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Interview with Helen M. Gunter

Roberto Serpieri*

Helen M. Gunter is Professor of Education Policy at the School of Environment, Education and Development (University of Manchester) and co-editor of the *Journal of Educational Administration and History*. Her main area of studying and researching are the processes of restructuring and reculturing of education systems (England and across Europe). She has specifically addressed in her recent works themes such as the knowledge production within the field of educational leadership, the changes in academic work and the reforms of Higher Education, the critique to distributed leadership as a tool of New Public Management in the field of education, the changing role of the education state and the ongoing and subtle processes of privatisation in the field of education. On the theoretical side, she has explored the generative tensions emerging from the adoption in the field of educational research of the ideas coming from influential thinkers such as Pierre Bourdieu and Hannah Arendt. Helen Gunter has published an impressive amount of books and edited collections, together with journal articles and other publications and her works are highly influential in the field of educational research. Since the publication of her seminal book *Jurassic Management* (1997) up to her recent works on School Academies, distributed leadership and the New Labour educational leadership policies, she has provided scholars and professionals in the field of education with stimulating theoretical insights and research findings that have inspired promising streams of research and critical thought.

Among her recent works: *Educational Leadership and Hannah Arendt* (Routledge, 2014); *Hard Labour? Academic Work and the Changing Landscape of Higher Education* (Emerald, 2012; with Tanya Fitzgerald and Julie White); *Leadership and the reform of education* (Policy Press, 2011); *The State and Education Policy: The Academies Programme* (ed.) (Continuum, 2011).

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Roberto Serpieri: In Italy we have strong barriers among disciplines, if you are a sociologist, you are not entitled in the same way of pedagogists in speaking of Education; and it is the same with economists, psychologists and so on; and so Education is a sort of mixed field of different disciplines; and it is almost the same with the organizational field where there are barriers between economics of organization, sociology of organization, etc. I imagine that in your country is quite different. So would you please tell me what do you feel in being a sociologist of education?

Helen M. Gunter: Ok, I see education as a field to study and practice and, as a field, you draw on the disciplines, so you draw on and make a contribution to history, psychology, sociology, and political science. So I see myself as a social scientist in the sense that I draw on social sciences disciplines and this is consistent with my first degree which it was in Modern History and Politics. So increasingly a lot of my work on educational policy is based on a return to earlier political studies and draws on the literature and research from the political science community. But I got into Sociology through my PhD and that was in the '90s and continues to do so today. So in many ways I inhabit a border line between sociology and political science and the relationship between the two. And I think I just come into this more recently through more work I've been doing on governance and theories of power and the way the power operates. So within the University system in England there are barriers in the sense that there are Schools and Faculties, so we have here in Manchester the Faculty of Humanities and within it we have a Schools of Social Sciences and the Business School. Within the Manchester Institute of Education we have groups or clusters around particular research and also teaching programmes. So, there are groups that focus around disciplines and of course careers are built around that, so people have titles and these link you into disciplines and fields. For example I have the title of professor of educational policy, and this is a way of defining a boundary. So there tends to be organizational boundaries like Faculties and Schools with networks of epistemological groups who many not necessarily talk to each other, even though they may be concerned with similar, or the same issues. And then you have got Journals that link into that and learning societies. This is why

we have thematic areas of research that enable interdisciplinary projects that cut across organisational boundaries and facilitate synergies. So can you do have boundaries but in Education we tend to see ourselves as a field that cuts across boundaries and certainly the University here encourages us to work in an interdisciplinary way, and to move across the boundaries. So, for example, I've got links with the Business school here and do collaborative work with colleagues across the Faculty and across the University. So there are boundaries, but there is also boundary crossing as well, and that is really exciting.

R.S.: And what about the influence of Pierre Bourdieu, who is quite a sociologist, on your work? Could you say some more about this topic?

