

# **'Quality' in English Education Policy Discourse, 1974-2016.**

David C Abbott

Submitted for the degree of PhD

University of East Anglia  
School of Politics, Philosophy, Language and  
Communication Studies

September 2023

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## **Abstract**

This thesis argues that the policy idea of 'quality' in education policy re-described social class and (re)produced a field of interest, promoting not the common good, but the interests of both those who created and promoted the concept, and those complicit with them. What is required to explain the phenomenon of 'quality' is a post-Marxist class analysis, which treats class as explanandum rather than explanans. It is argued that this is something best achieved by adopting Hindess' concept of forms of assessment, which refers to the ways political actors classify other actors. The study uses the methods of close reading and rhetorical political analysis to examine the forms of assessment used by political actors in the construction of education policy discourse on 'quality' in England between 1974 and 2016. Examination of White Papers and other documentary sources demonstrates that policy decisions and arguments about 'quality' were informed and guided by commonplace assessments of social class. These were subsequently institutionalized in a rhetorical process of state classification, reflecting a path dependency which was also rhetorical. The thesis concludes that the concept of quality is to be understood as a nodal point through which political actors were able to act strategically to restrict the definition of what counted as good schools, teachers and pupils.

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*"I have a mind to look like quality for a week. 'We'll go to Oxford,' says he."* Moll Flanders, Defoe, OUP 1988:61

## **Acknowledgements**

This research was funded by an award from the ESRC/SENS and I would like to thank them for their support. I would also like to thank my supervisors, Professor Alan Finlayson and Dr John Turnpenny, for their help and patience with this project. Whilst studying at UEA I have also been fortunate to benefit from conversations with Arife Kose and a number of education professionals who spoke to me at an early stage of the research. Thanks also to Mariam Yamin at the Western Bank Library, University of Sheffield. Finally, thanks must go to my family: for their tolerance and support, I am grateful.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Forms of assessment .....	15
Argument and structure of the thesis .....	18
<b>Chapter 1 The Genesis of ‘Quality’</b> .....	<b>21</b>
1.1 The provenance of ‘quality’ .....	22
1.2 Classes, interests, and forms of assessment. ....	26
1.3 The genesis of ‘quality’: The Revised Code and National Efficiency.....	32
1.3.1 National Efficiency and the 1902 Education Act .....	34
1.3.2 National Efficiency, the National Interest and Social Class .....	36
1.3.3 The Rhetorical Dynamic of Critique.....	37
1.3.4 The institutionalization and current meaning of ‘quality’ .....	38
1.4 ‘Quality’ and the constitution of interests.....	41
1.4.1 The New Public Management: Producers, Interests and ‘Quality’ .....	43
1.4.2 The implications of the NPM literature for an understanding of ‘quality’ .....	46
1.5 ‘Quality’, economic reason and the discourse of Public Choice Theory.....	47
1.6 Quality, interests and forms of assessment: a critique. ....	53
1.7 The state, interests, and economic reason: the need for a study of ‘quality’ .....	57
Conclusion.....	60
<b>Chapter 2 Towards the Political Analysis of ‘Quality’</b> .....	<b>62</b>
2.1. Ideas, interests and the ideology of ‘quality’ .....	63
2.1.1 Constructivist approaches to ideas and interests .....	66
2.1.2 Ideas and interests .....	68
2.2. Discursive Institutionalism and Constructivist Institutionalism.....	69
2.2.1 The ontological consistency of discursive institutionalism.....	71
2.2.2 Constructivist institutionalism and subjectivism.....	72
2.2.3 The incoherence of constructivist institutionalism .....	74
2.3. Understanding interests and ideas: the material and the ideal.....	76
2.4. Quality and ideology .....	80
2.4.1 Morphological analysis: outline and implications .....	81
2.4.2 Assessing the morphological approach .....	83
2.5. Language and the importance of context .....	86
2.6 A poststructural approach to language and discourse .....	92
Conclusion.....	98
<b>Chapter 3 Theory, Methodology and Method</b> .....	<b>100</b>
3.1 An outline of poststructuralist discourse theory.....	101
3.1.1 Society: the impossible object of analysis .....	102
3.1.2 Articulation and nodal points .....	104
3.1.3 Hegemony, antagonisms and logics .....	105
3.2 PSDT: Class, language and institutionalization.....	108
3.3 PSDT: a rhetorical turn .....	110
3.4 PSDT: institutions and institutional change .....	115
3.5 The role of dislocation .....	120

3.5.1 A rhetorical turn for PSDT .....	122
<b>3.6 From the ontological to the ontical: rhetorical political analysis.....</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>3.7 Methodology .....</b>	<b>129</b>
<b>3.8 Close reading: a method for RPA.....</b>	<b>134</b>
3.8.1 The sources used in this study.....	135
3.8.2 The method used in this study .....	138
3.8.3 The scientific status of PSDT.....	140
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>142</b>
<b><i>Chapter 4 The Construction and Institutionalization of ‘Quality’ From Thatcher to Major.....</i></b>	<b><i>144</i></b>
<b>4.1 Kairos, exigence and ‘quality’: the construction of a crisis in education in the 1970s.....</b>	<b>145</b>
4.1.1 The William Tyndale Controversy.....	148
4.1.2 Educating the poor: quality and equality .....	150
4.1.3 Callaghan’s Ruskin Speech.....	152
<b>4.2 Inventing the argument about ‘quality’: the rhetorical path towards a national curriculum. ....</b>	<b>154</b>
4.2.1 Problematization and Framing .....	155
4.2.2 Arrangement, Proof and Appeal.....	158
<b>4.2.3 Politics, decline and substandard schools.....</b>	<b>162</b>
<b>4.3 Quality, antagonism and the National Curriculum.....</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>4.4 Institutional struggle: HMI and OFSTED.....</b>	<b>167</b>
<b>4.5 Assessing the population .....</b>	<b>171</b>
4.5.1 Redescribing Class .....	173
4.5.2 The Myth of Leaders and Led .....	175
4.5.3 Ethos, ability and failure.....	177
<b>4.6 The institutionalization of ‘quality’ and the production of truth.....</b>	<b>179</b>
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>186</b>
<b><i>Chapter 5 New Labour: Quality in a Modern and Civilised Society .....</i></b>	<b><i>189</i></b>
<b>5.1 Blair’s Conference Speech 1996: A New Age of Achievement .....</b>	<b>191</b>
5.1.1 Blair’s use of ethos and pathos .....	192
5.1.2 The appropriation of ‘quality’.....	194
5.1.3 Blair’s claim to quality .....	194
5.1.4 Quality: a heresthetic moment?.....	196
<b>5.2 Excellence in Schools: the argument for a ‘crusade for higher standards’ .....</b>	<b>199</b>
5.2.1 Teachers as the key determinants of educational success.....	201
5.2.2 Pathos and the crusade for standards.....	203
5.2.3 Educational apartheid and a civilised society.....	205
5.2.4 Modernization and the case against uniformity .....	207
<b>5.3. Legislating for ‘standards not structures’: ‘quality’ and the modernizing of comprehensive schools.....</b>	<b>209</b>
<b>5.4 Institutional change: The LSC and ‘quality’ in the Learning Age .....</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>5.5 Can’t get no satisfaction: the demise of the LSC .....</b>	<b>219</b>
<b>5.6 New Labour’s forms of assessment and the path to academies: beacons, teachers and the deprived. ....</b>	<b>224</b>
<b>5.7 The rhetorical path towards academisation .....</b>	<b>228</b>

Conclusion .....	233
<b><i>Chapter 6 The 'strong' and 'the weak' and the construction of 'quality' in Coalition education policy .....</i></b>	<b>236</b>
6.1 The response to New Labour: 'Liberal Conservatism' . .....	237
6.2 Constructing a new narrative of 'quality': the role of commonplace themes. .	242
6.3 The critique of Ofsted's monopoly on 'quality' .....	248
6.4 Institutional change and the control of policy. ....	251
6.5. The 2010 White Paper: argumentum ad superbiam. ....	255
6.6. The re-description of 'satisfactory' and the metonymic pairing of the strong and the weak.....	261
6.7. The continuous pursuit of excellence: Regional Schools Commissioners.....	269
Conclusion .....	275
<b><i>Chapter 7 Conclusion: Quality, Class and Interests.....</i></b>	<b>278</b>
7.1 How and why did political actors use quality as a political concept in formulating education policy? .....	278
7.2 What were the ideational processes involved in the construction and articulation of 'quality' in education, and how and why did they change over time? .....	282
7.3 What was the relationship between 'quality' and interests? .....	286
Conclusion .....	291
<b><i>References .....</i></b>	<b>294</b>



## Tables

Table 1, White Paper Corpus	
.....	137

## **Abbreviations**

ALI	Adult Learning Inspectorate
BSI	British Standards Institute
CI	Constructivist Institutionalism
CTCs	City Technology Colleges
CPS	Centre for Policy Studies
DfE	Department for Education
DfEE	Department for Education and Employment
DES	Department of Education and Science
DfES	Department for Education and Skills
DI	Discursive Institutionalism
ERA	Education Reform Act (1988)
ESFA	English Schools Funding Agency
FAS	Funding Agency for Schools
FE	Further Education
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FSM	Free school meals
GM	Grant Maintained School
HMI	Her/His Majesty's Inspectorate
HMCI	Her/His Majesty's Chief Inspector
HTB	Headteacher Boards
ILEA	Inner London Education Authority
LEAs	Local Education Authorities
LSC	Learning and Skills Council
LMS	Local Management of Schools

MATs Multi-Academy Trusts

NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NDPB Non-departmental public body

NPM New Public Management

OFSTED Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PSDT Poststructural Discourse Theory

RPA Rhetorical Political Analysis

RSCs Regional Schools Commissioners

RQ Research Question

SFA Schools Funding Agency

SoS Secretary of State

SRA Strategic Relational Approach

YPLA Young People's Learning Agency

## Introduction

This thesis presents a political analysis of the concept of quality in education policy in England from the mid-1970s until 2016. Informed by poststructural theory, the thesis uses White Papers and other texts to conduct a discursive class analysis enabling a deconstruction of the policy narrative constructed through the concept of quality. This is a concept which political analysts have thus far not shown a great deal of interest in subjecting to sustained critical scrutiny, for everyone appears to be in favour of 'quality' and it is something which has been normalised and naturalised in English society.

Over the last forty years the point at issue in arguments about 'quality' has been that schools, teachers and pupil performance have not been good enough. Those presenting this argument have been aided in that they can draw and rely upon common sense cultural assumptions and commonplaces about the process of education. In terms of such commonplaces<sup>1</sup> it would for example, be obvious that students would perform better with improved teaching, and that the best schools were those with better teachers. Yet, the majority of variation in school exam outcomes is explained by the social class of the school intake (Gorard 2006). More recent research supports this finding and has found that Ofsted ratings of secondary school quality account for only 1% of variance in student educational achievement at age 16, after accounting for school performance at age 11 and family socio-economic status (Von Stumm et al 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the commonplace is a core idea in the study of rhetoric. A commonplace is a general argument or observation. As Skinner (1996) helpfully points out, commonplaces are maxims or stock themes. In political argument they function as standard proofs, as per the examples given here.

Politicians nevertheless persist with the demand for 'quality', yet, as Gorard has commented, they could simply 'disseminate the truth that in terms of traditional school outcomes it makes little difference which school a pupil attends' (Gorard 2010:761). However, this is unlikely to happen, for what the concept of quality does is force us to think of schools as abstracted from any wider social context. Thus, the school becomes a 'black box', and issues within the school are treated as wholly internal to the school. It can therefore be concluded that the use of the concept of 'quality' acts so as to re-describe social class.

The aim of this thesis is to investigate the hegemonic status of 'quality' and to subject it to political analysis and this requires the adoption of a critical approach to commonplaces and commonsensical thought. This is not something made easy in contemporary political analysis, which is predominantly empiricist. The upshot is such that the political analyst and critical realist Colin Hay asserts that good political analysis is often simply a matter of 'stating and re-stating what is obvious but all too rarely reflected upon' (Hay 2002:129). The problem with such an approach to political analysis is that it presents not just a simplistic empiricism but is wedded to a view of the world seen in materialist and dualistic terms. It thus assumes that political analysts can use language simply and unproblematically to describe the world that they inhabit. This is to be contrasted to poststructuralist informed views of language, which argue that meaning is not inherent in language, but rather constructed through discourse. It is also to be contrasted to the approach of the emergent field of rhetorical political analysis (RPA) which advocates a focus on rhetoric, as distinct from language, and

upon the object of argumentative action (Finlayson 2007:552)<sup>2</sup>.

The implications of this approach for the analysis of 'quality' are considerable. For an earlier generation of researchers in the field of public administration the rise of 'quality' was explicable in terms of structural forces, of which class was usually a key factor (Hood 1991, Hoggett 1991). However, the approach adopted in this study looks at 'quality' and its relationship to class, interests and the state in a more flexible way, and claims that these objects are not to be seen as natural, but as constructed objects. In the case of class, which as we have already noted, 'quality' plays a key role in redescribing, this is particularly important, for it presents the opportunity to think of class as explanandum rather than simply as explanans.

A political analysis of 'quality' must also embrace a view of the state which is informed not by structuralist tenets and ontology, but by poststructuralism. Rather than postulating political class domination<sup>3</sup> (Jessop 1990, 2016), this approach

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<sup>2</sup> As Finlayson (2007) observes, in focusing upon ideas, interpretive political analyses have missed the vital object of the argument.

<sup>3</sup> Jessop's Strategic Relational Approach (SRA- see Jessop 1990, 2016) and the associated concept of 'strategic-selectivity' is a potential candidate theory for explaining the rise of the concept of quality. Jessop tries to forge a synthesis of structure and action and stresses the need to explore 'who communicates with whom about what (and how these particular agents came to be constituted and to have these concerns) and to consider the projects which these agents tried to realize in making their own history' (Jessop 1990:334). This emphasis on agency is welcome, but the structuralist and materialist tenets of SRA prohibit political analysts from doing any such thing. Despite Jessop's attempts to convince us that he has jettisoned Marxist determinism, this approach assumes a dualistic ontology which hypostatizes the material. This is highly problematic for the political analysis of quality, since it renders the concepts of class, interests and the state as objects rather than constructions, and moreover, objects which are ultimately determined by an economic base, or accumulation regime. We are also presented with the contradiction of interests which it is claimed are not pre-given, yet a world which is populated by subjects who have no free will. Thus, although the SRA attempts to present class, interests and the state as structured but also fluid, in the absence of an account of construction, any claims to explain action are not just contradictory, they are redundant. The SRA must therefore be ruled out as providing a viable explanatory framework for the political analysis of 'quality'.

aims to understand the state as both the site and the outcome of political action, as a source of depoliticization, and as a site where notions of class are both officially constructed and institutionalized. This view of the state asks us to recognize it as an organization through which political actors govern by 'defining the field in which they can be understood to act, thus making their environment governable by holding off alternative ways of defining the situation' (Finlayson and Martin 2006:170). Not only does this help us to render class and interests as explanandum; it also points up the central action with which the political analyst concerned with 'quality' and class must be concerned; matters of definition.

It is to be noted however, that this is not an approach which is given any credence in recent work on 'quality' which attempts to explain the rise of this concept in terms of changes in the state through the concept of governance. Thus, the authors of the only critical monograph on 'quality' in education to date, posit a new mode of governance which operated through comparability as states shifted to producing evidence which legitimated the political action carried out to raise, maintain and monitor this object (Ozga 2011 (ed.) ). Similarly, Stephen Ball refers to a 'new management panopticon of quality and excellence' which he argues created a new mode of state regulation by way of the technologies of the market, managerialism and performativity (Ball 2003:215). Yet the causes of this change in form of state regulation are not identified. While work in this vein can be informative, the concept of governance on which it is based lacks precision and – in its assumption that political change is the product of impersonal social and economic forces – is apolitical (Wilkins 2021, Goodwin 2011:4).

