The (Im)possibility of the Project

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Radford Address

Introduction: Acknowledging the Elders

I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet together, today – the Ngunawal people – and by offering my respects to their Elders, past, present and future. I am mindful, too, that it was here, in Canberra, almost two years ago now, that the Prime Minister opened up the new Parliament by issuing an historic Apology to Aboriginal Australians for the legacies of colonialism that we all have lived through, in some fashion, and in which we are all implicated. For that act alone, at the outset of a new federal-parliamentary regime, as a significant moment in nation-(*re*)building, the Government, to my mind at least, accrued much credit. It remains for history to attest to whether or not that gesture becomes more than merely symbolic, in the most basic sense.

It is appropriate, I think, to turn to our own history, and to the acknowledgement of our own Elders in the Australian research community. I feel very honoured to be standing here before you today, to deliver the Radford Address – a most significant marker of Australian scholarship in Education Studies, as a distinctive and by various measures highly successful field of academic-intellectual inquiry. Bill Radford was one of those Elders I am referring to, here, one in a long line of distinguished figures in Australian educational history. Looking specifically at the list of previous Radford speakers, from Kim Beazley Snr on, I am humbled to be in their company, and I thank Noel, as Immediate Past President, and AARE more generally for their invitation to me to come before you and speak out of my own history of scholarship to the issue at hand today – namely, what I have called, perhaps rather enigmatically, "the (im)possibility of the project".

You will excuse me, I hope, if I labour the point: I am concerned at once with possibility *and* impossibility. The two are to be thought together, as co-implicative, or rather, as necessarily, inescapably contaminated each with the other. This is what thinking difference looks like, or thinking relationally. I want to engage here both

with the possibility *and* the impossibility of the educational project – and to suggest something of what it means to say this.

What is it, then, to locate what has been described as a constitutive (im)possibility at the very heart of education, which, as we know, is quintessentially a human social project? What are the consequences and implications of doing so? What does it mean for action, for *praxis*, and also for sustaining and furthering a sense of hope, of possibility – not simply what might be, but also, importantly, what *could* and perhaps *should* be? My presentation today is specifically addressed, then, to the theme of the (im)possibility of the educational project. I shall draw from philosophy, literature, psychoanalysis and history, as well as educational scholarship, to explore what it means to take this theme of (im)possibility seriously, in this context, as we look back as well as forward, in our being-together here and now.

Alexander Mackie and the Project of Teacher Education

Let me introduce you to another of our Elders. Alexander Mackie was the foundation Principal of Sydney Teachers College. Born, educated and trained in Scotland, where he taught briefly[1], he took up the Sydney position in 1906. This was one of the first of the new Teachers Colleges in Australia, as a new and comprehensive program of teacher education was installed across the nation, within the terms of reference of what has become known as the New Education – part of a new enthusiasm for public education as a necessary aspect of nation-building, post-Federation, and what a commentator has described as an educational renaissance in this country (Turney, 1983). Mackie was one of a number of remarkable educators, right across Australia in the early years of the twentieth century, who sought to open up new possibilities in and through state-sponsored schooling, for all children and young people. He was a teacher educator, first and foremost, although he later became the inaugural Professor of Education at the University of Sydney. As well, he was active in the establishment of the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER), under the auspices of the Carnegie Foundation, and indeed served for many years on the Council's Executive (Connell, 1980). He died in 1955. He is therefore a significant figure in the history of teacher education, public schooling and educational research in Australia.

I want to focus here on Mackie's work in teacher education. For him, teaching was a *vocation*. I use this term quite deliberately, in the sense of a calling, though thoroughly worldly. But he did not see this as something that one was, so to speak, necessarily born into or born for, something natural; rather, there was an important, even crucial, role for preparing and sustaining good teachers – for "teacher training", as was the common usage then. "[I]t is being more and more fully realised", Mackie (1907) observed in a speech delivered to the Teachers' Guild, soon after arriving in

