'The shape of things that are and were' and 'the shape of things to come': Some reflections on the sociology of education at the 40ᵗʰ anniversary of BJSE'

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Abstract

Reflecting through the prisms of past, present ("the shape of things that are and were") and future ("the shape of things to come"), this paper discusses three challenges for sociology of education: the rise of populism and declining faith in 'experts'; inequities within and re/produced by the sociology of education; and how to enact a sociology of education that can 'make a difference' to social inequalities. The paper puts forward some ideas in support of a current and future practice of the discipline that is pluralistic and orientated towards social justice. Arguments are made for the value of public-orientated dialogue that is conducted in a range of registers and the importance of acknowledging and engaging with the 'debt' (Ladson Billings 2006) that is owed to minoritized communities and academics. Finally, a case is made for a sociology of education based on the principle of service as enacted through praxis partnerships.

Introduction

The title of this paper references cultural works (such as the 1968 jazz track, "*The Shape of Things That Are and Were*", by George Benson) that explore tensions between past and present and which set out visions for future social relations. For instance, the 1933 science fiction book/novel *The Shape of Things to Come* by H.G. Wells is an imagined future history

which mixes dystopian and utopian predictions, in which the world moves through economic collapse, military dictatorship and the imposition of dominant cultural hegemony towards a future world peace, brought about through intensive upward mobility and specifically the enlightenment of middle class intellectual polymaths. The 1968 song of the same name – originally performed by fictional band Max Frost and the Troopers in the film *Wild in the Streets*, and since extensively covered by artists from George Benson to Slade and the Ramones - also evokes a struggle between 'old' and 'new' worlds in which societal change is similarly achieved (at least in part) through intellectual revolution ("*there are new thoughts, ready and waiting to explode [...] revolution, sweepin' in like a fresh new breeze*").

The common motifs within these works – intellectual thinking as a trigger/enabler for social change and optimism for a 'better' future – are themes that are addressed in this paper in relation to the sociology of education. However, I want to intentionally preface this discussion with a critique that has been levelled at such work, notably the criticism made of Wells, that "supplying … answers to the world's problems [is] a danger for any artist, since answers have the embarrassing habit of looking irrelevant in a very short time while the original questions retain their relevance" (Brosnan, 1991, p.26). This note of caution can be similarly applied to sociologists of education who might be seeking to answer the world's educational problems.

Instead, I argue for a pluralistic vision of the sociology of education that includes (but is not exclusively defined by) the value of a commitment to *praxis*. While there are many different conceptualisations of praxis, I use the term here to refer to the integration (not separation) of theory and practice in the production of personal and collective learning that is inherently tied to social action - as Paolo Freire explains, 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (1970: 33). The recursive relationship between theory, collaborative reflection, learning and action can be an important tool within emancipatory

projects that are orientated towards 'making a difference'. This is not a utopian (like Wells' vision) nor a redemptive project, in which sociology of education is envisioned as a vehicle for 'saving' people from educational problems. Rather, drawing on the principle of praxis, I make an argument for the value of practising sociology of education through a politics/principle of *service* – academic theory/ research as a form of social justice orientated collective endeavour, enacted through partnership in the service of Others. In other words, a sociology of education that is conducted 'with', not 'on' or 'for' diverse communities.

As invited by the call for this Special Issue, the paper riffs on the terminology of 'shape', which is employed as a spatial metaphor and device (as both a noun and verb) to trace the contours and features of the issues under discussion (e.g. the field of sociology of education; relations between past, present and future). However, 'shape' also has a less common dictionary definition relating to sports and athletics, in which shape can mean "to take up a stance, or set oneself to perform a specific action"[i]. With respect to this latter meaning, this paper is written from a deliberately personal stance – it does not seek to be representative or comprehensive in its discussion of the field of sociology of education. Nor does it seek to assert an authoritarian position on what the sociology of education *should* be. Rather, the paper traces some contemporary challenges and questions for the field and contributes some thoughts and thinking tools, providing just one partial viewpoint to sit among the kaleidoscope of other contributions to this Special Issue.

