

## Book review: The Confessing Society—Foucault, confession and practices of lifelong learning

By Andreas Fejes and Magnus Dahlstedt (London and New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2013) 122 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-58166-0

In *The Confessing Society: Foucault, confession and practices of lifelong learning*, Andreas Fejes and Magnus Dahlstedt convincingly argue that Foucault's work on confession is exceptionally useful when undertaking critical analyses of contemporary times. The authors open the book by referring to the statement that 'Western man has become a confessing animal' (1998, p. 59). Drawing on Foucault's later writings on governmentality, they claim confession to be a widely dispersed activity embedded within multiple everyday sites where we continuously seem to find ourselves invited into verbalisation in a confessional manner: to talk about ourselves, to reveal what we aspire for and to uncover our deficits, failures or shortcomings. Located in and driven by what is depicted as a wider ethos of therapy, a preoccupation of the self, sensations and emotions may be noticed. Private intimate relationships are put under the magnifying glass, seemingly prepared for careful examination, and are also often publicly displayed. It seems necessary to turn the gaze inwards, to confess and disclose in order to improve oneself, thereby achieving a happier and more well-functioning life. Confession, then, is claimed to be a powerful technology for creating, shaping and fostering good citizens.

However, the book does not just aim to describe the Foucauldian notions. Rather it closely investigates the emergence of a confessional mode in lifelong learning practices. In particular, it highlights acts of discrimination—what is considered good or bad, adequate or inadequate, normal or deviant—and what kind of subjectivities emerge in such enactments. This idea is further developed in the first chapter, *Introducing the confessing society*, where the authors present their main arguments by drawing on close readings of governmentality—how subjects are governed and govern themselves while at the same time governing others. Within that realm, confession stands out as a highly valued technology of the self, and therefore is important to our understanding of the workings of power. The all-embracing notion of lifelong learning is considered crucial to contemporary subject formation processes, thus, it is deemed to be critically important to highlight *how* confession is put into play, takes shape and operates within such varied framings.

The second chapter, *Reflection and reflective practices*, discusses this theme in terms of signifying a prevalent ideal assumed to accomplish successful learning. It reoccurs across spaces, in education as well as working life, and is taken for granted as being desirable. Drawing upon interviews from planned learning activities at a workplace, learning conversations and logbooks aimed at developing reflecting abilities are rather seen as confessional technologies at work to improve practices and performances. Chapter three highlights how elements of confession are at play by addressing *Deliberation and therapeutic intervention* in educational programmes. Drawing upon interviews and manuals, therapeutic-like models are analyzed in terms of educating for what is held to be an ideal democratic citizenship. Such initiatives seem to

direct their focus towards individuals' inner lives to make them capable of external changes and dialogue mobilised as a key technique for moulding active, responsible and flexible subjects. Accordingly, the willingness to engage in dialogue appears both as a prerequisite and an effect of participation.

In the fourth chapter, *Lifelong guidance* is the subject, depicted as prevalent, and promoted within educational as well as vocational practices with the aim of incorporating life as a whole. Drawing upon policies on adult education and guidance, the activation of individuals to take responsibility for aspirations, choices and changes is illustrated. Life is seen as something that becomes what you yourself make of it, where success and failure are to be seen as individual matters. Guidance transforms into a mode of speaking, insinuating itself into any relationship, and the need for counsellors may even be brought into question since the desire to speak the truth about oneself is the key to fulfilling goals and dreams. The fifth chapter, *Medialised parenting*, highlights ambitions to cultivate what is found to be desirable parents. Drawing upon media productions in makeover reality formats, the interventions made in families by experts to correct behaviour and support change are examined. In assessing, evaluating and exposing enactments, confessional verbalisations are vital, as they manifest the active, responsible and empowered parent. Dialogue about oneself is the tool portrayed as necessary for successful performances in family life and, also, as an accessible learning opportunity with a wide reference.

The final chapter, *Revisiting the confessing society*, summarises the idea that confession has become a crucial technology in contemporary governing strategies and, furthermore, that lifelong learning is a regime of practice where power is distributed to shape and foster desirable subjectivities. In this concluding section, the authors also critically review the benefits of and constraints on the way of dealing with confession throughout the book. Nevertheless, one of the main ideas in using such an approach is to comment on contemporary times by making visible the self-evident and the taken-for-granted as good, adequate or normal, and perhaps even opening for some alternatives. Drawing upon three examples—'Pierre Rivière', 'the Books of life', and, 'humour, satire and laughter'—they discuss how the mobilising of marginalised discourses makes the implicit explicit and may allow for other forms of power and subjectivities than the dominating ones. Thus, as pointed out, moving beyond, traversing and refusing should not be confused with getting away from power relations: they will still be at work and so need to be.

I really enjoyed the book. It is definitely a timely contribution to the field of adult learning and education. First, the analysis of various lifelong learning practices through the lens of confession is compelling. Second, the use of different empirical material promoting multiple rather than uniform readings is inspiring. Third, the emerging picture of how learning has become a vital part of the various examined sites is valuable. Fourth, the finding of how several practices, spread from formal to informal, in fact seem to consolidate what appears to be a hegemonic, unquestionable truth is important. Although similar points have been made elsewhere, the design of walking on the same path through various contexts is elucidating. Indeed, the critical ambition is also addressed and hopefully encourages educators, counsellors and other professional groups to pursue further discussions on how to stage lifelong learning.

Finally, to take a critical stance, as similar arguments reoccur throughout the book, there is always the risk of being repetitive rather than deepening the conceptual understanding. This might be the case at times, yet, since confession is anchored and manifested in distinct practices, my impression is that a good balance is maintained. It should also be noted that the empirical material provided is mainly taken from Swedish

contexts, but I presume that the exhaustive analysis makes them useful across cultures. My main, slightly ambivalent reservation would rather be that the solid, creative and elaborate style seems to falter a bit at the end. When the taken-for-granted-ness is rendered, the ambition appears to be to take the critical analysis a step further. More specifically, it is about moving beyond what may be considered ‘a confessional trap’ to anticipate, or rather point out, some alternative modes of life by illustrating how things may be otherwise dealt with. The cases drawn upon for analysis are interesting in all their oddity as they provide slices of the unfamiliar and marginalised, clearly aimed at destabilising and deconstructing the ‘truth’ of the present. However, when located among the up-to-date practices of the media, education and working life outlined as the primary landscape within which to orient oneself, at least some of the examples unfortunately appear somewhat far-fetched. Even though the approach in itself is enticing and often required in this kind of book, the attempts to let some possible alternatives emerge become less convincing, which disturbs the appealing account to bring what is held to be self-evident and normal into question. Still, I have to emphasise that such criticism should not in any way detract from what the book has to offer. I recommend it—not just for readers concerned with lifelong learning, but also anyone interested in critical analysis of adult everyday practices.

Presumably, one might feel that the confessional theme is more than saturated after reading this book. On the contrary, I still find myself pondering with this importunate idea in mind. Also, I have to admit, I am tempted by the authors’ invitation to further develop and (re)consider how confession and similar technologies operate in everyday interactions—inside and outside of education—where we continuously learn how to think, talk and act like particular kinds of subjects.

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## Reference

Foucault, M. (1998). *The Will to Knowledge: The History of Sexuality: 1*. London: Penguin Books.