Sydney and taking up his new position, "that a successful educational system is impossible without a professionally trained body of teachers". Moreover, as he continued, "the personality and high professional character of the teacher is an essential, indeed the essential factor" (Mackie, 1907). He went on to say that "the adequate training of the teacher is the essential condition of the success of our educational system" (Mackie, 1907). His vision of what was entailed in an adequate form of teacher training – his sense of teacher education as itself a *project* – involved a rich professional *and* intellectual (liberal) education. The following is worth citing in full:

> The teacher must be so trained that he will be able to carry on effectively and intelligently the work of education. He must be alive to and interested in current social problems . . . He must possess intellectual ability, and a high standard of knowledge; he must have professional skill, as well as sympathy, and he must be a person of high personal character. Unless teachers of such a type can be secured and kept, the efficiency of the schools will be endangered, *for neither building, equipment, nor administration can take the place of well-qualified teachers.* (Mackie, 1907, italics added)

He might have been speaking to the Education Revolution, a hundred years on.

Mackie (1907) saw the work of teacher education as crucial. It was, above all else, a matter of *formation*. The figure of the Teacher was the goal, the Grail, at once empirical and symbolic, and impossibly so, or at least imperfectly and uncomfortably, bringing together as it did pedagogic and social authority, the pastoral and the bureaucratic, social power and the unruly play of meaning, Polis and Psyche. Mackie's struggles in this regard are quite well documented. While he enjoyed a close working relationship with Peter Board, the visionary Director of Public Instruction in NSW in the immediate post-Federation period, he ran into difficulties with Board's more bureaucratically-inclined successor, S. H. Smith. Mackie and Smith had very different visions of teaching and teacher education – of what makes for a good teacher[2]. I am quite fascinated by their relationship, I must say, not simply as a matter of historical interest, but because it stages what becomes intelligible as a powerful symbolic scenario, one that resonates to the present day. Mackie from the very outset of his career wanted a system that encouraged and supported the development of what he saw as the fully professional teacher, knowledgeable *and* capable, and he was prepared to do anything he could to make this happen. Smith's emphasis was more instrumental, more oriented to the needs of workforce planning (staffing) and budgetary efficiencies, although he was equally concerned with schooling as a moral(ising) enterprise. Doubtless there was a clash of personalities here, but it was also clearly more than that: an ideological struggle over what counts as a professional

teacher, and hence of what constitutes a profession, with specific regard to public-popular schooling. In the battle with bureaucracy, Mackie was bound to fail. As his biographer observes of the latter period of his career, "during the years remaining to him as Principal and Professor, Mackie was often to come into conflict with his superiors", namely "the Public Service Board and Government and Department officials" (Baillie, 1968: 218). There was certainly much contention over that should be taught in the College, and what the College was for:

> Mackie and Smith were often at issue over the courses to be offered at College, Mackie aiming always at a full professional course, rich in culture and if possible, crowned with a University degree . . . Smith, on the other hand, felt that there should be instruction in the actual subject matter [of the school], coupled with a sound training in methods and techniques. (Baillie, 1968, p. 244)

Smith eventually was active in establishing a second Teachers College in rural-regional NSW, in Armidale, which he hoped would be much closer to his own vision and values, and in many ways it was. That is a story for another occasion – a tale of two Colleges. Meanwhile Mackie worked through the darkening days of economic downturn, fiscal stringencies, and the Depression in dogged pursuit of his sense of what should be, and indeed at considerable personal cost. He retired in 1940.

Why have I lingered on this moment in history? What is to be learnt from it, here? In considering this question I want to shift register at this point, and turn to matters of theory and philosophy. At issue, I suggest, is the question of *practice* – of how to understand the concept of practice, or perhaps the issue is how to grasp practice as concept. With colleagues, I have been developing a cross-disciplinary research program focused on professional practice, learning and education. We have been particularly concerned, at the outset, with understanding and researching professional practice – with developing a rich account of (professional) practice, as an object of scholarly study in itself, and within what we hope will become a larger programmatic exercise in what has been called philosophical-empirical inquiry. Work to date raises and explores intriguing and evocative questions of integrity and complexity, ethics and politics, subjectivity and the body, place and space, being and becoming. Out of all this, I shall single out the notion of practical knowledge and its relation to professional judgment.