The paper is also written from that stance that the sociology of education continues to be in a position of 'good health' – a judgement made on the basis of the standard, diversity and volume of contributions to journals such as the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, the level of recognition and admiration accorded to sociology of education research by academic contributors to the recent review of the field of education research, conducted for the Economic and Social Research Council (Archer 2019), and, from the

highly anecdotal example of ongoing student demand for sociology of education postgraduate courses at my own institution. Hence, although the paper identifies challenges and questions for the field (and recognises the wider pressing economic, neoliberal and performative demands to which contemporary HE is subjected, e.g. Ball 2012), these challenges are not raised within a rhetoric of 'crisis' nor that of an imagined lost prior 'golden age'. Indeed, as discussed later, an argument is made that sociology of education has been particularly enriched by contemporary contributions from Black, critical and feminist theorists.

Challenge (1): Populism and a public lack of faith in experts ("Throwing shapes")

In early 2019, I was in a taxi, travelling home from the airport after a work trip to Washington DC. In the course of asking about my trip, the (white, English) taxi driver expressed his admiration for President of the USA, Donald Trump, on the basis that he "puts Americans first" and said that he wished for a similar leader in the UK. When I expressed my own (counter) view, that Trump does not put *all* Americans first and does not prioritise the American (or global) environment, the taxi driver replied that although he "knows" there is a "lot of science" about global warming, this had little bearing on his views, stating adamantly, "I'm not convinced" before ending the conversation with the assertion that "it's just my opinion" and that "everyone is entitled to their opinion". Such views are, of course, not uncommon in public life and across the media and social media (e.g. see Pidd, 2019). But the vignette illustrates a contemporary challenge for sociology of education, namely the rise of populism in public and private life (e.g. Cox, 2018) and the decline in public faith in 'experts' (e.g. Davies, 2018), particularly those hailing from a tradition of left-wing intellectualism (Churchwell, 2018), which, from and through Marxism, feminism, post-colonialism, queer studies and many other schools of radical thought, has a history of alignment with the sociology of education (although of course there are and have been many sociologists of

education who would not identify themselves in this way). As Churchwell (2018) discusses, expressions of a public lack of faith in intellectuals and experts is far from new and has been a longstanding trope within right wing politics, albeit one that has been amplified in recent years.

It is not just the above-mentioned taxi driver who might be sceptical of science - the example extends much further - and the denigration of social science by policy professionals is well rehearsed. The main critiques levelled at social science and sociological theory and research is that it lacks rigour (Wiles 2004), is 'too distant and unwilling or unable to work effectively' with policy, fails to address "important issues" (Johnson 2004; p.29), is myopic in focus, 'irrelevant' to policy and is written in arcane and incomprehensible language (Davies 2004: 448–9). Arguably such critiques are only partial truths that reflect a particular perspective and overgeneralise and ignore both counterexamples and the role that policy plays in re/producing these oppositional relations. However, the critiques do raise valid challenges for the sociology of education with respect to the extent, or not, of capacity (opportunities, resources and will) to engage in public dialogue. This capacity is arguably restricted if discourse is limited to a single, elite register (e.g. complex theory as discussed only in the language of academic publications). Performances of elitism, such as through displays of academic 'cleverness', the use of "impenetrable English" (Buroway 2005, p.420) and complex scientific terminology (Lemke 1990) can be highly seductive, not least because these are practices of power that are aligned with hegemonic masculinity (especially performances of 'muscular intellect', Mac an Ghaill 1998; Francis 2007), whiteness and middle-classness that can generate status for those who 'speak' in this way (Archer et al., 2018). However, these practices can also entail a silencing of Others.

This is not to say that I don't believe that specialist terminology and complex theory has its place and value, it certainly can and does! However, problems arise when one (elite)

register dominates to the exclusion and detriment of others and when 'accessible', public-facing registers and those grounded in experiences of oppression are denigrated or excluded. As Hill Collins explains, "oppressed groups are frequently placed in the situation of being listened to only if we frame our ideas in the language that is familiar to and comfortable for a dominant group. This requirement often changes the meaning of our ideas and works to elevate the ideas of dominant groups" (1990; p7).

The dominance of elite academic 'language' and practice to the detriment or marginalisation of other registers risks contributing to the (self)isolation of social science theory and research and raises important equity challenges. Moreover, at the risk of over-extending the shape metaphor, such performances can be likened to 'throwing shapes', the dictionary definition of which refers both to a way of dancing that aims to get attention and/or to 'acting tough'. That is, the privileging of ostentatious uses of sociological jargon and theory can be interpreted as attention-seeking and competitive performances that attempt to re/produce academic status and privilege and which, consequently, can sit in tension with more emancipatory aims and can preclude public dialogue.