H.M.G.: Yes, I came to this very new in the 1990s when I was doing my doctoral work, which I did part-time. My supervisor was Jenny Ozga who just came to the University as a professor and in talking about my doctoral plans I decided what I wanted to study was the history of educational management in England, specifically the way in which it had been brought into Higher Education. I had not long completed a Master's degree in Educational Management and so I was interested in how that field of study and practice had entered into the university. It seems to be quite a new area, it seems to be one where there was very much literature, but little that was about educational management in the UK context. It tended to come from the United States or Australia and also a lot of it tended to be influenced by business thinking and literatures. So I was interested in where it had come from and who brought it into the academy. In relation to doing that I did it through reading the outputs of the field, so the Journals and the books. I was member of what then was called BEMAS, the British Educational Management and Administration Society, it is now called BELMAS, because cause Leadership has been put in the title, and I went to conferences and networks and so on. In addition to reading the outputs I worked on understanding the nature of the field by doing interviews with the people who were the professors and people on the trajectory towards being professor in the field, and I did it generationally. So there were two

people who were really quite crucial in England in the '60s who brought what was then called educational administration into the universities and by that we mean they got appointments, they got professorships, they wrote books, they were part of networks and so on, and that's Professor Sir George Baron, and Professor Sir William Taylor. So I was interested in the two originators and then I focused on the different generations coming through so I got, if you like, different generations, people representing different traditions and different scientific traditions and so on. So the question is "how do you get an understanding, a meaning on that data in terms of the bringing into the university this body of questions, of training, of professional development and research and so on? How do you bring meaning and understanding into that?". And Jenny [Ozga] suggested I looked at Bourdieu, so I did and I think I've been reading it for an hour and realised this was it, this was my intellectual, this was the love of my life and I didn't understand a lot of it initially. It was highly frustrating but the more I worked at it, the more it enabled me to bring a sense of a critical framework and thinking tools for analysis. This brought me an understanding to these data, and so I got my PhD in the 1999 and since then I've been writing from the thesis and developing my understanding of Bourdieu even more. I've also had an ESRC project that extended that work that I did for my PhD, called Knowledge Production in Educational Leadership Project. Because what came out of my PhD was a study of knowledge production, and I extended the study of educational management to a broader understanding of the field. I used Bourdieu in this project to map and examine the knowledge of the canon, the ways of knowing or methodologies, who were the knowers, who were the people who regard themselves or 'others' regard as being the people who know about this field or this issue. And so Bourdieu enabled me to do a lot of my project and move it forward.

R.S.: I remember that the first time I read your book about Jurassic Management, I was very impressed by the title, and obviously by your thesis. After that I found very interesting the many articles you've written with professor Ribbins about the production of knowledge in the field. I thought that, in a certain way, it was a sort of sociology of knowledge of the educational field. Starting from Jurassic Management how could you

describe your trajectory from the 'first', if I could say so, work on leadership in order to become one of the most famous, prestigious scholar in the critical leadership studies?

H.M.G.: Right. I think if you look at my work today, what I am very interested in is the nature of professional practice and so on, and how people go about doing their work, whether or not they can control their work, and in particular control what it is called the leadership 'turn'. It seems that everybody is identified as a leader or in relation to a leader (as a follower). But the other part of my work is to understand the knowledge production that underpins all of that. Now if you do backward tracking, then I think that both themes of practice and knowledge and the relationship between the two, have got their origins in the Jurassic Management work. But I think that work, if you like, is a good starting point, because it helped me to do some thinking. Now let me just put this in context: I was a Lecturer at the time and I was doing a PhD, but in the English context you have to produce four outputs for what was then called the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). And so I was new to a university...the research... prior to that I've been at a Polytechnic. And in doing research I wanted to do that through my doctorate as I described it earlier. But I also had to produce some outputs that could be counted in the RAE and in that sense it enabled me to think it through. So I did my very first refereed article, and it was published in 1995 in the *Journal of Educational Administration* where I proposed this idea of Jurassic Management and it then became the book in 1997. And its origins lie in cold Saturday afternoons in the Library in Keele University where I was both a student and a member of staff. And this is the days before on-line searches and on-line catalogues; everything had to be done manually. And so I would manually go through the journals searching for interesting articles and then photocopying and so on...and going along the shelves. So I would review the books and build up the bibliography but one Saturday afternoon I was looking at the shelves and I was struck about all the 'how to do it' books in education management: how to plan, how to do a school development plan, how to set a budget, how to market school, how to communicate effectively...There was, there was hundreds of them! I'm

