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Publics in education: Thinking with Gunter on plurality, democracy and local reasoning

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Abstract

In this chapter I reflect on the intellectual legacy of Helen M. Gunter, with a specific focus that recognises and celebrates the contribution of Helen M. Gunter to debates about publics and democracy in education. Here I engage with some of Helen M. Gunter's major works on educational leadership, consultancy and governance, among other areas of research, to think about the significance of publics as a vantage point through which to represent and understand the changing structures and cultures of education. This includes drawing on a range of literatures to chart the messy terrain through which concepts of the public (and private) are struggled over and contested from the perspective of different epistemologies and analytical traditions. Through mapping the various points of contention and agreement shaping the relationship between these literatures, this chapter locates Helen M. Gunter's intellectual work within a wider set of political and emancipatory traditions, principally those inspired by post-Marxism and poststructuralism and aimed at the development of human liberation through freedom from tyranny. This chapter acknowledges the significance of Helen M. Gunter to thinking about the possibilities of publics as historical, political and discursive resources for reimagining education for democracy and inclusion.

Introduction

Through a series of reflections and provocations on the changing meaning of the public from the perspective of a variety of literatures and vantage points, this chapter honours the intellectual legacy and contribution of Helen M. Gunter to education policy debate and research. More specifically, it makes explicit some of Gunter's damning critiques of the deleterious effects of privatisation and depoliticisation on the changing structures and cultures of public education, as well as draws attention to Gunter's innovative use of theory for traversing and transforming the current vogue for 'modernisation' that dominates contemporary global trends in education policy making. In this chapter I bring together and synthesize some of the main arguments of Gunter's pioneering work on educational leadership, consultancy and governance (2001a, 2001b, 2018, Carrasco & Gunter 2019, Gunter & Forrester 2009, Gunter & McGinity 2014), with a unique focus on the contribution of this literature to invigorating debates about the necessity and legitimacy of agonistic forms of democratic life in public education. These insights are combined with perspectives taken from different analytical traditions, including poststructuralist policy analysis, governmentality studies and policy sociology, among others, to help locate the importance of Gunter's work to investigations of the public and public education from constructivist and interpretivist standpoints. This includes situating the historical and political commitment of Gunter's work within long-standing commitments among critical scholars to improved conditions for democracy and inclusion in education.

In what follows I use the case history of education policy development in England to demonstrate the importance of poststructuralist analysis to understanding and representing policy spaces as dynamic sites for the circulation and production meaning, with a focus on the discursive arrangement of language as modalities through which policymakers and politicians seek to articulate and mobilise reform. This includes a focus on the rhetorical moves deployed by governments to produce the conditions for making possible different kinds of policy change, from the creation of 'consumer publics' to the involvement of 'expert publics' in the management of public sector reform. This is followed by a set of related discussions looking at the discursive significance of 'the public' within policy documents as meaning-making devices for enabling and facilitating specific modes of governance. Here I engage directly with Gunter's extensive body of work on the politics of education reform through the integration of complementary (and non-complementary) perspectives taken from researchers working in other fields and disciplines.

Locating publics

A poststructuralist reading of education policy texts and speeches reveals the importance of language to the discursive framing of policy problems and solutions (Bacchi 2000) and to the production and circulation of meaning more generally (Wetherell & Potter 1992). From a Foucauldian discourse perspective (Sharp & Richardson 2001), policy language is not only stipulative and iterative (capable of producing new meaning through practices of transposition and abridgement) but is regulative (representing pragmatic attempts to summon different kinds of subjects and authorize claims to

knowledge and truth). According to Clarke et al. (2015, 20), 'Policy, then, can be conceived as a particular setting in which meanings are made, installed, naturalised, normalised, and, of course, contested'. In this sense, the organisation of policy texts and speeches around selective language use functions to shape rather than reflect social reality (Fischer 2003). Policy texts represent dynamic spaces through which policymakers and politicians seek to articulate and mobilise reform. Viewed from a governmentality perspective, policy texts 'seek to purport 'truths' about who we are or what we should be' (McKee 2009, 468) and therefore open up possibilities for acting upon subjects 'so that the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed' (Foucault 1982, 790; also see Olmedo & Wilkins 2017). We should not infer from this that a direct relationship exists between policy and practice since we need to insist on the instability and fragility of its appropriation at the level of everyday actors where meaning is resolved contingently through different accommodations and revisions (Newman 2007b; Wilkins et al. 2019). It is important nonetheless to recognise policy texts and policy dialogue as sites where the possibilities of meaning are negotiated, transformed and struggled over. As Foucault (2002, 457) argues, 'A reform is never anything but the outcome of a process in which there is conflict, confrontation, struggle, resistance'.

