

Quality imperialism in higher education: A global empire of the mind?

Noel Gough

La Trobe University, Australia

ABSTRACT

This essay explores some ways in which concepts drawn from Deleuze and Guattari's "geophilosophy" can be used to analyse "quality" in contemporary global discourses of higher education, with particular reference to understanding "quality" as a Deleuzian "order-word". Specifically, I focus on the effects of the ordering functions of selected "quality" discourses in three nations/regions (Australia, Hong Kong and South Africa) and the ways in which analysing these effects helps us to understand what national quality agencies may be able to "trade" across national, linguistic and cultural borders – an issue of particular significance if such boundaries also designate power differentials. I argue that such analyses suggest a need to resist the new forms of "quality imperialism" produced by the present tendency among national higher education systems to cede their authority and responsibility for determining quality in their own locations to a decentered and deterritorialising apparatus of rule progressively constituted by supranational quality agencies and professionals.

The empires of the future are the empires of the mind.

Winston Churchill, Speech at Harvard University, 5 September 1943¹

The decline in sovereignty of nation-states ... does not mean that sovereignty as such has declined. ... sovereignty has taken a new form, composed of a series of national and supranational organisms united under a single logic of rule. This new global form of sovereignty is what we call Empire.

Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri, *Empire* (2000: xi-xii).

Empire as concept

I suspect that the term "empire" is an anachronism to many academics, especially to those who (like me) reside in the UK's former colonies and are old enough to remember when "Commonwealth" displaced "Empire" in everyday speech.² But the theme of empire has been revived recently; this is partly in the context of European history (e.g. Ferguson, 2003), but more obviously in debates about the role(s) of the United States as imperialist oppressor and/or more-or-less benevolent global superpower (e.g. Bacevich, 2002; Boot, 2002). Simon Dalby (2004: 1) notes that in many popular discourses "America is not supposedly an empire, not like the European states from which its political rhetoric works hard to distinguish it". He also argues that the global presence of the US

navy, the ubiquity of its troop garrisons in many “independent” nation-states, and its pre-emptive use of military force to impose its political and economic will, “has finally cut through the taboo on calling America an empire”. Understanding US power in terms of empire adds weight to Robert Walker’s (1993) long-held view that there is much more to global politics than many contemporary international relations models of competing and cooperating autonomous states seem to suggest. In a world dominated by imperial power, territorial assumptions about sovereignty might not be particularly useful.

Churchill’s figure of speech, “empires of the mind”, anticipates a conception of imperialism that avoids territorial assumptions. Michael Hardt and Antoni Negri (2000) offer an extensive exploration of this concept in their aptly titled monograph, *Empire*.³ They argue that even the most dominant nation-states have ever-diminishing powers to regulate the flows of capital, technologies and people across national boundaries and that sovereignty now is passing to an amorphous series of regulations and shared processes that exceed the mandates of nation-states and determine the rules for incorporating numerous institutions and peoples into what they simply call “Empire”, which they distinguish from imperialism:

In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colors of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow. (Hardt and Negri, 2000: xii-xiii, authors’ emphasis)

Hardt and Negri (2000: xiv) do not use “Empire” as a metaphor, “which would require demonstration of the resemblances between today’s world order and the Empires of Rome, China, the Americas, and so forth, but rather as a *concept*” (authors’ emphasis) characterised chiefly by a lack of boundaries: “Empire’s rule has no limits. ... No territorial boundaries limit its reign”.⁴

Audit cultures or audit Empire?

A number of recent news items from different countries prompt me to speculate that quality assurance in higher education might be becoming – to reiterate Hardt and Negri’s (2000: xii) words – “a *decentered* and *deterritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers”, and that this marks a shift from what Marilyn Strathern (2000) termed “audit cultures” (plural) to a singular *audit Empire*. For example, the *Sowetan* (South Africa’s largest selling daily newspaper) recently reported: “The Higher Education Quality Committee of the Council on Higher Education (HEQC) has just signed a memoranda [sic] of understanding with quality assurance agencies in the UK and India”.⁵ According to this report, the signing of this memorandum will enable the three national agencies to exchange information and expertise on, for example, “key policy documents and operational information” and “collaboration in joint research of mutual benefit”. Similarly, the executive director of the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), David Woodhouse (2005: 34), recently publicised “the signing of a memorandum of cooperation with the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation, and the Malaysian Lembaga Akreditasi Negara exploring the possibility of AUQA assisting it in a review of Malaysian providers”. Woodhouse claims that AUQA is “acting in the best interests of the overseas operations of Australian universities”, but adds: “we are conscious of “quality imperialism” and must acknowledge that many countries have their own quality assurance systems in place”.

