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making modern lives: subjectivity, schooling and social change

Julie McLeod and Lyn Yates, State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, USA, 2006, 276 pp., ISBN: 978-0-7914-6767-1, £65.50 (HbK)

Making Modern Lives is a rare educational study in that it engages throughout in substantive methodological issues with a distinct lightness of touch. The authors carry out an eight-year longitudinal study of twenty-six school-children (fourteen girls and twelve boys) during the years 1993–2000 in four Australian schools, institutions chosen because they differ in terms of class and ethnic composition. The young people's lives are recorded at school through qualitative interviews, and then immediately beyond school through further interviews. McLeod and Yates examine how gendered, classed and 'raced' patterns of inequality are reproduced in the lives of the adolescents, yet sometimes transformed and resisted by students during secondary school and through career choice. What is compelling about this research is that it interweaves different, sometimes epistemologically separate methodologies for analysing the interview data in ways that take the reader not only beyond 'older' sociological theories about social structures, oppression and social reproduction, but also beyond 'newer' theories of power, and ideas about the discursive construction of the subject. The lightness occurs because one enters into detailed exploration of methodology through the authors' reflective interpretation of the students' narration of their own lives and choices.

The main methodological concern of the book is how to empirically research identity and power, and as such it conforms to the turn to subjectivity by social theory in the 1990s. McLeod and Yates tell us that in the 1970s social theory had described the formation of gendered, classed and 'raced' identity through the concept of socialisation and the internalisation of roles imposed by external structures. By the early 1990s however these explanations had largely been replaced by the concept of discourse and the social construction of subjectivity by power and knowledge relations. They applaud this methodological shift because it allows for more complex ways of understanding politics, power and identity. However they also problematise the term discourse, arguing its deployment creates a flat picture of the person as its cipher. They are concerned to explore how educational discursive practices are encountered and mediated by the individual person in ways that involve agency and 'the psychological projects and desires of individual boys and girls' (p. 31).

McLeod and Yates' methodological strategies for analysing the interview data combine the following: Foucault's concept of discourse and of 'technologies of the self' and of 'governmentality'; Bourdieu's theory of economic and cultural capital, and of 'habitus', 'field' and disposition'; Giddens' thesis of the structuration of agency, and his concern with 'biographical projects and reflexivity'; psychoanalytic informed understandings of desire; and Butlerian notions of performativity that use Foucault's concept of subjectivity for a feminist reading of gender identity. The result is not a 'pick and mix' of clashing ideas, but rather a persuasive synthesis of different theoretical positions where the strengths of each are highlighted. The overall methodological framework eschews overarching, universal explanations and models of the subject and power, and attends to the specificity of the historical and political context of educational practice and lived identity, where the young person is understood to be both constructed and instrumental in constructing herself.

McLeod and Yates place the lived subjectivity of the students within the social and political context of the neo-liberal shift of government in Australia. They argue that the 1990s witnessed a transformation in the economic system, a de-traditionalisation of the world of work, and the emergence of a new cultural order. They examine the extent to which neo-liberal strategies have shaped the identities and life outcomes of the adolescents differently to that of their parents, and the extent to which the same social patterns are reproduced. However, they move beyond how the individual student is governed by the requirements of the new cultural order and new patterns of work, to one that involves how the student constructs him/herself according to the possibilities opened up for more fluid identities. In examining self-formation, McLeod and Yates do so through positing adolescence as a distinct period of embodied emotional and psychological change in the human life course. They explore how this particular important stage of embodied subjectivity is lived through engagement between family formation and public institution, and conclude that families, schools and young people forge new identities relationally.

McLeod and Yates' main questions concern: How is the adolescent's sense of self and subjectivity shaped? What does the adolescent bring from her/his own family and her/his biography to what she encounters at school? In what ways is the individual's path through school 'traditional', and in what respects are there signs of a new era or a 'de-traditionalisation' of society? What keeps patterns of old inequalities recreating themselves in new contexts? What kind of thing is subjectivity and how is it formed? How does subjectivity develop and how might it change? In what sense is one person's story 'evidence'? As researchers, how could they tell? What is their own role in the stories they elicited from the students and the interpretations they made from their conversations? These are substantive and focussed questions about theory and methodological ways of proceeding and writing. The result is an intriguing account of how Australian state policy,

constructed within the larger context of Western neo-liberalism and globalisation, and of structures of gender, class and 'race', are enacted at the local site of school culture, and the effects of these on young people's choices, future plans, political values and sense of self. The overall effect is that a methodological space has been opened for analysing social division by dismantling the theoretical boundaries that keep separate Marxist, Foucauldian and psychological ideas about the self and power. As such *Making Modern Lives* is a *tour de force* of feminist poststructuralism entering the field of educational research.

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