The state-society relationship points to one of the most enduring sites for contests over meaning in the field of education policy debate and remains a key reference point and discursive resource for politicians and policymakers keen to normalise different kinds of reform. A central plank in the education policy discourse of the New Labour government that took office in England in 1997 was a separation of the state and society, for example. While New Labour represented a commitment to piecemeal reforms engineered around redistribution, they continued much of the ideological work of

previous Conservative governments with their insistence on the virtues of choice and competition as structured incentives for public sector improvement (Wilkins 2010). New Labour sought to legitimise these reforms through a rhetorical move of separating the people and the state, 'with the people requiring rescue from an over-bearing, intrusive and dominating public power' (Clarke 2005, 449). More specifically, New Labour located the state and society through an antagonistic relationship in which the ontological primacy of society (reimagined through the lens of a consumer public) was represented as distinct from and superior to the traditional role of the state with its bureaucratic administration of 'need' through rational planning models:

> The rationing culture which survived the war, in treating everyone the same, often overlooked individuals' different needs and aspirations. Rising living standards, a more diverse society and a steadily stronger consumer culture have…brought expectations of greater choice, responsiveness, accessibility and flexibility. (Office of Public Services Reform 2002, 8)

Similar rhetorical moves can be observed in New Labour policy texts about education in which rational planning models (or 'statism') came to represent producer monopoly (the control and management of delivery services by a single authority) and the curtailment of individual need (Wilkins 2017a). New Labour were decidedly dismissive of the post-war system of education which they viewed as a 'one-size-fits-all' (DfEE 2001, 15) or 'monolithic' structure underpinned by a 'focus on a basic and standard product for all' (DfES 2004, Foreword). To combat the perceived institutional sclerosis of big government and its monopoly of public services, New Labour championed various

market prerogatives and business practices such as consumer voice and choice as drivers for school improvement ‘so that the system fits to the individual rather than the individual having to fit to the system’ (DfES 2004, Foreword). In a similar rhetorical fashion, the Conservative-Liberal-Democrat Coalition government that took office in England in 2010 articulated their own separation of the state and society through the construction of a ‘Big Society’ (GOV.UK 2011). Disillusioned by what the Coalition government viewed as a ‘broken society’, namely ‘broken families’, ‘communities breaking down’, ‘people stuck on welfare’ or ‘public services [that] don’t work for us’, the Big Society initiative aimed to ‘devolve more power to local government, and beyond local government, so people can actually do more and take more power’ as well as ‘open up public services, make them less monolithic’ (GOV.UK 2011). This included devolving ‘responsibility’ to individuals in the context of ‘more philanthropic giving, more charitable giving and more volunteering’ (GOV.UK 2011).

Similar to New Labour, the Coalition government embraced a utopian vision of ‘governance’ (or small government) in which state power is thought to be substituted by the spontaneous interaction and cooperation of service providers working consensually with communities to produce more sustainable, fluid and responsive forms of service delivery (Davies 2012). The reality however more closely resembles the entrenchment rather than the displacement of state power with responsibilities for public service management and delivery typically concentrated within newly devolved techno-bureaucratic settlements that limit participation to those who are bearers of knowledge, skills and expertise deemed relevant by the state. These newly devolved techno-bureaucratic settlements have taken on various forms including professional school governing bodies (Wilkins 2016), charity and private sector school sponsors and managers (Hatcher 2006) and business models of educational

leadership (Gunter & Forrester 2009), all of which cultivate new kinds of 'expert publics' (Wilkins 2017b) who can assist with practices of 'roll-out neoliberalism', namely the 'construction and consolidation of neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations' (Peck & Tickell 2002, 384).