I am familiar enough with the higher education systems in three of the above-named countries/regions (Australia, Hong Kong and South Africa) to wonder what such “free trade” between national quality agencies might produce (and/or prevent). For example, as Maureen Tam (1999: 222) points out, the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) “was set up in 1990 ... to advise on the academic quality of degree courses proposed or offered by the *non-university organisations*”

(my emphasis). I find it a little puzzling that the Australian *Universities* Quality Agency has signed a memorandum of cooperation with a council that accredits non-university courses, because the Hong Kong agency with the equivalent jurisdiction to AUQA is not the HKCAA but the University Grants Committee. Given that both of the Hong Kong agencies already cooperate with each other and with AUQA as full members of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE),⁶ I am also curious as to what additional purposes such a memorandum of cooperation between AUQA and HKCAA might serve. Woodhouse (2004b: 77–79) regards the establishment of INQAAHE during the 1990s as playing a “major part” in the development of “quality assurance as a profession” and notes: “In 2002, the Board of INQAAHE formally recognised the emergence of a quality assurance profession, and INQAAHE’s role as the professional association for EQAs [external quality agencies]”. Woodhouse (2004b: 77) also predicted that the 2000s would be “the decade of international quality”. Thus, while disavowing AUQA’s potential to be an instrument of “quality imperialism”, Woodhouse perhaps overlooks the possibility that quality professionals might be becoming the apparatus for ruling the global realm of quality in higher education. Nations might well have their own quality assurance systems in place but might also, in effect, be ceding their authority and responsibility to determine quality in their own locations to a global cadre of quality professionals. In other words, quality in higher education internationally could be reduced to that which quality professionals can audit.

I was less surprised by the news that South Africa’s HEQC had signed a memorandum of understanding with its UK equivalent. As Nico Cloete et al. (2002) demonstrate, in recent years South Africa has received a great deal of advice from other countries on how to establish a national quality assurance system. A. H. and J. F. Strydom (2004) add that South Africa’s political and historical ties to the UK and other major education-selling nations created some pressure to conform to their quality assurance practices. However, they also argue that the unique circumstances in which quality assurance systems are being developed in South Africa mean that “conformity with ... quality assurance systems in other countries should not idealistically be accepted as the answer for South Africa” (Strydom and Strydom, 2004: 111).

The following discussion explores some ways in which concepts drawn from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s “geophilosophy” can be used to analyse “quality” in contemporary contexts of globalisation, multiculturalism and international communication networks, with particular reference to translating, interpreting and/or “trading” “quality” across national, linguistic and cultural borders.

Deleuze and Guattari’s geophilosophy

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) offer a new critical language for understanding thinking as flows or movements across space, using concepts such as *nomad*, *rhizome*, *assemblage*, *detritorialisation*, and *lines of flight* that refer to spatial relationships and to ways of conceiving ourselves and other objects moving in space. Western scholarship conventionally represents knowledge as tree-like, with hierarchically articulated branches of a central stem or trunk rooted in fixed and firm foundations. Thinking rhizomatically and nomadically destabilises such arborescent and sedentary conceptions of knowledge. As Umberto Eco (1984: 57) explains, “the rhizome is so constructed that every path can be connected with every other one. It has no center, no periphery, no exit, because it is potentially infinite. The space of conjecture is a rhizome space”.

