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ATTEMPTING A THEORY OF UNTIDINESS: AN INTERVIEW WITH STEPHEN J. BALL

The interview was carried out in Brno, on 16 November 2011, during a lecture visit at The Department of Educational Sciences, Faculty of Arts, Masaryk University, The Czech Republic. The interviewers were Milan Pol and Roman Švaříček.

Roman Švaříček (RŠ): *The first question is, you have become well known for the theme of micro-politics in schools, which brought into the field of academe broader debate among your colleagues. But I think this theme of arguing, political debate and gossip, and things like that, must remain unnoticed for a long time? How did you discover this theme?*

Stephen J. Ball (SJB): Well, as with many pieces of the work I have done, I have often started from a sense of the inadequacy of existing work. And as I was teaching a course on school organization and looking at the existing literature and research, and preparing work for students, I had this sense that there was a whole dimension of the life of organizations and schools that was missing. That everything was treated in terms of the formalities and the surface features, and the under-life of the organization, the interpersonal relationships, the rivalry, the competition, was missing. So I decided that I would explore this and try and write a book about this other side of organizations. And I drew on some of my own research and looked for some other pieces of research that had some insights into this. But it was really the sense that something was missing from organizational analysis.

RŠ: *And did you feel that you were proposing something which is not or should not be talked about, such as ideological struggles and debating things that are not always related to learning?*

SJB: Well, I think certainly in the literature that existed before, there was a sense in which there was a silence about those things, although I think that was partly to do with the way in which

researchers and writers thought about schools and other kinds or organizations. That they didn't think that the social life of schools was significant. But what I was trying to show was that these things were significant, even if they didn't seem to be quite respectable in the sense of gossip and ideological debate, and the key point for me was that when teachers read the book they recognized this. So people thought that this was a more realistic account of their everyday life in schools. And now in a sense, it has become accepted as something that has to be taken into account in the life of schools. When the book was published, it represented a significant change from the existing tradition of research in school organization, which was much more formal, much more to do with structures and processes and orderly relationships, really to do with the surface of schooling. And then a number of other people took the idea into their own research and there has been a lot more research in a similar style. But in many places that I go to it's still a book that people often refer to and it's been translated into a couple of other languages, Spanish in particular – as *La Micropolítica de la Escuela* – and it's extremely widely read in Spain and Latin America, so whenever I go to Latin America, people always say *La Micropolítica de la Escuela* – but for me it now seems a long time ago.

Milan Pol (MP): *So what made you move from the school itself to a higher level, so to say – to educational policy?*

SJB: Well, I'm interested in the different moments of policy. The school is one of those moments and I often return to the level of the school. I have just finished a research project, I finished in May, which was focused on how schools do policy and which was based on case studies of four schools. We spent two years, two and a half years, visiting these four schools, looking at how they processed national policy at the local level. So I haven't abandoned the school entirely. And there are some aspects of that analysis which reflect the micro-politics of the school. But I have also become interested in other moments of policy, in the sense that I see policy not as a thing but as a process. Policy moves through time and space. I have become interested in other spaces in which policy is done. After micro-politics I did a study of the major educational reforms in England. That was the Education Reform Act in 1988. And again, I was looking at the existing literature on policy analysis, and as with the micro-politics of the school, I had the sense that something was missing, that again it was all too structured and formal and organized. So I decided that what I would do was to identify the key participants in the policy and go and interview them and talk to them about how the policy was constructed – in a sense again to look at the under-life of policy. So I interviewed around 50 people who were involved – politicians,

civil servants, people from trade unions, other people who were involved as stakeholders or in the policy process in some ways and tried to make sense of again what seemed to be the very messy, untidy processes of policy, and I wanted to retain that untidiness. I wanted to try and in fact theorize untidiness. I didn't want to develop or use theory that would organize, tidy up the policy process. I wanted to try and develop a set of theoretical ideas that would capture and understand the messiness. And that's what I have done over a number of years, and I have done a number of other studies which have looked at different sides of policy. More recently I did a study of private participation in policy and I did interviews with virtually all of the major private education companies in England, with one exception. One company wouldn't talk to me, but the others did. And then even more recently, I finished a study looking at the involvement of philanthropists in the process of policy. So I used the same approach, my ethnographic methods, to study these different moments of policy.