Representing publics

Another key feature of national and international education policy debates is the rhetorical move of constructing relations and attachments between people through the provision of collective nouns, be it 'the community' or 'the public'. The allure of these collective nouns relates to their capacity to mediate popular desires for sociality and solidarity (Clarke 2009) or moral authority (Etzioni 2003). As a trope or metaphor, these collective nouns therefore serve a wide range of dialogic, anticipatory and ideological uses in the service of both governments and citizens (Billig 1996). On the one hand, they work to index particular needs and aspirations ('public interest'), reference a structured or protected social existence ('public realm') and anchor the legitimacy of governing to different sites of collective authority ('public trust'). These various iterations of the public demonstrate how subjects are differently located within a state-society relationship; in this case, they are continuing, and part of, the ideological history of the ascendancy and dominance of a socio-liberal model of citizenship (Johansson and Hvinden 2005). A socio-liberal model of citizenship encapsulates the civil rights of citizens to liberty and equality before law as well as the political and social rights of citizens to participate in deliberative and judicial activities that affect government.

On the other hand, the process of constructing sameness across difference, where 'people like us' must be imagined and mobilised (Clarke 2009), opens up spaces for governments to articulate alternative models of citizenship, namely 'active citizenship' (Kivelä 2018) or 'neoliberal citizenship' (Hindess 2002). Neoliberal citizenship aims to produce citizens who are adept at navigating different sets of ethical and moral responsibilities and obligations through their relationship to others. The imaginary of community or the public therefore produces the conditions of possibility for 'a new spatialization of government' (Rose, 1999, 136). As Kearns (2003) and Newman (2001) observe, the concept of community emerged as a key strategy of governing for the New Labour government that took office in England in 1997. In their efforts to make individuals adopt greater responsibility for the management of local spaces as sites for community governance, the New Labour government mobilised community as a framing for cultivating particular kinds of moral and ethical selves. This included locating individual responsibility within a matrix of community-based reciprocities and dependencies that extended to wider moral obligations to community safety and regeneration (also see Muehlebach 2012). When viewed through the analytics of governmentality, collective nouns like the community and the public can therefore be understood to represent strategies, 'techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour' (Foucault 1997, 82). They provide governments with 'the ideal territory for the administration of individual and collective existence' (Rose 1999, 136).

Another important discursive accomplishment of this language is the construction of a set of relations and practices we might call private. The private, in effect, emerges as the constitutive outside against which different meanings and relationships can be positioned as public or made to appear coterminous

with the ‘changing qualities of being public’ (Newman 2007a, 888). For Gunter (2018), the private is signified through a range of policies and practices that effectively undermine the historical commitment of governments to a preservation of ‘the social’ as an expression of the will to politics. Here ‘the social’ is used to reference the historical production of moral and ethical selves, namely that indeterminate space in which subjects emerge through a state of active existence both as bearers and producers of discourse (see Holland and Lave 2001). Similarly, the will to politics describes the management of the relationship between citizens and the state through an open-ended, democratic project that recognises ‘the existence of contradictions and dilemmas within organisations and the productive contribution of conflict’ (Gunter 2001a, 96). According to Gunter (2018), the private and its various constituent parts – privatism, privatisation, depoliticization, and individualisation – work to displace or subsume these inherently antagonistic, productive spaces within different kinds of economising and instrumentalising logics that place limits on the possibilities for ‘spontaneity and unpredictability’ (ibid, 75) or ‘plurality’ (ibid, 155) regarded as essential to an agonistic democratic life. Viewed in another way, the private develops through appropriating and encasing in commodified and monetary forms those fragile, dynamic spaces in which claims to the liability and risk of different assets, property or power are deliberated as matters of public interest or ‘common-property resources’ and ‘common-property problems’ (Harvey 2011, 102).