In a world of increasingly complex information/communication technologies, the space of knowledge production (including educational research) is also becoming a “rhizome space”. Rhizome is to a tree as the Internet is to a letter. In other words, the rhizome represents networking that resembles the hyperconnectivity of the Internet. The structural reality of a tree and a letter – or a memorandum of understanding between two national quality agencies – is relatively simple: a trunk connecting two points through or over a mapped surface. But rhizomes and the Internet⁷ are

infinitely complex and continuously changing. Although INQAAHE characterises itself as a “Network”, the connections it provides are predominantly arborescent (a newsletter, a journal, a members-only database) rather than rhizomatic, such as might be facilitated by a wiki⁸ or similar open-access, interactive web tools. Imagining knowledge production in a rhizomatic space is particularly generative in forms of educational inquiry that seek to resist colonialism, imperialism and Empire because, as Patricia O’Riley (2003: 27) writes: “Rhizomes affirm what is excluded from western thought and reintroduce reality as dynamic, heterogeneous, and nondichotomous; they implicate rather than replicate; they propagate, displace, join, circle back, fold”.

Deleuze and Guattari (1994) characterise philosophy as the creation of concepts through which knowledge can be generated.⁹ One such conceptual creation is what they call *mots d’ordre* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 79), usually translated as “order-words”, which are not commands but terms that link implicit presuppositions to social obligations and produce locatable effects:

We call *order-words*, not a particular category of explicit statements (for example, in the imperative), but the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions, in other words, to speech acts that are, and can only be, accomplished in the statement. Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a “social obligation.” Every statement displays this link, directly or indirectly. Questions, promises, are order-words. ... language is the set of all order-words, implicit presuppositions, or speech acts current in a language at a given time.

Brian Massumi, in his translator’s endnote to Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987: 523) *A Thousand Plateaus*, notes that in standard French *mot d’ordre* means “slogan” or “(military) password” and argues that Deleuze and Guattari use it literally to mean “word of order”, that is, to suggest a command as well as a word that creates a political order. Similarly, Robert and Kerry-Ann Porter (2003: 139) suggest that “order-word” signifies “the immediate, irreducible and pragmatic relation between *words* and *orders*”, which can be viewed in two ways:

1. Words or speech acts are pragmatically implicated in a *social order* or in forms of, what Deleuze and Guattari call, “social obligation”. These forms of “social obligation” always presuppose *imperatives* ...
2. Words or speech acts can perform an *ordering function*: that is, they can *imperatively* or immediately change the circumstances in which they are formulated.

To exemplify their first point, Porter and Porter consider the imperatives presupposed by the “social obligations” that “order” the ways in which a PhD student and an examiner perform the *viva*:¹⁰

Think about the *social-institutional setting* in which the communicative exchange takes place, and the roles the examiner and student are *obligated* to perform in order to make their discourse function in this context. It is *imperative* that the examiner makes judgements relevant to the substantive content of the text under discussion. It is *imperative* that the student exhibits an intimate knowledge of the work she is required to defend. Clearly, all bets would be off if the examiner insisted on asking the doctoral candidate questions concerning her personal life rather than her thesis. Similarly, there would be no pragmatic grounds on which to proceed if the student responded to questions by turning cartwheels around the room. This is just another way of saying that forms of “social obligation” – that is, the imperatives implied by the social order or social-institutional setting – precede the performative assumption of speech action roles. (Porter & Porter, 2003: 139–140)

Kaustuv Roy (2004: 304) offers a succinct example of the second way in which Porter and Porter see words relating to orders: “when the judge pronounces ‘Guilty’, the result is not simple penitence but the *production of the convict* with its own intricate social structure” (2004: 304, author’s emphasis). Roy (2004: 304–305) argues that for Deleuze and Guattari language is neither information nor communication but, rather, “a leaping from order-word to order-word, punctuated by action, as each statement performs an act or an act is performed in the statement ... A word is what a word does or prevents from doing”.

If we approach “quality” as an order-word in educational discourses, then we will not ask what quality *means* but ask how it *works* and what it *does or produces* (or prevents) in specific locations.¹¹ Understanding “quality” as an order-word might help us understand what national quality agencies are able to “trade” across national, linguistic and cultural borders – which may be especially significant if such boundaries also designate power differentials. I explore this speculation further by focusing on examples of the effects of the ordering functions of “quality” discourses in three different nations, including the auditing processes managed by the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), the promotion and auditing of “quality” in both higher education and school education in Hong Kong, and continuing debates about “balancing quality and equality” in post-apartheid South Africa.