exaggerating but it looked like hundreds! And my question was: Is this all that this field is? Because at the same time I had Baron and Taylor's book from 1969 *Educational Administration and Social Sciences*, and they set out the knowledge base for the field and drawing on the social sciences and these chapters in the economics, in the organizing, the sociology of the organization and so on. So there was a sense in which my first degree told me that Baron and Taylor was essential in terms of the underlying scholarship. Before I had moved into higher education I'd been a teacher in a school for eleven years, so as a practitioner I was meant to read all these 'how to do it' books and yet for some reason nobody was linking the two. So that was running in my mind that there was something here deeply troubling about the field. And of course by then George Baron had retired and William Taylor had gone off into the high ranks of university leadership and so on. So, what was going on? And then on holiday I read Michael Crichton's book *Jurassic Park* and I really enjoyed it, is a really good drama, enjoyed the film that eventually came out. But to me it was a kind of metaphor for what was wrong with the way in which the field was producing resources for practitioners in the post 1988 period. Because in 1988 site-based management was introduced, where schools had the right to hire and fire their staff, run their budgets, set the direction of the school and so on, and essentially created the school as a business. This means that schools were operating in a market, and must compete with the other schools for students. And I'm being quite simplistic now, but that was the essential message. And what the field had done, and I've been part of this in my early career, was to set up training programmes and masters degrees that would enable field members to learn how to run a business: human resource management, appraisal, appointing staff, sacking staff, resource management, premises management because they got control of the building, all of those sorts of issues to be done with and so on. How to manage change and bring people with you, get people on board and so on. So you have all of these resources been produced and I thought what's happening is that the school seems to have been turned into a 'Theme Park' like *Jurassic Park*, as everything was predictable and controllable and rational and normal and that people didn't need to know and understand the world that they're in. They just needed to deliver this experience, so just as in *Jurassic Park* you get into a buggy and you're driven around as an experience and you observe the animals running around. Then it seems as if

professionals would have been turned into people who didn't really look at the schools, they just ensured children had the right type of experience because teaching and learning was pre-scripted. So I took that message, because Michael Crichton uses chaos theory to challenge and question it, so I started to read about chaos theory, particularly the book by Gleick, and it was fascinating stuff, really, really enjoyed it! But it challenged the kind of the doxa in the management texts and increasingly in the leadership texts, so things like having a vision and a mission. Well if you look at work outside of education looking at chaos theory, you know then visioning and missioning is a delusion, you know. People running companies don't operate like that or if they do don't survive very long. Also in the literatures everything was dominated by teams, as if the processes of a team mattered and you deliver things better, when nobody was actually asking "well what are we delivering? What's an educational process?" and so on. Matters to do with teaching and learning were more about the dynamics and construction of a team. So, that's what I tried to look at in the *Jurassic Management* and the main message was that this field it treats the practitioner as if they've got no intellectual nous, that they are people who can't think deeply about the issues, that these are matters that are..., that there is no history in this field, there's no theory of power in this field. And there's far too much project development, salesmanship going on and entrepreneurship, rather than serious research and thinking. So I think really the book, if you like, acts as a foundation for the other things that I've done.

R.S.: Another issue I was impressed by was your research about knowledge production on leadership and your ideas about regimes in the field of education. May I ask you how do you connect research fields with theoretical tools coming from Bourdieu's and other critical scholars?

H.M.G.: I think this is a life's work Roberto, so I think I'm partly into it, I think that the book edited in 2001 was a review of the literatures, there it came again from my thesis and what that generated for me was a need to get a further understanding of the literatures and the knowledge claims.