In classical liberal terminology, the public-private separation can be viewed in terms of ‘the distinction between state administration and the market economy’ (WeinTraub 1997, 7). The state-market distinction is problematic, however, owing to the ‘increasingly complex, pluri-lateral and cross-scalar’ (Mundy et al. 2016, 7) development of schools and school systems within different

transnational and multilateral arrangements that span the influence of intergovernmental organisations, private foundations, transnational advocacy networks, and global business communities (see Srivastava & Baur 2016). The expansion of public-private partnerships and the growing privatisation management of public sector organisation means that it is more appropriate to describe state-market and public-private separations as blurred and traversed by a range of different logics, actors, networks, and projects. The resultant formations are various and contentious, but can be captured through the following three dominant trends: depoliticization or the subordination of politics to economic evaluations and technical achievements; privatisation or the 'relocation of decision making from representative institutions into corporate-controlled arenas' (Gunter 2018, 10); and individualisation or personalisation, namely the celebration of the moral and ontological primacy of the individual as 'the focus, site and outcome of decision-making' (Carrasco & Gunter 2019, 70).

Mediating publics

At the heart of Gunter's critical orientation to education policy research is a commitment to mapping the emergence and effects of these reforms to the changing purposes, structures and cultures of public education, or what Gunter calls the 'politics of modernisation' (2001b, 104). Through her creative appropriation and application of various concepts borrowed from Arendt, Bernstein, Fielding and Moss (Gunter 2018), and Bourdieu (Gunter 2001b), among other key theorists, Gunter helps us to think through the possibilities of actively resisting this 'militant opposition to a commons agenda for public services education' (2018, 150). This includes a strategic commitment to critique and

problematisation as essential ontological and epistemological tools in the support of democratic public life, namely social arrangements that fulfil the common interests through collective organisation and management of public resources and assets as a kind of valued commons or 'common schooling' (Gunter 2018, 2). Gunter draws our attention to a range of spaces and practices through which this critical work is continually managed and performed, from the role of 'critical knowledge workers' (2001b, 99) to the activities of 'critical work (ibid, 96) and 'critical governance' (Gunter & McGinity 2014, 500), all of which bring into focus the importance of publics and 'politics as a relational knowledge production process' (Gunter 2018, 3).

However, unlike traditional advocates of state-centric approaches to governance (Pierre and Guy 2005), Gunter does not appear to be calling for the restoration of power to conventional state-mediated publics like local authorities, leadership teams or school governing bodies, although Gunter recognises the importance of these to a sustainable democracy. Pierre and Guy (2005) for example challenge the idea that modern products of devolution, namely networks or partnerships, function effectively as sites for enabling fair, transparent and democratic exchanges between stakeholders. Hence, Pierre and Guy (2005) call for greater state regulation of the interactions between systems and institutions to coordinate forms of conflict resolution, bargaining and coherence within increasingly diverse societies. Gunter (2018) is sympathetic to this view and, like Pierre and Guy (2005), tends to resist arguments which too enthusiastically embrace a view of modern societies as governed by the spontaneous and self-organising capacity of networks or partnerships (see Kooiman 2003), namely those perspectives which appear to overlook the continuing importance of the state in 'setting rules and establishing an enforcement mechanism designed to control the operation of the system's

constituent institutions, instruments and markets' (Spotton 1999, 971). According to Carrasco and Gunter (2019, 68):

> The role of the nation state does vary in the design and enactment of privatisation but the tendency is for the state to retain sovereign authority through legislation and policy design, where the change for the state is to operate as the delivery regulator rather than provider of service standards.

More radically, Gunter (2018) advocates for the kinds of social arrangements that allow for new kinds of publics to emerge, namely the kind that evolve in tandem with the changing qualities of being public over time and space. This includes cultivating spaces through which to articulate new representational claims and forms of knowledge production and exchange that continually work with and against established forms of institutional and professional power. Gunter's (2018) key intellectual contribution here, among many others, is to think beyond a view of the public, or public interest and public trust, as an undifferentiated or pre-existing entity and therefore one that lends itself effortlessly to tidy representation and 'fractionalization' (Newman 2007, 904). As Gunter (2001) points out, the fractionalization of the public takes on various forms through the provision of different analytical logics and policy framings, be it the 'pragmatic-empiricists' who focus on 'the internal logic and order of things being discussed, or whether 'concepts' are clear and precise' (ibid, 96); the 'instrumental position [that] provides models of effective systems and cultures designed to enable

site-based performance management to be operationalised' (ibid, 95); or the 'positivist ontology and epistemology that has led to behaviourist and functional models of leadership' (ibid, 96).