Some effects of auditing quality in Australian universities

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) describes itself as “an independent, not-for-profit national agency that will promote, audit, and report on quality assurance in Australian higher education”; it is responsible for “conducting quality audits of self-accrediting Australian higher education institutions... [and] providing public reports on the outcomes of these audits”.¹² AUQA provides an online glossary, which defines “quality” as:

Fitness for purpose, where “purpose” is to be interpreted broadly, to include mission, goals, objectives, specifications, and so on. This is an inclusive definition, as every organisation or activity has a purpose, even if it is not always precisely stated. “Fitness for purpose” means both that an organisation has procedures in place that are appropriate for the specified purposes, and that there is evidence to show that these procedures are in fact achieving the specified purposes.¹³

AUQA therefore requires each university to prepare a “performance portfolio”, a self-study of the “fitness” of its procedures for achieving its specified purposes. This portfolio is then scrutinised by an audit panel which may ask further questions of clarification, seek further documentation, and undertake a site visit in which they observe aspects of the university’s operations and interview various members of staff. The audit panel eventually prepares a report containing commendations (statements about what the institution is doing well), recommendations (things that need to be done) and, since 2004, affirmations (matters in need of attention that the auditee has already diagnosed).

In the Australian higher education community, “quality” is thus a word that has created a socio-political order (materialised in AUQA, the activities it “orders” in universities, and the portfolios and reports these activities produce). Enunciations such as “quality assurance” and “quality audit” are pragmatically implicated in forms of social obligation that presuppose imperatives for all of the parties concerned. The roles and actions that AUQA and the universities are obligated to take in order to make their discourse function are implicit presuppositions, but they become more visible when these imperatives and obligations are challenged or ignored, as would also be the case in Porter and Porter’s (2003) PhD *viva* scenario, quoted above, if (for example) the examiner *did* ask inappropriate personal questions or the student *did* turn cartwheels around the room in response to the examiner’s academic question.

The social order in which communicative exchanges between AUQA and Australian universities take place, and the roles each party is obliged to perform in order to make their discourse function, was challenged by Edith Cowan University (ECU) in 2004. Immediately after AUQA released its report on ECU, the university placed a quarter-page advertisement in the Higher Education Supplement (HES) of *The Australian* newspaper, which began with the following claims:

In the latest audit undertaken by the independent Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), Western Australia’s Edith Cowan University (ECU) gained strong endorsement for its strategic focus, reputation and performance across many operational areas.

Leading outcome

... ECU attained the highest number of commendations of any University audited by AUQA during its three years of operation. And its ratio of commendations to recommendations for improvement is also the best of all Universities so far examined: 23 to 12.¹⁴

The advertisement included a table that ranked institutions based on the number of commendations each university received from AUQA (see Figure 1). The table presents the names of ECU and three other Western Australian universities – the University of Western Australia (UWA), Curtin University and Notre Dame University – in block capitals and bold type, and the numbers of commendations and recommendations received by each of these four universities were also displayed in bold type.

SUMMARY AUQA AUDIT REPORTS		
	Commendations	Recommendations
EDITH COWAN	23	12
Griffith	21	16
Queensland	19	16
UWA	18	21
James Cook	17	16
Macquarie	17	23
South Australia	16	10
Newcastle	16	19
Southern Queensland	14	22
Australian Maritime College	13	16
Southern Cross	13	18
New England	12	16
Australian Catholic	12	19
Canberra	11	21
CURTIN	10	20
NOTRE DAME	10	22
RMIT	10	24
Swinburne	8	18
Adelaide	7	26
Ballarat	6	26

Figure 1. Detail from Edith Cowan University's advertisement in The Australian, 3 November 2004 (p. 25; shown actual size)

One week later, the HES carried three letters to the editor, grouped in three columns under the common headline, "Audit comparisons controversy". Reading from left to right, the first letter was from the Executive Director of AUQA, Dr David Woodhouse (2004a); the second was from Dr David Hamilton (2004), Director, Planning and Resource Development, University of Canberra; the third letter was from ECU's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Millicent Poole (2004).