RŠ: *It's quite interesting for me that you go from schools, from teachers to schools and from schools to policy and then to global policy. You are moving to some higher level of abstraction or higher level of theory which can, of course, influence people and teachers. And it is very interesting that you have worked on and shown how teachers are influenced by this global policy and how they live in a system of terror that concentrates on performance. But are all these things, the concentration on performance in particular, new, or do you think that they were here already? Lyotard, for example, warns in his 1975 book Postmodern Condition that education should not just concentrate on performance. Do you think it's something new or was it here always and we didn't notice it?*

SJB: Yeah, I think the issue is one of the primacy and intensity of the focus on performance. And historically, I think, certainly in the English-speaking countries, there have been various moments when performance has become very important. At the beginning of the state system in England in the 19th century there was a very heavy emphasis on performance, and in fact a relationship between funding and performance. And in the United States, there was a period in the 1920's when performance measurement was very important. But I think in the period since the end of the Second World War through to the 1980's performance was of less significance. There was more emphasis on classroom processes and a diversity of objectives surrounded education – social learning and the development of the whole child became more important. But now we have moved into a period of hyper-intensity in many cases in relation to performance and we now have new technologies of measurement, new systems of testing, new forms of statistics, and the role of measurement and performance and comparison operates at every level, because now we also have international comparisons of performance of whole systems, through PISA. We

have the European Commission benchmarking systems, so performance has become a primary policy technology, and the most dangerous aspect of it, I think, is that now politicians have recognized the power and effectiveness of performance management, and rather than determining practice directly, they can determine practice indirectly, through the use of performance indicators, targets, benchmarks, output indicators and really, in many ways, I think that performance management is far too dangerous to allow politicians to play with it. But nonetheless, they see how powerful it is. So the education system, I think increasingly, is saturated with the demands of performance. Although, of course, I recognize that movement in that direction is different in different countries with different paths and dependencies, but the overall trend internationally is in that direction of greater or lesser speed.

RŠ: *I think that in a short period of time the Czech Republic will copy this system of measurements in the fifth and ninth grades, and although there is lot of experience of the weak points of this system, a lot of politicians feel that this is the way we can satisfy parents with results. So how do you think that it will change the system in the Czech Republic?*

SJB: I think it will. In England and also in other… in the United Stated, in Australia, and in some countries in the Far East, very significant negativities have been generated as a result of a focus on performance. It works very directly on teachers' practice and the way teachers think about what they do. So it does change things very dramatically. And one of the common negativities across systems is the way in which it leads schools and teachers to concentrate their efforts on those students who can make the most significant contribution to improvement. So it leads to systematic attention to and systematic neglect of students. And it compounds social inequalities. It also puts enormous stress on teachers. In most of the systems that have high stake testing, there are high levels of teacher stress, teacher illness, teachers who want to leave the profession. And I don't think politicians recognize those negativities.

MP: *Maybe in connection with this, we could get to the curriculum and the issue of its reforming or developing. We have had a new, two-levelled curriculum in this country since 2004/5 that somehow gives guidelines centrally and then provides and even expects – it provides the space for schools and expects them to build their own curriculum. Although it brings a great deal, at the same time it seems to undermine a little the traditional structure of curriculum, bringing new cross-curricular themes and somehow appealing to, let's say, a more human relation between pupil and teacher. Some critics say the curriculum is becoming empty in this way. And some of them add we have to control it from the outside in order to avoid extremes. What do you think about this?*

