. In many ways education remains primarily an urban issue and education policy is organised around urban issues and the management of working class populations. But there is also a relational history that social class has

to be understood in terms of the tensions and interplays between the working class and the emerging middle class in the nineteenth Century. Education policy, again certainly in England but I think also in other countries, has been driven by the attempt to mediate between the necessities of attending to the management of the working class and the necessities of attending to the interests of the middle class. So I have tried to approach class in terms of the relationality of classes both in relation to practice within schools but also in relation to policy and I see policy as being a classed issue. Policy is a site of struggle over class interests, class influence and class reproduction. And particularly in the last 25 years as was the case I keep earlier in the nineteenth century that one can make sense of the developments in education policy in terms of the exertion of the middle classes interests in relation to changing economic problems on a global scale. So it is this interplay between privilege and disadvantage that I have focused on in terms of understanding social class. This was also influenced by almost the first sociology of education text I read seriously, that seemed to deserve a serious reading; that was a book written by my undergraduate tutor Dennis Marsden with Brian Jackson, a book called *Education and the Working Class* (1962) which I think is still probably the best book on sociology of education written in English language. It is an extraordinary book. Even now it is so contemporary and immediate. Their focus was to look at successful working class children in order to understand disadvantage. So they were focusing on this interplay between success and failure, advantage and disadvantage, privilege and under-privilege in order to open up and move away from social typologies as ways to explain social class and inequality in terms of the adequacies of or the oppressions which act upon the working classes. Those things are important but we also have to understand the actions of privilege, the work that certain groups do within the education system to maintain their privilege, to maintain their distance from others and of course this is again where Bourdieu becomes useful and important in understanding the operation of classifications and distinctions, the distances that need to be kept and the significance of particular kinds of cultural capital in the education system. So I have tried to work within that perspective and in

particular in recent years focused on the middle class as an object of study in order to understand advantage and disadvantage. But in doing that I realised that this is also inadequate because one cannot really fully begin to develop an understanding of the relations between education and social class without attending to issues of gender, and to issues of race. Gender I have been able to think about to some extent particularly because of the role of mothers within the processes of social reproduction and more recently and more systematically I have been able to attend to race with some colleagues (Nicola Rollock, Dave Gillborn and Carol Vincent) and we have recently completed a research project on the educational strategies of the Black middle class. So again what I wanted to do, and managed to recruit my colleagues to do, was to focus on a group that was contrary to the stereotypes of Black families within the education system. In the media and in policy in the UK the assumption is almost automatically that Black, and particularly African-Caribbean families are working class, that they have social problems, and are social disadvantaged. So what I wanted to do was focus on a group that did not fit that profile and to understand their engagement with education from the perspective of privilege. And what the research points out very dramatically is that although social class is important and while these families have enormous resources they can bring to bear upon their children's education, very often, in many circumstances, racism asserts itself as an exclusionary and an oppressive experience, an every day mundane experience. And this means that on some occasions their class resources are confounded, refused, unrecognised, that race trumps class. So again in a very focused way this research attends to the interplay between advantage and disadvantage.

**R.S.:** In fact, when we were reading our question yesterday afternoon we thought that we missed the points of race and gender in a certain way. What is very interesting is the relation between different kinds of social fragmentation such as class, gender and race. This is the most important

problem but, from a critical point of view, we need to point out that the most important concept continues to be class.

**S.J.B.:** But also when you start to think relationally and in terms of intersections, the inadequacy of sociological accounts which focus on single dimensions or perhaps the interplay between two dimensions, becomes very apparent. They are always defined by their inadequacy, by their partiality, by their failure. Most sociologists tend to represent their accounts in terms of their completeness, their success, their adequacy and I think that is misguided.

**R.S.:** The problem of governance and the new organisational forms of governance in the *post-modern State* are a recurrent focus in the recent researches and reflections of many contemporary scholars. All around the world, a new mode of governance promoted by public states that encourage constrained discretion and delegate power while retaining it at the same time. A governmentality with a loose texture where politics and bureaucracies experiment new policy instruments to liberate new forces, to enable new kind of actors and to legitimate new policy discourses. Innovation is becoming a key imperative and a key device and it becomes clear also in Italy now that innovate means explicitly to introduce non-educational actors on the scene of politics. This probably continues to reproduce asymmetries of power but probably it means also to create new asymmetries that we are not able to see with our previous interpretative models. What about this new kind of governing policies? Confronting such new individual and collective powerful actors, do you see any chance for social actors, educational among the others, to contrast the spreading of power inequalities? What do you think about? Because in a certain way England is a main laboratory of these innovations...