Woodhouse's (2004a: 31) letter refers to ECU's advertisement as "unfortunate and misleading":

... unfortunate because it purports to use the outcome of the AUQA audit process as a basis for producing comparisons among universities. These audits were not set up for this purpose – in fact quite the converse. Each audit reviews the auditee against its own objectives ... Under such circumstances, comparisons become meaningless. The universities themselves expressed repeated concerns that AUQA's audit reports would lead to the media generating league tables, and AUQA promised to attempt to write them in such a way as to discourage this tendency. It is

particularly unfortunate therefore that a member of the AVCC [Australian Vice-Chancellors Committee] has chosen to take such an approach.

Woodhouse adds that “AUQA was conscious that the only area that might lend itself to

– admittedly spurious – comparisons would be the numbers of recommendations and commendations” and explains how the ECU advertisement misleads readers by making such comparisons.¹⁵

Hamilton’s (2004: 31) letter begins by supporting Woodhouse’s interpretation of the purposes of AUQA’s audits:

“Never, never” was the mantra chanted by the inaugural executive director of the Australian Universities Quality Agency, David Woodhouse, as he made his way from university to university a couple of years ago introducing the compulsory audits. Never would the audits be used to rank universities.

That was until last week when Millicent Poole, vice-chancellor of Edith Cowan University, broke ranks with her higher education colleagues and purchased space in the HES to publish her rankings of institutions based on the number of commendations each university received in their AUQA report.

I doubt if it was any coincidence that the letters from Woodhouse, Hamilton and Poole were placed alongside a one-and-a-half page feature article, “Ranking mania reflects distortion of priorities”, in which Colin Steele (2004) discusses the scores achieved by Australian universities in *The Times Higher Education Supplement* World University Rankings. Elsewhere in the same issue of *HES*, columnist Dorothy Illing (2004: 34) alludes to these rankings in a very forthright commentary on the ECU advertisement:

Forget the international league ladders: Edith Cowan University has established its own set of quality rankings. And it has already raised the ire of the Australian Universities Quality Agency. Last week the uni took out a big advertisement trumpeting the positive findings of its first audit by AUQA ... To demonstrate its success the uni drew up a table ranking the ratio of commendations to recommendations¹⁶ (never mind the new category of affirmations) for all unis audited so far. Of course, ECU was at the top. And by its spurious measures, two competing West Australian unis were highlighted near the bottom. Bit cheeky. The number of recommendations and commendations – the standard reporting format used by AUQA – does not reflect winners and losers. Nor are the reports to be used as rankings. ECU vice-chancellor Millicent Poole should know that. She sits on the AUQA board.

Poole’s (2004: 31) letter defends the advertisement by claiming that ECU was “seriously disadvantaged by the circumstances” of the public release of the AUQA audit report and the subsequent press coverage, “and felt compelled to defend its reputation”. The circumstances to which she refers include *The Australian* publishing a story (within hours of the AUQA report’s public release), “which focused almost entirely on criticism contained in the report and made no attempt to offset the criticism with a response from ECU”. Poole argues that the advertisement “was chosen as an effective way of establishing some degree of balance on the public record and responding to public perceptions” and also makes the extraordinary claim: “There was no intention to rank other institutions”. As Figure 1 clearly demonstrates, ranking other institutions is precisely what the ECU advertisement does.

The imperatives implied by the social-institutional setting in which AUQA produces quality audit reports for Australian universities include a social obligation *not* to use the reports to make meaningless comparisons between institutions or to produce spurious rankings. If we use Porter and Porter’s (2003) PhD *viva* scenario as an analogy, we could say that Poole has responded to AUQA’s report (and media stories based on it) by turning cartwheels around the room – and then vehemently denying that she did so.

The ECU advertisement might itself have performed an ordering function and changed the circumstances in which it was formulated. Hamilton’s (2004: 31) response reveals some ambivalence

about the “order” in which AUQA and universities are mutually implicated. For example, he agrees that “audit commendations and recommendations are meaningful only in the context of the particular institutional quality framework to which they refer” and that “counting commendations contributes nothing to assessments of institutional quality or quality frameworks”. But having asserted that “counting commendations contributes nothing”, Hamilton begins his very next sentence by writing: “Even if the count of commendations meant something ...”. Is this wishful thinking? Does Hamilton imagine that a “count of commendations” *could* conceivably mean something? His initial support for AUQA’s position shifts ground a little towards the end of his letter:

An analysis reveals the counts of AUQA commendations have varied over time. There are clear signs of commendation inflation – there has been a steadily increasing trend in the number of commendations ...