The conclusion which must follow from this critique is that the political analysis of 'quality' requires us to consider not just a different ontological perspective and a reformulation of the concepts of class, interests and the state, but also an articulation of key research questions on 'quality' which focus upon the very construction of the political and which are not generated on the basis of pre-given categories.

### **Forms of assessment**

What these considerations suggest is an ontology which posits class as a discursive structure and one of several possible bases for social antagonism. This is a view which holds that there are no universal political agents motivated by pre-constituted interests and identities. It is also to make the point that 'in politics ideas and concepts are not social scientific in nature, they are political' (Finlayson 2004:536). This is an insight which must be applied to both 'quality' and to social class<sup>4</sup>. The claim made here is that political actors have used 'quality' as a term to classify and to rank both schools and people, and in England that ranking correlates with the concept of social class. However, this is something which is obfuscated by the euphemisms which political actors use to refer to social class.

The use of synonyms for social class arises since direct talk of class in England is potentially risky in a meritocracy which is regarded by many as at least formally egalitarian; for, the chances of upward social mobility notwithstanding, there is something about assigning class to a person which seems

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<sup>4</sup> It is also an assertion which is to be challenged, as it appears to endorse the view that concepts in social science are indeed, 'scientific'. There are good grounds for arguing that many social scientific concepts are political in character and social science is itself a form of social (and thus, political) critique. However, the point applies to the issue here.



permanent. At the same time, the use or non-use of the word 'class' or its synonyms, carries political and strategic meaning. With the use of the appropriate term, blame can be shifted, or a situation may be either ameliorated or exacerbated, according to ideological stance and strategic intention. However, it is also the case that in sociological terms, class is not a concept which is necessarily well understood by political actors or political theorists. For these reasons, class is a concept most frequently navigated in public discourse by way of euphemisms and commonplaces: in official discourse it is most commonly rendered by reference to 'disadvantaged areas' or 'inner cities'<sup>5</sup>.

Given the focus of these points on language and matters of definition, the upshot for the political analysis of 'quality' is clear. In order to explicate the meanings which political actors give to social class and to thus understand precisely what it is that the concept of 'quality' becomes a proxy for – and how – what is required is not a structural class analysis, for that is a form of analysis which imposes pre-given categories upon the object of analysis. What is required instead is a poststructuralist discursive class analysis, which enables a deconstruction of the policy narrative constructed through the concept of quality. This is best achieved by way of a discursive analysis of education policy discourse which views class

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<sup>5</sup> In the context of this study, my argument is that these terms refer to social class. This interpretation is based on knowledge of official usage. As used by Ofsted, 'disadvantaged' refers to pupils for whom the pupil premium provides support. DfE use of the term differs, measuring disadvantage by eligibility for free school meals (FSM) (Long and Bolton 2015). Since the DfE also analyses performance data using an index which is based on income levels (the Income Deprivation Affecting Children Index), it seems clear that the official focus is on a bureaucratic definition of social class. This is to be distinguished from a sociological definition of social class. However, that the object is social class rather than for example, ethnicity, seems clear both from these definitions and from the fact that, as Gillborn has shown in great detail, British politicians and officials have rarely demonstrated a great deal of concern with ethnic inequality (Gillborn et al., 2017).

temporally through the conceptual lens of forms of assessment.

The notion of forms of assessment derives from the work of Hindess (1987) and refers to the ways in which political actors conceptualize, understand and classify other actors. The forms of assessment used by any group of political actors will depend on the time, place and the ideological predilections of the group. The process by which that assessment is constructed will be contested and political and assessments are thus political classifications of social groups. From this perspective it is unsurprising that such classifications do not necessarily act to reduce the educational inequality which politicians across the spectrum are quick to censure. There are two points which are particularly important for the political analyst of 'quality' to note on this matter. Firstly, classes are not to be regarded as actors, and secondly, the political actors themselves may not be entirely accurate guides to the class structure of their own society. In short, the methodological approach taken in this thesis reflects that set out by Foucault: 'People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what, what they do, does' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1983:187).

This is an approach which presents the political analyst with numerous methodological challenges, one of which concerns the task of examining a discourse which has persisted for over forty years, across many changes of government. Although this is problematic for a variety of methodological, theoretical and practical reasons, I have taken the view that the advantages of such an approach outweigh the disadvantages. For only an analysis across the period can identify the continuities in policy on 'quality' and alert us to the political interests and identities served and constructed by such policy.

This thesis therefore aims to contribute to the study of British politics by highlighting the continuing importance of class<sup>6</sup>. However, it will be argued that class is to be understood discursively, and undertaking the task of a discursive class analysis enables the analyst to set out research questions which offer the prospect of challenging old paradigms which persist in presenting class in the guise of explanans.

To this end, explaining 'quality' requires reformulating the relationships between class, ideas, interests and the state. This thesis therefore addresses three generative research questions (RQs):

RQ 1. How and why did political actors use 'quality' as a political concept in formulating education policy between 1974 and 2016?

RQ 2. What were the ideational processes involved in the construction and articulation of 'quality' in education, and how and why did they change over time?

RQ 3. What was the relationship between 'quality' and interests?

### **Argument and structure of the thesis**

The thesis commences with a genealogical examination of the provenance of 'quality' in Chapter One. The chapter shows that while 'quality' appears to be derived from business and management discourse, it is in fact more firmly embedded in

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<sup>6</sup> Few would now agree with the essentialism in Pulzer's well-known claim that 'class is the basis of British party politics: all else is embellishment and detail' (Pulzer 1967:98). However, the structuralist and essentialist assumptions involved in this empiricist view of social class live on in a new generation of political scientists (see Evans and Tilley 2017).

strategic political conduct and requires analysis in the context of interests. Chapters Two and Three develop the theoretical and methodological framework for addressing the research questions set out here. Chapter Two argues that the dominant constructivist approaches in contemporary political analysis suffer from a number of weaknesses which render them inadequate as candidates for theorising 'quality'. It is argued instead that poststructural discourse theory (PSDT) is better able to demonstrate how ideas are coupled with interests and thus to explain the hegemony of 'quality'. Chapter Three provides a critical outline of this theory and explains why it is necessary to adopt a broader notion of rhetoric in order to examine how political actors map social order, the operation of forms of assessment and how these processes act to institutionalize the re-description of social class.

Chapters Four, Five and Six are concerned with the substantive analysis of education policy discourse in England. Chapter Four covers the development of policy on 'quality' over the course of five governments between 1979 and 1996. The chapter identifies three key moments in the construction of 'quality' and argues that these created a rhetorically dependent path of institutional change and hegemonic practice, enabling political actors to decontest hierarchy and inequality and to support a fantasmatic neoliberal vision of meritocracy. Chapter Five examines the role of 'quality' in the context of the New Labour government elected in 1997. The chapter shows that in this period, 'quality' enabled political actors to create a discourse which banished old social divisions by way of a heresthetic which acted to re-describe class. This in turn facilitated the construction and reconstruction of multiple notions of interest, cutting across the different constituencies of pupils, parents and education professionals

in schools and the state bureaucracy. In Chapter Six it is argued that the Conservative-led coalition government elected in 2010 was able to re-articulate 'quality' by way of a different configuration of political ideologies in order to further develop the policy of academisation in an increasingly differentiated schooling system and to promote a traditional curriculum.

The conclusions to be drawn from these analyses are presented in Chapter Seven. It is contended that what 'quality' did and continues to do, is to provide political actors with a way to classify objects. Political actors have been able to use this classification device as both a tool and a weapon in the conduct of strategic political action, institutionalizing particular notions of social difference by suppressing rather than expanding the political. Various ideational processes have been involved in the construction and reconstruction of this concept in the process of argumentative action. What precisely 'quality' is and means during any particular period varies, making it a highly flexible political tool. The interests served by this concept are highly partisan, but they are not class interests. Indeed, the political influence of this concept is in considerable part due to the fact that it simultaneously both constructs and appeals across class boundaries. In sum, 'quality' does not mask any interests, it produces them. This is what has enabled political actors to use it as an effective tool of political control. How and why this was done is the chief problem which this thesis aims to explain.

## **Chapter 1 The Genesis of 'Quality'.**

This chapter sets out to demonstrate that there is a pressing need to study the concept of quality as used prolifically in political, public management and managerial discourses. The claim made here is that 'quality' is best understood not simply as a political idea, but also as an element of political ideology with links to particular interests. It is argued that previous academic work on 'quality' has not considered how the concept has been constructed, mobilized, and articulated by political actors in terms of particular interests, and thus that the political structuring of these processes has been obscured<sup>7</sup>. To do this, it is argued that the political analysis of 'quality' requires the examination of political ideology and language, and in particular, a focus on the arguments, rhetorical devices and strategies used by political actors in the processes of thinking and acting politically. In this way it is argued that the justification for a study of 'quality' is not simply that it will fill a research gap, but rather, that a new terrain opens up and presents a potentially transformative way of approaching political analysis.

In order to fulfil these aims, this chapter first sets out to examine the genesis and provenance of the idea of 'quality' in the context of a critical analysis of the concept of interests. Building on work drawn from post-Marxist, poststructuralist, constructivist and discursive institutionalist approaches, it is firstly argued that ideas constitute interests, and that interests are to be understood as constructed. However, this cannot be taken to imply that interests are simply

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<sup>7</sup> There is in fact a very limited critical academic literature on the matter of 'quality' and it is a somewhat neglected concept. It does not feature in the Keywords Project at the University of Pittsburgh which aims to continue and update the work of Raymond Williams (see <https://keywords.pitt.edu/book-entries.html>). This neglect perhaps reflects the very hegemony of 'quality'; it may appear too obvious to warrant further study.

constructed subjectively. The implication which follows from the identification of interests as constructs rather than as given by context, is that analytic effort must be directed to the examination of the ideational processes whereby those interests are constructed. The challenge for a poststructuralist and post-Marxist interpretive political analysis of 'quality', is to create an analytical framework able to explain the strategic use of ideology and account for both subjective and intersubjective ideas and the connections between them.

### **1.1 The provenance of 'quality'.**

Contemporary notions of 'quality' derive in the first instance from the development of the concept in business management in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. From this viewpoint, the concept of quality developed out of industrialist F.W. Taylor's interests in the idea of 'scientific management', and the application of time and motion studies and statistical techniques to maximise the efficiency of industrial production. In his text on management, while Taylor made several references to the quality of work and of products, and clearly indicated that the quality of work was of the utmost importance, he did not develop the concept in any detail (Taylor 1911). Nevertheless Taylor provided a base from which a later generation of management writers in Japan and the USA would develop the concept of quality from the late 1940s. It was then adopted by governments in the 1960s by way of the US military and NATO (Martinez-Lorente 1998). This understanding of the genealogy of 'quality' has been pervasive. In the work of these thinkers, 'quality' was centrally concerned with specifying the qualities required of products: products had to conform to specification and be fit for purpose (Juran 1945,

1951). This meant that from the beginning, 'quality' reflected a concern with standards and standardization, and this enabled the meaning of 'quality' to slide into something which could, and for its advocates, should be quantified, hence the emphasis on the development of statistical methods by such pioneers as Shewhart and Deming (Sallis 1993). This emphasis on the quantitative has continued through to the present as is evident in the development of the highly statistical 'Six Sigma'<sup>8</sup> industrial methodology in the late 1980s, as well as in current obsessions with 'data' (De Feo et al 2003, Davies 2017a).

It is these approaches which have percolated into the field of education and as one educationalist commented in the early 1990s as 'quality' came to the fore in education, since the performance indicators constructed were modelled on the methods used in industry, "Quality requires therefore the adoption of business practice and business language" (Pring 1992:10). However, such comments might appear to indicate an ideological relationship of some kind and support for such a view can be found in the work of Raymond Williams. Although Williams seminal *Keywords* does not include reference to 'quality', it does comment on the word 'management', with which 'quality' is commonly collocated in official and business discourse. Relevant to this discussion is the point that from the mid-eighteenth century, 'manager'

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<sup>8</sup> Six Sigma (there is also a version called 'Lean Six Sigma') is a method of quality management developed in the 1980s at Motorola. It aims to reduce defects and builds on ideas developed in Total Quality Management, lean management and the work of Edwards Deming. Thus far, political analysts have shown little interest in this variant of 'quality' technology, although its use in the public sector has attracted some interest from scholars of business and organization management (see Radnor and Walley 2008, Radnor and Osborne 2013). Forbes magazine carried an article detailing how Newt Gingrich used the concept during campaigning in the 2012 presidential run (Forbes <https://www.forbes.com/sites/realspin/2012/09/09/lean-government-six-sigma-why-do-politicians-ignore-it/?sh=79d473774c3e>).



was the term used to describe those in charge of public institutions such as schools and workhouses. The word was not so widely used in business and overlapped with the more common term 'agent', for some time. Williams concludes that the change in terminology from 'masters' to a softer 'employers and managers', played an ideological role, as "the internal laws of particular capitalist institutions can be presented as general, abstract or technical laws, as against the merely selfish desires of individuals. This has powerful ideological effects." (1988:191).

Interesting as this preliminary genealogy is however, it is one which could lead the political analyst of 'quality', astray. The etymological roots of 'quality' in fact stretch back much further and offer alternative meanings: the word is a calque, created by Cicero from the Greek *ποιotes*, referring to 'of what nature' or what kind a thing might be and enables language users to classify objects (Levy 2008). Then, in Middle English 'quality' was used to refer to the character or disposition of a person, or to a particular property or feature, in an archaic use of the word as a referent to high social standing (Defoe 1988:61). Most recently, in the context of modern economics, 'quality' may be understood in either absolute or relative terms. In the former case, it refers to luxury goods associated with status. The implication of this, according to one educational management writer, is that to apply the concept in an educational context is elitist, reflecting the fact that "quality has class" (Sallis 1993:23).

These points are of considerable significance for the current analysis of 'quality'. The last point testifies to the

perlocutionary force of the concept of quality<sup>9</sup>. It can be seen that 'quality' is a word which can be used to grade and classify both people and things. Williams findings are also instructive; but rather than view these through the prism of Marxist theory, I argue that it is more useful to take them as evidence that ideology, in the sense of ideas, is used as a tool of political strategy in the conduct of government. Indeed, Williams comments on the etymological origins of the word 'management', and its resonances with care, handling, and the household, are evocative not so much of Marx's capitalist state, as of Foucault's pastoral state. This genealogy therefore suggests both that the concept of quality is much more deeply ingrained in the institutions of the state than economically inclined theories indicate, and that there has been a shift in the way state personnel understand their relationship to the institutions for which they are responsible. Moreover, it also suggests that assessments of the worth or social standing (i.e. status and social class) of people are not imposed by economic forces, but rather by other people and take place and are institutionalized in the course of strategic political action. To take such a view is to suggest that when political actors talk about 'quality' in relation to other people or in reference to particular institutions, they are trading perlocutionary meanings of 'quality', while engaging in a process of making social and political judgments and arguments. However, these observations pre-empt examination of policy and political discourse, and serve simply to point up claims which will be further examined in the course of this thesis. Before proceeding further, it is

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<sup>9</sup> The term perlocutionary derives from Austin's work on speech acts (Austin 1978). Austin defines a perlocutionary act of speech as the effect an utterance has on the thoughts or actions of another person, in contrast to locutionary acts which refer to the literal meaning and illocutionary acts which refer to the intention of a speaker in making a statement (e.g. request, command, query, etc).

therefore necessary to reflect on the theoretical assumptions made in Marxist class analysis.

### **1.2 Classes, interests, and forms of assessment.**

These points suggest that if we are to understand how and why political actors have used the concept of quality in policy, it is necessary to review the Marxist legacy critically. This work aims to do that, and starts from a position sympathetic to the views set out by Laclau and Mouffe (1987). In order to carry out this task, this section of the chapter delves further into two elements of critique central to this thesis: the rejection of the idea that classes can be seen as actors, and the rejection of the idea that there are objective class interests which are determined by the economic base of capitalist societies.

