

“Willed” to Choose: Educational Reform and Busno-power

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The "ethico-political choice we have to make every day," said Michel Foucault, is "to determine what is the main danger."¹ In Professor Marshall's timely paper we are called upon to consider the assertion that a danger other than that which Foucault has named "bio-power" is emergent within contemporary, neo-liberal educational practices in New Zealand. Through his explication of the notions of "busno-power" and "busnocratic rationality," Marshall directs our attention to processes of subjectification that function within these neo-liberal reforms to constitute subjects as "autonomous choosers." Throughout my remarks I take Professor Marshall's argument to be that busno-power differs from bio-power in terms of effect rather than form.² In my view, Marshall presents a genealogical analysis not unlike the one by which Foucault yields the notion of bio-power. Marshall's point of departure, however, lies in his reframing of the salient discursive structures that organize neo-liberal educational reforms in order to map certain products of power that he believes are not accessible through reference to bio-power.

I believe that the work Marshall has accomplished in this paper is very important, particularly to those of us who teach teachers. Educational reform is being undertaken around the globe, spurred, as Marshall's analysis confirms, by shifting socio-political, economic and, in a word, "governmental" pressures. Marshall's analysis of busno-power and busnocratic rationality as they emerge within a New Zealand context makes it possible to imagine genealogical readings of educational reform, which is to say, readings of the effects of power invoked by such practices, both as they are advocated within governmental reports or actual legislation, and, more broadly, as they emerge out of particular socio-political and economic contexts.

In my comments today I want to focus on Marshall's effort to distinguish busno-power from bio-power. In my view, whether or not busno-power achieves the kind of explanatory scope of bio-power, it seems clear to me that Marshall's effort to separate the two is useful in so far as it highlights: (1) the shifting partnerships between state, academic, and corporate bureaucracies that administer state-sponsored educational programs; (2) discursive practices that organize knowledges and knowers less in accordance with truths than with (choice) performances; (3) the resultant danger, not of docile bodies (though I do not see these constructions as mutually exclusive) but of docile "minds."³ It is the third point that I want to address and, though it may be audacious to do so, or simply wrong-headed, I would like to characterize the contrast in "dangers" articulated in Professor Marshall's paper as a shift from what Foucault calls the "will to truth" to what I see in Marshall's description of busno-power, as a "will to choose."

In the first section of his paper, Marshall establishes "governmentality" as the overarching principle by which bio-power and busno-power are to be compared. "Government," says Marshall, should be understood as

a form of activity which attempts or aims at the conduct of persons; it is the attempt to shape, to guide, or to affect not only the conduct of people but, also, the attempt to constitute people in such ways that they can be governed.

Simplistically stated, the contrast Marshall draws between bio-power and busno-power depends upon his demonstrating that neo-liberal reforms invoke governmentality in different ways, both in terms of its controlling of conduct and in terms of its constitution of people as governable.

Marshall succinctly summarizes the two key features of bio-power as: technologies of domination and technologies of the self. He emphasizes, rightly, I think, the sense in which bio-power identifies a connection between the constitution of subjects and discursive processes that encourage and systematize self-revelation. He also argues that bio-power refers to power/knowledge practices exercised specifically on the body-as-anatomical/biological. In this latter respect, I find that my reading of Foucault departs from that of Professor Marshall, but I do not believe that I am prevented, thereby, from endorsing in significant ways the comparison he makes between bio-power and busno-power. In my reading, it is the role (in shaping bio-power) that is played by the human sciences, by epistemic disciplines generally -- it is the conjunction of technologies of the self with the "will to truth" -- that is critical to his argument.

The effects of power by which Marshall generates his account of busno-power are spelled out in the second section of the paper. Whereas bio-power constituted docile bodies in terms of the "deep truths" about subjects' desires,⁴ busno-power constitutes docile [minds] in terms of the "quality" of expressed, consumer-style choices. Marshall writes:

The individualizing aspect of busno-power constructs a notion of subjectivity in which the notion of the autonomous chooser is embedded. Being an autonomous chooser then becomes *pathologised* from choosing *behavior*, not merely to a type of human nature...but almost to a *totalizing* form of human nature.

