

# Interview with Professor Stephen J. Ball

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Stephen J. Ball is one of today's most renowned researchers in the field of Education Policy. Until July 2015, he held the chair of Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education at UCL - Institute of Education (London). In September 2015, he became a Distinguished Service Professor of Sociology of Education. He is a member of the British Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences. Stephen J. Ball has a wide range of publications<sup>2</sup>. This interview was conducted in London on September 21<sup>st</sup> 2015. The questions were divided into three sections: epistemological questions on education policy, training of future researchers and writing papers on education policy.

**JM:** In 2010 we created the Latin American Research Network of Theoretical and Epistemological Studies on Education Policy (ReLePe)<sup>3</sup>, and the main objective of this network is to promote epistemological and theoretical studies in education policy. What is your opinion on the development of theoretical studies on educational policy, and do you see any relevant gaps?

**SJB:** I think theory is very important to the study of policy. We need more theory and we need better theory. I think the majority of policy analysis now and historically has not been very theoretically sophisticated or indeed not informed by theory at all in many cases. And that means that a lot of policy analysis imports into its work implicit assumptions about how the world works, about what policy is, about the work of policy makers, about policy processes – these things are taken for granted, they're not addressed – un-reflexive humanism, simple positivism, a naivety about language – and that means that distortions are built into the way that people think and research... think about and research policy. For example, I think the majority of policy analysis is dominated by an implicit unaddressed assumption of rationality, that policy processes are rational, that it's an orderly process, it's a coherent process. And I think that brings distortions to the empirical work of a lot of researchers, they assume that rationality when they engage with policy. And a lot of policy work is not very rational, not very orderly, not very well organised. And so we need to think theoretically about the possibility of irrationality, messiness, of disorder, chaos and this also points to questions about what

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<sup>2</sup> [www.uepg.br/gppepe](http://www.uepg.br/gppepe) (there is a list of Stephen J. Ball's texts and interviews published in Portuguese and there is also a reference list of Brazilian researches and publications using Ball's ideas).

<sup>3</sup> [www.relepe.org](http://www.relepe.org)

counts as data, and the possibilities of what might be data. Which means that we need to think about the ontological basis of policy, we need to think about the relationship of policy to the way in which we think about how the social world works more generally. So, theory is very important. On the other hand, there is now a very interesting body of work, particularly coming from Australia – which is re-working the ontological basis of policy research – done by people like Matthew Clarke, Taylor Webb, Kalervo Gulson and Gregg Thompson<sup>4</sup>.

**JM:** In your paper ‘Policy Sociology and Critical Social Research: a personal review of recent education policy and policy research’ (1997)<sup>5</sup> you mentioned two kinds of epistemology: deep epistemology and surface epistemology. Could you explain these concepts? Do you think it is possible to explore deep epistemology in a set of Education Policy publications or even just focus on one researcher?

**SJB:** So what I mean by deep epistemology relates back to what I was saying in the last answer, which is that policy is a social process, a relational process, a temporal process, a discursive process. It’s a process invested with power relations, it’s a political process. And a deep epistemology would engage with those kinds of issues and questions as a basis for the interpretation policy process. So on what assumptions about power, on what assumptions about subjectivity, on what assumptions about truth does the policy analyst operate? And those things come into play in relation to any and every study in one way or another. Again, as I said before, often those things are built into policy studies implicitly and are never addressed directly. Un-named assertions of humanism, logocentrism, patriarchy and representation are smuggled in. And what we end up with is a kind of surface epistemology, a set of fairly mundane reflections about access to data, the status of actors’ interpretations, respondent validation etc. That’s fine, but it doesn’t go far enough. You have to think beyond that or think deeper than that. What kinds of subjects do we assume we are dealing with here? What is the discursive basis of their interpretations? Do we have a view of the world which is a constructivist view – the idea that world emerges out of the meanings of individuals – or is it structural – are there some deep structural economic or discursive bases for the world we’re studying? Which again raises questions about what counts as data, and how are we going to ‘write’