Central to this is the concept of *phronēsis*. A term from Greek Antiquity, Aristotle mobilises it to refer to that form of knowledge, or knowing, that is associated with practice and experience. *Phronēsis*, or phronetic knowledge, is that which issues from and in *praxis*, from the situated activity of practice, from practice-*ing*. This is most certainly not conventional, propositional, codifiable knowledge, in any form – indeed, whether it can ever be codified is still a matter of debate. As my colleague Stephen

Kemmis (in press) argues, it is not at all a *positive* knowledge; rather, it is "a kind of *negative space* for knowledge". As he writes, further: "The disposition – the virtue – of *phronēsis* belongs to wisdom, a more elusive, negative kind of knowledge". It is this that I think is at the heart of professional practice, and hence of teaching and teacher education alike. Yet there is an important sense in which it is *not* teachable – and hence it cannot be realised in the curriculum of teacher education, or indeed in professional education more generally. How then is professional learning and professional education possible?

This suggests that there is what can only be understood as an unresolvable paradox at the heart of the project of teacher education – an *aporia*. This is again a term from the Ancient Greeks, most recently mobilised by Derrida in his meditations on justice, hospitability, ethics, friendship and democracy (Derrida, 1994, 1997, 2001). For me, *phronēsis* links as readily and necessarily to aporia as it does to praxis, though it must also be said that the three are best thought together, as interrelated aspects of the practice concept (Green, 2009a). I have sought to represent that relationship as follows:

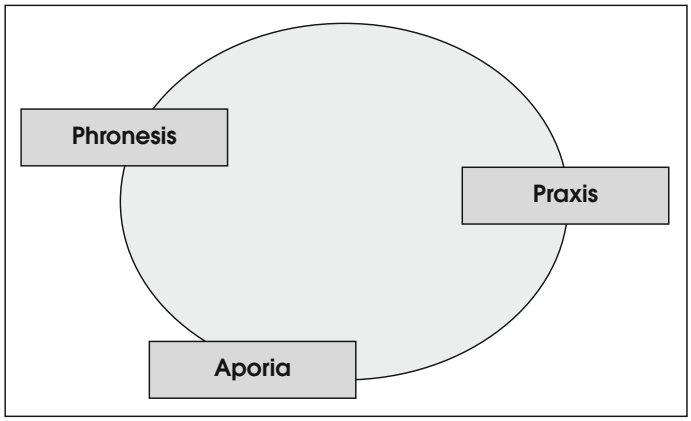

Figure 1: Thinking Practice

Aporia involves in turn another critical relationship: between *undecidability* and *decision* (Critchley, 1999, p. 109) – or what has been described, more fully, as the ethics of undecidability and the politics of decision. This is surely the fundamental dilemma of professional practice, enacted constantly and even unceasingly, at all levels: the impossibility of knowing enough, of having enough information on the basis of which to make the right decision, in all the urgency and drama of the moment; and yet, the necessity of doing so, of acting, of moving on – the imperative to act, and doing so, but without guarantees. This, then, is something of what I mean when I refer to the (im)possibility of the project. Teaching *and* teacher education alike are thoroughly caught up in this essential, inescapable dilemma, as practices in themselves, but also because teaching – pedagogy *as* practice – is the very object of

teacher education, its *raison d'etre.* And yet we all too often underestimate the sheer complexity of what this entails, or what it requires.

The Impossible Profession(s)

Freud famously linked education with psychoanalysis and politics as what he called the impossible professions. Actually this was somewhat differently expressed at different moments in his work and picked up variously by his commentators. Early on, he referred to "three impossible professions – educating, healing, and government" (Freud, year, cited in Felman, 1997, p. 17). Later, he formulated this as follows:

> It almost looks as if analysis were the third of those "impossible" professions in which one can be sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfactory results. The other two, which have been known much longer, are education and government. (Standard, XXIII, 248, cited in Felman, 1997)

While it is not my concern here to articulate fully how these three fields are to be thus brought together, it is worth observing that they are all what might be called professional practice fields, and they are all in some way or another realised in and through language. You may have noted, moreover, that Freud speaks in this regard of "be[ing] sure beforehand of achieving unsatisfactory results" – an intriguing, somewhat unsettling idea.

