Int Rev Educ (2014) 60:303–305
DOI 10.1007/s11159-014-9415-3

BOOK REVIEW

The confessing society: Foucault, confession and practices of lifelong learning

By Andreas Fejes and Magnus Dahlstedt. Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2013, 137 pp. ISBN 978-0-415-58166-0 (hbk), ISBN 978-0-415-66037-2 (pbk), ISBN 978-0-203-81817-6 (e-book)

David A. L. Coldwell

Published online: 21 May 2014

The principal contribution of this book is to employ a Foucault-inspired analysis of confession in the lifelong learning process by adopting the core concepts of *technologies of power* and *technologies of self,* using four empirical examples taken from:

- student behaviour correction;
- care workers' professionalisation;
- adult students' educational guidance; and
- parental coaching.

The authors state: "Our hope is that our narrative will make visible the naturalness and the taken-for-granted-ness of the present and will show how confession has become a powerful technology in the shaping of citizens" (p. 22). They add that "the aim of our narrative is rather to disrupt the discourses that are currently taken for granted and perceived as natural, good and true, and to make these discourses stutter" (ibid). Whether the authors succeed in doing this, or indeed whether there is anything special to be gained in this largely abstract analysis for the practical educational process of lifelong learning needs further elaboration and justification.

The book starts with an introduction to the "confessing society" with Foucault as its central theoretical pillar. His heuristics of "technologies of power and self" provide the central conceptual focus to the ensuing critical analysis. Technologies of power concern the ways in which the self is objectified and shaped by certain ends or domination. Technologies of self are those which individuals utilise to try to constitute themselves as subjects and to transform themselves to desired states of happiness, purity, wisdom or even immortality.

D. A. L. Coldwell (✉)
School of Economic and Business Sciences, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
e-mail: david.coldwell@wits.ac.za

This is followed in Chapter 1 by a brief history of confession by tracing its origins in the care of self during the Greco-Roman period and the emergence of confession as a specific vehicle in Christianity for the redemption of sins and ultimate salvation. The authors then complete the chapter by connecting confession to the core topic of the book, that of lifelong learning.

Although this is perhaps the most interesting and lucid chapter of the book, there appears to be no mention of the possibility of cynicism in the act of confession itself, whereby an act of confession is no longer an outpouring of honest introspection, but a means of displaying "feelings of self-importance and superiority" (Nietzsche 2003, p. 13). The authors thus do not appear to have been able to make their narrative "discourses stutter", to the extent that they have not fully analysed how confessions can be cynically used to meet a particular individual's ends and are sometimes used as masks in themselves. This aspect is manifest in Foucault's description of the case of the murderer Pierre Rivière trying to show the authorities of the time the rational premeditated nature of his crimes and, by doing so, to justify the death penalty which he sought (Foucault 1975).

Chapter 2 discusses the importance of reflection on and reflective practices in action. Reflective practices are seen as a way to improve professional practices particularly in education. However, such practices as the authors show have utility in other professional situations, for example that of elderly care workers, through the use of log-books (technologies of self) and the use of reflection itself as a desirable professional activity directed by prevailing technologies of power discourse pertaining to elderly care work itself.

Chapter 3 analyses interviews with staff from two different schools on Social and Emotional Training (SET) and Aggression Replacement Training (ART), two American-inspired sources which have been used as therapeutic interventions in Sweden. The authors show how such therapeutic interventions aim to shape and foster desirable democratic citizens through the arts of motivating, acknowledging, calculating and collaborating. The authors state (p. 56) in this regard that: "A democratic subject is one who can live a productive and well-behaved life without any aggressive or ill-placed behavior." In other words, people moulded by the prevailing technologies of power and self will become desirable democratic citizens. An important observation made here by the authors is the prevailing, largely global attitude to talent and the achievability of success in life. People are told that *everyone* can be successful if they simply master and change themselves to muster their full potential. The authors appear rightly sceptical to this injunction, which must rank among the biggest and most widely communicated falsehoods ever imposed by educational bodies in particular on their gullible citizenry. The idea that *everyone* can achieve success, even in particularly narrow or limited fields of human endeavour, is the source of widespread unhappiness, frustration and aggression among those who fall by the wayside.

Chapter 4 turns its attention to the issue of Lifelong Guidance, which the authors note has become an important policy in the European Union. Lifelong guidance is seen in Swedish society as no longer requiring a counsellor or teacher as each citizen becomes their own counsellor. However, the authors note that although this shift in learning focus appears to liberate the individual as they are no longer

governed through society as such, they nevertheless remain governed through the encouragement of honest confession and the *regulated* educational choices offered for self-actualisation. Thus, the authors maintain (p. 71), "Instead of power and governing becoming 'visible', governing is exercised at a distance."

Chapter 5, the penultimate chapter of the book, presents an interesting and insightful analysis of the burgeoning phenomenon of "medialised parenting". The authors cite the examples of the Swedish televised series of the *SOS Family*, the British *Supernanny* and the American *Nanny 911,* all of which present "experts" as advisors on how to cope with difficult children and discipline. Other medialised shows have tried to show how to deal with immature and spoiled young people in reality TV series like the British one appropriately called *Young, dumb and living off Mum!* Such technologies of power aim to persuade parents to make the right choices in bringing up their children and to follow the medialised expert advice. Through technologies of self, parents are advised to remould themselves to reach the pinnacle of parental wisdom and familial happiness. Those who choose not to make the choices proffered by the experts are doomed to ultimate failure.

The final chapter, entitled "Revisiting the confessing society", tries to bring the various, rather disparate strands of the arguments and evidence together. In this task the authors are only partly successful. Although they have noted and carefully documented the burgeoning importance of confession as a means of presenting oneself, "warts and all", to public scrutiny and thereby availing oneself, either through education as in lifelong learning, or through therapy, of the opportunity to reinvent oneself (and thus achieve wisdom, happiness and immortality through self-actualisation), they have not been able to convincingly show how contemporary society is "confessional". Nor have they been able to show how such confession links with lifelong learning in any meaningful, practical way. We are therefore left with an interesting and well-written book which uses Foucault-type analyses to disturb and deconstruct things which are taken for granted today. But at the end of the day, the reader is left asking: what practical purpose does this deconstruction serve?

References

Foucault, M. (Ed.) (1975). *I, Pierre Rivière, having slaughtered my mother, my sister and my brother… A case of parricide in the 19th century.* Translation by B. Kriegel. New York: Pantheon Books.

Nietzsche, F. (2003). In D. Breazeale (Ed.), *Untimely meditations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.