SJB: Well, in one sense there is a political contradiction between performance control and curriculum control. Performance control is indirect: you set targets or you measure and compare between institutions without intervening in practice. But specifying curriculum is a more direct form of control, where you are actually intervening in practice and determining practice, creating frameworks for practice. And they don't necessarily fit together very well in some circumstances because performance has an influence on how the curriculum is organized or prioritized. And one of its effects is to narrow the curriculum very often to focus on those things that are measured and neglect those things that are not measured, and that usually means focus on numeracy and literacy and technical skills and science and neglect of arts and performance, the other kind of performance, drama and things of that kind. But both kinds of emphases seem again to be moving globally. Many countries are thinking about both the need to test and the need to change their curriculum. And I think this is caught up with global educational discourses around the knowledge economy, around preparing students for a different kind of work life, and in many places there is a kind of shift from an emphasis on knowledge and teaching towards an emphasis on learning and skills. But I think again there is a lot of … these are things that perhaps again should not be left to politicians to determine. Because I think very often they don't actually understand what they are doing and they get caught up in the rhetorics of notions like the knowledge economy and then try to read that into what should be happening in schools, whereas in fact there is not necessarily a clear match between the real economy and these rhetorical economies that are talked about by the European Community and the OECD. So I think there is a whole series of policy contradictions around schooling at the moment.

RŠ: *Did you find an alternative to the concept of the high-stakes test, something which could have the same or similar results – something that could be as useful for parents as for politicians?*

SJB: I think it is actually particularly insistent in countries like England and the US and some of the other countries that have taken these ideas a long way. That it's actually almost impossible now to speak sensibly about education, to talk about thinking differently about education. The discourse, both the political discourse and increasingly the professional discourse, is so strongly captured within the notions of standards and performance and school effectiveness. Trying to articulate other versions of what education might be for has become almost impossible. These discourses around performance are so powerful and so exclusive of alternatives that anything else sounds like some kind of nostalgia or romanticism, or just insanity. What we have lost, I think, certainly in England, is any sense that there needs to be a discussion which begins by saying what

education is for. What do we want from our education system? Instead, the idea is we want higher standards. But that is not about what education is for. That's about how you measure education. But how you measure education has been translated into what education is for. So I find it very difficult to answer that question because I want to say, 'Well, if we are going to do that, I want to start somewhere else'. I don't want to start here where you are. I don't want to debate on your territory. I want to start from the beginning. I want to start again.

RŠ: *It goes back to the philosophy of education and ethics, because I think this is the thing which is missing, as you said. The micro-politics was missing at that time. I think what is missing now is a philosophical debate on the foundations of education.*

SJB: Absolutely. I think that's absolutely right. But now the notion is that education has this symbiotic relationship with the economy. And increasingly education is being assimilated into the economy in a very unthinking way. And we have lost any sense of perspective on the idea of having to think about what education is for, about its principles, its values, about its ethics. Yes, I think that's absolutely right.

RŠ: *But on the other hand we have so many people saying, 'Without a prospering economy, without education serving the economy, we won't have money for a welfare system, we won't have money for children with special needs'.*

SJB: I think it's very interesting that again, the European Community has this very powerful commitment to trying to identify the relationship between levels of schooling or education and economic performance. But now, logically, at this moment in time, in Western Europe, that relationship no longer exists, in the sense that the Western economies are not growing. So we have spent the last, in particular, the last ten years expanding educational provision, getting more students through higher education, raising educational achievement. So how is that reflected in economic growth? It's not education: it's the banks that are related and the performance of the financial system that is related to economic growth, presumably, not schools. If there was a relationship, where has it gone? In the UK, in the last year, our economic growth was 0.5%. If there is a relationship between education and economic growth, why is it 0.5% now when three years ago, it was 2.5%? There isn't any less education now than there was then.