And that's what the work with Peter Ribbins was about, which was fabulous, I loved to do that work with Peter, it was so creative and I think we both got a lot out of it and we still talk about it fondly, and it was an important period of time. And what that work enabled us to do is to get a sense, if you like, of the sorts of knowledge...the canon, what's being produced and what are the claims underpinning it. So what is philosophical is distinct from work that is really quite instrumental, work that's rooted in qualitative and humanistic engagement with people and their lives and their careers compared to work that is much more hopeful of a world that may be different, of the schools that may be different, world that is more imaginary in that sense but rooted very much in the same values. So this is the all range of different work going on, but it connected back to the Jurassic Management, because the work illustrated again this trend and this drive towards instrumentalism and towards, if you like, just activity, activity disconnected from any knowledge base or any sense of what it is all about and who is producing it. It's a sense, if you like, of just becoming a product in a market place, to be bought and sold and to be rebranded all the time. So I think that work confirmed that, but increasingly what I wanted to do was to expand the empirical base for my thesis work. So in my thesis I've got 16 in-depth interviews with people who worked on educational management, but it was quite clear that there was a shift happening in terms of leadership. So I put the bid into the ESRC when I came here to Manchester in 2004 and having won it, it enabled to me to collect more data, so I think we have got about a 116 interviews of which we have about 60 from higher education, so the 16 became 60. Some of those people from the 16 I re-interviewed because of the time issue and shift towards leadership and they very kindly enabled us to do that, but it also meant that I could go out into areas that my PhD hadn't be able to – we all know that a PhD can only do one job. And so we included more people from the management field, but also I was able to get the policy scholars and the improvement and effectiveness scholars. So in that sense I've got quite a lot of people whose work is either directly involved in leadership or who happen to come across leadership, because it's part of what they're doing. So there are some people that are interviewed who would say that are not actually leadership scholars, they work on curriculum, they work on policy, but they can't help dealing with leadership issues because it stares them in the face. In addition to that, I've got also people from Unions, from Local

Authorities, and Government Ministers, people from Think Tanks and so on, even from the National College – all different kinds of people. So the question is how do you theorize this?

R.S.: Yes and may I also ask you how do you theorize and how do you ‘translate’ in empirical terms?

H.M.G.: Yeah, that’s hard and I think I need to write it and think it all through and I’m very conscious that I’ve not yet written how I did it. But you have, if you like, lots of different kinds of sources of evidence. So you’ve got the outputs from the field, the journals, the books; you’ve got people’s biographies in the form of their CV, so we collected CVs; also ask them in the interview what their major outputs were, if that was relevant because not everybody was a researcher. And then you’ve got policy documents I’ve got nearly a thousand primary and secondary sources – and so on. So the question is “how to make sense of all of that?”. A lot of it, is an intellectual project that I can’t really articulate. And that’s part as well of me being part of the field that I’m researching, that is a very important issue that has to be addressed, what it means to be a professor in the field that you’re professing in and that you are researching, you know? And so, you know, I would quite clearly – and people know this and it’s very upfront – ...and that I’m part of the critical policy studies community, you know. I, well, I’ve never hidden, and that for people know who I am or the likely way I would be approaching these topics and so on. So the key thinking tool from Bourdieu that I have used were matters of the “game”, social practice as a game and so it’s the case of conceptualising what game is played here and in what ways these people play and who they are associated with and linking with. And that was the first stage of analysis, is: Who works with whom? Who writes with whom? Who does projects with whom? You know those sorts of interconnections, if you like, and how that links with the kinds of label like ‘school improvement’. School improvement only exists because you’ve got a network of people who identified in that way, they interconnect to each other, they’ve worked in the same school or institute, they’ve set up a journal where they all write in,