Analysing the median number of commendations for each of AUQA’s auditor directors shows one auditor has a median number of commendations of nine, compared to another, who has 16 ...

Commendation inflation, auditor impact and the ... oscillations in the number of commendations included in reports all suggest that now is just the right time to audit the auditor – independently.

This “audit comparisons controversy” provides a snapshot of what “quality” as an order-word *does* and *produces* and *prevents from doing* in the audit culture of Australian higher education. It has produced a new bureaucracy (AUQA) and produces flurries of intense activity in universities as teams of academics and administrators strive to generate a “performance portfolio” that demonstrates the “fitness for purpose” of its plans, policies, procedures, protocols, programs, etc. At the same time it prevents (or at least distracts) these same academics and administrators from other “quality”-related activities, such as considering the fitness of purpose of various university operations. As this example demonstrates, “quality” in Australian higher education also produces controversy, dissent, and the somewhat bizarre public spectacle of a Vice-Chancellor attempting to deny the undeniable.

Quality effects in Hong Kong

In Hong Kong, “quality” as an order-word in education produces a number of different effects from those it produces in Australia. As previously noted, two organisations – the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation (HKCAA) and the University Grants Committee (UGC) – identify themselves as quality assurance agencies in higher education, and each performs functions that are different from one another and from AUQA. The HKCAA conducts academic accreditation of degree courses offered by non-university institutions. The UGC is a non-statutory advisory committee responsible for advising the Government of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People’s Republic of China on the development and funding needs of higher education institutions in the SAR. For example, the secretary-general of the UGC, Nigel French describes its roles and functions as follows:

The UGC in its mission statement pledges to uphold the academic freedom and institutional autonomy of the institutions while at the same time seeking to assure the quality and cost-effectiveness of their education provision, and being publicly accountable for the sums of public money devoted to higher education. (French, 1997: 42–43)

Thus, as Ka Ho Mok (2000: 158) points out, the quality assurance activities driven by the UGC emphasise “value for money” and attempt to measure the quality of the output (i.e. graduates) and “value added”, that is, “the value of the output minus that of the input”. Control mechanisms introduced by the UGC include Research Assessment Exercises (which, like their UK equivalents, link resource allocation to research performance), Quality-Process Reviews (evaluations of the extent to which universities have institutionalised quality assurance, assessment and improvement systems; see Massy, 1997), and Management Reviews (examinations of each university’s roles, missions, academic objectives, resource allocation, planning and financial process mechanisms; see Mok, 2000).

Quality as value for money also seems to be one of the prime ordering functions of Hong Kong's Quality Education Fund (QEF): "Formally established on 2 January 1998 with an allocation of HK\$5 billion [approx. AUD\$800 million], the QEF provides an effective channel for worthwhile projects from the school education sector to be funded".¹⁷ However, a more significant effect may be that it produces innovation. An exhaustive search of the QEF homepages reveals no stipulative definitions of "quality". Rather, it seems to be left largely to applicants for funding to demonstrate that their projects are likely to be "worthwhile" within a very broad range of parameters. For example, the 2005 Call for Applications/Guide to Applicants describes the scope of the QEF as follows:

The Quality Education Fund (QEF) mainly sponsors worthwhile projects that benefit pre-primary, primary, secondary and special education. These projects should be non-profit-making, pioneering or experimental in nature and aim to further the development of quality education in line with the prevailing education policies in Hong Kong.¹⁸

The "prevailing education policies" include a major cultural shift from a highly centralised school education system to one that gives much more autonomy to teachers and school administrators in curriculum matters. As a consequence, the assessment criteria for QEF proposals foreground school development and teacher/principal professional development as well as cost-effectiveness. These criteria seem to be consistent with interpretations of the QEF's purposes by researchers such as Edmond Law and Maurice Galton (2004: 44), namely, that QEF exists "to promote and support various forms of teachers' participation in school-based initiatives".