MP: *What if somebody says, 'Well, these are short-term images that come and go in economic cycles, whereas education might have longer-lasting effects on the economy'.*

SJB: Well, I don't think that the … I mean, yes, you could make that argument but I don't think that relates back to the evidence that is being provided for us by the experts who are identifying and measuring this relationship. But that doesn't seem to be the argument they are making. They seem to be inserting a much more direct relationship between levels of educational participation and performance and economic growth. If they are then going to say, well, who are they, intervening factors in terms of economic cycles, then I would want to see that being developed and built into the models that are used in relation to education. And in some ways, there is a contra-effect. One of the things that happens in the UK, and I am sure it happens elsewhere when there is a recession, is that unemployment increases. More students stay on at school because they are without a chance. And more people apply for teacher training and more students stay on at university, so there would seem to be an inverse relationship between economic performance and educational participation. But it works in the other direction. I mean, it seems to me that on one level, these are discourses and rhetorics of convenience. They are partly job-creation schemes for statisticians and researchers who can inhabit the various spaces created by the European Community for the development of measurements and indicators. But they are also a political convenience. They provide a form of argument and legitimation for politicians which they can then use in relation to education policy. I just remain unconvinced by the arguments that try to relate economic growth to education, at least try to relate them as directly as you suggested, by kind of current wisdom.

MP: *I didn't mean in particular lifelong learning and its use. How do you find the current academic discussion about this?*

SJB: I think to a great extent it is captured within the framework of the European Union conception of lifelong learning. This attempt to measure and extend measurement so as to capture all kinds of learning within the framework of output-related or economic-related learning. This ambition to include formal learning, non-formal and informal learning has aspects of measurable learning activity which can then be related to levels of economic performance or economic growth. And I don't think those things are neutral. I think technologies, including research technologies, actually have an effect of changing the objects which they research. They… this is our role as Foucault would put it, the role that academics and researchers play in contributing to the management of the population. So we provide tools, conceptions, classifications, frameworks, technologies which enable governments to extend their management of the population in ever more sophisticated ways. So we are not innocent.

RŠ: *That's one thing I would like to ask you about your position as an author, as a researcher, as someone who produces lots of articles, lots of books. And your position as an author is very unusual for me because when I was reading your papers, it was like as I was reading the motto of Kurt Lewin – 'The most practical thing is the working theory'. And I think that's what you are trying to do – to work on the level of theory, and you are not trying to produce any advice for teachers, for schools, for politicians. How did you come to this position?*

SJB: I suppose there are two ways in which I think about that. One way relates to what I was saying earlier in that the problem is very often that any contribution, recommendation or advice is captured within the framework of current discourse and very often the point of my analysis is to destabilize that discourse rather than to contribute to it. So I often want to start from a different position or create the possibility of a different position without necessarily knowing what that might be. But the other point is that, or the other way I think about this in relation to what I am doing in terms of the kind of ethics of my own practice, is that I don't want to tell people what to think. I want to provide them with tools so that they can think. So I see what I am doing as an attempt to develop theoretical and analytical tools that people can use to deconstruct their practice or deconstruct the relations of power within which they operate rather than offering them a set of alternative versions of what those relationships might be like. And I don't think I would be very good at that anyway. So I kind of stick to what I am good at. But I do … it's interesting the way in which there are kind of normativities around our practice as scholars and researchers, that there is an expectation that you do that. And a book I wrote a couple of years ago … when I sent it to the publishers, it didn't have a concluding chapter and the publishers said to me, 'Well, can't we have a concluding chapter?' And I said, 'I don't have any conclusions. This is what I have done'. And they said, 'Well, could you just write something?' So I wrote a short endpiece which was titled "Not jumping to conclusions". And it was about … I wrote about the problem of conclusions. Also, I am very committed to the inadequacy of research. I have this notion that the world is very complicated, immensely complicated and what research does is simplify the world. And really any piece of research is always flawed and inadequate, partial, incomplete, and I think we need therefore to be very, very modest and very, very tentative about what we say. And I think research does great injustice to itself and to the world when researchers come to very clear conclusions, because that normally means they are wrong. But there is this pressure towards concluding and people say, 'Well, so what? Tell us what to do'. And I don't think research is very good at doing that.