Although the matter of class analysis has been little discussed in the limited and fragmented literature on 'quality', this is a necessary preliminary step in this project. It is necessary because the language of 'quality' as articulated through official discourse is pervaded by a discourse of social class, although this is a point that is missed in much of the literature on 'quality'. Yet, as one educationalist has put it, the current education system in England is one which "retains powerful elite prejudices" and is permeated with neoliberal rhetoric which has "worked to bury social class" (Reay 2006:294, 2012:592). However, this is to make neoliberalism an actor, and misses the insight derived from a rhetorical-political approach, that socio-political relationships mediated by notions of class persist. It will be argued here that in contrast, over recent decades it is not that social class has been buried; rather it is the case that it has been re-described in the course of strategic political action. One contribution this thesis thus aims to

make is to investigate how and why political actors have acted in this way. To do this, it is necessary to reflect on how political actors make assessments of institutions and people. Given that the genealogical discussion above has demonstrated the role of 'quality' in classifying and evaluating activity, and the demonstration that this may apply as much to people as to things, at this stage in the argument, there appear to be good grounds for believing that the concept of quality is an important element in this process of assessment. Moreover, as was noted, 'quality' may also convey notions of social standing, which correlates with social class; the argument of this thesis is that these resonances in meaning persist. It is for these reasons that any attempted post-Marxist account of 'quality' must commence by considering just why the notion of classes as actors and the allied idea of objective class interests are inadequate, and what they may be replaced with. These are matters which are tackled by Hindess in his critique of class analysis (1987).

As Hindess argues, classes are not to be understood as coherent collective agents able to act on the basis of pre-existing, objective interests which can be derived from social structural location. To postulate classes as actors is to make a category mistake. The reasoning behind this argument is that actors, whether individual or collective, in order to act, must make decisions. To do this, actors need to reason and formulate decisions. Individuals, political parties, governments, trade unions or other collective organizations can do this; classes cannot, since they have no organizational means to do so, and are not mobilized political organizations; they are social structures and they are discursive. Political organizations may claim to represent a particular class, but

this is a claim which must be secured rhetorically<sup>10</sup> and is subject to empirical verification. It is more accurate to see political organizations as acting in the name of particular classes.

No less problematic is the notion of objective class interests. If interests are not recognized by actors, they cannot logically be constituted by those actors as reasons for actions. Here, the argument becomes a little more complex; Hindess argues that what he terms 'real interests', even if unrecognized by those they are ascribed to, can be identified by other parties and through various means to be discussed further below, come to have effects on the actions of those other parties. The position here is bluntly stated by Hindess: "interests should not be regarded as given by or reflecting social structural location" (1987:120). This is to argue that the interests of any actor cannot be read off from structural location, though this is not to say that structural location is unimportant. On the contrary, political actors make assessments of their interests in making decisions, but interests can also themselves be a product of the assessments made by other political actors. This tells us that interests are constructed from accounts of actors situations but as Hindess observes, these are situations open to dispute and change, and themselves dependent on dynamic discursive conditions. On those occasions when interests are important in decision-making, they must be understood as being the outcome of some form of assessment on the part of certain political actors. If that assessment does not take place, it is argued, then the interests have not had an impact on decision-making activity.

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<sup>10</sup> By way of a 'representative' claim.

This is not to imply that social structural location, of which class is merely one element, is of little or no political significance. While the forms of assessment that Hindess refers to – assessments of interests – are not to be seen as determined by their structural location, location still matters, since it structures the access which actors have to the process of assessment. Likewise, it is argued that the abilities and preferences of actors to locate themselves in relation to their interests will influence the assessments they make and thus shape their reasoning and decision-making processes. Moreover, in the course of such orienting processes, class is but one social feature which actors may use to navigate and act; other social categories can be used for such purposes, such as ethnicity, nationality, gender, or age cohort.

In sum then, this critique suggests that classes and interests are important elements of sociological and political analysis, but not in the ways in which Marxist theory up until, or indeed, since the late 1970s, has understood them. The contribution from Hindess is one of a number of theoretical challenges that helped develop a post-Marxist approach in the 1980s. These theoretical developments will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. For now, what is important is to indicate the significance of several theoretical points emerging from this critique for the analysis of 'quality' in this study. As we have seen, there is a compelling argument that social structures are not to be understood as external to and independent of the discursive realm. They are instead to be seen as constituted through discourse. This theoretical shift implies that a linguistic and symbolic dimension is integral to an understanding of the political, and that enables an understanding of the centrality of performativity in political

action. The upshot of this is that “the logic of the performative cuts across any strict distinction between the ‘real’ or material and the mental or ‘imagined’ ”(Martin 2002:129).

This is a point of considerable significance for this study since in tandem with the critique of a deterministic sense of class and class interests discussed above, economic views of class, collapse. The implication of this is not however, that class is not ‘real’, nor that it does not refer to real social differences, and is of little or no political importance. The point is rather that class is a socially constructed concept. When political actors refer to it, their actions are to be seen as a drawing upon a commonplace term, rather than as making a ‘cognitive shortcut’ (Hay 2002). Studies of social stratification and social mobility can shed considerable light on the empirical detail of contemporary social inequalities and the outcomes of government policies (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009, Goldthorpe 2016). However, when applied to social and political action, if used without care social class becomes problematic and may be reified. This is recognized in Hindess’ analysis, which notes that political parties may claim to act in the real interests of a class. However, those interests are not objective, but are constructed through forms of assessment and invoked by political actors in order to provide justification for actions. Typically, political actors claim that their actions are performed for the benefit of others, and frequently particular social groups are specified as beneficiaries. As Hindess puts it “To say that interests are effective in so far as they provide reasons for action is to say that those reasons are articulated by particular agencies, by individuals or by organizations such as governments, trade unions or political parties. The interests involved in the

reasons they articulate may be their own, *or ones they attribute to others*" (Hindess 1987:115, my emphasis). It will be argued here that the study of these processes is central to any attempt to explain 'quality'.

To this point it can be added that actors may have numerous, conflicting and changing reasons underlying the assessments they make, and thus decisions are multiple and complex, and frequently involve disputes with others. It is precisely this context which means that the political environment is one which "gives scope for dispute, and also for the persuasion, propaganda and other forms of political work intended to change people's assessments of their interests and how they might be served" (ibid.:116). This thesis will therefore build upon the concept of forms of assessment. It will be argued that understanding the decisions and arguments constructed by political actors in respect of 'quality' is best understood through a rhetorical political analysis. This, by focusing on, *inter alia*, the metaphorical and metonymic tropes deployed by political actors, will permit an examination of the rhetorical foundations of society.

An important implication of this argument is that, just as class interests have no unique grounding in social structural location, ideology, that is, beliefs and ideas and the language in which they are expressed, equally, cannot be shown to have "an automatic 'class' character" (Martin 2002:134). Thus, Marx's dictum, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force" (1974:74), must be modified. Since, as we have established, classes are not actors, classes cannot be said to 'rule', and since ideas are not the product of classes as actors, it is misleading to postulate 'ruling class ideology'



as some objective structure. This is not to deny power, but is to pose new questions as to what form power takes and by what means it is exercised. The upshot of these arguments is that while the provenance of 'quality' clearly lies in the domain of particular interests, which interests and how these interests were constructed and articulated and have become so powerful, needs to be analysed.

On the way to this conclusion, we have seen the opening of a space where an interpretive and rhetorical analysis of 'quality' may be formulated, examining the forms of assessment used by political actors. This is also however, a space where claims about interests are constructed and offered by political actors as reasons for action. We have also seen that in this process the logic of the performative cuts across distinctions between the material and the 'imagined'. It is important to recognize this not simply as an analytical point, but also as an heuristic notion which can guide the political analyst in interpreting and explicating the context in which 'quality' came into currency. Moreover, these points help to establish the possibility that 'quality' is to be seen as an example of the strategic use of ideology. However, political actors do not conjure ideas from thin air, and for this reason, understanding the ideational processes which generated 'quality' requires further examination of the genealogy of the concept through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, this must be a genealogical analysis which examines the development of 'quality' in situ; while 'quality' appears to have origins in managerialism, its meaning should not be essentialized.

### **1.3 The genesis of 'quality': The Revised Code and National Efficiency.**

Having worked through these conceptual matters it is appropriate to turn to consider how ideas about 'quality' in education have developed. The view that 'quality' is to be seen as intricately connected to strategic political conduct and to the forms of assessment used by political actors, is one which is reinforced by a brief review of the historical development of the concept. Concerns with the quality of education in England and its relationship to the national economy can be traced back at least to the mid-nineteenth century. The Newcastle Commission of 1858 had expressed the concern, echoing public opinion that in education, Britain lagged behind other nations (Sylvester 1974:42). The Revised Code of 1862 thus directed that one third of the grant available to schools was to be dependent upon attendance and inspection of student performance in reading, writing and arithmetic. This system of 'payment by results', resulted in a narrowing of the curriculum, cheating and manipulation (gaming) by teachers and school managers and was said to discourage entry to the profession (Jabbar 2013, Simon 1965:115). The language in which the arguments for reform were made has a familiar ring: Education Commissioner Robert Lowe, introducing the Revised Code in 1862 said, "if instruction is given the public money will be demanded – I cannot say to what amount, but the public will get value for its money" (Sylvester 1974:61). The continuity of this phrase across time is striking.

While economic concerns about education at this time were explicitly focused around the cost of education to the state, rather than concern with the national interest, the strategic political environment changed and by the mid 1870s, official concerns were focusing more on economic competitiveness and the quality of technical education in comparison with

other European countries. What drove these changes however, was not the impersonal economic forces of the “first great globalization” (O’Rourke 2018:20), but the ideas which informed political actors assessments of the situation at that time. This is vividly demonstrated by the case of the Efficiency Movement from the last decade of the nineteenth century into the 1920s and which is to be seen as the progenitor of ‘quality’.

### **1.3.1 National Efficiency and the 1902 Education Act**

The new ideology of ‘National Efficiency’ came to prominence in the UK during the Second Boer War (1899-1902), and had a significant political effect since it “brought into focus all the anxieties of previous years” (Searle 2003:57). National Efficiency consisted of two strands of thought. A technocratic strand identified waste and muddle as one of the chief problems of the British State, and led to arguments that all public life and government should be organized through the application of scientific knowledge. A second strand was managerial and argued that, “ the empire should be ‘put on a business footing’ and administered by ‘business methods’ ” (Searle, loc. cit). There were also calls for the recruitment of businessmen into government to achieve such ends, something Lloyd-George responded to in 1916. National Efficiency became an idea which attracted the support of many influential figures of the time, including Bertrand Russell, George Bernard Shaw, H.G Wells, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and Winston Churchill (ibid.:58ff). The term became a slogan and was an idea that was applied to various policy areas and political arguments.

This included education, and the 1902 Education Act, in abolishing local School Boards and replacing them with Local

Education Authorities which were to have responsibility for all grades of education, staffed by full-time officials and co-opted experts, reflected these principles. The education system created by this legislation was in fact a dual system based on social class, with 'elementary schools' for the masses and 'secondary' education for a minority; these categories of school do not therefore map precisely onto current terminology and reflected differences in the level, or what could be termed the quality of the education provided, not simply the age range of the students. It was the concept of National Efficiency which enabled political actors to create this system, by arguing for the abolition of overlapping administrative units and the creation of Local Education Authorities. Faced with criticism by those defending the status quo, those supporting these legislative changes could defend their proposed changes on the grounds of both administrative and economic efficiency and level the charge of inefficiency against their opponents.

However, a problem for the Education Board (as the ministerial department was labelled at the time) was how to justify the subsidies provided for the secondary schools running alongside elementary schools, but largely reserved for pupils from more privileged social class groups. The solution was to argue that these schools were simply providing a different education, since "the Board could not say that it was a different education for a different class" (Simon 1965:241). This solution worked precisely because National Efficiency appeared to be a neutral idea which could transcend class antagonisms, and which attracted advocates from across the political spectrum. This also meant that National Efficiency could be useful to politicians arguing from opposing positions. Tory politicians, if challenged on the

grounds of their democratic credentials (given their defence of middle class privilege), could simply invoke efficiency and difference, whilst railing against amateurism and ad-hocery. Yet for the Liberal Government in 1911 National Efficiency could also be used to criticise hereditary privilege. It was an idea that could be used to dismiss Tory criticisms of social legislation as misplaced sentimentalism; welfare, it could be argued in response, was simply common sense and in the interests of all.

### **1.3.2 National Efficiency, the National Interest and Social Class**

This analysis can be developed further, for what we see in these cases of political argument is more than simply the birth pangs of 'quality'. In the case of the development of British education policy from 1862 to the 1902 Education Act, what is notable is not simply how political actors constructed educational reform as in the national interest, but the place of social class antagonisms in that process. This was achieved rhetorically, and as the remark above concerning interests suggests, what was important in that process of construction were the forms of assessment used by the political actors concerned. As this example indicates, political actors during this period problematized the education system as the cause of economic and military deficiency. In constructing a view of the national interest, political actors were attempting to quell class antagonisms. At the same time, they assessed the interests of different groups of the population in different ways, and their rhetoric not only enabled them to justify this, but also reveals the social imaginary upon which those assessments were based. However, political actors were not simply responding to a situation, they were taking part in and creating dynamic rhetorical-political relationships. Thus, in

the context of the financial restrictions implemented on education and local authority spending through 'Geddes Axe' in the 1920s, political debate became focused around issues of national economic management, and arguments came to be concerned with a level of education spending that the nation "could not afford" and with the need to "save the nation from penury", while the Daily Mail mounted an 'anti-waste' press campaign (Simon 1974:29, 298).

### **1.3.3 The Rhetorical Dynamic of Critique**

The case considered above suggests that the idea of 'quality' developed from National Efficiency, and that in these political situations a rhetorically constructed problem demanded responses from various political actors. Political and institutional change by this account, is not to be seen as driven by impersonal material forces, but rather by the rhetorically constructed problematizations devised by political actors, and the argumentative action which ensued from, and at the same time, structured these ideational processes. In both cases we also see so-called arguments from waste in which, "in an optimistic conception of the world, the idea of waste encourages the completion of structures, by embodying in them the thing whose absence is felt to be a lack" (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2008:280). Moreover, in both cases, to this rhetorical insight another must be added: in the rhetorical situation, fixing and defining the point of the dispute, itself something established through argument, will confer advantage on some political actors, and disadvantage others. Thus political actors sought to argue that military or economic decline was the result of a lack of efficiency, or specifically, an inefficient educational system, and not some other factor. From the establishment of this point, political argument took a particular path.

To make this point however, is to invoke the concept of the rhetorical situation: an 'indeterminate context marked by a troublesome disorder which the rhetor must structure' (Consigny 1974:178). This concept will be discussed further in Chapters Three and Four, but my claim at this point is simply that this process creates a rhetorical political dynamic and sets a pathway for further political argument and institutional change; the development of 'quality' is to be seen in just such terms. In this respect, the analysis which will be developed follows that of Boltanski and Chiapello: 'critique' is indeed one of the most powerful motors of what the latter term the 'spirit of capitalism', that is, the ideology which justifies engagement in capitalism (2018:42). That analysis usefully draws our attention back to the issue of interests and the ways in which such critique compels those defending capitalism to refer to "certain kinds of common good in whose service it claims to be placed" (loc. cit.). It is this which underlines the political significance of a rhetorical political dynamic of 'quality' and which makes imperative the need for a study which demonstrates how and why such rhetorical dynamics are constructed.