<sup>4</sup> One work that could be cited here is the book *Education Policy and Contemporary Theory: Implications for research* (Gulson, Clarke & Petersen, 2015). It is interesting to note that in the introduction of the book the authors indicate that it was written ‘for researchers and students with an interest in the critical and creative potential of social theory in education policy analysis. It sets out to achieve (at least) three aims in relation to education policy analysis: it argues for the utility and necessity of theory; it celebrates the pleasures and rewards of theory; and, it offers models of, and advice on, the use of theory in education policy research. This book, as such, complements a body of existing work arguing for the value of theory in educational research (Anyon, 2009; Ball, 1995; Dimitriadis & Kamberelis, 2006; Dressman, 2008; Sikes, 2006)’ (Gulson, Clarke & Peterson, 2015, p. 1). Similarly, the central concern of ReLePe is deepening the theoretical and epistemological studies of education policy.

<sup>5</sup> This paper was published in Portuguese in *Revista Currículo sem Fronteiras* in 2006 (volume 6, number 2, p. 10-32) with the title ‘*Sociologia das políticas educacionais e pesquisa crítico-social: uma revisão pessoal das políticas educacionais e da pesquisa em política educacional*’, which was also included in the book ‘*Políticas Educacionais: questões e debates*’ (Ball & Mainardes, 2011). I highlight the publication of the book ‘*Educação Global S. A.*’ (Ball, 2014).

data, how do we represent meaning? And it's at that level that I think one is engaging with a deep epistemology. So you can look at almost any piece of work and you can think about it in those terms and look at either implicit or explicit assumptions about what people are like, how the world works, what policy means.

**JM:** The point is that when you are trying to analyse Education Policy papers in terms of epistemology, sometimes it's difficult because authors don't make explicit the epistemological aspects, it's difficult, and we are trying to analyse a set of publications and it's very difficult<sup>6</sup>. In your paper 'What is policy? 21 years later: reflections on the possibilities of policy research' (2015)<sup>7</sup> you wrote: "We tend to limit our ambition and stay on the surface of things, taking policy at face value and re-inscribing its claims to coherence in our analyses, rather than seeking to address *The Order of Things* (Foucault, 1970)". Can this reflection be generalised for the field of Education Policy in general?

**SJB:** Yes, I think so. The phrase 'the order of things' is an allusion to Foucault's book *The Order of Things*. And what I'm therefore also suggesting, alluding to, is that perhaps we need to think epistemically in Foucault's sense – we need to think about the epistemes which underpin and make possible certain claims about the truth of policy. The grounds on which statements are deemed to be true or false. And at the moment it could be argued... I've been thinking about this a bit... drawing on Foucault's work... that we have now entered a kind of fourth episteme. He talked about three epistemic periods in *The Order of Things*, culminating in the modern period. But perhaps thinking about some of his later work, we're now within a neo-Liberal episteme. And within that there are certain premises about the truth, and that essentially and simply statements which count as true are those statements which refer to the operation of the market – are to do with competition and choice and investment and responsibility, productivity and efficiency. So this involves looking beyond the surface features of policy to begin to understand those neoliberal epistemic characteristics of policy. So that's what I'm suggesting.

<sup>6</sup> More information about the focus of education policy epistemologies and meta-research can be found in Tello (2012) and Tello and Mainardes (2012, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Paper published in 2015 in *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 36 (3), 306-313.

**JM:** In our research network, we are also interested in analysing the constitution of the field of Education Policy in our countries (Brazil, Argentina Colombia, Chile, Mexico, etc). Do you think Education Policy can be considered a specific field of knowledge? Some researchers tend to consider it as a discipline or even as part of the Sociology of Education (which seems to be the case in the UK)<sup>8</sup>.