RŠ: *But I think you must hear the other side – from teachers mainly, who always say to us: 'Give us some conclusion, some advice, write us a cookbook for how we should teach better. Don't give us ideas about how we think and how we should think about lifelong learning or whatever.' Competencies, for example, which is something related to Czech curriculum reform because there is a strong shift towards competencies, but nobody knows what competence is. So they ask – tell us how we should teach competence.*

SJB: Well, I think that's an example of the way in which to do that would be to compound the existing relations of power within which teachers are set, so they think about themselves in that way as the recipients of useful knowledge about schooling rather than its creators. And my view is that teachers should be public intellectuals and that they should be involved in making up good educational practice rather than being its recipients. And that we should be empowering them and we should be empowering them by giving them the skills of analysis and the skills of research and the skills of deconstruction which then they can use in a positive way in relation to their practice. So I want to refuse those existing power relations as far as I can. And I want to engage with teachers as intellectuals. One of the things I do when I am invited to talk to teachers, in presentations, is I often talk about them using theory. I would talk about them using Foucault, Bourdieu. I am not going to treat them as though they can't understand and engage with those things. So when people invite me, I say, 'Yes, I am very pleased to talk but I am not going to talk differently from how I would talk to a group of PhD students'. I may try to explain myself perhaps in different ways and use different illustrations but I am not going to speak differently. So I try to establish different kinds of relationships with teachers in some ways. And my experience of that is a very positive one. I mean sometimes some people don't want to engage and are not interested and they drift off to sleep but other people are excited and energized.

RŠ: *And there is a whole area of research which tries to combine these prescriptive recommendations, the theory which advises we practise with the practice itself – action research. They try to combine these two things and a lot of expectation was placed in action research. But in my view – you may wish to correct me – action research didn't fulfill its expectations. Why?*

SJB: I think because it became too reductionist, it became too focused on action or practice without theory. So it became very much developing new recipes at a fairly simple level. If I do this with my students then they will do this. It will raise their mathematical performance or it will create new kinds of classroom environments. And I think action research needs to take account of theory in the same way that other research does. So I think there needs to be thinking about ontology and epistemology and issues about representation. But that kind got entirely excluded.

It became much more focused on very low level aspects of practice, and I think that is why it eventually failed. Because in a way, it meant that the action researcher, the teacher, didn't have anything to take away from the experience apart from this one piece of practice. OK, so I can do this better. What else have they got? They haven't got anything that is transferable in a sense. They are not empowered as a researcher. And I think that is why it normally fades away.

RŠ: *And there is another growing type of research which is called evidence-based research, evidence-based practice. Isn't this even more strange because there is no internal validity, there is no external validity, there are no standardized techniques. You just choose one example and you say everybody should do this because this is the best example; it could be an example from one school transferred to another city and country, even to another continent. And we don't know if this method will work in another area or five years later. So don't you think that maybe this whole new area of evidence-based research is even worse than action research?*

SJB: Well, I do have a lot of scepticism about it for a number of reasons. I mean, in some of the evidence-based research there is a very careful technical approach to, for example, the synthesizing of many research studies and attempting to draw out common messages, which usually involves the filtering and sifting of research studies based on certain criteria for rigour and validity. There is a centre at the Institute of Education that focuses on this, and one of the first areas they worked on was entrepreneur and school leadership. And I think they identified 800 studies on school leadership to which they then applied their criteria. It was immediately reduced to 26. Only 26 made their initial criteria and I think their final report was based on four studies because there were only the four studies which matched or fitted with the criteria for valid, reliable research studies. And it seems to me very often that the technologies of synthesis in those cases become predominant over the messages or the value of the research. But my other scepticism is not so much in relation to practice, although it comes into play there, but in relation to policy, evidence-based policy. And that's the extent to which ultimately politicians, policy-makers, will select among the evidence-based policies on the basis of their initial political prejudices. I mean, the key example for me is school choice. I think internationally, arguably, there is more research on school choice than almost any other policy-related topic in the whole of education. There are thousands and thousands of studies on school choice in countries around the world. And 98% of them all have the same findings, which include things like: middle-class parents use choice much more than working-class parents, middle-class parents have more resources and capital and skills to operationalize choice than working-class parents. Choice leads to social segregation and separation and inequality. But does that stop politicians introducing

school choice? No, they are not interested in those things. But the evidence in that area is overwhelming and of great significance. But politicians are not interested in it. So I end up being very sceptical about the whole issue of what evidence- or policy-based practice is about. It is an open system where you can convince the practitioner, convince the politician, convince the policy-maker that this is the right way to do things or the better way to do things. And it doesn't seem to work like that.