Deborah Britzman (2009) has recently extended her remarkable *oeuvre* into a fascinating consideration of this very matter. She addresses what she calls "the very thought of education" (p. 2) – how education itself is to be *thought* – drawing not just on psychoanalysis as such, but also literature and education, including teacher education. As she puts it, "the very thought of education is difficult to think" (Britzman, 2009, p. 2). This is very far from policy-speak. Its intelligibility is, I suggest, of a quite different order, a quite different register – and yet it is crucial that we allow such things to be said, to enter into the complicated conversation that brings us together here, and now. For Britzman, and for other scholars such as Shoshana Felman (1997) and James Donald (1992), at the heart of the educational enterprise is the question of *subjectivity*, understood through the lenses of not simply psychoanalysis but also philosophy – more specifically, that post-Cartesian, post-Kantian philosophy which problematises the human subject as a self-possessing, author-it(er)ative identity. As Britzman (2009, p. 3) writes:

> [W]hat can it mean to think the thought of education as experience, as pedagogy, as affect, as uneven development, as intersubjectivity, and as the basis of the transference and the countertransference[?]

It is in this context that she refers to the "constitutive impossibility of education" (Britzman, 2009, p. 16).

Britzman devotes a chapter specifically to "the impossible professions" as such, although the book as a whole is working through this theme. She points to the uncertainty that permeates them from the outset, their psychosocial complexity, their characteristic affectivity, their participation within dynamic networks and practices of power and desire. "The idea of an impossible profession", she writes,

> affects us because it proposes a constitutive discontinuity, a lack the profession represses, negates, and projects into others. The impossible professions are a terrible remainder of what is most incomplete, arbitrary, and archaic in us and in the events of working with others (Britzman, 2009, pp. 129-130).

That is, there is something in these fields, these professions, which makes them (always) necessarily incomplete, or lacking – inescapably imperfect. It is in this context that she refers to "teacher education as an unfinished project" (Britzman, 2009, p. 144), though it may be that it is better described as an *unfinishable* project. The work of education is interminable, that is, in much the same way as (psycho)analysis is, or the work of government. "Education itself", she writes, "will be interminable because it is always incomplete and because it animates our own incompleteness" (Britzman, 2009, p. 3). The enterprise is thus inherently unsatisfactory, marked as it is by a fundamental, enduring lack – or, as I prefer, it is (im)possible.

Part of this has to do with the very nature of knowledge, and the role and significance of the unconscious in this regard, of what it means to take up the subject-position of teacher, and being positioned as the Subject of Knowledge –"the subject supposed to know". There is an important connection here between what goes on in schools and what happens in doctoral research education, although this is rarely recognised or appreciated (Green, 2005). Hence the force of Britzman's (2009, p. 144) observation that "[t]he subject supposed to know is a pernicious figure in the history of educational institutions". Again we are drawn to consider what I have previously described as knowledge's negativity, or the dark side of knowledge. The unthinkable in Thought itself.

I want to shift at this point to address what is arguably at the very core of education *and* of teaching, and that is the exchange itself, the encounter. This is the pedagogical relationship between teacher and learner, teaching and learning. It is best understood, I suggest, and above all else, as a communicative practice – as communication. But how are we to think about communication? Or, rather: how might we think *differently* about communication, and hence about curriculum and education more generally? The commonsensical starting-point is to think about this in terms of a transmission model. That in turn has its more and less sophisticated versions. But what characterises the model generally is, firstly, the commitment to an over-arching

logic of identity, and secondly, relatedly, its enframing within what Michael Peters (1998) and others have called the modernist philosophy of the subject. The transaction is relatively simple and straightforward, save only for technical or engineering problems; the message in its own inviolable identity moves more or less readily through a passage, a conduit, between a sender and a receiver, each equally inviolate, and self-sufficient. Such is the Dream of Reason. It is repeated throughout our logocentric history, most recently in our engagements with technology. But we need to ask what is added in these exchanges, what difference(s) are introduced, what (ex)changes? What is *different*, now?