Assembling publics

In each of the above examples, the politics of publics is reduced to an aggregate model of tidy constituent parts, ultimately leaving them vulnerable to capture at the level of equivalence, commensurability or sameness, thus undercutting the 'pluralism of ideas and positions' (Gunter & McGinity 2014, 310) that naturally make up the range of objects and specific issues through which publics emerge (Marres 2005). Moreover, the concerns of policymakers and politicians to give some coherence and representation to specific leadership styles as 'charismatic' or preferred models of governance as 'effective' can be complicated by the fact that these interventions are regulative as well as stipulative: they start from the normative assumption that the public is a 'pre-existing collective subject that straightforwardly expresses itself or offers itself up to be represented' (Mahony, Newman & Barnett 2010, 2) and therefore overlooks 'the uneasy and impermanent alignments of discourses, spaces, institutions, ideas, technologies and objects' (ibid, 3) that make up the formation of publics. As Gunter (2018, 6) observes, these diverse skirmishes have been 'deployed to close down spaces for debate within government institutions through the adoption of templated solution strategies, the transfer of services to delivery agencies and the removal of issues from public agendas'. In response, Gunter (2001, 102) outlines a theory of public education or common schooling 'in which difference is not articulated through niche marketing and an economic liberalism of self-interest, but through new

ways in which rights are talked about and worked through in the locality'. In this framing, Gunter (2018, 9), drawing on Arendtian scholarship, calls our attention to the 'infinite variety of people and their standpoints' and the importance of locating freedom 'within relational politics in the public realm' (ibid, 10).

Similarly, Boyask (2020, 7) conceives the public as 'multiple, so that public education is defined by difference and variation in respect of its constituents and their opinions'. However, while Boyask (2020) and Gunter (2018) share a conception of the public as plural and multivocal, one that unfolds beyond the direct control of hierarchies and markets, they disagree on the historical role of private schooling to these projects. For Boyask (2020), it is important to recognise that some schools in the private sector offer up alternative spaces for the cultivation of democratic and inclusive cultures, namely those that traverse and actively resist the sovereign character of utility maximisation, calculation and self-interest so endemic to the organisation of contemporary schools and school systems around the globe.

Boyask (2020, 21) points to evidence among some private schools of 'resistance to regulation from either the state or the market within an entity that sits outside of a mainstream and bounded public sphere yet still engages with the public in an ideal and democratic sense'. Following Fraser's (1990) conceptualisation of 'counterpublics', which are set up in opposition to the communicative practices of the male-dominated bourgeoisie public sphere proposed by Habermas (1991), here the notion of publics is 'used to articulate political practices at odds with those believed to be sanctioned as proper

in the mainstream public sphere' (Cassegård, 2014, 690). Boyask (2020, 7) thus seeks to accommodate a broader definition of public education that is not necessarily 'public' in the traditional sense of being 'common and free to all', but which reflects the continuation of a set of historical commitments to a wider, 'deeper tradition that links people with democratic participation', one that recognises 'The existence of a public is contingent on its members' activity, however notional or compromised, and not on its members' categorical classification, objectively determined position in social structure, or material existence' (Warner 2002, 419). For Gunter (2018, 108), private schools do not conform to a definition of the 'commons', namely common property resources and assets designed for individual and collective benefit, and therefore do not satisfy a definition of a 'common' school, that is, 'schools are owned, shared and for the commons' (ibid, 72). Despite these disagreements, it is important to acknowledge the different ways in which publics, in the plural, cut across common and uncommon schooling, 'being assembled at particular moments for particular projects' (Newman and Clarke, 2009, 20).

Yet despite Gunter's (2018) commitment to 'common' schooling, she does not strictly advocate for emancipation based on universalism since this can lead to the exclusion of certain groups and individual rights. Instead, Gunter and McGinity (2014, 310) appear to favour agonistic forms of particularism that lend themselves to the pursuit of 'a pluralism of ideas and positions that is not currently tolerated'. Hence, Gunter (2018) remains circumspect of the current vogue for consensus in policy making and governance and its potential to undermine an agonistic conception of publics as diverse and multiple. Here the public is 'positioned in a field of multiple relationships with the state through which it is constituted in a range of different ways' (Clarke and Newman 1997, 127). As

Young (2016) observes in her research on school governing bodies in England, the shift from stakeholder to professional models of governance has altered the ways in which school governing bodies are characterised as diverse, where 'diversity' is narrowly conceived through an appeal to skills, professional experience and specialist knowledge.