there are conferences and symposia and so on. So this is a sense in which through CVs, through writings, through professional practice you understand, if you like, the various epistemic groups and so getting a sense of that and how people so far identified, so this is the game. Then, how field positions enable habitus to be revealed. Habitus is interesting, because when you read all of the interviews there is usually an espoused association and link with children and enabling children into develop. So you may be a professor, far removed from the primary school classroom, but you see yourself as working through your research, through your conference papers in ways that directly connect to that child. When you link your research into the supervision of doctorates and masters, teaching on masters, doing professional development work with the profession, you can then start to get even closer to practice and closer to children. So that links everybody, I don't think that there is anybody who didn't make a claim that the thing that was important to them was the welfare and development of children and their learning and so on. And there was a strong identification with teachers as a profession and wanting to work and support and enable. But the big difference is how people identify themselves in relation to policy and what they see as being the purposes of their work in relation to policy. So if you talk to the critical leadership people they see their contribution as being describing and understanding and explaining policy. In other words, they see themselves as researching 'about' the policy. When you look at the effectiveness and improvement and leadership and management people they see themselves as doing research 'for' policy. See the game, if you like, is revealing habitus or dispositions regarding research projects, Journals, conference attendance and titles of jobs, and so on. So I had that sense, if you like, of mapping the field as 'people', not as abstract knowledge. So I've got that, but then you think ok who's playing this game or what's going on? Now the situation in England may be unique or you can tell me otherwise, but we had 30 years of Governments determining the game and playing the game in education and New Labour did it was to play with energy. And so the game was being defined, rules were being defined, through direct policy intervention in the field. New Labour took office in 1997 on the basis that they knew the way to reform schools was through heads and leadership. That's very clearly documented: they set up the National College, the remit the National College had was to train and develop educational practitioners but particularly head teachers and get

them credited as leaders. And, importantly, the knowledge in the field would be controlled by them. They would know and understand what good practice was and they would bring the experts in from around the world to do it. So you've got this situation where they would also decide which kind of research to fund. And so a Government was colonising the field even though the field was pluralistic with different epistemic communities. How do relate the two? What I did was I took Bourdieu's mapping of economic and political power, and I coded every transcript of people located in the universities, people in business, we interviewed people from private sector consultancies, politicians, people in the National College, 25 head teachers. I identified indicators of capital and so being a head teacher was more in terms of capital than being a professor. But a professor of school improvement is worth more in this game, than a professor of policy. And I used the data that I got from that to then map people onto the grid and so you put the people who are very strongly pro-economic and pro-power allocated on a territory that's dominated by Government, so you've got Ministers and civil servants who see their job in a very powerful position because Labour had a huge mandate to govern. They see their job as linking very much into the economic and global production and the importance of the economy. And they brought in people to enable them to do that: they brought heads in, they brought academics in, people from Local Authorities and you can see that in the transcripts of lots ... if you just take academics for example; academics in school improvement see themselves as people who do business with Government. And I've got them saying it and they have said it in public places. So I'm not saying something that is a big revelation. But they see an engage and symbolic exchange: so Government Ministers wanting be seen to be 'modern', so they bring in big consultancy companies, and so on. And the consultancy companies want to access a new market, so they're exchanging there. Researchers come in and research can be useful and relevant in exchanging with Government and Government has got legitimacy from a professor from a world leading university working with them. And then you've got, when I mapped it, you've got people who are not powerful in relation to Government and they don't see their work as directly enabling economic production. They see their work as twofold: one is to reveal the social injustices in society and they critique the groups working with Government, but also they working differently with practitioners because

there are head teachers in there working on social injustice projects, a lot of students' voice project for example would be located there. This is because students voice projects don't necessarily lead to economic production but they do lead to important democratic cultures and so on. And then in the middle you've got the people who I'd interviewed for my PhD and that community had really been decimated and had been decimated for a number of reasons. There were number of retirements and sadly there were number of deaths of key people, and what seemed to happen was that New Labour made it attractive for certain people to want to play that game. And some joined that game from that middle group while others were on the kind of a periphery in great hope and their expectation. Whereas others where quite frankly shocked about what was going on and they started to look at the critical side of things and in particularly there were a number of women who wanted to develop more work around diversity and issues of gender and they seem to be more orientated towards the policy research and socially critical work. So that's what I did then. Now in doing that, I think you're right, it is challenging and Bourdieu says nobody likes an informer, because I was in effect informing on my community, if you like, in Bourdieu's terms and making public what everybody knew but nobody talked about. And the book that's come out of it has being very well received from what I've heard. If people don't like it they've not come to talk to me about. That's all I was saying.