#### **1.3.4 The institutionalization and current meaning of 'quality'.**

This must bring us to consider the contemporary meaning of 'quality'. The meaning of any concept is polysemous and different meanings may often be contradictory. Since the 1960s, in the context of management and politics, 'quality' may be seen to have four main referents: conforming to specification, exceeding specification, exceeding specification and continuously improving, or referring to a degree of excellence superior to all other standards (Sallis 1993).

However, as we have seen, there is also a surplus of meaning such that 'quality' may carry resonances of earlier senses, including those of status and social standing. These potential meanings are significant in the process of the construction of interests, and thus, in the context of an interpretive political analysis of 'quality', investigative effort must be directed towards the examination of which particular meanings of 'quality' were stabilised, and in relation to this, through what means, by which political actors and for what political purposes.

In the case of the UK, 'quality' was first institutionalized through the creation by the British Standards Institute (BSI) of two British Standards protocols, BS 5174 in 1974 and BS 5750 in 1979. The BSI is a company, but it is an unusual one; created by way of an arcane mechanism of the state, it was incorporated under Royal Charter on the recommendation of the Privy Council, as means of regulating standards in industry. In this way, the BSI can be seen to be situated 'outside' both the economy and the political system and thus is seen through official eyes to be well placed to both represent and serve the public interest or common good. Previous research indicates that it was the creation of this standards-quality narrative in the 1970s, reflecting the problematization of industrial competitiveness rather than welfare problematization which should be seen as the initial driver of neoliberalism in the UK (Gibbon and Henrikson 2012).

The role of the BSI also points to the importance of power relations within government and between government and business interests in the regulation of 'quality'; in the bureaucratic struggle for power, it was the BSI which was



found by the Central Policy Review Staff, to be “acceptably neutral and non-intrusive” (Gibbon and Henrikson 2012:301). Thus by way of what the latter authors refer to as “governing through quality standards” (ibid.:282), the role of ‘quality’ can be seen to have played an important role in the development of neoliberalism in the UK. For this reason, further research into the political strategies which promoted it is warranted. In this first institutionalization, the BSI defined ‘quality’, reflecting the military influence on standards, as ‘conformity to specification’. This however was only one step in a process which carried on for over two decades and was added to by the creation of the National Curriculum in 1988 and a shift to a discourse of not merely ‘quality’, but excellence.

Successive agencies were created to administer ‘quality’ policy by the Major governments of the 1990s and the New Labour governments of the first decade of twenty-first century. The persistence of rhetorical-political dynamics and arguments concerning the best way to operationalize ‘quality’ over a period of some twenty years, led to a succession of agencies designed to carry out funding and inspection functions in secondary and further education. Thus, the early 1990s saw the creation of a number of disciplinary mechanisms principally concerned with the monitoring of ‘quality’, including Ofsted and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) and its inspectorate. However, the political dynamic of ‘quality’ did not follow a smooth path, and agencies and inspection regimes were scrapped or continually reformed in the years that followed, with the creation of the Learning and Skills Council (LSC) and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) in 2001. These agencies were in turn abolished in 2010 and replaced with the Skills

Funding Agency (SFA) and the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA), the latter then being replaced by the Education Funding Agency (EFA), and both agencies amalgamated to form the Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA) in 2017, a body which is at the time of writing, itself under review.

These reflections on the contemporary meaning of 'quality' are of significance to this study for several reasons. Firstly, they indicate, once again, the importance of an examination of strategic political action in the context of state institutions for an understanding of 'quality'. The research cited here also highlights the inadequacy of economic accounts. Secondly, in the light of the claims made here that 'quality' is to be seen as contested and polysemous, the political-institutional turbulence referred to, indicates that 'quality' has been an object of political contest. This calls for further investigation as to the relationship between 'quality' and the state.

#### **1.4 'Quality' and the constitution of interests.**

The import of what has been argued thus far in this chapter, is that 'quality' is to be seen as a political idea and as a key point through which political actors constitute their interests. Drawing on Hindess, it has also been argued that interests are constructed from the assessments that political actors construct in particular political situations. Moreover, these are situations which are open to dispute; they are not simply political situations, they are also rhetorical situations. These insights present the possibility of posing new questions about the concept of quality; in particular, how it was that 'quality' came to constitute particular interests<sup>11</sup> and through what

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<sup>11</sup> This comment and those which follow over the next few pages on the matter of interests, relate of course to RQ3, and are elaborations of that broad and generative question.

forms of assessment this occurred, and how and why political actors came to use the concept of quality, and what they understood by it. These are questions which have not been addressed in previous work and they generate in turn a further question; how it is that such interests became embedded and embodied in state institutions. As indicated earlier, these questions point towards the possibility of a post-Marxist account of the state and of 'quality'. It is argued here that to embark on such a task is to set out a study which focuses on the forms of assessment and the arguments through which political actors make the judgements which inform political action. Since the forms of assessment carried out by political actors are open to and characterized by argument, it is also to claim that it is the study of rhetorical political action which best enables such a study.

At this point however, it is necessary to consider the claims made above in the context of recent developments in the political theory of institutions. The argument is not that ideas and interests are the same thing, but rather, that interests are constituted by ideas (Wendt 1999, Schmidt 2008). However, as Larsson elaborates, to say that ideas are constitutive is to say that it is the ideas themselves which 'create' their referent object, that there is no material substrate and that ideas come to exercise "their own influence, transcending the power of those who originated them" (Larsson 2015:177). This is therefore, not to concur with the views put forward by those presenting discursive and constructivist institutionalist approaches.

As has been argued (*ibid.*:187ff), these approaches are inclined to assume the autonomy of actors, involve a rump materialism, and overlook the fact that while political actors create their own ideas, they do so in the context of wider

ideational structures, and what I will term here, following Hindess, forms of assessment. These forms of assessment are social structures and processes, and are therefore, not simply subjective, but also intersubjective. Thus, this study aims to follow the line of argument introduced by Laclau and Mouffe, citing Cutler, that “political practice does not recognize class interests and then represent them; it constitutes the interests which it represents” (Cutler et al 1977 in Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2014:106). To be clear, as the latter argue, there is no essential necessity for the concrete demands of a group formed by political practice to be articulated as a class interest. However, I argue that if political actors are also political and social theorists of a sort, this suggests the need to examine precisely how political actors do in practice construct identities and historical interests, how certain demands are constructed and hegemonized, and the strategic role of political ideology in that process. With these points in mind, it is now time to examine some of the fragmented and limited literature on ‘quality’. In particular, given the comments above, it is important to review this work in terms of what it has to say about the constitutive role of ‘quality’ in the construction of particular political interests.

#### **1.4.1 The New Public Management: Producers, Interests and ‘Quality’.**

One important fragment of the academic literature on ‘quality’ is to be found within the sub-disciplinary field of public administration, a field which focuses on institutions and the decision-making processes of government. Work in this field does not however, have a great deal to say about the ways in which the identities and interests of political actors are structured and constructed. Nevertheless, it does

draw our attention to the role of interests in the development of policies about 'quality'. Thus, Dunleavy, arguing for a radical vision of public administration focusing on the state, the promotion of particular interests, and the selective nature of policy solutions, claims that "professionals almost always act instrumentally to secure an organization of the public services which advances their interests as against client groups or the public at large" (1982:223). For many politicians in this period, this was precisely the point; reform was necessary in order to bear down upon 'producer interest' and subject it to the 'consumer demand', and thus, to raise standards.

However, while Dunleavy referred to civil servants, in discussing the NPM reforms of the 1990s, Pollitt suggests that, despite the public discourse in critique of 'producer interests', the managerialism of that time was attractive to many other public service professionals such as headteachers, given the material enticements of increased budgetary autonomy and line management authority (1993:46). Nevertheless, although Pollitt identifies one key element of the NPM reforms as "a rhetorical emphasis on the need to improve service quality" (ibid.:180), this comment is never developed into a rhetorical political analysis, and the constitutive role of 'quality' in the creation of particular interests is not considered. What is noted, is that headteachers and other public service professionals were, "taught to think of themselves as managers", and that following the reforms of the 1990s, "Head Teachers had to sell their schools as never before", and at the same time, "many professionals were propelled into roles they had never trained for and often did not relish" (ibid.:137/181). These observations suggest a need to further investigate the

rhetorical construction of interests in the context of political strategy.

Fleeting references to interests are also evident in other analyses of the NPM. Hoggett (1991) argues that the new concern and focus on results was related to the replacement of control by contract, while Winkler (1990:151) points out that the interests served by such a change and by the consequent reduction in the size of the civil service and the transformation of its character, were those of the government itself. Since the articulation and measurement of 'quality' was intimately concerned with such cost reduction exercises, the claim that the rhetoric of 'quality' was used as a legitimating device for the control of the state labour force (Kirkpatrick and Martinez-Lucio 1995), appears sound, albeit only one part of the political reasoning that constructed 'quality' as such an appealing political solution.

The rhetorical emphasis on 'quality' noted, but not examined by Pollitt and others working on the NPM, must therefore be a key focus of this research, and it will be argued that the language of contract is of ideological significance because it is essential to the functioning of the market (Harden 1992). Moreover, such language reflects a particular ideology being put to work by political actors; that is, a neoliberal emphasis on the individual and the role of individuals in the market. Yet while in some theoretical approaches this ideology is seen to be operationalized through "the technology of the contract", it is contended here that such an approach neglects the central importance of 'quality' as a political technology, something missed in previous research (Broadbent and Laughlin 1997:279). The language and discourse of quality then, no less than the reference to

contract, can be assumed to be driven by particular economic and political beliefs, ideas and goals. All this suggests a need to develop work carried out by writers on the NPM in the 1980s and 1990s. It will be argued that this is something best done by taking a rhetorical turn to examine the political arguments through which 'quality' came to be promoted as a political strategy. In short, it is to probe and to interrogate the reasons why political actors placed such rhetorical emphasis on the need to improve service quality. To do this is to recognize rhetoric as an important part of political action, and not as something that is merely to be contrasted with 'reality' or 'real interests' that are deliberately obscured by language (Martin 2014:3).

#### **1.4.2 The implications of the NPM literature for an understanding of 'quality'.**

The NPM literature presents both limitations and potential insight for the political analyst interested in 'quality'. On the one hand, Pollitt, in explaining the distinctiveness of the UK in adopting the NPM, helpfully notes that the prevalence of single party government, the focus on prime ministerial power, submissive parliaments, combined with the ability to reform administrative organization without recourse to statute law, made the political costs of management reform in the UK low, reducing the number of veto points (2013). This suggests a political dynamic around the discourse of 'quality', whereby the political costs of not reforming began to rise, and it is noted that political parties aspiring to government were in effect forced by the constraints of the dynamics of party competition to set out policies for public sector improvements (2013:475).

However, what this can tell us about the processes by which interests are constituted is limited if it neglects the rhetorical element of political dynamics; the argumentative action through which politics is constituted and conducted. This becomes a particularly crucial omission when structural explanations are imported into a public administration framework. We find researchers attributing the cause of the NPM to inter alia, changes in the class structure and in the electorate (Hood 1991), a “crisis in the bureaucratic mode of production” (Hoggett 1991:243), or the “hollowing out of the state” (Rhodes 1994:151). Such explanations thus find the cause of the NPM, and by extension ‘quality’, in reified social forces and structures. Even in the case of a putative radical public administration, the role of class in the constitution of interests is reified and hypostatized since we are told that the mechanisms which coordinate different areas of state activity are to be treated as summary measures “of the balance of state policy as between social classes and groups” (Dunleavy 1982:222). It is the contention here that such arguments are apolitical, and neglect to consider the very political action which constitutes the object of investigation. This is to argue that such accounts fail to develop an analysis of the causal and constitutive role of ideas<sup>12</sup> (Hay 2002:257).

### **1.5 ‘Quality’, economic reason and the discourse of Public Choice Theory.**

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<sup>12</sup> This continues to be the case in recent work on the ongoing debates about the NPM; see for example, Klenk and Reiter (2019), Osborne (2017), and Shand et al (2023). The NPM is no longer so new, and these scholars are not unaware of changes and plurality. Nor are they unobservant; in a very comprehensive review Lapsley and Miller (2019) point out that it is the simplicity of the NPM which provides much of its suasive force, while approvingly citing Pollitt’s comment that the NPM is “a rhetorical and conceptual construction and like all such constructions, it is open to re-interpretation and shifting usages over time” (Pollitt 2007:110)xHowever, Pollitt’s recognition of the importance of rhetoric has not been taken up in a way that interpretive political analysts would find helpful. An earlier attempt to do so, by Hood (1998), presents a rigid and somewhat limited rhetorical framework.



Previous sections have directed our attention towards the notion of a discourse of 'quality' and the last section has pointed to a postulated political dynamic around that discourse, whereby the costs of not reforming public services by way of 'quality' began to rise. It has also been argued that while the development of the NPM was central to the rise of 'quality', the NPM literature neglected to develop an analysis of the causal and constitutive role of ideas. In order to begin such an analysis, in this section I wish to first examine a branch of economics and political economy which focuses on the study of economic efficiency and the provision of public goods, before focusing on one particular study, exclusively concerned with the concept of quality. I suggest that it was this body of work which was central in promoting and articulating the concept of quality from the 1970s, with profound political consequences. The branch of economics and political economy referred to here is the Public Choice School, a group of American economists active in the mid-twentieth century, prominent members of which included the Chicago based economists, Milton Friedman and Gary Becker. However, of particular importance here is the so-called 'Virginia School' of political economy.

For this school of thought, decision making is understood as individual and driven by self-interest; group decisions are to be seen simply as an aggregation of private decisions (Buchanan and Tullock 1962). The implications of this postulate are far reaching. It is not simply used to undermine standard economic views of market failure; it extends the reach of the discipline of an empirical, mathematical economics into the political, with the contention that the notion of self-interest as driving social action should be extended from the economic sphere. Thus, public choice

theorists reject what is seen as the erroneous assumption that once actors turn from economic action guided by self-interest, to political action, they are governed instead by notions of the common good. In contrast, public choice theorists contend that *all* action is driven by self-interest, and this view is used to present what is claimed to be a more realistic view of "politics without the romance" (Buchanan 2003:13). From this perspective, while it is acknowledged that markets are imperfect, it is argued that so too are governments. It is claimed that the problem with governments is that they are dominated by particular interest groups and in the context of public goods they are unable to eliminate free riders. It is argued that the consequence of this is that externalities are imposed upon society, as costs are widely diffused yet benefits are highly concentrated.

Studies from public choice theorists built upon these foundations to present a critical portrait of rent-seeking politicians, pork-barrel politics and logrolling practices (Tullock 1974, Kruegar 1974, Niskanen 1971). Olson's work for example, claims that the explanation for such phenomena is to be found in the structure of self-interest and the political institutions which are developed upon that concept (1965). As the size of groups attempting to carry out collective political action increases, where a group works to provide public goods, members will have incentives to free ride, and the number of free riders will rise. In contrast, where a group is working to provide benefits only to private members, the free rider problem will not arise. One conclusion drawn from this is that large groups and their members will face high costs in organizing collective action, in contrast to smaller groups, where the costs to members will be lower.

Individuals in large groups will gain less per capita of successful collective action, and so, in the absence of selective incentives, the motivation to partake in group action declines as group size increases. Large groups are therefore less able to act in the common interest than smaller groups and this enables small interest groups to gain influence and impose externalities on the whole society (Olson 1965). The logic of public choice theory is precisely that notions of the common good are reduced to an identity with self-interest. The consequences of such an approach to political analysis are exemplified in Downs seminal study (1957), which posits that voters choose parties on the grounds of which party will provide “the highest utility income from government action”, and similarly that parties are to be understood as vote maximizing organizations motivated to seek office, “solely for the income, power and prestige that accompany it” (1957:138-41).