A corollary of this shift towards professional governance is that consensus is pre-empted by concerns with achieving programmable actions and actionable solutions that uphold the smooth running of the school as a high-reliability organisation. In an effort to recalibrate the language of governance according to the explicitness of economic indicators, compliance orders and accountability targets, school governing bodies therefore typically mitigate the scope for agnostic democratic dialogue since it gives rise to protracted and unwieldy value conflicts that do not automatically lend themselves to consensus (Wilkins 2019). In these contexts, consensus is contrived precisely because it emerges through a set of pragmatic and strategic concerns with aggregating voices and aspirations according to those forms of 'representation' or 'knowledge' that are amenable to the scrutiny of external regulators and funders. As Rancière (2010, 196) reminds us, consensus 'defines a mode of symbolic structuration of the community that evacuates the political core constituting it, namely dissensus'. In response, Gunter (2001a, 104) emphasises the importance of democratic forms of knowledge production that seek 'to understand experiences in a contested policy space'. At the same time, Gunter (2001a) recognises the importance of consensus to conflict situations where unique relations of power sharing are resolved contingently in local spaces through the negotiation and reconciliation of seemingly incompatible social interests.

Contesting publics

A key focus of Gunter's critique of 'modernised' education systems is the centrality of the figure of the consumer and of individual rights to the production of enclosures and exclusions that normalise market-based reforms. For Gunter, consumption signifies 'a form of authorised inaction, where citizens are disciplined into accepting and applauding, not thinking and acting politically' (2018, 6), while 'privacy or the individual [is s/he] who decides what matters and frames exchange relationships, and so is free from the scrutiny of others (2019, 17). The main contention of Gunter's argument being that 'individualised freedom outflanks notions of distributive justice integral to the commons' (2018, 137), which in turn 'violate[s] the commons as diverse publics' (2018, 136). In a similar vein, Marquand (2004) and Needham (2003) argue that the consumer embodies identifications and practices that are necessarily private or acquisitive and instrumental in orientation, and therefore must be considered intrinsically antithetical to a Marshallian or socio-liberal paradigm of citizenship with its emphasis on the pursuit of common interests and common resources for the public good. Here, the citizen and consumer are used to symbolise divergent and opposing forms of social coordination, from de-collectivisation and self-interest (consumer) to de-commodification and common interest (citizen) (see Wilkins 2010).

Yet these distinctions are problematic in that they condense some very complicated meanings and practices, namely the process through which different rationalities, ostensibly in conflict with each other, are grafted together to form the basis for public action and various iterations of local reasoning.

Arvidsson (2013), for example, draws our attention to the 'value creation' (368) and 'strong civic element' (368) underpinning some practices of consumption where 'the productive activity of consumers is neither alienated nor is it commanded' but 'is undertaken freely out of 'passion for' (or 'affective proximity' to) the cause to which it is dedicated' (383). Similarly, Bevir and Brentmann (2007) encourage us to resist any bifurcation of the citizen and consumer as representative of uniform and tidy categories of divergent or opposing rationalities, which they classify as a categorical error and symptom of classical sociological thinking. Instead, they highlight the ways in which these rationalities interact and combine across diverse practices, sometimes in ways that are 'creative and enabling' (171) for the pursuit of 'association and community and even for the promotion of democracy and justice' (186).

Reflections

In this chapter I have offered up some reflections and provocations on the intellectual legacy and contribution of Helen M. Gunter to the field of education research, with a specific focus on how Gunter and other researchers working across diverse disciplines and knowledge specialisms help us to think through the diverse practices and rationalities that make up the formation, mediation and assembling of publics. Here it becomes possible to situate Gunter's work as part of, and continuing, the history of a wider set of political and social commitments to thinking normatively and ethically about the role of publics to supporting forms of value creation, shared responsibility and common understanding that actively resist 'residualization' (Newman 2007, 904) by the state and other

authorities, and in the process produce alternative spaces for sustainable and inclusive forms of democratic self-governance.

Author biography

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