Thus, in the context of Hong Kong's QEF, "quality" can be seen to be pragmatically implicated in a new socio-political ordering of schooling and new forms of social obligation which presuppose imperatives to "pioneer", "experiment", and participate in school-based initiatives.

Quality and equality in South African education discourses

In post-apartheid South Africa, "quality" can also be seen to be pragmatically implicated in a new socio-political ordering of education and schooling, but here the new forms of social obligation presuppose imperatives toward social *transformation*. Johann Steyn (2004: 101–102) characterises transformation in South African education as:

- the transformation from a fragmented educational system to a unified system;
- the efforts to remove inequalities and the move towards equal education;
- the shift away from a monocultural educational system;
- the intention to shift from a content based education to Outcomes Based Education;
- the repealing of anti-democratic policies;
- the transformation from a closed society to a more open society;
- the "catching up" with leaders in the field of education; and
- the intention to create a just system that provides for access to quality education.

A distinctive characteristic of South African discourses of educational transformation is that the enunciation of "quality" orders conversations around "equality", and *vice versa*. For example, Willem Du Plessis (2000: 65) argues that during the apartheid years "all good quality education was the sole property of schools for Whites, in White residential areas, beyond the reach of non-White students". Similarly, writing in the run-up to the first democratic elections in 1994, Pam Christie (1993: 11) asserts that the pursuit of quality education "has become a catch cry limiting the influence of Black students on the existing practices of historically privileged schools". Five years after those elections, Ken Hartshorne (1999: 7) insists that little has changed: "quality education is only a strategy to slam doors in the faces of Black learners". More recently, Steyn (2004: 106) characterises contemporary perceptions of quality and equality in South African education as opposing positions in a "debate",

with some protagonists arguing that “the quest for quality education is an attempt to maintain standards in White schools and universities and to exclude Black learners”, and others arguing that “the eradication of gross inequalities is not a viable option in the light of the hard [economic] realities”.

Thus, in South Africa, the enunciation of “quality” not only orders conversations around “equality” but also orders these concepts into an inverse or adversarial relationship. For example, Steyn (2004: 97) describes “balancing quality and equality” as a “dilemma” and as “a kind of juggling act”, which implies that increasing one’s commitment to quality *necessarily* reduces one’s commitment to equality (and *vice versa*). This is not the case in a number of other nations from which South Africa has made policy borrowings, where equality (or equity) is understood to be a *necessary condition* of quality.

South Africa’s discourses of social transformation produce a socio-political ordering of education and schooling that emphasises economic and racial equity, which in turn leads to a positioning of equality as being in tension with quality. This contrasts with “equality” in nations such as Australia and the UK, which produces “orders” (such as policy directives) on equity issues that extend beyond race and class to include gender, sexuality, disability, etc. In Australia it is relatively easy to demonstrate that (say) gender equity is an *achievable condition* of quality education, rather than something that is economically or socially “beyond the reach” of the majority of learners.

A pause in the middle of things

Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 25) explain that rhizomes have no beginnings or ends but are always in the middle: beginnings and ends imply a linear movement, whereas working in the middle is about “coming and going rather than starting and finishing”. I agree with Elizabeth St. Pierre who writes:

we must learn to live in the middle of things, in the tension of conflict and confusion and possibility; and we must become adept at making do with the messiness of that condition and at finding agency within rather than assuming it in advance of the ambiguity of language and cultural practice. (St. Pierre, 1997: 176)

Thus, I have no “conclusion” to this essay but will simply pause “in the middle of things” to reflect briefly on what I have learned by writing it.