**SJB:** That's a very difficult question because the sociology of education is now such a disparate field of knowledge, it doesn't have much coherence, it is a very loose combination of a whole range of different kinds of work, different points of focus, levels of analysis, theoretical perspectives, ontologies. I don't think there's anything that you could capture in a very simple label or descriptor as the sociology of education. And if you look in the other direction yes, you can talk about education policy studies as a field of research, but it immediately begs the question about the relationship of education policy to other kinds of policy and to other analytical possibilities – for instance education policy analysts are not good at attending to money – and we might want to look to Harvey, Lerner, Peck and Brenner and Jessop, for insights into the economisation, and the geography of policy. And particularly if you take neoliberalism very seriously then, as Tony Blair put it when he was Prime Minister in the UK, “education is our best economic policy” – and in that sense you can argue that education policy analysis is actually a kind of a subset of economic policy analysis. So you could make a more coherent case around the relationship of education policy to other kinds of policy analysis, rather than to the sociology of education. But then that also depends upon national traditions and the organisation of knowledge and [how] its vertical and horizontal relationships... as Basil Bernstein would have it... are organised in particular locations. So it is difficult to answer that. Equally you have to think about whether it's an important question. Is it important that there are clear distinctions and demarcations between areas of research? Or perhaps it may be more productive to minimise those and think in a post-disciplinary, post-philosophical way about theory and analysis, drawing on and putting together insights and possibilities from different theories and disciplines – a more plural and diversified theorising.

**JM:** One of the issues that emerged from the discussions with researchers of the Latin American Research Network is regarding the object of study of Education Policy. In your opinion, what is the object (or objects) of the study of Education Policy?

**SJB:** The object of study is constructed by the epistemology that you operate with. On the one hand, it can be that you're interested in the meanings and interpretations of

<sup>8</sup> So far, in Brazil, there has not been a debate on the issue regarding whether education policy is a particular field of knowledge or an academic field. In international literature, authors such as Cibulka (1994), Ladwig (1994), Lingard, Rawolle & Taylor (2005) have considered the Education Policy as a field. More recently, Lingard and colleagues, based on Bourdieu's theory of the social field, consider that there is a global field of education policies (eg. Rawolle & Lingard, 2015; Sellar & Lingard, 2014), and global education policies. Azevedo & Aguiar (2001), Mainardes (2009), Santos & Azevedo (2009, 2012), Krawczyk (2012), Tello (2012, 2013, 2014), Schneider (2014) and Souza (2014) also refer to education policy as a field. Tello (2013) refers to education policy as a theoretical field. Oliveira (2011) refers to public policies in education.

policy actors. Or you might be interested in the epistemic principles which give rise to the truth and falsity of policy and various other things in between. It's a question of what kind of decisions you make about your epistemological position. That then constructs the object of study, in the way that Foucault suggests that bodies of knowledge construct the objects about which they speak. A prime example in policy research is 'implementation' – there is a firmly entrenched tradition of implementation research which construes policy as a linear, hyper-rational process, at 'the end' of which we find implementation 'failures'. That is a conception of policy I try to counter and ridicule in *How Schools do Policy*<sup>9</sup> and to construct the object of study in an entirely different way – *as enactment*<sup>10</sup>.

**JM:** Perhaps it is difficult to define a fixed object?

**SJB:** Different versions of policy studies construct the object of knowledge differently in all sorts of ways. In the UK policy analysis for many years focused upon the work of government, and policy was almost seen as a synonym for government – in the traditional sense of the word. But now we've come to understand what counts as policy in different ways, and I've tried to argue that policy is constructed and done in all sorts or arenas, at all sorts of levels, by all sorts of people. So that the object of study becomes dissipated or has to be understood in terms of a trajectory analysis, as in movement through time and space. The way we construct our object of study also anticipates the research designs and the research methods that we use to engage with it.

**JM:** Now, I have a question about big and small theories, which I think is an important idea. Could you explore your idea of big and small theories and how you are applying this idea in your research?

**SJB:** Well really that maps back onto what I mean by surface and deep epistemology. Classically small theory is interpretational theory. It's about actors and their relationships and I'm not saying that is unimportant, I do think it's important to understand how actors make sense of policy and then act in relation to that sense-making. Indeed that's becoming a very common, even very dominant approach to policy analysis, and also has a long history based on doing interviews with policy makers etc. But on the other hand big theory takes you in slightly different directions, usually in some kind of structuralist direction. And obviously Marxism is a big theory, in this sense, which sees policy making as ultimately dependent either upon the balance of forces within class

<sup>9</sup> *How do schools do policy: policy enactments in Secondary Schools*, by Stephen J. Ball, Meg Maguire, Annette Braun, published in 2012.