Thus, according to Foucault, subjects are constituted through their revelation, internalization, and normalization of already-constituted "deep truths." According to Marshall, on the other hand, subjects are constituted through their expression of "autonomous choice."

I am not reviewing here the segments of Marshall's paper in which he specifies the discursive features of busnocratic rationality, but part of that discussion must now be brought forward to account for the way in which busno-power accomplishes governmentality. The point to which Marshall brings us through his analysis of "busnocratic rationality," is a point at which the legitimating function of "truth" in the traditional liberal education scheme is recognized as having been supplanted by a new legitimating technology, that of "choice." "Quality," Marshall writes, "is to be assessed by consumer satisfaction." The driving force, then, of busno-power as I understand it, is seen to be what I have called, in echo of Foucault's terminology, a "will to choose."

What is the "main danger" associated with "choice" as a legitimating technology? Marshall draws out an answer to this question with his analysis of the constraints of an "autonomous chooser" subjectivity. Seen as "perpetually responsive to the environment," the autonomous chooser whose agency is legitimated in terms of choice behavior, constitutes within its "self" a "market" enterprise. Marshall writes:

It is not just that the insertion of the economic into the social *structures* the choices of the individual but that, also, in behavioristic fashion it manipulates the individual by penetrating the very notion of the self, structuring the individual's choices, and thereby, in so far as one's life is just the individual economic enterprise, the lives of individuals.

To say that I share Professor Marshall's reluctance to embrace educational reform that risks constituting our lives as individual economic enterprises would be an understatement. My response is much closer to abhorrence than reluctance; however, the path of resistance is not clear to me and it is with a brief consideration of what it would mean to take the question of resistance seriously that I want to close my remarks.

Marshall utilizes a comparison of traditional liberal autonomy, referred to as "personal autonomy" in his paper, with the now suspect "autonomous chooser" used to highlight the ways in which

individuals are constituted as enterprise. While I can accept the usefulness of such a comparison in helping us to notice the outlines of an "autonomous chooser" mentality, I do not see it as a viable direction in which to promote resistance. The reason for my reluctance is simple: it is the traditional liberal notion of personal autonomy as legitimated through reason that Foucault has critiqued through his analysis of bio-power. This leaves me, and also, I think, Marshall, in a position of resisting both bio-power and busno-power at the same time.

The question I would like to leave with you today, then, can be stated concretely with reference to one of the structural shifts that Marshall sees as a significant element of busnocratic rationality. I present this question not only as an immediate project, though it is that; I present it also as an indication of the kinds of work that remain if we are to take seriously the inquiry that Marshall has opened to us today. The question: If it is dangerous, in the busno-power sense, to have the range of choices in educational programs determined by people outside of the traditional educational institutions, and it is dangerous, in the bio-power sense, to have the range of truths made available in educational programs determined by people inside the traditional educational institutions, what path can/should teachers tread?

1. Michel Foucault, "On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of a Work in Progress," in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 232, as cited in Frank Pignatelli, "Danger, Possibilities: Ethico-Political Choices in the Work of Michel Foucault," *Philosophy of Education 1993*, ed. Audrey Thompson (Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society, 1994), 378.

2. Here I mean to imply that Foucault and Marshall share an analysis of power that can be contrasted to the forms Foucault has called "economic" and "sovereign" power. Bio-power and busno-power differ in terms of the effects of power, which is to say the relationships of power that they manifest.

3. Here I wish to note my discomfort with Marshall's characterization of busno-power as being exercised through persons' minds. I would prefer a characterization that avoided reinscribing mind/body dualism, particularly as my reading of Foucault's notion of bio-power does not entail restricting its descriptive value to specifically anatomical or biological discourse.

4. I draw upon Rabinow's construction of bio-power here. He writes:

Foucault's interpretive analytic starts with our current danger...that by trying to ground our power in religion, law, and science, we have been led to seek the truth of our desire and have, thereby, become entangled in our selves and governed by a normalizing web of law and medicine. (Dreyfus and Rabinow, *Michel Foucault*, 257).

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