R.S.: May I ask you two more questions? The first is about the future development of your empirical and theoretical work, what could you tell us on your research on distributed leadership and your forthcoming book on the thought of Hanna Arendt? The second is about what do you think about the European sociological community of scholars in the field of education.

H.M.G.: When I finished the ERSC funded knowledge production project, at the same time we had an emerging group here in the School [of Education] interested in policy and leadership studies and we've been looking at distributed leadership and the growth of it and so on. And so David Hall led on the writing of a bid to the ESRC to study distributed

leadership and what that project did was to enable me to do what the KPEL couldn't do. In other words the KPEL project was about mapping knowledge production and people and methodologies and so on. And while head teachers were included in the sample we weren't able to look at the realities of how people go about the leadership practice and understand what they're doing when they call it 'leadership'. And so the project that David and I did with Joanna Bragg let us do that, because we did 5 in-depth case studies of schools and that not only obtained data about how people understand leadership but also studied decision making and the ways in which people go about their jobs. So I think that's been a very important development and we are in the process of writing papers from that. At the same time my connections with colleagues nationally and internationally suggested that even though there was critical thinking and theorising going on the field, it was very easy to ignore it and to regard as even eccentric or possibly dangerous. It was very clear to see that theory was something that the field did not regard as 'normal'. And so Pat Thomson, Jill Blackmore and myself have got a book series with Routledge that's in production where we are looking at the mobilisation of social theory and political theory in the field of leadership. And so Pat Thomson is doing a book on Bourdieu, Jill Blackmore is doing one on Nancy Frazer, Donald Gilles is doing one on Foucault and so on and so far. And I'm doing a book on Hannah Arendt and that is really interesting because I read some of it in the past but did not really get into it, sufficiently, though I knew enough to know it was possible to do it and also being very exciting. So this last year I've been reading Hanna Arendt and drafting a book using Hannah Arendt's thinking tools to think about the relationship between leadership and power and the State, that's what was all about and is now in full draft and I'm looking for that coming out. And I think that her ideas will continue to influence me and to interconnect me more perhaps into the political sciences. And in terms of the European side of things, well as you know England is an island... [We both laugh at...] what can I say? I think that my main preoccupation in the last twenty years has been about the way in which functional knowledge production, that's very popular in the United States, has dominated the field in England. And so certain key writers and key texts that are regarded as quite 'sacred' by the Jurassic Management community remain, and what's really interesting is the way in which the Jurassic Management metaphor is still relevant today, you know.

That community is very strong and this aspect of it in Australia and New Zealand as well. For me, I think the European side of it has increased in the last four or five years, particularly with our collaboration and emerging work through our European network. There is also the language issue, you know, the translation – in the sense that England has been seen as a ‘laboratory’, the development for much of this leadership work, and I know a lot of it travels backwards and forwards over the oceans to the States and across to Australia and so on. And many of the people who I charted in my knowledge production are out then now selling their products in leadership. But how the different nations and communities and cultures across the Europe have responded to New Public Management and the drive towards leadership and so on, and certainly the opening of Eastern Europe and the growth of markets there, and again there is a need to investigate where people turn to when they want to look for intellectual and research sources that enables them to think about the re-design of their systems. I found all of this really quite fascinating and I think sociological work and political science work is absolutely crucial to enable us to chart what’s going on and to develop alternatives. This is because there are and there has to be an alternative to the functional knowledge production that is spreading all around the world as ‘effective’ and ‘efficient’ leadership.

R.S.: So there is a European hope?

H.M.G.: Well I would hope there is, and not least from accessing the research and thinking of European colleagues through attendance conferences and so on. I think our research is showing some deep problematic issues with the way in which leadership is constituted and the way in which people are trained to adopt certain languages, certain embodiments, the accents, what they say, but importantly where the silences are.

R.S.: Well, thank you Helen for such interesting interview.