<sup>10</sup> The term 'enactment policy' is difficult to translate to Portuguese. In an interview with Professor Stephen J. Ball, published in 2009, we explained that 'this word has been used in the legal context to describe the process of passing laws and decrees. During the interview, Ball used the word in a theatrical sense, referring to the notion of the actor having a text that can be displayed/represented in different ways. However, the text is only a small part (albeit an important one) of the production. Ball used this term to indicate that policies are interpreted and materialised in different and varied ways. The actors involved (in this case the teachers) have control of the process and are not "mere implementers" of policies' (Mainardes & Marcondes, 2009). Rosa (2012) considers that the best translation of *policy enactment* is 'encenação de políticas'. We have also used the concept of 'política em ação' to refer to the policy being effectively developed at schools.

struggle, or as related to the particular constitution of the means of production at any point in time. Equally discourse theory takes you towards the kind of epistemic questions that I was alluding to before, which involves looking at the grounds on which claims about truth are justified and how policy subjects are produced, how they are spoken by discourse, how they are formed and re-formed by policy and invited or summoned to speak, act, read, work, think, feel, behave and value, desire. That is, the ways in which policy is constructed in language, through particular practices, particular social relations – relations of power – and particular organisational forms and structures. So that's what I mean by bigger theories – it's much more ambitious both in its depth and its breadth because it involves taking you in the direction of what Foucault would call a *dispositif* or an apparatus, or what Deleuze talks about as an assemblage<sup>11</sup>. Policies are unstable assemblages of values, authority, meaning, and practice. Assemblages bring together various states of things and bodies, as well as utterances, modes of expression, and whole regimes of signs – both material and immaterial objects. So you can no longer concern yourself simply with one technology or one policy, but you have to see those things in a complex relationship of objects, people, language practices as relating together as some kind of more or less coherent whole. This is not a re-articulation of the macro and the micro but an erasure of that binary to see policy as a set of techniques, categories, objects and subjectivities. That is a very material conception of discourse that does not prioritise the 'reading' of texts but rather attends both to the conditions of possibility and historical contingency, and the way that discourse is written onto bodies.

**JM:** The Network of Theoretical and Epistemological Studies on Education Policy (RelePe) so far has organised 3 conferences. The last one was the "1<sup>st</sup> Latin American Meeting of Lecturers/researchers on Education Policy" (Unifesp, July 2015)<sup>12</sup>. One of the focuses of this conference was the preparation/training of the researchers on Education Policy (master, PhD etc.). In your opinion, which aspects are relevant to be considered, when preparing researchers?

<sup>11</sup> According to Wise (2005, p. 77), assemblage, "as it is used in Deleuze and Guattari's work, is a concept that deals with the play of contingency and structure, organization and change" (p. 77). The term in French is *agencement*, usually translated as 'putting together', 'arrangement', 'laying out', 'layout' or 'fitting'" (Wise, 2005, p. 77). It is important that *agencement* "is not a static term; it is not the arrangement or organization but the process of arranging, organizing, fitting together. (...) An assemblage is not a set of predetermined parts (such as the pieces of a plastic model aeroplane) that are then put together in order or into an already-conceived structure (the model aeroplane). Nor is an assemblage a random collection of things, since there is a sense that an assemblage is a whole of some sort that expresses some identity and claims a territory. An assemblage is a becoming that brings elements together" (WISE, 2005, p. 77). Youdell (2015) explains that Deleuze and Guattari use notions of 'assembles', 'arrangements' and assemblages' "to think about the multiplicity of diverse and moving elements that combine to form complex social formations. They suggest that apparently whole entities, and 'education' might be one such entity, can be understood as assemblages of heterogeneous components that cross-cut economic, political, state, social, institutional, linguistic, semiotic, representational, discursive, subjective and affective orders. Such components have often been treated as separate or of differential significance in social science, but for Deleuze and Guattari (1983:52) these are inseparable" (YOUDELL, 2015, p. 111).

