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REPONSE

# On Being Agnostic: A Response to Bernadette Baker[1]

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## Introduction

In her paper "Normalizing Foucault? A Rhizomatic Approach to Plateaus in Anglophone Educational Research", Bernadette Baker places my work on Foucault[2] on a plateau of agnosticism. That appears more generous than its being assigned to the categories of vilification or discipleship as in the case of Francis Schrag and Lynn Fendler. More of that later. I have been described as a neo-liberal, postmodernist, radical democrat, postfoundationalist and as a member of the New Zealand Mafia (together with Michael Peters, Mark Olssen and Patrick Fitzsimons). Agnosticism suits me better, for it fits well with my recent work on Foucault. But that was not always the case, as I will discuss below.

Baker states that when asked 'a usually generic question about Foucault' her response is '*Which* Foucault?' She continues: 'I offer potential counterpoints as lines of flight that, if anything, understate the variety of approaches to Foucault and that suggest the nuances possible through reading him. This strategy is not to be understood as grounding a primordial Foucault but as precisely the opposite'.[3] Thus she is careful to avoid giving Foucault a determined identity or turning him into a *subject* or an *author.* Identity politics is just another version of the subject or subjectivity. But is she equally determined to be as careful with Francis Schrag, Lynn Fendler and myself? In what follows I will speak only for myself, as I do not want to take part in what Foucault called a great indignity, namely, speaking for others.

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1 I wish to thank Lynda Stone for comments on this response.

2 James D. Marshall, 'Michel Foucault: Marxism, Liberation and Freedom'. In Bernadette Baker and Katharina Heyning (eds.) *Dangerous Coagulations: The Uses of Foucault in the Study of Education.* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2004), 265-278.

3 Bernadette Baker, 'Normalizing Foucault? A Rhizomatic Approach to Plateaus in Anglophone Educational Research', *Foucault Studies*, vol. 4 (2007): 87-88.

This response to Baker's paper will look first at the notion of normalizing Foucault and at her account of plateaus and how technically they place texts in relationships with ideas, thereby avoiding talking about the subject who might be said to be the author of the texts. This also avoids talk of normalizing Foucault. Second, it suggests that a case can be made for retaining the notion of a subject. This case is based first upon Jean-Paul Sartre's critique of Husserl's transcendental ego, where it is clear that there can be no such thing as 'the subject.' (Foucault too was steeped in the critiques of Husserl).[4] Yet Sartre was to retain a notion of 'the subject', in a *political* sense and use, as an owner of rights and as the bourgeois subject of emerging social management and economic theories in the social sciences. On these issues I will draw some parallels between the thinking of Sartre and Foucault. Finally I will return to my work on Foucault in terms of Baker's plateaus of vilification, discipleship and agnosticism.

## Plateaux and Subjects

The first half of Baker's title questions normalizing Foucault. Is it possible? is it worthwhile? By 'normalizing', 'Foucault meant, briefly, making an assessment of the deficiencies of those disciplined that is directed not towards punishment for the sake of revenge, as in the premodern age, but to reform of deviant behaviour'.[5] But, Foucault argues, normalizing in the early asylums was essentially a moral exercise used by physicians to control the mad. It was not because they had 'psychiatric' knowledge of the mad, but because they represented the moral demands of society that they had authority to practise what would become psychiatry.

Baker addresses this issue early in the introduction when she identifies three historical propensities in the field, in particular the propensity in responses to Foucault's work to 'carve out moralistic dualisms around their utility.' The aim of her paper is to 'demonstrate the pull of such propensities' by the use of examples in each of her three plateaus. What might be explored would be the propensity and morality of responders to Foucault to respond from a set position. For example, a vilifier may consider that Foucault, as a vagabond, should be kept without the gates of the philosophical citadel. An educator seeking better tools in educational research may need to draw upon the fashionable concept of power/knowledge. Each would have been responding to 'moral' demands from within a professional community, whereas an agnostic might just be playing with 'idle' intellectual ideas.

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4 Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow. *Michel Foucault; Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics,* 2nd Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983).

5 Gary Gutting. *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

I have used the term 'agnostic' deliberately in the title of this response. This is because it may be either a noun or an adjective, and is used to refer to or describe a subject in a certain way. But, it might be said, that is to return to the notion of a subject, or of an author of a text or statement. On the other hand, to talk of a plateau of agnosticism and the situating of texts or works on that plateau is to talk not of a subject or of an author but of a relationship between statements, or texts, and the idea of agnosticism. In my case it is not talking of Marshall and *his* agnosticism but of works, of texts – a book or books – and that they *exhibit* agnosticism, in this case towards Foucault's works. In the former case I own the text; in the latter I do not.

This permits Baker to adopt a strong and sensitive theoretical position. Consistent with Foucault's position on the death of the author and his refusal to talk of the subject, she is able, by drawing upon Deleuze and Guattari and the notion of the rhizome, to launch a strong discussion of educational research on what has passed as liberal education or, for neo-Marxists, as schooling. (Lyotard's notion of performativity also captures well where modern education has moved under new economic and management theories).