Despite these confident assertions, public choice theory and the rational choice approach to political analysis set out by Downs are not to be seen simply as detached academic reflections. They are in fact a form of economic reasoning applied to political action, and it is in their application as ideas about political economy that these strands of thought have had a key role in public discourse. Public choice economists achieved high social standing; Arrow, Becker, Friedman and Buchanan all won Nobel Prizes, and their work was disseminated through think tanks and both elite and popular journalism. The reasons for that popularity should not be difficult to discern. As indicated above, public choice theory involves what can be seen as a progressive, egalitarian element yet at the same time, it reduces common interest to self-interest. This combination of ideas enabled political

actors from across the political spectrum to draw upon these ideas and in so doing, help to constitute neoliberal reasoning for their own purposes, thus explaining how it was that neoliberalism was able to permeate the 'modern left' as well as the right (Amable 2011).

However, while the economic approach set out in rational and public choice theory evinced a concern with matters of satisfaction and preference, it was only with the publication of Hirschman's classic text, *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, that this turned to an explicit focus on quality and interest articulation. As one eminent critic of Hirschman's work helpfully tells us, "the most useful way of thinking about the book is to say that it is about situations in which quality can be improved" (Barry 1974:90). Hirschman's views are to be understood as a critique of what he perceived to be simplistic views of market mechanisms and the view that competition necessarily led to increased efficiency. Yet while the book is couched as an appeal for a fusion of economics and politics, Hirschman in fact uses much the same approach, "never explicitly using any assumption about motivation that would take him outside an individualistic maximising framework of analysis" (Barry op. cit.:86). Thus, it is argued that there are two responses to a decline in quality in any organization or firm: exit and voice, where exit refers to the ability of consumers, citizens or service users, to simply leave and find alternative provision and voice refers to attempts to complain in order to improve matters. These basic conceptual devices are elaborated through the course of the book and applied to various examples, including that of public education provision.

While Hirschman does not provide much in the way of a definition of quality, what he does do is present an

explanation of how it shapes political behaviour. We are told that for any individual a quality change can be translated into an equivalent price change, but this is frequently different for different customers as appreciation of quality varies. A deterioration in quality will inflict different losses on different consumers and those who exit when quality declines in the case of so-called 'connoisseur' goods are not necessarily the marginal consumers who would exit if price increased. Such consumers may in fact be intramarginal consumers with considerable consumer surplus, who are thus rather insensitive to price increases but likely to be highly sensitive to a decline in quality. Consumers with high consumer surplus are those who have most to lose from a deterioration in quality. The concept of consumer surplus is thus important, since the larger the gain, the more likely the consumer will be motivated to 'do something'. Thus, Hirschman concludes, "in this way it is possible to derive the chances of political action from a concept that has dwelt so far exclusively in the realm of economic theory " (Hirschman 1970:50).

It is this calculus that is applied directly to the analysis of exit and voice in the case of public education. Hirschman reasons that the rapid exit of highly quality conscious customers is a situation that paralyzes voice by depriving it of the principal agents for change; those who value good schools will be the first to move out. Where there is a decline in the quality of public schools, schools will lose the children of those highly quality conscious parents who might otherwise have fought deterioration. Conversely however, if quality declines in a private school, such parents will keep their children in the school for much longer. Where public and private schools co-exist and quality is higher in the latter, a decline in quality

will be more strenuously fought within the institution. The argument here is that these are views which have become largely commonplace.

### **1.6 Quality, interests and forms of assessment: a critique.**

Hirschman's analysis of exit and voice, despite its critique of overly simplistic market views (there is specific mention of the Chicago School), sets out what remains a liberal and rational approach to the relationship between economics and politics. While that approach is open to numerous criticisms, not least of Hirschman's model of political action, at its heart lies a recognition of the importance of quality as an interest, and the recognition that voice "is nothing but a basic portion and function of any political system, known sometimes as 'interest articulation'" (1970:30). Hirschman's belief was that if voice was recognized as a mechanism that could be harnessed to 'maintaining performance', it would be possible to mould institutions so as to reduce the costs of individual and collective action (1970:42). In this respect, the influence of Hirschman's critique of modern ideas of choice was reflected in the policies and approaches exemplified by the NPM and echoed by politicians promoting such policies (Dowding 2015:5). Hence for Hirschman, understanding the significance of voice, and the expression of choice in regard to quality, had to point towards the need for an institutional balancing of exit and voice. This Hirschman saw as dependent on the "readiness of a population to complain and on the invention of such institutions and mechanisms as can communicate complaints cheaply and effectively" (op. cit. p43), sentiments which seem entirely to presage the aims and achievements of political actors promoting and implementing the NPM.

However, despite Hirschman's reference to voice as the articulation of interests, the elaboration is not further developed. This is problematic, since it means that actors' reasons for developing interest are obscured. In his review of *Exit, Voice and Loyalty*, Barry identifies many problems with Hirschman's treatment of voice, and three can be judged of particular importance to this study. Firstly, different forms of voice are conflated, and no distinction is made between protests to secure a collective good, such as a parental campaign for better schools, and cases where individual consumers pursue claims for individual benefits (Barry 1974:92-93). This matters since the reasons and explanations for such interests that arise in these different situations are likely to differ. Secondly, voice should be understood, not only as a possible response to decline, but as a possible response to "a *belief* that a firm or organization could do better"(op. cit. :90, my emphasis). Thirdly, the connection between the belief that improvement could be brought about and the experience of deterioration, is contingent.

Such criticisms are highly important since they point towards the need to pose questions as to how interests are constructed, which political actors are involved in these processes, and in what ways. These however, are not questions posed by Barry, whose critical analysis was generated from within the confines of Oxford analytical political philosophy as per the 1970s. Nevertheless, Barry's points are useful and may be further extended. Thus for Hirschman, 'quality' is a matter of demand:

"Whoever does not exit is a candidate for voice and voice depends, like exit, on the quality elasticity of demand. But

the direction of the relationship is turned around: with a given potential for articulation, the actual level of voice feeds on *inelastic* demand, or on the lack of opportunity for exit” (op. cit.:34, original emphasis).

In this formulation Hirschman reduces ‘quality’ to demand; to an economic concept. However, in political terms, this economic formulation translates into a question as to how important the quality of a service or good seems to individuals or groups. To answer such a question it is necessary to understand what those individuals or groups mean by ‘quality’; what they believe it is, or is not, and whether it is considered an important thing, and why. However, as Barry comments, the concept of quality implies a unidirectional standard of judgement; it is a thing that all consumers or users would rather have more of. In Barry’s terms, the value assumption here is that the quality of a good should be as high as possible, at any given price, although it is noted that this is not entirely uncontroversial even in economics, and assumes that consumption is the object of all economic activity. Yet when this economic concept is applied to a political situation, it becomes a highly problematic analytic tool; as Barry observes, “the talk of ‘quality’ conceals the fact that what we have in this case is simply a difference of opinion” (op. cit.:100). Thus, paraphrasing Barry and applying his insight to the case of quality in schools, what talk of the decline in the quality of schools means is, decline from the point of view of the critics of standards in schools.

In this regard, Barry’s work is to be treated as a proto-rhetorical political analysis, which points us towards the need to examine the meaning of quality. This is something that Hirschman also points toward, yet his recognition that



interests are articulated is not matched by an analysis, nor a recognition of the political process of articulation. That this is what articulation is, must force those wishing to understand 'quality' back towards the analysis of the forms of assessment used by political actors in the process of constructing and articulating interests. In the case of education, as one observer has noted, quality is reflected in the standards referred to when judgements are made, and those standards cannot be divorced from wider arguments about the purpose of education (Pring 1992). Standards and notions of quality are thus logically related and essentially contested concepts. Quality is therefore not to be seen, as in Hirschman's work and in the hands of its promoters, as a term from some theoretically neutral observational language. On the contrary, it is intrinsically related to social judgements and thus to the political, hence "performance has to measure up to standards which are inseparable from the activity as one perceives it and these perceptions have been internalised from participation in a form of life shared with others" (Pring 1992:17).

This would seem to highlight the need for a more thoroughgoing rhetorical political analysis of 'quality'. It may well be the case, as Barry asserts, that "people may *sometimes* consult their interests in deciding how to act" (Barry 1970:72, my emphasis). What is also important to consider though, as Hirschman reminds us, is that interests have to be articulated. However, this is a process that Hirschman does not pursue any further; his analysis neglects the vital issue of power in the construction and articulation of interests and the view that 'quality' itself may constitute interests. For the political analyst, the question thus begged

is how and in what political spaces the process of interest construction and articulation takes place.

### **1.7 The state, interests, and economic reason: the need for a study of 'quality'.**

If the above analysis suggests that an inquiry into 'quality' must look at the processes involved in the formation and articulation of interests, it is public choice theorists who remind us that interests themselves are intricately related to institutions. As Olson asserts, one purpose of what he terms 'economic institutions' is the furtherance of members interests, and there is an expectation on the part of members that this will be the role they carry out (1965:5-6). This point is extended to the state, with the claim that the state is expected to further the *common interests* of its citizens, albeit with the important qualification that the state often has interests and ambitions apart from those of its citizens (ibid.:7).

These are useful insights, yet from the vantage point of the present what is striking about Olson's work and public choice theory in general, is the way which this body of work presents as an unwitting exemplification of Foucault's concept of the art of government. In discussing that concept, Foucault contends that this new form of governmental reason is to be understood as something that works with interests, where interest is to be recognized as the 'operator' of that new art (Foucault 2010:44). Through this lens, interest is seen as the principle of exchange and the criterion of utility, and governmental reason functions in terms of interest, thus: "it is through interests that government can get a hold on everything that exists for it in the form of individuals, actions, words, wealth, resources, property, rights, and so forth"

(ibid.:45). In this form of governmental reasoning, it is the idea of limited government which enables intervention to be framed as legitimate only when carried out on the basis of interest or the interplay of interests. As liberalism develops into neoliberalism however, the problematizing frame shifts from a focus on how to create the space of the market, towards a problematic focused on how the exercise of political power can be modelled on the principles of the market economy. In the neoliberal art of government, the regulatory principle is the mechanism of competition; “what is sought is not a society subject to the commodity-effect, but a society subject to the dynamic of competition” (ibid.:147). This matters for the concerns in the current work, since, as one commentator has observed, the concept of competition is vitally important in neoliberalism as it is “through processes of competition [that] it becomes possible to discern who and what is valuable” (Davies 2017b).

From the discussion of ‘quality’ thus far, it appears that this process of valuation is precisely what policies of ‘quality’ have facilitated, yet this is something not recognized in the current literature. To make this statement moreover, is to pitch the political analyst promptly back to consideration of the concept of forms of assessment, and serves to underline the point that political actors (re)construct forms of assessment in the course of political action. It is also to signal that political analysis requires the consideration of both ideas and arguments, and that this process must be principally informed by a concern with the rhetorical character of political action. As the discussion of public and rational choice theory above has indicated, the reduction of political action to the instrumental and economic, provides an oversimplified political analysis, one which omits to consider the forms of

assessment used by political actors. The implication of this is that if 'quality' is to be subjected to a more thorough political analysis, political action has to be understood as argumentative action. In order to understand these forms of action, the contention here is that it is necessary to recognize as the objects of analysis, not simply the ideas used by political actors, but also the arguments that they use.

One of the arguments of the present work then, is that the study of the politics of 'quality' can best proceed, at least in this case, as a rhetorical-political activity. This, despite a few references to the political rhetoric of the NPM, is not something which previous research has attempted to do. At this point, it is only necessary to point out that the relevance of such an approach to the study of 'quality' arises given the form of 'quality' as constitutive of interests. As we have seen, interests are considered to be of vital significance in a Foucauldian understanding of contemporary governmental reasoning. It has also been argued above that while 'quality' has been presented and promoted by political actors as constituting the common good, as Winkler (1990) argues, the interests served by the NPM (an integral element of which was 'quality') were precisely those of the government itself. Furthermore, the very concept of 'interest' is derived not from economics, but from the conduct of politics itself. Interests came to be seen as the main motivational force in human behaviour and thus as a guide to political conduct through the sixteenth century. It was political advisors who stressed that interests should be observed in a rational and calculating way. They did this as a result of an awareness of the strategic advantages that would accrue to political actors, from viewing conduct as rational calculation, rather than a product of the passions (Heilbron 2015).

The significance of this for the study of 'quality' is that it suggests that the environment in which the concept of quality has been promoted and developed, and which is constitutive of interests, is a strategic environment. This is also to say that the action which takes place in such an environment, argumentative action, is to be seen as the medium of strategic political action, rather than as a response to a situation which is independent of an interpreting political actor (cf. Consigny 1974, Vatz 1973). It is for this reason that a rhetorical-political study of 'quality' may be able to illuminate how and why political actors found such a concept useful. It is therefore as a consequence of the lack of recognition on this point that such a study of 'quality' is necessary.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that there is a pressing need to study the politics of 'quality'. As the chapter has shown, 'quality' has been studied in the field of public administration as a policy, but not as a political idea. This has in turn meant that the role of 'quality' both in, and as, strategic political conduct has been overlooked in previous work. It has been argued that through a genealogical approach to 'quality', the strategic political thinking that has driven the rise of this concept becomes more apparent. Analysis on this basis suggests that 'quality' is a concept which has enabled political actors to navigate adroitly through strategic political environments which are themselves constituted by argumentative action. In doing this however, political actors make use of forms of assessment as well as rhetorical strategies. The chapter has indicated in outline form how such processes have operated at several historical conjunctures, and how, in the case of the NPM, the

regulation, management, and not least, the constitution of interests through the concept of quality has been of central importance. It has also been argued that there is a need to recognize the importance of 'quality' in the development of neoliberal articulations of competition, and attention has been drawn to the role of economic reason in Foucault's 'neoliberal art of government'. However, if this sets out a case for the political analysis of 'quality', what is now required is a theoretical framework for that analysis. This is the focus of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 2 Towards the Political Analysis of 'Quality'**

It is clear from the discussion in Chapter One that 'quality' is a political idea. Less clear, however, is what political ideas are and what they do. Thus, to ask questions about how and why political actors have used the concept of quality, as this thesis does, is necessarily to ask questions about the role of ideas in politics. It is also to ask questions about interests and about the connection between these two objects. These are questions which have thus far, not been directly addressed in the limited and fragmented academic literature on 'quality'; they have though, been the subject of much recent debate in political analysis. This chapter will therefore examine this latter work. It will be argued that an understanding of interests and ideas by way of a poststructuralist discursive analytical approach provides the best way of proceeding towards a political analysis of 'quality'.

This step takes the political analyst of 'quality' into contested and complex theoretical territory: the position of this thesis is that political analysis is by no means "often a case of stating and re-stating that which is *obvious* but all too often rarely reflected upon" (Hay 2002:129, my emphasis). To the contrary, it is argued here that the category of the 'obvious' must be deconstructed. As a preliminary to that activity it is worth noting, as others have pointed out, that poststructuralism does not argue that there is no such thing as reason, but rather that there are multiple forms of reason and rationality (Finlayson and Martin 2006). The consequence of this for the political analysis of 'quality' is that rather than simply engaging in a limited process of 're-stating' what is taken to be obvious, political analysts must aim to be 'multi-lingual': to translate, interpret, interrogate

and reveal the processes and the voices, by and through which political meaning is rendered. This can permit a greater understanding of how what appears to be obvious is both the condition and the outcome of political action.

This is to say that what must be examined is the constitution and construction of 'the obvious'. The political analyst must therefore recognize that 'quality' is a discursive, rhetorical and ideological, as well as a political, phenomenon. This chapter will therefore proceed to examine in turn, the role of ideational processes, political ideology, language and rhetoric and the discursive-institutional construction of interests. On the way, the extant literature of 'quality' drawn from several sub-disciplinary fields is discussed in relation to these conceptual and theoretical areas of concern. The chapter concludes by arguing that the best framework for the political analysis of 'quality' is one which is based upon poststructural discourse analysis.

