Education, choice, and the uncanny father, by Ren*t* S*lecl

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Abstract. This paper contains my second attempt to pastiche the Lacanian philosopher and social theorist Renata Salecl. The pastiche responds to the theories of social inequality and education of Pierre Bourdieu.

I don't have much rationale for this pastiche, but I like the style, find it more difficult to do than some others, and I confess I get a feeling of having got lucky if a style is only managed once.

The former leaders of socialist Europe would address their citizens like teachers addressing pupils. "You must study hard," and "You must learn, learn, learn," citizens were told. In Western capitalism, on the other hand, the dominant ideology is choice. How does this ideology apply to education? Of course, many parents in capitalist societies are just as concerned about education as parents in socialist ones, but the ideology of choice leads to puzzles. Is the child free to choose whether to learn or not learn, or must the child be forced to learn, so that they can have more choices later?

The anthropologist Gillian Evans' book opens with supermarket shelf stackers who want better jobs. Evans conducted fieldwork with a working class family in London. She describes how the middle class deal with the problem of how to apply choice to education, by organizing their children's days with education and activities, so that they can have an adequate choice of

professions later, while Sharon, the mother of the working class family, passes on an attitude of do as you please now:

> Sharon applies the same do as you please philosophy to her daughters' education. She says of them, 'If they want to learn they will, if they don't, they won't, and that's that.' Sharon explains that Tracey is the perfect example of the success of this approach because she has done relatively well at school, choosing to apply herself to school work because it pleases her to do so, not because she had been forced at home. (2016: 43)

Evans draws a strong contrast between middle class and working class ways, but both are responses to the one ideology of choice. That ideology does not clearly guide the parent on whether to give the child more choice, as working class mother Sharon does, or give less to enable more choice later, as English middle class parents do.

In the second half of the twentieth century, the leading theorist of educational inequality was the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu presents a social world divided into fields, such as philosophy and literature. Participants in a field have a set of behavioural dispositions for participating in a field, which are difficult to codify as rules – what Bourdieu calls a habitus. An individual's habitus is important in determining how successful they will be. For example, a teacher tells a student that they need to use more references. The student asks, "Could I use just these references and still get a first class?" The teacher tells the student that they could if they wrote somewhat differently, but it is difficult to explain exactly how. The student's stylistic dispositions make a difference, such as the vocabulary they use to express their points, and it is

easier for a person to develop those dispositions if they come from an affluent social class, says Bourdieu.

Bourdieu's theory of educational inequality invites us to imagine what the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan calls a subject supposed to know. Applying the concept to Bourdieu's theory, this subject has the right background and so they can just instinctively make the right stylistic choices, giving them the rewards of high grades and educational certificates. But in Lacan's theory the subject supposed to know is a fiction. Perhaps everyone finds the education system puzzling in some respect, and there is no one who is totally at home within it. I scored well in school and approach topics as a perpetual good student, but I'm surprised by events, such as finding myself pastiched in France and England, and don't know how to react.

In the late 1980s, a medical professor at the University of Manchester began writing books against fashions in literary theory, novel writing, and continental philosophy. He was playing the role of the responsible father, against the excesses of these fashions, such as the claim that owing to the horrific nature of late twentieth century life, realistic fiction was no longer a suitable way of representing the world. He drew on the English analytic tradition (Tallis 1988: 20), but later compilations of articles on aesthetics, mainly by philosophers working in this tradition, exclude the professor. Why is that? Does Bourdieu's theory apply – is the professor's habitus preventing inclusion?

A Lacanian perspective distinguishes the symbolic from the imaginary. The symbolic, in this situation, is the set of rules required to qualify for these anthologies. The imaginary is the kind of person we imagine qualifying – what they look like and what their behaviour is like. It may be that the person who qualifies by the anthology rules does not appear as a father-like figure at all. It may even be that the father figure of the university, applying these rules, is uncanny; that an extreme divide between the symbolic and the imaginary has opened up.

One of Lacan's most quoted sayings is "Father or worse." In socialist societies, there is a close relationship between the symbolic role of the political father and the image of the father. That role is achieved by corrupting the formal voting process, so it never allows for alternatives, and by propaganda. Fatherly images of Stalin or Mao, or whoever the socialist leader is, appear throughout the country. But strictly keeping to the rules that constitute the symbolic, without ever compromising, can enable an uncanny political father to emerge – a figure who meets the rules for that role but does not fit the image. A clever-looking dark-haired Polish girl holding papers with media insights but not properly sharing them with a Chinese boy is the political father, for example. Her image is writ large on a screen outside a university library.

References

Evans, G. 2016. *Educational Failure and White Working Class Children in Britain.* Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tallis, R. 1988. *In Defence of Realism.* London: Edward Arnold.