But what has happened to the subject? Gone, into nothingness, it might be said. Good riddance! But is there still a need and a place for the subject? I will suggest that there might be, but not as a part of a theoretical structure that Baker has proposed for considering educational research. Instead, it is what I will call a *political* need, and I derive it from the texts of Jean-Paul Sartre, somewhat ironically, for he had annihilated the notion of the subject of consciousness at least as early as 1936/7.[6]

Sartre responded in 1936/7 in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (*TE*) to Edmund Husserl's 1929 Paris lectures. In it he argued that there could be no such thing as Husserl's *ego*, or subject of consciousness. Sartre accepted Husserl's position that consciousness always involved intentionality and that this was towards an 'object' external or outside of consciousness. But that implied that there could be no ego 'in' consciousness to be conscious of, for an object of consciousness was external to consciousness itself, as an intentional object. Sartre poses his major problem with Husserl's version of phenomenology in the opening lines:

> For most philosophers the ego is an 'inhabitant' of consciousness. Some affirm its formal presence at the heart of *Erlebnisse*[7] as an empty principle of unification. Others – psychologists for the most part –

6 See also Marshall, 'A Critique of *Anxious Identity*'. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 38:5 (2006): 669-81.

7 'Erlebnisse' ('*erlebnis*' in German) – immediate experience not mediated by intellectual elements and which eludes conceptualisation; hence Sartre's comment of it as 'an empty principle'.

> claim to discover its material presence, as the centre of desires and acts, in each moment of our psychic life. We should like to show here that the ego is neither formally nor materially *in* consciousness: it is outside, *in the world.* It is a being of the world, like the ego of another.[8]

This means that consciousness cannot contain or be any 'longer a [Kantian] set of logical conditions," as it (consciousness) "is an absolute fact' (my enclosures). In saying that this consciousness is an absolute fact Sartre means that a psychic and psycho-physical *me*, which he concedes to Husserl, is enough: '[N]eed one double it with a transcendental *I*, a structure of absolute consciousness?' Indeed, if it is claimed that a transcendental *I* is thought to be needed for unifying and individualising consciousness, Sartre responds first that it cannot be personal and, second, that 'it is in the object that the unity of the consciousness is found'.

> By intentionality consciousness transcends itself. It unifies itself by escaping from itself. The unity of a thousand active consciousnesses by which I have added, do add, and shall add two and two to make four, is the transcendent object "two and two make four." Without the permanence of this eternal truth a real unity would be impossible to conceive, and there would be irreducible operations as often as there were operative consciousnesses… The object is transcendent to the consciousnesses which grasp it, and it is in the object that the unity of the consciousness is found.[9]

Consciousness itself then is empty. Husserl saw the transcendental *ego's* task as being the task of constituting such things as ideas, sense data and images as contents of consciousness into intended objects. Sartre says *nothing.* What this plays havoc with is any representational theory of knowledge. As consciousness is empty there can be no sense data to be 'turned into' representations of intended objects. Consciousness being empty everything must be in the external object. If Husserl saw intentionality as being one essential aspect of consciousness Sartre sees it, instead, as *being* consciousness. As Williams and Kirkpatrick say:

> To use the metaphorical language sometimes employed by Sartre… consciousness is a great emptiness, a wind blowing towards objects. Its whole reality is exhausted in intending what is other. It is never 'self-contained', or container: it is always 'outside itself'… On this view, the character of the object of consciousness regains its

8 Jean-Paul Sartre. *The Transcendence of the Ego.* Trans. and edited by Forrest Williams and Richard Kirkpatrick (New York, NY: The Noonday Press, 1957). Originally published 1936/7. Henceforth TE.

9 These quotations are to be found in *TE*, 35-39.

> independence for phenomenological investigation and becomes analysable in its own right (as in the original phenomenological theory of intentionality).[10]

In the conclusion to *TE* Sartre suggests that the real function of the ego (Husserl's) is not so much theoretical, as 'reflecting an ideal unity' so as to 'bind up the unity of phenomena' but, rather, as *practical*. This theoretical task is said by Sartre to be pointless because 'the real and concrete unity has long been effected.' Instead, the practical and essential role of the ego' is to mask from consciousness its very spontaneity… [which] ... renders impossible any distinction between action and passion, or any conception of an autonomy of the will.' The ego serves an essential *practical* function therefore because '[it] is thanks to the ego, indeed, that a distinction can be made between the possible and the real, between appearance and being, between the willed and the undergone.'[11] In this essay Sartre not only critiques Husserl's account of consciousness but also begins to develop his own fuller position on Being and consciousness which is to be found later, and more developed, in *Being and Nothingness.* Sartre moves from the notion of consciousness 'escaping itself' (in the quote from *TE* above) to its being literally *nothing* in *Being and Nothingness.*

Nevertheless, a vestige of the practical subject remains strongly in Sartre's later and more political texts. As Bernard-Henri Lévy puts it:

> Even in the magnificent deconstruction-reconstruction performed by *Being and Nothingness,* or the first 'phenomenological' manifestoes, something remained in *Baudelaire,* in *Saint Genet* and, perhaps, here and there…[of the subject and subjectivity]. Of the determination to save, against Heidegger – against philosophical modernity, against his own ontological intuitions, and, to some extent, against all reason – a pole of subjectivity which could be a bulwark of resistance, there remained a reminiscence ... when he attacked the structuralists…he was the only modern to have managed to tie together the anti-humanist thread and that of a persistence of consciousness without which both the spirit of resistance and law and human rights remain a dead letter…[12].