### **2.1. Ideas, interests and the ideology of 'quality'**

It cannot be said that researchers in the fields of education policy sociology and public administration (where the limited critical literature on 'quality' is to be found) have entirely ignored the ideational aspect of 'quality'. One educational researcher has commented that the concept of 'quality' was "borrowed from the private sector" (Gewirtz 2000:354). Another researcher working in public administration was struck by the enthusiastic response from public sector managers to Peters and Waterman's bestselling book *In Search of Excellence*, observing that: "this single text has had a most remarkable impact on the rhetoric, if not the practice of managers in the public sector, producing a plethora of 'Excellence' schools, conferences and even annual



awards" (Hoggett 1991:247). Another educational researcher has claimed that 'quality' has functioned so as to "mask inequality" (Gillies 2008:690). Other prominent contributors to the public administration literature have been no less clear that 'quality' has the characteristics of an ideology, likening it to a religion (Pollitt 2013:475).

However, while the ideational aspect of 'quality' is noted in this literature, the explanatory frameworks underlying such claims are problematic. There is a broad agreement that 'quality' is ideological, yet the sense in which this concept is used is not elaborated in any detail. In the work by Gewirtz and Gillies, there is a structuralist and Marxian implication that the ideological simply reflects material relations of production. Thus, by implication we must assume that 'quality' reflects not just the language, but also the interests of business and that is the unacknowledged reason why it 'masks inequality'. This materialist approach is also evident in Hoggett's argument, where it is clear that the underlying reason for the success of *In Search of Excellence* is ultimately to be seen as material; the causal factor behind the shift to the NPM is attributed to a crisis in the "bureaucratic mode of production", resulting from the development of post-Fordist production methods and "the fiscal crisis of the state itself" (Hoggett *ibid*:243-44, 246).

Elsewhere in the public administration literature however, a seemingly more pluralistic and sophisticated approach can be found. Thus: "technically interests would be found to 'underdetermine' outcomes"(Pollitt 1993:111). In this vein of thought, it is argued that 'quality' became popular in the late 1980s because political actors found the concept agreeable. However, it is claimed that this was not because political actors were persuaded by others; rather, it was due to the

impact of structural change. As Pollitt reasons the managerialism that 'quality' was associated with was to be seen as an ideology, and ideologies are to be understood as rooted in the socio-economic conditions to which they give meaning. Thus it is asserted that Thatcher and Reagan were "able to popularize the 'message' [of 'quality'] so successfully because it was already formulated and because the conditions for its widespread dissemination were already ripe"(ibid 28).

While this last explanation for the rise of 'quality' seems to avoid the determinism implied in the other work considered here, it leaves us with a circular solution; it would seem that 'quality' became popular because people were primed by the socio-economic conditions of their existence to be receptive to it (cf. Finlayson 2004:537). The argument of this thesis is that such an explanation is highly unsatisfactory and develops as a consequence of the reliance of this literature upon a dualistic ontology which privileges the material over the ideal. Thus causality is cast in material terms, and interests are assumed to be objective and structurally determined through the relationship of political actors to the means of production.

Something in the way of an alternative to this view is provided by Hood, who argues that changes in public management policy are to be understood as processes whereby received ideas change through fashion and persuasion such that: "the development of arguments in public management is more often a 'reactive' than a 'proactive' process in that ideas about how to do better are typically not constructed on a blank slate but through a process of rejection of opponents' views, current institutional systems or both" (Hood 1998:189). Even so, what is seen to

cause the rise of the NPM and thus, 'quality', is again, ultimately a range of material factors: technological change, new methods of political campaigning, changes in incomes, and a "more socially heterogeneous population less tolerant of 'statist' and uniform approaches in public policy" (Hood 1991:7).

In this section of the fragmented literature of 'quality', we therefore remain trapped within a dualist ontology, with explanations which may oscillate between materialist and idealist poles, and which do not recognize interests as constructions. It will be argued here that, given their reliance upon attributions of causality to extra-discursive structures, such accounts cannot lead to viable and credible political analyses of 'quality'. A poststructuralist approach rejects the dualistic ontology which such analyses are based upon and points to the conclusion that such an endeavour must necessarily require a recognition of the mutually constitutive character of both ideas and interests. A path towards that goal, developed by political analysts inspired by constructivist approaches, is to be found in a vein of work on the role of ideational processes.

### **2.1.1 Constructivist approaches to ideas and interests**

Through most of the twentieth century, the dominant views in political analysis, which aspired to the status of a science, were rooted in materialism and positivism. Consequently, political behaviour was seen as driven by material forces and the interests seen to result from them. In rationalist political science this is reflected in the view that behaviour is motivated by the desire to maximise self-interest. Similar views however, are also found in Marxist accounts, although there the concept of self-interest is transformed by way of

the mechanisms of class, class interests and class consciousness. The dominance of this positivist and materialist view of the political has been profound; even when materialist accounts have conceded a role to ideas, the material remains dominant and the ideal is seen as shaped or determined by the material and therefore has no independent causal role (Hay 2002:207). The tendency has thus been to regard the strongest explanatory currency in positivist fashion as that which can be counted, and thus ideas are interpreted as “covers for the real work of real interests which are not shaped by ideas” (Finlayson 2004:534).

The claim made here is that it is precisely such views which are at play in the explanatory accounts of ‘quality’ discussed in the previous section. Moreover, as we have seen in the first chapter, the notion of real objective interests given by or reflecting social structural location, has been subjected to considerable criticism and consequently rejected (Hindess 1987). That is the position supported in this thesis and it is also supported by recent work on ideational processes carried out by political analysts taking a constructivist approach. A substantial body of work in this tradition developed from around the late 1980s, partly in response to new institutionalism (Hay 2008) and the most recent of these constructivist accounts argue that ideas are tools which are used in various ways by political actors and thus constitute and construct interests (see Blyth 2002, 2003, Abdelal, Blyth and Parsons 2005). While such approaches are clearly of relevance to the political analysis of ‘quality’, suggesting the possibility of a more agential approach to explaining policy ideas, from the perspective of poststructural discourse theory, this approach remains unsatisfactory. As we will see,

this is a consequence of the ontological assumptions made in constructivist accounts, which retain a dualistic understanding of the material and the ideal. This, and the assumption of a rational autonomous subject, results in explanatory accounts which fail to fully grasp the constitutive character of social and political structures. Nonetheless, this work is an important contribution to the study of ideational processes and given that the discussion thus far has not yet determined what ideas are and what they do, it warrants consideration. Moreover, a critique of this work enables the merits of poststructural discourse theory to stand out in relief.

### **2.1.2 Ideas and interests**

Constructivist definitions of ideas provide something in the way of a baseline for political analysis in claiming that ideas are best understood as “claims about descriptions of the world, causal relationships, or the normative legitimacy of certain actions” (Parsons 2002:48). The reader must be alerted however, to note that this implies a certain ontological position: ideas are “analytically distinct from the material world [and] such claims give meaning to it” (Béland 2010:148). A more complex picture is provided by Schmidt: ideas are the substantive content of discourse, where discourse is to be understood simply as the “interactive process of conveying ideas” (Schmidt 2008:303). This approach is developed into a typology and it is claimed that ideas come in two forms, the cognitive and the normative, existing at three levels: policies, programs and philosophies. Cognitive ideas are causal ideas which provide “recipes, guidelines and maps’ which political actors use to justify policies ‘by speaking to their interest-based logic of necessity” (ibid 306). Normative ideas work in a different

way, and “attach values to political action and serve to legitimate policies in a program through reference to their appropriateness” (op cit, my italics). Another key contributor in the constructivist fold, tells us that ideas are simply beliefs and perceptions. What they do is to “serve as *cognitive filters* through which actors come to interpret environment signals and, in so doing to conceive of their own interests” (Hay 2011:69, my italics).

These accounts thus provide us with descriptions of what is meant by the word ‘idea’, and at the same time they begin to sketch out explanations of what it is claimed ideas do and how they are to be understood as relating to interests. What these constructivist accounts share is the view that the role of ideas in politics is such that they help make actors aware of their perceived interests, the notion of objective interests having been rejected. The claim is that this is an approach which sheds considerable light on the construction of policy paradigms and the processes of political mobilization and coalition building (Béland 2010, 2019). Ideas serve as tools and as the means by which political actors create ‘conduits’, through which political power can be channelled. Moreover, since ideas help to make actors aware of their interests, both ideas and interests are to be seen as linked not simply to power, but to domination. Ideas are to be seen then, as tools of domination (Béland 2010).

## **2.2. Discursive Institutionalism and Constructivist Institutionalism**

It is from these last two competing definitions that recent constructivist views have been developed. Two constructivist approaches – discursive institutionalism (DI) and constructivist institutionalism (CI) – are now predominant in political analysis and both examine ideas and interests in the

context of institutions (Schmidt 2008, Hay 2008). DI is associated with the work of Schmidt and uses concepts of discourse and ideas to provide an endogenous account of institutional change which acknowledges the role of agency. This approach argues that there are two institutional contexts, simple and compound polities, characterised by different types of discourse. Institutions in these different polities are not external role forming structures, nor are they material, but are instead to be understood as structures and constructs which are internal to agents. Institutional change is the outcome of an interaction whereby agents background ideational abilities, which follow the ideational rules of the setting, explain how institutions are created, and foreground discursive abilities, which follow a logic of communication, explain how institutions persist or change (Schmidt 2008).

In contrast, Hay's constructivist institutionalism focuses on ideas rather than discourse, adopting the concept of cognitive filters and stressing the role of ideas in politics in order to explain 'postformative' institutional change. Change is seen to arise from the relationship between political actors and the contexts in which they find themselves, while institutions are seen to be built upon ideational factors that exert an independent path dependent effect on their subsequent development. This is a path dependent process, but it accommodates a notion of path shaping and is therefore deemed not to be deterministic (Hay 2011:68).

In rejecting the concept of objective real interests, these constructivist accounts may appear at first sight to have created an approach that could be of considerable value for the political analysis of 'quality'. The recognition that political actors sharing the same situation do not have the same interests and that actors are non-interchangeable (King

1973, Hay 2017) suggests a conceptualization of the nature of social and political structures and relationships which avoids the economism of Marxist analysis. It becomes possible to generate new research questions as to how ideas are involved in political mobilization and their role in advocacy coalitions and as 'coalition magnets' (Cox and Béland 2013, Béland and Cox 2016). The appreciation that what is important is perceived rather than objective interests (Hay 2011), and that political actors are subject to "persuasive power through ideas" (Schmidt 2017:250), also indicates a recognition of the importance in political explanation of ideas and agency. Applying this framework to the analysis of 'quality' could potentially answer the research questions which are the concern of this research. They could also generate further questions, without the need of recourse to a determinate material substrate, such as: (i) whether and how 'quality' was perceived and constructed as representative of particular interests, (ii) by what means support for the idea of quality was generated, and (iii) which political actors supported and promoted it. However, recent debates have led to criticism of both DI and CI, casting doubt on their coherence (Hay 2011, Larsson 2015, Hay 2017, Schmidt 2017, Larsson 2018, Jacobs 2018).

### **2.2.1 The ontological consistency of discursive institutionalism**

A first criticism, which comes from within constructivist thought, concerns the extent to which DI is constructivist. DI claims that ideas, defined as the content of discourse, are said to be "sometimes important" in exerting a causal influence in promoting change, but sometimes they are not important (Schmidt 2008:311). Thus, whilst this approach claims to be constructivist, Hay, arguing from an alternative



constructivist position, claims that it is “ontologically inconsistent on the question of material interests” (Hay 2011:65). On the issue of interests and ideas, Schmidt asserts that “all interests are ideas, and ideas constitute interests, so all interests are subjective” (Schmidt op. cit. 317). It is thus clear that we are to regard interests as subjective and norm driven, and we are correctly reminded that they are not “strictly utilitarian” (Schmidt op. cit. 318). Yet elsewhere Schmidt maintains that “interests also matter as do material conditions and hard economic variables that may serve to drive change” (Schmidt and Radaelli 2004:193). Matters are further obscured when we are informed that discourse is important when it exerts a causal influence on policy change by reconceptualizing interests and changing institutions, yet when it does not exert causal change it merely serves “to reinforce interests, institutions and culture” (Schmidt *ibid* 201). As per Hay’s commentary, this is an inconsistent approach to the relationship between the material and the ideal since, in common with other constructivist accounts, it puts us in the contradictory position of viewing structurally derived interests as social constructs (Hay op. cit. 71). However, given Hay’s own theoretical allegiance, it is difficult not to conclude that this must also apply to his own position.

### **2.2.2 Constructivist institutionalism and subjectivism**

A second set of criticisms concern Hay’s proposed alternative to DI. As we have seen, Hay finds fault with what is a rump materialism in many avowedly constructivist accounts. CI sets out to avoid this problem and casts political actors as strategic actors who aim to achieve their goals in a context that is said to be selectively favourable to certain strategies. In this treatment, ideas are seen to be important because

strategic actors work with perceptions of the context which are incomplete. However, ideas, or more precisely, “desires, preferences, and motivations” are not seen to be determined or given by the context and interests do not “serve as proxies for material factors” (Hay 2011). The role of ideas is to mediate between actors and context; ideas become codified and embedded in institutions, serving as cognitive filters. It is in this way that political actors, through interpreting the ‘signals’ emitted by the environment, “come to conceive of their own interests” (Hay 2011 67-69). In this theory then, interests are to be understood as social constructions: they “do not exist, but constructions of interests do” (2011:79).

This account has recently been challenged by the argument that it simply reduces ideas to properties of individual conscious minds, and thus is subjectivist (Larsson 2015). This criticism is disputed by Hay, who insists that ideas and interests are irredeemably ideational and reflect actors normative orientations towards the context. However, given Hay’s assertion: “the things I value themselves cannot be derived from the context in which I find myself. However conventional they may be, the relative values I assign to my preferences are *mine alone*”, Larsson’s point appears to be a sound one (Hay 2011:77, my emphasis). This is a stance strikingly reinforced in Hay’s reply to Larsson, where the point that it is the political subject who is the locus for decisions as to preferences, desires and motivations, is bluntly put with a Cartesian certainty: “I simply do not see how it can be any other way” (2017:241). Of course, other views are in fact, readily available: notably, given the stance in this thesis, a poststructural discourse analytical approach which considers that rather than thinking of ideas as

mediating between subject and context, they are to be seen to construct and constitute both of those entities.

This however, is a route which is rejected (Hay 2002). Instead, Hay argues that his account of CI is one which is at pains to point out the mutual interdependence of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. We are told that this is a matter of logic; the purely subjective is asocial by definition and the social is inter-subjective, therefore the socially constructed must, by definition, be subjective (Hay 2017). It makes no sense, the argument continues, to dissolve the subjective into the inter-subjective, as without a notion of subjectivity, we cannot conceive of inter-subjectivity. On this line of argument therefore, CI cannot, Hay argues, be subjectivist. Hay develops this argument further, arguing that what Larsson may in fact object to, is what can be termed the 'intra-subjective', which refers to ideas that are sui generis: "specific to the individual in question, in the sense that no other subject is assumed to hold them in quite the same way and for quite the same reasons" (2017:241-2). However, this too, Hay maintains is also entirely compatible with constructivism, since people respond 'intra-subjectively' in making political decisions and thus political action is a product of the interdependence of inter- and intra-subjectivity.

### **2.2.3 The incoherence of constructivist institutionalism**

The latter point from Hay however, only serves to strengthen the case that what his constructivist institutionalism provides is a view which is based upon a notion of a pre-existing subject. As any connection between context and actors is severed in this ontology, it is difficult to see how subjects are formed. Indeed, Hay shows an explicit disinterest in this matter when he writes, "By intra-subjective, here, I mean

ideas that, *however they might have come to be acquired and held*, are specific to the individual subject in question” (2017:240, my italics). In further defending his argument, Hay draws upon his earlier work in order to demonstrate the interrelationship of inter- and intra-subjectivity and argues that crisis narratives construct subject positions for their readers, “drawing them into a script that serves both to cement the perception of crisis” (ibid 245). Yet Hay draws theoretical support for the interdependence of inter- and intra-subjectivity from the Althusserian concept of interpellation. It is an incoherent constructivism which draws upon Althusser’s structuralism, for that approach, as is well known, is one which insists that the subject cannot be seen as the source of conscious recognition of its objective interests, since it is itself constructed in and by the ideological process of interpellation (Hirst 1976).