MP: *You are implicit about it already but could you say explicitly what you think are maybe the biggest challenges for educational research?*

SJB: I am tempted to say that we have to rediscover our researcher's role in some ways. I think in a way educational research has lost its way. I mean partly because it has been captured within these new discourses of policy-related and practice-related research. Partly also that there is such an enormous degree of diversity and fragmentation within educational research that the educational research community is now very fragmented. And we have become very kind of topic-focused so people research mathematics education or they research policy or gender or school leadership and we have become focused upon our own topics and less aware of the sense of our practice in a more general sense. And again, I think our theoretical and philosophical principles. So I think the challenge in a way for educational research in the immediate future may be one of survival, whether we can actually justify our continuing existence and whether or not governments will be willing to fund educational research other than in the very narrow ways that they think are useful to them. So we need to perhaps engage with our audiences in a different way. So perhaps, I don't know, survival is our greatest challenge.

RŠ: *Don't you think that this is quite a – let's say – naïve idea, because when we go to school, every time the teachers want simple solutions. And you are saying that we should close the gap between theory and practice by liberating people from practice to the same level as the theory is. But do you think this will ever come about?*

SJB: I think if we move in that direction, if we come to that then we are reducing educational research to the same kind of process of technicalization that is happening in other fields of education, other fields of social practice. Rather than being intellectual practitioners we become technicians who have a set of very basic skills which can then be undertaken by people with low levels of qualification in relation to low-level operations. So we are contributing to our own endings in that sense. And it's a giving up of an intellectual life in relation to a kind of technical life of recipe production. So I think there is a paradox in that for us. But also I don't want to tell

other people what kind of education or research they should do and I don't think I want people … everybody to do the sort of research that I do. But as far as I am concerned, I do not want to but also I don't think I am able to engage with practice in that sort of way. I want to ask much more fundamental questions about practice rather than improve it. I want to undermine it in some ways.

MP: *And let me ask the final question. What's your next book going to be about?*

SJB: At the moment I am writing a book about Michael Foucault. It's a book in a series on social theory and education. There is already a book on Freud and education and Marx and education and there's going to be Bourdieu and education and Deleuze and education, so I am writing the Foucault and education. The series is intended to demonstrate … to show the engagement of an author or researcher with a theorist. So it is not explaining Foucault, it is actually demonstrating involvement, engagement and work with Foucault. So I am actually really enjoying it. It's a slightly different kind of writing and it's allowing me to think about the ways that I used Foucault and other ways that I might use Foucault. I am working on the second chapter at the moment – it's called 'Let's rewrite the history of education policy'. I am suggesting, drawing on some of Foucault's work, that we can rewrite the history of education policy as a history of blood. So that's what I am working through at the moment. Education policy – the history of education policy is a history of blood.

MP, RŠ: *Thank you very much for this interview.*

About Stephen J. Ball

STEPHEN J. BALL is a professor of Sociology of Education at the Institute of Education, University of London, United Kingdom. His main areas of interest are education policy analysis and the relationship between education, education policy and social classes. Professor Ball is author and co-author of numerous concepts frequently cited by experts in many countries. These include micro-politics of the school, terror of performativity, cycles in educational policy, changes in discourse, philanthropy in education and the education market. His methodological approach is based in ethnography and includes the use of sociological theories and methods in the analysis of the education market and social class, the application of methods of deconstructive and critical theory to concepts of lifelong learning and privatization of schools, and the application of the theoretical benefits of Foucault, Bourdieu and Bernstein for the analysing of education. Since the

1980s he has published a large number of articles and books, such as *The Micro-Politics of the School: Towards a theory of school organization* (1987), *Education Reform: A Critical and Post-Structural Approach* (1994) and *The Education Debate: Politics and Policy in the 21st Century* (2008).

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