Sartre talked of subjectivity in the fifties but only to describe it as bourgeois. Lévy, continuing, says that Sartre, who swore by the group in fusion alone and dreamed only of seeing serial collectivities melt in the heat of these groups, went on to suspect, in the so-called solitude of the subject, a rise of the

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10 Williams & Kirkpatrick (1957) 'Introduction' to *TE.*

11 *TE*, pp. 100-101.

12 Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Sartre: The Philosopher of the Twentieth Century.* Trans. Andrew Brown. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 400-401.

bourgeois order aimed at making the 'factories' 'work better', and even praised Marx for describing as 'sub-men' the separated, inert, in short, solitary workers. So the practical subject is the bourgeois product, the solitary individualized worker, a sub-man without whom 'resistance and law and human rights remain a dead letter.'

## Sartre and Foucault

At this point we need to return to Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and his talk of the constitution of the subject. For Foucault, 'author' of 'What is an Author?,' [13] talk of the constitution of the subject must have been difficult. Yet Foucault had encountered this earlier in *Madness and Civilisation*[14] in trying to talk of 'mental-illness' when there was no such thing, and in defending himself against being identified as a Marxist when he used Marxist concepts. But in *Discipline and Punish*[15] it was slightly different as, in society, there was little problem in talking about subjects. The subject, for most people, did exist. Here Foucault talks about subjects and of being subjected. However, practical, everyday political discourse 'demanded' the use of a subject.

Both Foucault and Sartre sensed the effects of the human sciences, the effects of individualizing humans, of producing sub-men, isolated and partially determined. They seldom met and did not overly engage in academic polemics. Didier Eribon[16] describes their joint appearances in protests and resistances to instances of the abuse of human rights and of justice. But by then it was too late. At Sartre's funeral Foucault was reported as saying: 'When I was a young man, he was the one – along with everything he represented, the terrorism of *Les Temps Modernes* – from whom I wanted to free myself'.[17] Nevertheless both sensed the need for, possibly at most, a *political* sense of the use of the subject.

## Which 'Foucault'?

Baker raises the question, correctly in my view, as to which Foucault we are talking about. But the reflexive question might also be raised as to which Schrag, Fendler, Marshall or Baker she is talking about. Her use of plateaus and texts enables her to avoid the author as the subject of the text, and to

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13 Michel Foucault, 'What is an Author?' In Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader.* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 101-120.

14 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilisation: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason.* Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Pantheon, 1965.

15 Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* Translated by Alan Sheridan. New York: Vintage, 1979.

16 Didier Eribon, *Michel Foucault,* translated by Betsy Wing. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), chapters 17-19.

17 Eribon, 280.

concentrate on relationships between selected texts and designated plateaus – in this case vilification, discipleship and agnosticism. In a very perceptive reading of my paper, Baker assigned me to the agnosticism plateau.[18] Yet my early work on Foucault might well have been assigned to the discipleship plateau. For example, to someone who had written several philosophical articles on the punishment of children[19] and how talk of the meaning and justification of punishment of children did not 'sit' well with traditional philosophical theories of punishment, reading *Discipline and Punish* in 1982/3 was like a breath of very fresh air. What I had argued conceptually was tracked out historically by Foucault: the punishment of children was more like a form of training and improvement and was to be 'justified' accordingly, and not by retributive or deterrence theories.

I became a disciple of Foucault to the extent that I turned increasingly to historical data and the history of concepts. My elder son Dominique and I published a book in 1997 on discipline and punishment in New Zealand education modeled, to some extent, upon Foucault's *Discipline and Punish.*[20] From the late 1980s, I would say that my earlier papers on Foucault belong to the plateau of discipleship. More recently I have been writing approvingly about his account of problematisation. Thus, depending upon which 'Marshall' is identified, I could be sited upon the discipleship plateau. The question, *which Marshall?*, is thus shifted to a second question; which texts? But for the academic theoretician more work can be done with that second question.

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18 Lynda Stone and Bernadette Baker have given the most perceptive and sensitive readings to my knowledge, of my work on Foucault. See, for example, Lynda Stone, 'Break with Tradition: Marshall's Contribution to a Foucauldian Philosophy of Education,' in Paul Smeyers and Michael Peters (eds.). *Postfoundationalist Themes in the Philosophy of Education: Festschrift for James Marshall.* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006).

19 E.g., James D. Marshall (1975) `Punishment and Education', *Educational Theory* 25 (2): 148-55.

20 James D Marshall and Dominique James Marshall. *Discipline and Punishment in New Zealand Education* (Palmerston North, NZ: Dunmore Press, 1997).