Gert Biesta is one scholar who has led the way in thinking along these lines. Pointing to the limits of the Enlightenment (while acknowledging its achievements) and observing that "Kant's philosophy led to a subject-centred analysis of the reality of education", which he finds misguided and misleading, he asks: "How is education possible?" In his work, he expressly links education and communication, pragmatism and deconstruction, and problematises what he calls "the metaphor of 'transmission'" (Vanderstraeten & Biesta, 2006, p. 165). Drawing from Dewey and Derrida, he develops a powerful critique of the "transcendental view of communication", preferring what he describes as participatory and deconstructive views and versions, seeing in them a richer, more complex, and hence more adequate and appropriate understanding of educational reality. I concur wholeheartedly. As I have written recently of the relationship between curriculum and communication, there is much to be gained by thinking again and anew the communicative character of educational practice, and by taking difference seriously, as a *resource* rather than a problem (Green, 2009b). For Biesta (2004, pp. 12-13), "education is located not in the activities of the teacher, nor in the activities of the learner, but in the interaction between the two". He thus wants to emphasise "the gap between the teacher and the learner" (p. 13), which he sees as irreducible, and productively so. Moreover: "the gap between the teacher and the student is not something that should be overcome, *because it is this very gap that makes communication – and hence education – possible*" (Biesta, 2004, p. 13, emphasis added). The difference is constitutive: it makes a difference. This is Gregory Ulmer's (1985, p. 162) point, too, when he states that "every pedagogic exposition, like every reading, *adds something to what it transmits*" (emphasis added). "Teachers teach and learners learn – and the difference remains" (Green, 2009b).

I want to foreground the concept of pedagogy here. This is because, as I see it, it is pedagogy that needs to be focused on, as the motivating, organising centre of education – it is pedagogy that makes education what it is, as a distinctive human activity. But this is nonetheless something which is much misunderstood, perhaps because it is at once so familiar and yet so strange, so seemingly awkward on the tongue, even now, at this present time of renewed interest in the term and the

concept. It is something that has a long educational history, in fact, pre-dating schooling in its modern form, as David Hamilton and others have taught us. Undoubtedly it featured in Mackie's curriculum at Sydney Teachers College, and elsewhere across the country, although by then it had become largely associated with 'method' – and, at least hitherto, the special province of Masters and Mistresses of Method. We are beginning now to understand the concept more fully, however, in all its rich complexity, partly taking into account European educational traditions and discourses and partly by virtue of gathering in the insights and arguments of Continental philosophy (Hamilton, 1999, 2009). As well, there has been important empirical and conceptual work done recently in this regard in Australia, and elsewhere (Alexander, 2000, 2008; Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006). It seems to me particularly useful to think of *pedagogy as practice*, first of all, which means necessarily accounting for its practice traditions as well as its material-semiotic contexts and conditions.

In my own work I have proposed that pedagogy is best and most appropriately conceived as *teaching **for** learning* (Green, 1998). This account brings together teaching and learning, teacher and learner(s), which is common enough. But what is different here is that what is thematised and emphasised is, first, the relationality of the relation – the need to think the two together, without privileging either – and second, the complex asymmetry of the relation. That is, while neither term is privileged over the other, both are, in effect. This is the condition of *undecidability*, in Derrida's sense, a distinctive logic, as he argues, with its own productivity, its own value. Hence, teaching is *for* learning – learning is its *reason d'etre*, its object, its authorising, organising principle. Teaching is what it is ("teaching") only if and when learning happens. Teaching is thus dependent on and (as it were) determined by learning. As Biesta (2009, p. 105) writes: "[I]f teaching is to have any effect at all upon students it is first of all because of the activities and interpretations of the students". This is "the deconstructive 'nature' of education" for Biesta:

> [t]he fact that the successful transmission of knowledge or skills from the teacher depends upon the interpretations by students of what is being taught – interpretations that are never determined by the teaching and, therefore, always contains the risk of misunderstanding and misinterpretation. This shows that the very condition of possibility of successful education is also its condition of impossibility. (Biesta, 2009, p. 106)

Such a view can be seen as conventional enough, and quite familiar: another version of learner-centredness. But how is learning itself conceived? What are its boundaries, its limits, its forms and modes of existence? How is learning *known*? How is it to be named and claimed, as such? We have developed certain disciplinary technologies for

doing this, of course, but these are inevitably technologies of (en)closure – arbitrary, and always exclusive, partial. Learning therefore must be grasped as a non-identity, or outside the logic of identity altogether, as difference. What then is the *object* of teaching? Teaching is *for* learning. Pedagogy is teaching for difference.