“Quality” (as a Deleuzian “order-word”) produces different effects in different locations. For example, the deployment of “quality” in the audit discourse of Australian higher education clearly produces very different effects from its mobilisation in debates about “quality versus equality” in South Africa’s social transformation. One implication of this analysis is that when we engage in conversations about “quality” across national, linguistic and cultural borders, we cannot be content with stipulative definitions. It would be nonsense to say that *here* quality “means” fitness for purpose, or that *there* quality “means” value for money, or that somewhere else quality “means” social transformation. Rather, we need to understand how quality works and what it does, what it produces, and what it prevents from being done in specific locations through a more determined scrutiny of its locatable effects. Such scrutiny should perhaps also precede any “trading” of quality assurance artefacts such as policy documents and operational information and might help us to resist quality imperialism. However, such resistance seems unlikely to be produced by attempting to regulate this “trade” with linear connection devices (such as bilateral memoranda of understanding between national quality agencies) that impose an arborescent structure on the rhizomatic tangle of international quality discourses.¹⁹

Notes

1. The Churchill Centre <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=424> Retrieved 3 August 2006.

2. For example, from 1905 to 1957 Australians celebrated Empire Day on 24 May (Queen Victoria's birthday), although in my own childhood it was better known as "Cracker Night" and was the main annual event for releasing fireworks. It was renamed British Commonwealth Day from 1958 to 1965, after which it effectively disappeared. In fact, it was renamed Commonwealth Day from 1966 and moved to 11 June (the present Queen's "official" birthday, which is recognised in most Australian states by a public holiday on the second Monday in June).
3. I admire Hardt and Negri's restraint in resisting any temptation to expand (or add a subtitle) to *Empire*. Their use of this single word intensifies the persuasiveness of a very lengthy (496 pages) argument.
4. Hardt and Negri explicitly acknowledge Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) *A Thousand Plateaus* as a significant influence on their thinking, which is evident in their references to deterritorialisation, and their creation of *Empire* as a concept rather than as a metaphor.
5. *Sowetan*, 14 March 2005: 8 (no by-line).
6. <http://www.inqaah.org/> Retrieved 3 August 2006.
7. See, for example, the Burch/Cheswick map of the Internet as at 28 June 1999 at <http://research.lumeta.com/ches/map/gallery/isp-ss.gif> Retrieved 3 August 2006.
8. *Wikipedia* describes a wiki as "a type of website that allows users to easily add, remove, or otherwise edit and change some available content, sometimes without the need for registration. This ease of interaction and operation makes a wiki an effective tool for collaborative authoring. The term wiki can also refer to the collaborative software itself (wiki engine) that facilitates the operation of such a website". See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wiki> Retrieved 3 August 2006.
9. As Michael Peters (2004: 218) points out, this is very different from the approaches taken by many analytic and linguistic philosophers who are more concerned with the clarification of concepts - Deleuze and Guattari complicate the question of philosophy: "by tying it to a geography and a history, a kind of historical and spatial specificity, philosophy cannot escape its relationship to the City and the State. In its modern and post-modern forms it cannot escape its form under industrial and knowledge capitalism".
10. *Viva* is the UK term for a final oral examination of a doctoral candidate's research.
11. Several recent studies demonstrate the generativity of this approach to analysing the semiotics of institutions such as schools and universities; see, for example, Kaustuv Roy (2003) and the recent special issue of *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36(3) 2004 on Deleuze and Education.
12. Unless stated otherwise, all quotations pertaining to AUQA are taken from its website at www.auqa.edu.au Retrieved 3 August 2006.
13. The AUQA glossary also provides stipulative definitions of eight other "quality" terms, namely, "quality approval", "quality assessment", "quality assurance (QA)", "quality audit", "quality control (QC)", "quality management", "quality management system (QMS)" and "quality system".
14. *The Australian*, Higher Education Supplement, 3 November 2004: 25.
15. Woodhouse argues that comparing the numbers of recommendations and commendations assumes that they all have equivalent weight, whereas in any given audit some are rather specific and confined, while others are of broader import.
16. Illing is in error here. The table in the ECU advertisement (see Figure 1) ranks the universities by numbers of commendations, although the preceding text claims that ECU's ratio of commendations to recommendations is "the best of all Universities so far examined".
17. See <http://qef.org.hk/eng/main.htm?aboutus/aboutus02.htm> Retrieved 3 August 2006.
18. See <http://qef.org.hk/eng/user/getform.php?ID=24> Retrieved 3 August 2006.
19. Of course, the analytic possibilities suggested by understanding international quality discourses as a Deleuzian rhizomatic tangle far exceed the analysis I have made here, but it is beyond the scope of a 6000 word essay to do more than gesture towards these possibilities.

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