<sup>12</sup> The manual of the *I Encuentro Latinoamericano de Profesores de Política Educativa* (1st Latin American Meeting of Professors of Education Policy) is available on [www.encuentrorelepe.com.br](http://www.encuentrorelepe.com.br). Information on the *Jornadas Latinoamericanas de Estudios Epistemológicos en Política Educativa* (Latin American Conferences on Epistemological Studies on Education Policy) held in 2012 (Buenos Aires, Argentina) and 2014 (Curitiba, Brazil) can be found at [www.relepe.org](http://www.relepe.org).

**SJB:** I think the simple answer to that is to make them read theory. What I find very often with my research students is that when they come they're interested in an object of study, they're interested in privatisation or parental choice or the introduction of management relationships into the governance of higher education, or working class students in elite universities, whatever – they have a topic of study and they conceive of that in a fairly straightforward way, empirical way. They think, I'll go and ask some people about it and they'll tell me what it's like. But very often when I make them read theory they actually end up rethinking their whole project and sometimes reconceptualising their objects of study. So I think being theoretically literate and being able to think beyond the object of study to how it's conceptualised is really the most important thing. And that's transposable, because you can then use your theoretical resources for other studies addressing different topics and problems. And it doesn't mean you have to commit yourself to one theoretical position, you can develop a toolbox of concepts and techniques and methods from different theories as long as they have some sense of degree of coherence in your work. You can then use them in relation to any objects of study. So that's the most important preparation for policy analysis, for policy research students... that they read lots of theory. And my experience also is that if you get students to read lots of theory they normally end up finding something that works for them, and that's what's important. I don't see it as a kind of commitment, as an identity. When I was a young researcher it was expected that you assume an academic identity – which was played out in your writing – based on some kind of theoretical commitment. So you might be a neo-marxist, or symbolic interactionist or a feminist. I don't think that is so clear-cut any more. Those expectations are not so strong, and many researchers are uncomfortable about identifying themselves with a single theoretical position. But that means it is important to have some degree of reflexivity about the decisions you make in relation to research, data, and writing. What is important is to acquire and develop a set of theoretical tools that work – that are useful – that have leverage in relation to what it is you are trying to understand.

**JM:** I've heard carefully your answers and comments about the *Journal of Education Policy*<sup>13</sup> and it is all very interesting. Now, I have a quite similar question. In your opinion what are the features of a good paper on education policy?

**SJB:** That's a difficult question because a paper could be formulated with different objectives. It could be an attempt to develop a theoretical perspective in relation to policy analysis. Or it could be a piece of empirical work. But if it's an empirical piece, then based upon what I've been saying already, then it should be something that allows the reader to understand the basis on which the writer then constructs their object of study

<sup>13</sup> The Journal of Education Policy was founded in 1986. It is one of the most important journals on Education Policy. On the website <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/tedp20>, Professor Stephen J. Ball, as its editor, answers several questions about the journal.

and can see the ways in which those assumptions, those premises, they both enable and constrain the researcher in terms of what they're able to say about their objects of study. So for me at the other end of that one of the important things is to have a degree of modesty about what you're able to achieve and what claims you're able to make. I think a lot of policy researchers over-claim for their research – they make claims that are not firmly grounded, either empirically or certainly not epistemologically or theoretically. So I think there needs to be more reflexivity in relation to such papers. Which is the sort of thing that Bourdieu always argued, that there needs to be an understanding of the socio-political basis of the production of intellectual work. And Bourdieu was also very clear that what he was doing was a very modest enterprise – he talked about not developing theories but doing sets of experiments. And he never claimed to have produced any grand social theory in the same way that Foucault never claimed to write social theory. Foucault talked about building strategic knowledge one brick at a time. And that's what I think we need – we need more wall-building and fewer claims about the erection of shoddy houses and palaces without foundations... we need to be more modest... and then we can get somewhere.

**JM:** Thank you very much Professor Ball. I am sure that the interview will be very useful.

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