I have evoked this elsewhere, in referring to the pedagogical imagination: the imagination of otherness (Green, 2003a). Teaching in such a view necessarily reaches into the realm of the unknown, into otherness, into the future. Surely this is to restore to teaching something of its dignity, its necessity, even its heroism, however mundane. The gap remains, is irreducible, difference persists. And yet teaching continues, the project goes on . . . This opens up an ethical concern for the other, for otherness, for "the impossible possibility of the in-coming of the other" (Biesta, 2009, p. 107). An ethics of pedagogy is caught up, then, with the logic of difference:

> As long as the gap between teaching and learning continues to exist, there is at least the opportunity for the in-coming of the other – of the coming into the world of new beginnings and new beginners. (Biesta, 2009, p. 107)

This is the realm of Arendt's *natality*, of Deleuzian emergence, of Derrida's rich sense of the futural.

Here I want to mention a doctoral dissertation that I examined this year, by Sam Sellar, whose work on "the ethico-affective dimension of pedagogy" (Sellar, 2009a, p. 47) is surely one of the most useful contributions to scholarship in this area. Elsewhere he describes pedagogy as "an inherently relational, emergent, and non-linear process that is unpredictable and therefore unknowable in advance" (Sellar, 2009b, p. 351). Following Bauman, he contrasts "being-for" with both "being-aside" and "being-with", and writes that "[t]he potential emergence of being-for inheres in the quality of situations. It cannot be predicted and neither can its arrival be justified after the event" (Sellar, 2009b, p. 357). Sellar's concern is therefore for what he describes as "the responsible uncertainty of pedagogy", which nicely complements Britzman's (2009, p. 37) call for "a psychoanalytic pedagogy of uncertainty". What I take from this is that it is the *practice* of pedagogy, in the complex sense of practice-theorists such as Schatzki and Kemmis, that matters most, ethically and politically, and that offers the fullest horizon of (im)possibility. Lather (2007, p. 16) proposes that what is "precisely the task [is] *to situate the experience of impossibility as an enabling site for working through aporias*" (emphasis added). This conceptual and semantic field, then, is central to what has been called the primacy-of-practice thesis (Green, 2009c), and it presents to my mind perhaps the greatest challenge to the field: an open question, and one to which we must respond. What does all this mean for teacher education, for teaching teachers, for teaching the impossible profession?

"The Machinery Never Quite Works"

To this point I have focused attention primarily on what I have called the project of teacher education. It's appropriate now, and timely, to turn to considering more explicitly the related projects of public schooling and educational research, and also to (re)turn to history. The three projects are, in fact, quite complicatedly interrelated, and indeed in various ways are parasitic on each other. Public schooling came first, of course, historically, as it were calling both teacher education and educational research into being, although now they might be said to enjoy a complicated co-existence, each with the other(s) – despite various 'flights'…

Public schooling emerged and was consolidated over the nineteenth century, first in the United Kingdom and then in Australia, being formally legislated here in the 1880s. Following Federation, the ambit of the comprehensive school was extended to the post-primary, secondary phase, while primary education was further refined and strengthened. I want to insist that public schooling can be and is appropriately understood as a *project* – a probe into the future, marked by a real sense of hope, of yearning, and encapsulating a vision of bringing together enlightenment and emancipation, knowledge and freedom. This was surely the promise of imagining the schools as free, secular, and compulsory, and deeply engaged in the work of nation-building. But public schooling can equally be seen as a *program*: a practical realisation of what is deemed socially desirable tempered by what is historically or circumstantially possible, or do-able. I have elsewhere (Green, 2003b) suggested that programs are to be understood as necessarily, indeed inescapably disjunctive with both 'discourses' and 'effects' – that is, the practices and institutions that we initiate and install, in seeking to manage both the social and the symbolic, cannot be traced back in any straightforward fashion to rationales, arguments, theories and concepts *or* to what actually happens. This is not to say that no such relation exists, rather that it is much more tenuous and complex than often assumed.