I therefore suggest that value needs to be accorded to attempts to work theory across more than one register and that the capacity for sociology of education to engage equitably in public dialogue should not be relegated to the (oft looked down on) realm of 'impact'. This may be increasingly important for supporting and enabling dialogue across the front and back seat of the apocryphal taxi ride.

So, how can and does the sociology of education engage with and in these discussions? How do we keep the necessary complexity to our work while also making it accessible for, and engaging with, diverse audiences?

In order to address this point, I suggest that we need to consider the second challenge, namely that as with any academic practice, the field has been and is implicated in the reproduction of inequalities – and needs to think more urgently about how to 'shape up'.

Challenge (2): Putting 'our' house in order ("You better shape up")

The sociology of education is not a hermetically sealed field. It is, of course, part of wider society, so it is not surprising to see wider inequitable power relations reflected in the field. However, as a discipline that is particularly concerned with issues of power and inequality, I would argue that 'we' should be better placed, motivated and informed, to do more to acknowledge, call out, challenge and address these injustices – a position that will require many of 'us' to recognise our own privilege and complicity.

As Black, feminist and working-class researchers have extensively documented and theorised (through great emotional labour), there are a myriad of structural, institutionalised and interpersonal practices and micro-aggressions that are enacted by and through the academic field that reproduce and maintain the dominance of whiteness, masculinity and middle-class privilege (to name but three dimensions of inequity) in and beyond the university (e.g. see Ahmed, 2012; Bhopal 2015; Mirza 2017). Even the most cursory internet search or scan of a 'key texts' reading list brings up a list of sociologists of education who are distinctive in their homogeneity. For instance, the Top 10 famous sociologists of education (according to degree.net[ii]) reveals a list of predominantly privileged white men: 1. Durkheim, 2, Weber, 3. Charles Wright Mills, 4. Daniel Bell, 5. Goffman, 6. Foucault, 7. Habermas, 8. Bourdieu. 9. Giddens 10. Gary Alan Fine.

This body of critical work urges us (but particularly those who are socially privileged) to re-examine our everyday personal and professional practices and to reframe and de-centre

what and whose work 'counts'. As Patricia Hill Collins (1998) writes, "elites possess the power to legitimate the knowledge that they define as theory as being universal, normative, and ideal" which has led to Black women academics being recognised as having 'thoughts' rather than 'theories'. We thus need to find new ways to value and make visible the vibrant, consequential and diverse theory and research that exists nationally and internationally within the sociology of education.

So what would/could this mean in practice? I do not intend to construct a Wellsian utopian "answer" here, but rather foreground and signpost some thinking tools, which provide principles that might be learned from, applied and adapted for local contexts in particular configurations of space/time:

The first idea is to re/claim a more radical meaning of 'redemption' in the sense of paying back (redeeming) a ***debt*** that is rightfully owed. I draw here on Gloria Ladson Billings (2006) foundational work in which she re-framed (what is often popularly termed) the educational 'gap' in Black children's attainment as an educational 'debt', produced by intersectional injustices, that is owed to these young people by society. Extending this idea to the field of sociology of education, urges us to consider how sociologists of education might address and 'repay' or 'redeem' the debt owed to underserved communities and academics by the education system in general and by the field of sociology of education in particular. For instance, how do our personal, professional and institutional relations and practices produce inequalities in the field itself? , As Sara Ahmed (2014) explains, this would require everyone – but particularly privileged academics - identifying and recording injustices ("you have to record what you do not want to reproduce") and taking complaints seriously (such as complaints and experiences of racism). That is, treating complaints as "*non-reproductive labour*, as the work you have to do in order not to reproduce an inheritance" (ibid.).

