

The rationalisation of education (0052)

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Introduction

In a brief pamphlet written in 1992 Gilles Deleuze suggested that the idea of a disciplinary society associated with Foucault (1991) was being replaced by the society of control (Deleuze, 1992). Whereas the disciplinary society was organised through institutional enclosures characterised by mechanisms of surveillance, the society of control achieves the administration of life through ubiquitous procedures that take the form of codes, guidelines, process and the incessant calibration of behaviours: “just as the corporation replaces the factory, perpetual training tends to replace the school, and continuous control the examination” (Deleuze, p. 5).

These developments were foreshadowed by Max Weber. In his *Protestant Ethic*, Weber famously invokes the ‘iron cage’ which modern man had constructed for himself, signifying the development of procedures and behaviours necessary for a modern economic order whilst “the rosy blush of its laughing heir, the Enlightenment, seems to be irretrievably fading” (Weber, p. 181-2). Jürgen Habermas provides us with an amplification of Weber’s central thesis. According to Habermas, rationalisation includes: the development of techniques to reproduce predicted behaviours; a social and vocational world configured so that the efficacy of such techniques become progressively easier to achieve; and crucially, the construction of a self whose personality is characterised by methodical conduct (for example, the requirement that one be constantly ‘pro-active’) – see Habermas, 168-171; also Bennett, p. 60; Weber (1948).

Rationalisation pervades social discourse not only in terms of characterising the means for securing goals; it increasingly characterises those goals themselves. Education, for example, is rationalised through the characterisation of learning as an achievement-process in which assessment lies at its heart. This amounts to more than the mere prizing of good results; the entire process itself is driven by a system of monitoring and evaluation at every stage in which teachers – not just pupils – are held to account. This rationalisation now pervades higher education. This is illustrated, for example, in a standard text of pedagogy addressed at university teachers in which the strategy of ‘constructive alignment’ is commended, i.e. the alignment of learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment. We are told that as a consequence “students are ‘entrapped’ in this web of consistency optimising the chance that they will engage appropriate learning activities” (Biggs and Tang, 2011: 97-98). Over one hundred years on, this eerily echoes the metaphor of the iron cage.

Exploring alternatives

Is it possible to evoke a different way of conceiving activities and discourses that do *not* have rationalisation at their core? Alasdair McIntyre provides us with one picture through thinking of activities in terms of *practices*. The idea is that a practice generates its own goods and its own goals and purposes; therefore criteria of excellence are internal to that practice. In this way, it could be said that a practice generates its own rationale through an internal *logos*. Macintyre’s definition of a practice is well-known:

By a practice I mean any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence that are appropriate to, and partly definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved are systematically extended". (MacIntyre, p. 175)

We can see how this might work with subject disciplines on two levels. First, the internal epistemological structure and processes of a discipline generate conclusions, theorems and interpretations through a discourse that, in principle, can operate independently of rationalisation. Second, normative recommendations, because they are the outcome of this internal discourse can address needs and concerns premised on a construction of the self (for example 'the patient') that does not necessarily depend on the discourse of rationalisation, especially through the suggestion that a practice contains its own internal goods. It is not, of course, that practices, so understood, do not contain activities that are instrumental and rational-purposive: but these kinds of activities are subordinate to, and partly defined by, what constitutes an internal good.

Moreover, given that long established practices (such as subject disciplines) have *traditions*, these may act as powerful counterweights to rationalisation. For through a tradition, the present can reconnect with the past so that traditions become part of the present. A practice may be seen as having its own genealogy with its own internal time-structure. That is, a practice can be viewed diachronically so that at any given time its development can be given a genealogical explanation rather than one which is merely synchronic.

I suggest that a practice, so conceived, can serve to keep the depredations of rationalisation at bay and to diminish its effects. Decisions to interpret internal goods through the lens of rationalisation may of course be made and often are: but they are deliberate decisions that can be contested through the invocation of the claims of the internal goods of that practice. But there are problems, all the same.

First, through the process of peer review, disciplines might be expected to retain their own integrity along the lines suggested by the concept of a practice. But what if the bulk of practitioners have succumbed to rationalisation? How would they know? For example, is the oft-repeated injunction that processes of enquiry be evidence-informed driven by a rationalisation that discourages more speculative enquiries?

Second, subject disciplines, considered as practices, require some kind of institutional setting to flourish and so the inevitable question arises as to what, and to what extent, its practitioners owe the institution that enables them to engage in their practice in the first place. Yet whilst institutional demands that derive from rationalisation may be difficult to resist, given that the institution is dependent on a practice retaining its internal integrity perhaps academics are in a stronger position than is sometimes thought. Perhaps academic managers and leaders do not have to fashion an iron cage for themselves after all.

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