Drawing on history and theory, cultural studies and psychoanalysis, Donald's (1992) account of education, media, power and the popular remains relevant and resonant in this regard. As he indicates, it is important to supplement our account with "stories not just about reason and intentionality", or rationality, but with due reference and respect as well for "the messy dynamics of desire, fantasy and transgression" (Donald, 1992, pp. 15-16). He points to the contingency of programs, technologies, strategies. Tracing the emergence of mass schooling alongside other public-popular institutions, he draws attention to the convergence and articulation of various cultural inventions: notably the teacher and the curriculum, but also, of course, the school itself and the classroom, in more or less the form we know them today. Importantly he highlights the tension in post-Enlightenment societies between the twin goals of individualisation and socialisation. Just as much as state and government more

generally, teachers are caught in a dilemma, "charged with a mission that is at once essential and impossible" (Donald, 1992, p. 141). The issue, again, is how to understand and work with poststructuralist and psychoanalytic notions of *subjectivity*, not just individually or personally but also across the social field, and at different levels – that is, of the interplay of subjection and subjectification. "The machinery never quite works", as he puts it (Donald, 1992, p. 93). There is always an excess, a remainder. Governmentality is always fraught with complexity, with contradiction and contingency, and risk. Public schooling lies within this ambit, at once compulsory and compromised, and constantly caught up in managing its own breakdown. "There is now a general consensus that public education systems in the English speaking world are[,] at best, in difficulty, or at worst, in crisis" (Campbell & Sherington, 2006, p. 1). Some might say that this has been the case from the outset, although the historical record is mixed in this regard.

There are links here with the project of educational research. In an earlier Radford Address, Richard Selleck (1989) told of how the field was historically implicated in the nineteenth-century emergence of a new understanding of science, a new faith in "the power of scientific detachment and objectivity" (p. 7), and "a growing interest in statistical work" (p. 5). Speaking of the Manchester Statistical Society, he indicates how educational research became intelligible within the larger disciplinary platform of the social sciences, and new interests in power and statistics became linked to government. Manchester itself was representative of what was perceived to be and experienced as a growing urban crisis, as documented not only by Friedrich Engels but also by James Kay-Shuttleworth, architect of public schooling and teacher education alike, and furthermore an early and influential member of the Manchester Statistical Society. Education thus became inescapably associated with both dream and nightmare, and arguably remains so today.

Bill Connell (1980) and others have traced the development of educational research in Australia, with early work at Sydney and Melbourne Teachers Colleges leading organically into and being subsumed in the work of the Carnegie-sponsored Australian Council for Educational Research. Mackie himself was convinced of the power and value of experimental (i.e., scientific) inquiry, as well as being a firm advocate of the New Education, and of "progressivism" more generally. For him and for others of his period, *and* subsequently, education became articulated with science and more specifically with psychology and measurement. What must be recognised and acknowledged, however, is firstly the *ambivalence* of this new scientific project – something Freud became particularly insistent on – and secondly the need to engage the aporias and associated dilemmas that mark the new social space. These arise because account must be taken *simultaneously* of the population and the individual, as related *social* categories, moreover on various scales – classroom,

school, city, nation, etc[3]. A turn to the child notwithstanding, and despite similarly a growing concern for so-called individual differences, the logics of populational reasoning and the new order of discourse was such that teachers, and teacher educators, struggled to manage what was clearly impossible . . .

The Sense of an Ending, or Final Mediations on the (Im)possible

Is this how it ends, then? Is this what we are left with, at a time when clearly we are desperately in need of hope, as the world around us heats up and the seas rise, centimetre by centimetre? It was the Italian philosopher of praxis Antonio Gramsci who famously spoke of pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will, and we would do well to recall his words here, and his own larger project. What lessons might we take from his example, and that of many others? How to make sense of (im)possibility as a motif for educational theory and practice, now? That last question assumes, of course, that I am correct in claiming that (im)possibility matters. Although something that may have to remain hanging for the moment, or suspended (like your judgement . . .), I offer it nonetheless as a figure of speech, and a provocation.