The argument here then, is that CI is untenable as a means of comprehending the political idea of quality because this constructivist approach neglects and obscures precisely what is political about the political. The political analyst must necessarily be concerned with how ideas are acquired as well as with how they are related to, and how they construct and constitute interests. By severing the relationship between political actors and the context, which they do not simply inhabit but rather construct, CI denies itself the opportunity to examine the political process. The space which Hay alludes to, but dismisses, where subjectivity and identity are constructed rather than acquired, is precisely the space that political analysis should scrutinize. Examining this space is an activity that cannot proceed far with a rationalistic notion of ‘cognitive filtering’, which postulates political actors simply as information processors, albeit strategically oriented

processors. To move beyond this bare, simplistic landscape, however, it is necessary to reflect further on the ontological assumptions underlying constructivist theory.

### **2.3. Understanding interests and ideas: the material and the ideal**

What we have seen in the previous section is that attempts to develop a constructivist approach to political action and institutional change have inevitably had to consider the relationship between the ideal and the material, and that the responses to this theoretical problem have resulted in explanatory accounts which are unsatisfactory in several ways. In the case of discursive institutionalism, it has been argued that there is ontological inconsistency and a rump materialism. In response to these difficulties Hay has developed constructivist institutionalism, but it has been argued here that this results in an incoherent structuralist subjectivism. In these accounts, the material appears in different guises. In DI, the material has a distinctly economic character. In CI, it is seen largely in institutional terms; it is the context, or the environment in which political action takes place and acts as a constraint, presenting the strategic selections from which political actors must make their choices. However, the critique to be developed here is that it is from the very maintenance of a dualistic approach to the ideal and the material that such problems stem.

In some respects the positions in the perennial philosophical conundrum of ideal and material are, as Hay observes, relatively simple: materialists argue that material factors, in the form of interests, determine ideas and thus outcomes, whereas for idealists, it is ideas which are determining or causal factors (Hay 2002:205). However, it is also easy to

misconstrue positions in this debate, which is what Hay does in describing poststructural discourse analysts as idealists, based on the claim that “in Derrida’s terms all is language, there is nothing outside of the text” (op. cit.). For Hay, this is untenable and hence an ontology which distinguishes between the discursive and the extra-discursive is to be defended. However, this is an argument that relies upon an inaccurate translation of Derrida’s original phrase, “Il n’y a pas de hors-texte” (Derrida 1997:158, Deutscher 2014:98). What this phrase actually means is that even the unnumbered (hors-texte refers to inserts of various kinds) and sometimes blank pages in a book count as part of the book, or to put it another way, ‘even an outlaw has everything to do with the law, because it makes him what he is’ (Wood 2016). Therefore, as Derrida himself pointed out, it is more accurate to paraphrase the point in the following terms: “that nothing exists outside context” (Derrida 1988:152). This matters for two reasons. Firstly, as we have seen, Hay’s constructivist institutionalism wishes to sever ideas and interests from the context. Secondly, it demonstrates that poststructuralists, following Laclau and Mouffe, do not take an idealist position at all. As the latter argue, “The fact that every object is constituted as an object of discourse has *nothing to do* with whether there is a world external to thought, or with the realism/idealism opposition” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2014:94, original emphasis). As the point is explained further in that text, it is not denied that objects exist externally to thought; what is denied is the very different proposition that such objects could constitute themselves as objects outside the discursive conditions in which they emerge. Hay clearly cannot accept this conclusion, since he claims that ‘contemporary idealists’ (i.e.

Laclau and Mouffe), tend to dissolve the very distinction between the ideal and the material (Hay 2002:207).

However, this is to misconstrue the position taken by Laclau and Mouffe, which is explicitly materialist. As Laclau and Mouffe explain, idealism does not claim that there are no objects external to the mind, but rather that “the innermost nature of these objects is identical to that of mind [...] it is ultimately thought” (1987:86). This is furthermore, not at all a position which they support; their approach is materialist, but it suggests a more precise and subtle meaning of the term, given that it affirms “an irreducible distance between thought and reality” (Torfing 1999:45). It is therefore Hay’s position on this issue which lacks coherence. For to insist that the material is extra-discursive, which must be the implication of his position, is to argue, not just that the material is self-constituting, but also that it is beyond meaning. This seems an absurdity, and one which can only lead to an atrophied political analysis. Rather than dissolving the distinction between the material and the ideal as Hay claims, Laclau and Mouffe’s approach subjects it to critical examination. In so doing, they establish an alternative ontological approach to that offered by those adhering to either ‘as if realism’ or critical realism (Hay 2014, Jessop 2014). This is a radical materialism which asserts the existence of an external reality, yet rejects dualism and all forms of essentialism.

These issues may appear abstract and far removed from our concerns with the political concept of quality. Yet, in the study of politics the debate over the precise role played by material and ideal factors has been longstanding and contentious, and the continual rivalry and privileging of either ideas or material interests, presents an unenlightening and

“unsustainable binary opposition” (Griggs and Howarth 2002:100). In contrast, the ontological approach suggested by poststructuralist discourse theory recognizes the discursive character of ideas and interests. This is something which can be of great use in the political analysis of ‘quality’, since it enables a shift to a focus on political logics and the study of how it is that political actors and groups use ideational resources in attempts to hegemonize the field of meaning at a particular time. Poststructuralist discourse theory conceives of ideas as signifiers and structure as something which is indeterminate and open to contingency, and never completely stabilized. Social structures, which are discursive, are seen as permanently dislocated. They are subjected to and constituted by the attempts of political actors (who may be mobilized and organized in many social and political forms) to fix meaning by converting floating signifiers - that is, ideas and signs which are open to a range of meanings - to empty signifiers, which lack any precise content and meaning, and thus serve to “divide the world between the forces of good and evil” (Jacobs 2019:305).

It is this process which enables a group of political actors to attempt to suture its internal differences by showing the dependence of its own identity upon the opposition of other groups (Howarth 1995). This fixing process requires the availability of suitable and credible signifiers, and the presence of political actors who are strategically positioned so as to be able to create empty signifiers (Griggs and Howarth 2002:103). Given the genealogy of ‘quality’ presented in Chapter One, it would seem that the political idea of quality is a prime candidate to be seen in such terms. However, at this point, with mention of the fixing of meaning,



we must turn to reflect upon the concept of ideology and the senses in which this concept will be used in this study.

#### **2.4. Quality and ideology**

As we have seen at the start of this chapter, researchers from both education policy studies and public administration have not been reticent to label 'quality' as ideological. While the point can hardly be said to be developed in any detail, the implication is that 'quality' represents particular class interests. Such accounts thus seem to offer a form of explanation for the policy which must be reliant to some degree upon Marxian concepts of class in the context of an economic base and ideological superstructure (Gewirtz 2000, Hoggett 1991, Gillies 2008). Others have drawn upon the concept of ideology in perhaps a slightly less Marxian way but still conceive of it as something which produces an illusion or a distortion of reality and which is used by elites to mask the truth or as a symbol in the service of power (Pollitt 1993, 2013; Hood and Dixon 2010). Such tendencies are also evident in research on 'quality' in the field of management studies: Willmott (1993) identifies totalitarian prescriptions in corporate culture (of which 'quality' is a central element), while Klikauer argues that management theory is itself an ideology which disguises the pathologies of 'managerial capitalism' and is geared towards establishing a false consciousness (2019). As seductive as such theories can sometimes be, the argument of this thesis, in keeping with other work in a post-Marxist vein, is that the economism involved in such approaches makes them untenable. However, this is not to argue that the concept of ideology must be jettisoned. On the contrary, this thesis will argue that 'quality' is ideological, but this begs the question of what sort of conceptualization of ideology can be retained and used

in a post-Marxist, poststructuralist discourse analysis. In order to do this, it will be argued here that a tenable concept of ideology must be, as one researcher has put it, “re-inscribed on a new terrain” (Norval 2000). In this thesis, this ‘new terrain’ is conceptualized by way of work on the theory of political ideologies drawn from Freeden’s morphological approach, Laclau’s discourse analysis, and rhetorical-political analysis.

#### **2.4.1 Morphological analysis: outline and implications**

Freeden’s approach to what we must term more specifically political ideologies, serves as a useful point of departure, for it sweeps away the conceptual baggage associated with economic and Marxian views as noted above, positing political ideologies simply as sets of ideas through which political thought is organized and understood. In this view, ideologies are seen to consist of clusters of political concepts which are made up of both ineliminable and quasi-contingent features. At the same time, this is a semantic view of ideology, and the meaning of these features is taken to be indeterminate and essentially contested, with political concepts being understood to acquire meaning not simply from the transmission of tradition, culture and discourse, but also from their proximity to other political concepts within a particular cluster (Freeden 1996:54). One point to be drawn from this is that ideologies are not to be thought of as mutually exclusive systems of ideas (ibid 24). The meaning of important political concepts, such as liberty, equality and freedom, varies as the concepts move between different ideological clusters and it is for this reason that we find socialists, liberals and conservatives, talking about what is seemingly the same idea in very different ways. What ensues is thus a competition for the control of political language, as

different political actors attempt to assert the superiority of one set of ideological interpretations over another (Freeden 2012, Maynard 2013). With respect to 'quality', this raises the possibility that the concept is understood in competing ways by different political actors whose actions are rooted in different political ideologies, for in the framework of this approach, 'quality' may be considered as a quasi-contingent concept occupying a changing position in different ideological configurations. The malleability and attractiveness of 'quality' is recognized in one element of the educational literature, where it has been fleetingly noted as a concept supremely open to rhetorical manipulation (C Winch 1996:30). However, what remains unexplored in the extant literature is precisely how different groups of political actors have constructed 'quality' through rhetorical activity, and what political benefit they have gained from the use of this concept.

Morphological analysis offers the beginning of an answer to the first of these two research questions. As indicated above, the construction and attribution of meaning is not to be understood as a voluntaristic activity; the potential meanings of political concepts are restricted by morphological, cultural, historical and social contexts, which political actors 'cannot easily shrug off' (Freeden 1996:52). Moreover, there are no 'correct' definitions of concepts; definitions must be wrought from the range of potential meanings by political actors so that a single meaning is attached to a political concept. In this way, Freedon argues, political ideologies aim to 'cement the word-concept relationship' and this is done by 'decontesting' the meanings of essentially contested concepts, such that the binding decisions necessary for political action are possible (ibid 76). Political ideologies are

thus to be understood as configurations of decontested meanings of concepts; they serve as “bridging devices between contestability and determinacy’, and provide political actors with the ‘maps of social reality” by which they attempt to navigate through engagements with political opponents (Freeden 1996:76).

#### **2.4.2 Assessing the morphological approach**

The morphological approach is one which is very useful for the political analysis of ‘quality’: it provides an outline of what political actors do with political concepts, it demonstrates how political thought is arranged and how “conceptual decontestation drives subsequent political thought along certain routes” (Finlayson 2012:752), and it illustrates the advantages for political analysis of taking a semiotic turn. Nevertheless, there are several points at which it must limit the attempt to comprehend the political concept of quality. As one political analyst observes, the focus on political concepts comes at the expense of consideration of objects, institutions, symbols and identities. There is a focus only on ‘major political concepts’, and a neglect of theorization of subjectivity and the functioning of ideology (Norval 2000:327). On this latter point moreover, the concept of decontestation leaves open the very means by which it is achieved (Frowe 1999:26) and by neglecting the external and expressive aspects of what is after all, ideological expression on the part of political actors, the morphological approach appears to risk “representing the process as a kind of ritualistic interpellation that ‘has always already’ happened” (Finlayson op cit 757). We have already seen that for some, this risk appears to have been materialized as per the account of Hay’s work discussed above.

Yet for all this, morphological analysis points in a useful direction for the political analysis of 'quality' which this thesis aims to conduct, and it does this firstly through the concept of decontestation, and secondly by way of its particular conception of the notion of the essentially contested political concept. The great value of this first concept is that it enables us to puncture common sense; the reason why 'quality' appears to be so 'obvious' and hard to counter is precisely because the concept has been decontested. The interpretive challenge for this thesis is to demonstrate how this concept has been decontested and constructed as common sense.

The notion of the essentially contested political concept can likewise perform useful work for a poststructuralist discourse analysis. In its first formulation political concepts are conceived as essentially contested concepts, drawing upon Gallie's seminal work (Freeden 1996). However, Freedden modifies this concept, pointing out, contra Gallie, that essentially contested concepts are not merely concerned with "valued achievements", nor are they concerned only with appraisal, and charging that Gallie collapses two distinct meanings of 'appraisive' in such a way that the scope of the contestability of political concepts is restricted (1996:55-56). Hence it is argued that essentially contested concepts are also concerned with what is unvalued and devalued, as well as with what is valued, and that what is contested in political concepts is also concerned with claims as to what it is that is empirically observable and describable; thus, matters of purported fact are also the subject of contest. On the final point, Freedden argues that Gallie collapses the meaning of 'appraisive' in the sense of a grading of the different orders of importance of various aspects of a concept, into another sense pertaining to the intension and extension of the

concept. These are useful qualifications which deepen understanding since, as Freeden puts it, 'political concepts create through their 'topography', the reality to which we relate and attribute significance' (Freeden 1996:57); it is in this sense that they are constitutive and provide "maps of social reality" (Freeden in Syrjamaki 2012:1).

As Norval has noted there is a remarkable coincidence between the morphological approach and post-Marxist developments of a concept of ideology, and shorn of its essentialism, (something which Freeden has himself broached), the notion of effectively contested concepts (Freeden 2004) is to be seen as one part of a rhetorical political theory of ideologies which conceives of ideas not only as political concepts, but also as signifiers (Finlayson 2012). Thus, decontestation is a concept which, in spite of Freeden's more structuralist leanings, is to be seen as a redescription of Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of hegemony (Norval 2000:328, Finlayson 2012:757). This opens the way to the view of ideology which will be used in this study, which draws upon the notion of a rhetorical political theory of ideologies (Finlayson *op. cit*). This approach acknowledges not only that ideologies are partly constitutive of the political and the social. It also recognizes what is omitted by both morphological and poststructural accounts of ideology; that ideological expressions are responses to ongoing situations and are productive and creative attempts to persuade other political actors of the 'correct' ways to understand, act and respond to such situations. In this light, 'quality' is to be understood as a political doxa and the route to understanding how it has been constructed as such, must lie through recognizing its manifestation not simply as a concept or signifier, but also by examination of the arguments through

which 'quality' has been created and promoted. Moreover, since all of these objects are represented by words, and since, as we have seen, the focus of decontestation is concerned with the meaning of concepts and signifiers, it seems logical to suggest that understanding how political actors have constructed 'quality' is something best advanced through a linguistic and rhetorical turn.

## **2.5. Language and the importance of context**

This section sets out to make the case that in order to understand how and why political actors have used the concept of quality, political analysis must grapple with the study of language. This is an approach which has not been something that researchers have shown any particular and sustained interest in doing. It is true that 'quality' has been identified as a 'buzzword' used right across the political spectrum (Pollitt 1993:183) and one educational researcher has argued that under New Labour the vocabularies of quality management discourse and egalitarian discourse became conflated, serving to "mask key issues relating to educational inequality" (Gillies 2008:690). It is also the case that researchers have noted that the rise of 'quality' saw the adoption of a business vocabulary in education (Pring 1992), 'borrowed from the private sector' (Gewirtz 2000:354). All of this attests to the significance of language in political action and makes it easy to agree with Connolly's claim that the language of politics is not a neutral medium that 'conveys ideas independently formed; it is an institutionalized structure that channels political thought and action in certain directions' (Connolly 1983:1). Yet still, the task that remains for an interpretive political analysis of 'quality' is to ascertain precisely how it was that political actors working in and with

language, channelled and institutionalized political thought and action through the use of this concept.