This notion of a sociology of education debt, can be integrated with the concept of *rightful presence* (e.g. Squire & Darling 2013) that has been used within sanctuary cities research (e.g. Vrasti & Dayal, 2016) and is now being applied in educational research (e.g. Calabrese Barton and Tan, 2018). Rightful presence draws attention to the conditions that are required for 'inclusion' and foregrounds the role of dominant society in creating and sustaining the conditions which exclude Others. For instance, the concept can help identify what Ahmed (2014) terms 'atmospheric walls', which 'can become a technique, a way of making spaces available for some more than others'. Together, the concepts of educational debt and rightful presence provide a useful foundation for challenging hegemonic assumptions, such as the idea that Black, feminist and working-class academics suffer from a participation 'gap' (their levels of participation 'lag behind'), or where they are present, are (made to feel) 'out of place' in the field. The concepts help shift the onus of responsibility and action to identifying and dismantling the power relations, practices and processes of Othering that produce inequitable patterns of presence, recognition, participation and belonging in the field and focus attention on the unspoken/unseen injustices of colonisation (of physical and discursive spaces) on which notions of presence are founded (e.g. see Tedesco & Bagelman 2017). Such ideas help build a useful foundation for collaborative projects that wish to move beyond the empty 'diversity rhetoric' that pervades mainstream institutionalised approaches to equality work and which have been documented as preventing meaningful action (Ahmed, 2012).

The third idea that I would like to contribute into the mix is the recognition that action and reflection towards social justice requires the ***giving up of privilege*** by those in positions of power. In previous work, written in the context of challenging injustices in science education, I refer to this as the zero sum game of equity work. That is, efforts to 'widen participation' in a particular field will necessarily require the giving up of privilege by those

who occupy positions of dominance in the field. Elites cannot remain intact if equity is to be enacted. In the case of sociology of education, this poses a key challenge for people like me (white, middle-class, senior academics) – it urgently reminds me that injustices are not just enacted by those I study - we are all implicated, *I* am implicated – and hence we must be called to action and account. What this might look like in practice will necessarily vary by time, context and scale (from the personal to the collective) – it will also need to be enacted through dialogue (in which the privileged listen and learn from Others). But a tangible example might be that of reflection and action around when the privileged academic should *not* speak (to evoke Gayatri Spivak, 1988). This would require embracing the associated personal 'costs' that might be involved when, for instance, making space for Others (by stepping aside/ back), helping create the conditions for Others to speak, taking a stand against unjust practices (e.g. micro-aggressions; all white/ all male panels) and actively investing in and supporting the well-being, status and progression of Others within the field.

Challenge (3): Enacting a socially just sociology of education through service and praxis - '*Shape shifting*'

The sociology of education has an important and distinguished history of speaking truth to power, a role that Apple (2013) has neatly referred to as the 'critical secretary' to society. This is a role that I both value and respect. However, the third and final challenge that I wish to raise is whether this role, alone, is sufficient for a social justice project? In particular, I propose that there is useful scope for a greater prominence and value to be given (alongside – not instead of - work that falls within the critical secretary role) to sociology of education research that seeks to engage more directly with policy and practice through principles of *service*, *praxis* and *partnership*.

The application of sociology to practical educational contexts and issues is not new. Durkheim has been credited with initiating the sociology of education from his work with teachers and the application of sociology to teacher education (e.g. see Barnes 1977). According to a review by Beaulieu et al. (2018), the last two decades have also witnessed a steady growth in research, both in the USA and internationally, that falls within the remit of what Boyer (1996, p.19-20) termed 'engaged scholarship', which involves 'connecting the rich resources of the university to our most pressing social, civic, and ethical problems' so that universities become 'staging grounds for action' in which 'academic and civic cultures communicate more continuously and more creatively with each other, … enriching the quality of life for all of us'.

A sociology of education based on the principle of *service* recognises the value that knowledge, skills and resources can have as tools to help oppressed communities to realise their needs and goals in the pursuit of social justice. This model places the sociologist of education as a public servant, whose research aims to be conducted 'with', not 'on' or 'for' Others. The principle of service makes us ask/reflect, whose interests does this research serve? Who is speaking (and about whom?) and who is silent? Without a guiding principle of service, academic work can risk falling into what Mike Oliver (1992) has termed 'intellectual masturbation'. Writing in the context of disability studies, Oliver (1992) explains his frustration, as a disabled academic, with theoretical debates between 'academics with abilities' who dominate the field, contesting 'the relevance of a theory developed by other people with abilities' in a context 'divorced from any reference to direct experiences of disability' and with little reference to 'the work of disabled writers and studies which attempt to take the experience of disability seriously'. Instead, he calls for research that engages centrally with the social creation of disability as oppression and which can tangibly benefit the lives of disabled people.