**S.J.B.:** Those processes are now been played out in almost every nation around the world perhaps with the exception of North Korea and Cuba. What we are seeing is a fundamental change in the nature of the state and the role of the state in all the countries around the world. A move to a kind of oxymoronic phenomenon, the neoliberal state, a state which is no longer taking responsibility for its citizens, no longer taking responsibility for the delivery of public services but rather is the commissioner of the contract and the performance manager who will drive the system but has the system delivered by other actors of various kind, by the private sector, by voluntary organisations, by philanthropies, by charities, by religious institutions. The whole landscape of the state and the public sector is undergoing a massive change and the state itself is no longer an adequate focus for understanding policy, for understanding the public services, either in the sense that many of these things now have to be understood in the broader context of globalisation or as part of new and complex relationships within and beyond the state itself. Policy is being done in new locations, by new actors, through new discourses that have been imported from elsewhere. Different kind of relationships (contracts, partnerships, social enterprise) have been developed and some of our key traditional concepts like democracy, and like citizenship have been hollowed out in relation to all of this. Democracy is now reduced to the minimalist concept of voting rather than a way of acting in relation to others, and in the same way the citizenship is now about responsibility for oneself rather than responsibility for others. So there is a diminution, a hollowing out of those concepts in relation to these new conceptions of the state, these new kind of social relationships, a democratic deficit and opacity and elusiveness about policy, about responsibility, about decision making, about power, about influence. In many ways our traditional analytic tools are quite inadequate for making sense of all this. This is a new kind of “disorderly order” that is dense and opaque and multifaceted. It is moving, it is fragile, it is unstable whereas most of our political concepts have to do with very structural notions about how states work and their relationships operate. We have to begin to think with notions of mobility and flow and flexibility and agility. A new vocabulary and new concepts are needed. But in saying that I do not

think we should underestimate the continuing importance of the state. It is not that the state is less important than it was, rather the state is operating in different ways. So we have at the same time as these processes of de-concentration and de-statalisation, as Jessop calls it, parallel processes of centralisation. And the key policy technology here is I think performance management. Performance management is an amazingly powerful technology, much more powerful I think than initially politicians realised and the more they realise its power the more dangerous it becomes. Michel Foucault said that the main task each day when you wake up is to decide that which is the most dangerous. I think currently the most dangerous is performance management, and concomitantly numbers. The manipulation of numbers offers such enormous power to politicians through the very simplest forms of technical operation. You just have to alter few targets, set different benchmarks, deploy new indicators and you can shift whole systems dramatically, and speedily. We have to understand that and understand how it may be possible to escape from some of that, to act back against that. So I am thinking about governance and about resistance<sup>†</sup>.

**E.G.:** Our last question. Is there any topic fascinating your future research agenda? In the last years, you have reworked themes like privatisation and the policy enactment in ordinary schools along with new issues such as philanthropy and partnership. We would like to know which is your future research programme.

**S.J.B.:** I think there are two or perhaps three related things that I am particularly interested in and I want to resume work on. One is privatisation, using an approach that is much more focused on a kind of

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<sup>†</sup> Ball, S. J. & Olmedo, A. (2013). Care of the self, resistance and subjectivity under neoliberal governmentalities. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(1), 85-96.

business analysis. So we can begin to understand the work of education businesses by reading their accounts, reading their company reports, understanding processes of consolidation and merger and the business logic, which underpins their engagement with the world of education. Again we need a kind of new language, a new set of concepts and we can borrow some of those from business and from economics but we have to be very careful not to take too much ideological baggage with them. And this has to be done in a global frame because increasingly education business is multinational businesses. We cannot go on thinking about education policy within the framework of the nation state. And there are going to be new kinds of issues about the relationship between the interests of global education businesses and the interests of nation-states, particularly as more of the assets of the public sector are transferred to the control of education businesses. They may have interests in terms of selling or using those assets differently from the interests of nation-state. And in relation to that again, there are new arenas in which policy has been constructed, arenas beyond the nation-state, new settings for the micro practises of globalisation and neoliberalism which are very opaque, are very elusive, and difficult to access – posing new problems to researchers. And the third thing on which I want to work more is the global middle class. So I am still in pursue to the middle class, still trying to understand a middle class but to understand this new kind of post-national global middle class. Those actors, and their families, who do the work of multinational business. Not the owners, not the multinational business capitalist class, but those who are in management and professional positions, who move around the globe, spending three years in New York, three years in Tokyo, and two years in Paris, who in some cases take the families with them, move their family, their children between different kinds of schooling, private schools, local schools, international schools. Perhaps they are developing a post-political, post-national, cosmopolitan perspective and perhaps their children also are being made up within a new kind of sensibility and identity in class terms, beyond a national identity. So I am very interested in those as a group and of course they are in some senses the actors of neoliberalism, they are



archetypal actors of post-national global neoliberal practice. There is much to be done!

(Transcribed by Emanuela Spanò)