I have sought here to put forward a number of different ways of understanding what this might mean, hoping that you will have attended to my presentation not just cognitively and intellectually but also affectively and as it were aesthetically. I want, in concluding, to connect the theme of (im)possibility to the notion of utopia, to utopian thought and also to literature, especially science fiction[4].

Fredric Jameson has called utopia, as a literary and philosophical genre, "a meditation on the impossible, on the unrealizable in its own right" (Jameson, 2005, p. 232). He links utopian thinking (including its dystopian variants and counterpoints) to the future, to thinking the future – for him, something that is deeply associated with the socialist and Marxist traditions he has spent a career and indeed a lifetime engaging and exploring. Another commentator, Tom Moylan, in reflecting on what he calls "the vocation of science fiction", points to " . . . the ways in which utopian writing not only negates the present but also generates the opportunity for a cognitive encounter with what might be and with what might be done to get there". As he writes, "the present is not just made impossible by the invocation of Utopia's horizon but also by the steps taken on the way . . . to it" (Moylan, 2008, pp. 82-83) – yet another sense of the impossible, you'll note, and this presented in a scholarly context "demanding the impossible" . . . Moylan continues thus: "[U]topian writing has always refused the limits of its present time even as it draws on its possibilities in order to produce an alternative version/vision of reality that works as both an indictment of the enclosed present and a projection of forward movement". This is, moreover, as he puts it, "a projection whose power lies not in its ideologically bound representation of 'real' political solutions but rather in *its*

pedagogical provocation of new thinking and new action" (Moylan, 2008, pp. 83-84, emphasis added).

Education too has its utopian dimension (Halpin, 2003). However this is not, I submit, to be best understood within the terms and frames that the field has understood itself historically, that is, as an inherently perfectible enterprise – a dream of Science. Rather, it has to do with its *vocation*, as a project that is necessarily invested with a sense of hope, of possibility, despite the challenges that beset it, pragmatically, ethico-politically, epistemologically, and ontologically.

I want to evoke here, finally, a literary work of astonishing beauty and power, a scarifying vision of humanity and its limits, and of what has been called the more-than-human world *in extremis*. This is Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*[5]. What endures and resonates with me is the image of carrying the fire, in the passage of a man and his son through a desolate landscape, towards an improbable future. "You have to carry the fire" (McCarthy, 2006, p. 234). We watch a child walking alone into an uncertain future, towards the faltering, flickering promise of light.

Early this year, I was privileged to attend a concert in what was clearly[6] the last Australian tour of another of our Elders, the Canadian singer and songwriter Leonard Cohen, and now I speak not simply of a generation but of all of us, as human beings as well as educators. Among the memorable words and images, sounds and silences, were these lines: "Ring the bells that still can ring / Forget your perfect offering / There is a crack, a crack in everything / That's how the light gets in" (Cohen, 1997) – it caught the imagination, and the heart ("That's how the light gets in…"). In this presentation, then, I have outlined, as best I can, what it means to see what *we* do as, misquoting Adorno[7], *work on the (im)possible*. That is, an imperfect, ongoing project to make out of where we are now, and where we have come from, a resource for going on, for moving on, for getting things done, in a World charged with (im)possibility.

Endnotes

[1] He subsequently became a lecturer at University College of North Wales, Bangor, before moving to his new position in Australia (Baillie, 1968).

[2] See Green and Reid (2002) in this regard.

[3] More recently of course, account needs to be taken of the global scale (e.g., PISA).

[4] I acknowledge here two linked special issues of *Arena Journal*, both addressed to these very same issues – Nos. 25/26, 2006 ("Imagining the Future: Utopia and Dystopia") and No. 31, 2008 ("Demanding the Impossible: Utopia and Dystopia").

[5] For an excellent account of the novel framed expressly as a "critical dystopia", see Ryan (2008). As he writes: "Rather than dismissing the chance of utopia, the critical dystopia contains, within its dismal setting, a warning against the present and a hope for a transformed future – a future that might avoid the conditions described within the text" (Ryan, 2008, p. 152).

[6] In revising this text for publication, I am uncomfortably aware that Cohen is once again about to tour Australia – another last time . . .

[7] Cited Britzman (2009, p. 141).

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