In our own research, we have found praxis to be particularly powerful when enacted through partnerships, such as with teachers (e.g. Archer et al., 2018), youth and informal educators, and policy professionals (e.g. Archer et al., in press). Praxis partnerships have helped us to work through the pitfalls of research 'talking down to' or 'educating' others and have provided rich, co-learning experiences for all of us. They also provide a dialogic space and bridge between partners to help navigate the potential risks identified by Beck (2005) in which sociology can be subverted to become "a servant of power" (Burawoy, 2005, p.420). Indeed, we have found that these partnerships have helped us, in some instances, to both highlight injustices and work collaboratively to identify more socially just alternatives. For instance, as a result of research-practice partnership work, the Institute of Physics (IOP) changed its policy and practice aimed at encouraging more girls to study Physics at A level, moving away from deficit approaches (based on assumptions that girls' attitudes and aspirations were the 'problem' and need to be changed – in the words of the IOP's head of education, 'blaming girls') towards changing the ways in which physics education is dominantly constructed and practised. The productiveness of the principle of partnership is also powerfully exemplified by the move to research+practice partnerships in American educational research, particularly where these partnerships are focused on decolonising mainstream education and supporting indigenous and minoritized knowledges, interests and educational approaches (e.g. Bang and Vossoughi, 2016).

In the UK, such approaches have the potential to be both supported, but also constrained, by the current impact agenda, in which research funding has been increasingly encouraged/required to contribute to society, culture and/or the economy. This potential will be largely determined by the way in which impact is (broadly or narrowly; normatively or radically) conceptualised. As noted in numerous, pertinent critiques, such as those by Colley (2014) and Back (2015), the impact agenda is an articulation of managerial audit culture that

is problematic on many levels. However, arguments have also been made that, despite this, it can still be appropriated to support emancipatory, participatory 'bottom up' research and "provide institutional space for work towards social justice, in line with long-standing traditions of critical social science and "public sociology"" (MacDonald 2017), see also Basi and Sloane (2018) and Pain et al., (2011), *inter alia*.

Conclusion

In her 2019 keynote address, Na'ilah Suad Nasir argued that issues of equity in education have never been more important and yet have never been more elusive. The pursuit of social justice in and through education remains a key goal for many sociologists of education. To return to the themes that framed the start of the article, what roles, capacity and opportunities exist for sociology of education theory, research and critique to effect change towards social justice? To what extent might this be an optimistic, or a doomed, project?

Reflecting on the "shape of things that are" and "the shape of things to come", I identified three key contemporary and future challenges for sociology of education, arguing that the challenge of populism and declining faith in 'experts' means that the sociology of education could usefully ensure that it includes a strong tradition of public orientated dialogue, conducted in a range of range of registers, in order to play an active part in societal discourse. Attention was also drawn to the challenge of ongoing inequities and injustices *within* sociology of education and for researchers to acknowledge and engage with the debt that is owed by sociology of education to minoritized communities and academics in order to support their rightful presence in all educational fields. I also argued that social justice work will require the giving up of privilege – a task not just for policy and practice but also (white, male, middle-class, heterosexual, able) academics themselves. Finally, I made a case for the

value and potential of a sociology of education based on the principle of service as enacted through praxis partnerships.

I have attempted throughout to make clear that these ideas sit within a pluralist vision of the sociology of education – they are not presented as 'the', 'the only' or even 'the most important' vision. Rather, I am advocating for these aspects to be valued as (equally valid) facets of a broader canon of theory and practice.

While I do not envisage the utopian future or the revolution depicted by H.G. Wells or Max Frost and the Troopers (racisms, sexisms, classisms etc are notoriously too well placed, resourced, adaptive and slippery for that – and much dominant intellectual thought is too distant from the communities it seeks to speak for/to), I also do not subscribe to the pessimism that is attributed to theorists like Bourdieu (Gunter and Willmott 2002) who refuse to entertain the potential for hope and change (c.f. Bourdieu and Passeron 1979). Indeed, even from within Bourdieu's own conceptual framework, "change in a field is not only possible but inevitable" and "even though fields are reproductive, they are not uniform" (Thomson et al 2019). As Gramsci (1973) reminds us, no hegemony is absolute so there is always a potential for change. But in particular, I remain inspired by critical and Black feminist theory and research on the radical potential of *hope* and *love* (e.g. Darder 2002; Hill Collins 2009; Nasir et al 2018) – which offers us ways of thinking otherwise and making a difference in people lives and the politics of representation, policy and practice, even if these changes are necessarily small and constrained by time and space.

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