The argument of this thesis is that carrying out this task requires the interpretive political analyst to engage with the implications of the 'linguistic turn'. This refers to a range of work in Anglo-American philosophy developed in the early twentieth century, united around the view that the study of language would enable philosophical problems to be "solved (or dissolved) either by reforming language or by understanding more about the language we presently use" (Rorty 1970:3). For our purposes here, it is sufficient to note that the upshot of this line of philosophical work is that there are no facts outside of language and there is no reality other than that which is presented under some linguistic description; in this sense the notion of the 'extra-discursive' is both illogical and impossible. We have already seen such views in play earlier in this chapter; now we must focus on exploring the background to that previous analysis by examining the way that the impact of the linguistic turn was amplified and extended by work in linguistics.

Of particular significance in this respect is the work of Saussure and his seminal publication the *Course in General Linguistics* (de Saussure 1974). In this work Saussure argues that language is a system of signs and that meaning is dependent on differences within the system of language. This is to argue that the concepts which language users refer to and use are embedded in language rather than natural or pure and direct representations of an extra-linguistic reality. Saussure's reasoning is that language must be seen to consist of signs, which are formed of two elements: signifier and signified. Signifiers act as a medium and are the sound, word or image which attracts the attention of an actor and



communicates a message, whereas the 'signified' is the message or concept itself. However, the relationship between these two elements is arbitrary and the significance of this is that it indicates that meaning is a socially produced convention operating through a system of language. Terms only have meanings because of their differential nature; they operate through context and position in relation to other words and by the exclusion of alternative meanings.

Thus, the signifier 'dog' is not the same as 'cat', and similarly 'English' is not 'French'; it is by learning the differences between such signs that we learn the meaning of the concepts. The political implications of this theory are profound; it can be seen as suggesting that the meaning of the ideas with which politics is concerned, are formed through this linguistic system, and this is something which works on the basis of excluding other possibilities of meaning. This theory therefore suggests that it is language which structures, categorizes and organizes the way political actors think. Most importantly this theory suggests that our access to what constitutes 'reality', cannot be direct, but something which is constructed and understood through language.

The value of the linguistic turn exercised by Saussure for the study of 'quality', and its focus on linguistic construction is usefully highlighted by contrast with an approach discussed previously; Hay's constructivist institutionalism. As we have seen, CI claims to provide a superior account of political institutions and change, on the grounds that it acknowledges the importance of ideas in the construction of institutions. Moreover, in recent work, CI appears to take a linguistic turn. In elaborating his notion of institutionalism, Hay argues that institutionalisation occurs "whenever there is a 'reciprocal

typification of habitualised actions”, and emphasises that this is a crucial point since, “what makes typification reciprocal is language” (Hay 2016:522). Language, we are told, is the medium through which the enabling and constraining qualities of institutions are affected, and it is through language that inter-subjective understandings arise. On a following page we are informed that the historicity of institutions, their path dependence, “is linguistically achieved” (op cit 524). Hay develops this point and argues that CI is compatible with and builds out of, Berger and Luckmann’s social constructivism and John Searle’s approach to social facticity.

For Searle, reality is equivalent to social facticity, which is understood as a quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognize as having a being independent of our own volition; these are ‘brute facts’ which cannot be wished away, such as the reality of mountains or physical objects. Hay adds that what is important about this view is that it demonstrates that facticity is knowledge-independent, and so ‘real things’ can only be posited to the degree that there is an inter-subjective consensus; so mountains (and ‘quality’) only exist so long as we all agree that they do. As Hay points out, a second aspect of this ontological view is that we can distinguish between natural and social facts and the latter also depend upon inter-subjective consensus. Hay illustrates this point by reference to the five and ten-euro notes he finds in his pocket (Hay 2016, 2017). It is argued that this currency has a natural and a social facticity and it is the latter which is most important for political analysis; it is not reducible to the natural facticity of the object, its value is socially derived, and it is independent of “my and/or others

knowledge of it” and “would not remain a currency note if no one knew what it was” (2016: 521).

The argument to be made here however, is that Hay’s linguistic turn is one which is severely limited, and it leaves us with what can only be a common-sensical political analysis. Hay’s approach shows no recognition that language is constitutive of reality; it is deemed to be merely the *medium* through which action is filtered. In contrast, the view from Saussure and others is that language is not only the medium, it is constitutive and constituting, and has materiality. The paucity of Hay’s account is amply demonstrated by contrast with Saussure’s well-known illustration of the 8.25 train from Geneva to Paris (de Saussure 1974:108). To understand what the concept of the ‘8.25 train’ means it is important to understand that language differentiates the elements of concepts. If we understand this we can appreciate that the ‘8.25 train’ may start or arrive a few minutes late, but it is still called the ‘8.25 from Geneva’. We can also appreciate that the concept does not apply narrowly to any particular coaches or engine; on different days, different engines or coaches may be in service, but the name, or the identity, still holds. As another exponent of the linguistic turn puts it, “language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Wittgenstein 1997:11).

In order for a system of language to work effectively however, Saussure’s theory tells us that any object must be related to something which is different and something which is similar; in other words, the position or context matters and without consideration of it, there can be no understanding. The reason why Hay is able to understand and differentiate between the five and ten-euro notes in his pocket and other worthless bits of paper he may have on his person, is not

because there is a consensus that some pieces of paper will be deemed equal to values of five and ten-euros respectively. It is because these notes are similar to other currency notes, and yet different from others; moreover, some potential alternative meanings of these important pieces of paper have been excluded, (which implies the operation of power/hegemony) and that is the consequence of a particular position, context and situation.

From a Saussurean perspective then, what Hay's analysis has entirely omitted is the process whereby meaning is fixed through the structure of language. To press this further, the reason why Hay is able to maintain the view that the value of the currency in his pocket is knowledge-independent, is because, (as we have seen above in section 2.4) he has rejected the view that 'desires, preferences and motivations' are determined by context, and given that approach, it is difficult to see why knowledge about currency would be treated any differently to these other forms of belief. In turn, the reason why Hay takes such a view of context is a consequence of an ontological assumption. In this regard, Hay's reliance on Searle's approach to social facticity (Hay 2016, 2017) is informative. For Searle's philosophical approach is one that posits direct realism, that is, the view that the senses provide us with a direct awareness of objects as they really are. As one philosopher has observed, Searle "defiantly rejects any philosophy that controverts the commonplace" (Lepore 1998<sup>13</sup>). However, this is the very same approach that characterizes Hay's political analysis, and given such views, the political analysis of 'quality' could finish here. For on this common sense approach, the most parsimonious explanation as to why political actors adopted

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<sup>13</sup> No page reference is provided in this online reference. See end references for the url.

and promoted the policy idea of 'quality', (subject to empirical verification), would have to be simply that schools were not very good and required improvement.

However, to take this line of analysis would be to ignore the glaring fact that over the period which this research is concerned with, there has been considerable debate about schools, and their 'quality' is a highly contested matter. It would also be to neglect what examination of such debate should lead to in political analysis; the investigation of the meaning of terms and the examination of how political language constitutes the very object of enquiry that must concern the interpretive political analyst. For the argument here is that 'quality' has become normalized and seen to be 'common sense', and the goal of this research is to demonstrate how this truth regime came to be constructed. That task cannot proceed by way of theory which perceives political language to be a neutral and descriptive medium. For this reason, the analysis of 'quality' must take a linguistic turn. The question remains as to what sort of linguistic turn is required.

## **2.6 A poststructural approach to language and discourse**

While the structuralist approach to language outlined above opens a way towards the political analysis of language, it has been subjected to a number of criticisms since its development around the beginning of the twentieth century. Critique of this approach came with the development of a body of work which is called 'poststructuralism', a term variously defined but which can be broadly understood as referring to "a retrospective epistemological construction that gives a point of meaning in the vast landscape of 'French' philosophy" (Dillet 2017). Despite this imprecision, the term

does give a convenient label for a strand of work which argues from the baseline that the assumptions evident in structuralist thought, focusing on the notion of structures as self-sufficient systems, are flawed. It is thus argued that structuralism is an approach which presents a view whereby language appears as a closed system and acts as a determining structure. From this position, structuralism is seen to portray language as a self-defining and self-regulating structure, and the emphasis on structure leads to the elimination of the subject. This presents us with a system of language which is homogeneous and uniform; it is rigid, with the relations between signifiers and signified being fixed by the system.

These criticisms are most commonly associated with the work of Jacques Derrida (1967/97, 1976, 1981). Derrida's claim is that language is more complex than it is assumed to be in structuralist theory; meaning is not so neatly arranged as Saussure's binary thinking suggests and it is best understood as something which is unstable and contested. Saussure conceptualizes the meaning of a sign as being generated from the difference between it and other signs, and so signs are therefore to be seen as consisting of binary pairs. Derrida accepts this up to a point, but he argues that this is an unstable process since every sign contains a trace or a mark of its opposite. There are several implications which follow from this observation. Firstly, there is always a surplus of meaning. This is to say that meaning is open-ended, not closed as structuralism claims, since any 'ultimate' meaning is always elusive, or to use Derrida's term, is always deferred. Secondly, this instability, which is a consequence of the traces of meaning inherent in any sign, means that there is a continual play of difference in the

construction of meaning. For Derrida, meaning is not rigidly fixed: it is produced through the interplay of different traces. Since traces are repeatable and changeable this is a creative and dynamic process and meaning is the product of what is termed *différance*. For the purposes of this study, the key significance of these concepts of the trace, *différance*, and iterability, is that they tell us that the meaning of words must vary in different contexts across time and space, since there is no fully closed system of language.

At the same time however, in language and discourse there is always an element of continuity; a pathway, a track, or a mark, which is derived from the repeatability of the trace (Spivak in Derrida 1997:xvii). Thus, in contrast to the static view presented by structuralism, this approach to language offers a greater possibility of explaining change, a key concern in this research. It follows from this analysis that to understand the meaning of a signifier such as 'quality', the political analyst must investigate the way in which particular contexts lead to changes in meanings and how these meanings are articulated. Furthermore, these three concepts in Derrida's work move us away from the structuralist focus on language to a more sophisticated understanding of how it is that language organizes ideas, knowledge and experience. This is termed discourse. It is discourse which makes language and signs possible, but discourses are incomplete systems produced by the play of differences, and vitally, it is claimed that meaning is maintained through the suppression of alternative meanings.

It is this approach to discourse which was one of the key influences upon Laclau and Mouffe in their development of poststructural discourse theory (PSDT) as set out in their seminal publication, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*

(1985). However, the view of discourse which Laclau and Mouffe develop in that work is not to be understood as simply concerned only with language, nor with ideas. Discourse through the prism of PSDT is a more complex notion and draws upon not just Derrida's work as explained above, but also Foucault's archaeologically informed sense of discourse, which conceives of discourse in terms of rules of formation and crucially, with social practices. Discursive structures for Laclau and Mouffe are therefore not to be understood as mere cognitive or contemplative entities, nor as simply linguistic; they are articulatory practices which constitute and organize social and political relations (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2014:82).

This approach stands in sharp contrast to the views of discourse employed in the institutionalist approaches discussed earlier in this chapter. As we have seen, for Schmidt, the concept of discourse is to be understood as referring to the interactive process of conveying ideas. Moreover, in Schmidt's assessment, this notion of discourse is of varying importance to the success or failure of ideas in politics and the explanation of change: 'But discourse, like ideas, sometimes matters to that success and sometimes does not' (Schmidt 2008:311, see also Schmidt in Béland and Cox 2011:62).

In defending this position against critique from a poststructuralist point of view from Larsson (2015), Schmidt has defended her approach to discourse, arguing that in her work she has explicitly referred to the benefits of post-structuralism. Discourse, Schmidt clarifies, "spans the divide between the substantive content of ideas and the interactive processes of discourse through its embodiment of both" (Schmidt 2017:253). Further, as Schmidt notes, another



charge made against her concept of discourse is that it is merely about discursive interaction and cannot deal with meaning content, as well as the fact that it is, "Habermasian at that (another bad thing?)" (2017: 249). Several pages further on, Schmidt claims that she does use discourse as a framework of meaning and states that understanding discourse as an interactive process is not to be seen as equivalent to strategic communicative action "although it does build on Habermas, among others" (2017: 253).

The argument here is that these defences do not refute the criticisms made against Schmidt's concept of discourse. Checking the sources cited by Schmidt in support of her claim to have explicitly made reference to the benefits of poststructuralist analysis, (Schmidt 2011a, 2011b), one finds very limited statements which in no way indicate the acceptance of a poststructuralist understanding of discourse. It is true enough that in an earlier publication Schmidt comments that discourse is "not only what you say, however; it includes to whom you say it, how, why and where in the process of policy construction and political communication in the public sphere" (2008:310). The elaboration here is useful, but it falls short of recognizing discourse as practice and as a constitutive structure.

Furthermore, in making this point about political communication in the public sphere, Schmidt references two major studies by Habermas. Whilst this does not in itself commit Schmidt to accepting a Habermasian view of language in toto, other comments made in the publications discussed do seem supportive of a Habermasian view of language. Although Schmidt claims that her notion of discourse as an interactive process is not equivalent to strategic communicative action but instead builds on

Habermas, what is not explained is how her position differs from a Habermasian approach to language. The rhetorical question posed by Schmidt in response to Larsson's critique, suggesting that a Habermasian approach is assumed by him to be 'another bad thing?' (2017:249), seems to imply an acceptance of at least the basic assumptions of that position.

However, for a useful political analysis of the role of ideas in policy, of which 'quality' is one example, this is an issue which needs to be addressed in a more direct manner. This is something which Schmidt does not do. Yet, as is well known, the Habermasian approach to language is problematic to say the least. What is particularly problematic about that approach is that it assumes that language is fully transparent under ideal conditions. For Habermas, speech is to be seen as oriented to the idea of a genuine consensus, albeit it recognized that is something rarely realized, hence the need to eradicate distorted communication. As other commentators have suggested, this is a claim which is hard to sustain (see e.g. Held 1990:396, Skinner 2002:177). The manipulation and miscommunication which Habermas rightly identifies as problematic, are not however, mere accidental effects of language use. Rather, they are an intrinsic element of what the unstable system of language is; it is constantly changing and being "reconstituted by social practice and erased by custom and practice" (Kohn 2000:410). Furthermore, as Stanley Fish has argued, Habermas' position belies a distrust of language; a desire to escape from distorted communication and to capture the purified and theoretically neutral observational language which will deliver universal harmony. Most crucially though, that project is one which cannot work because it is founded on a flawed understanding of what language is. Language is never

fully transparent and language users are not oriented to consensus; on the contrary, “When I try to persuade you to my point of view, my intentions are entirely strategic. I want to get you on my side [...]” (Fish 2017:200). There is also of course, an ontological claim at work here, which is that we cannot escape a world of instrumental purposes. Thus, language provides no neutral ground: “the *entire* field is *saturated* with interest” (Fish 2017:200, my emphasis).

### **Conclusion**

This last point very helpfully brings us back to the consideration of interests, which, as has been argued throughout this work thus far, are of central importance in understanding the policy idea of quality. The argument of this chapter in the first instance has been that work from public administration and education policy sociology has neglected to examine the ideational aspects of ‘quality’ in sufficient detail. Such work has employed explanatory frameworks characterised by economism or by circular forms of reasoning and has been trapped within a dualist ontology. The chapter then moved on to discuss how the two dominant constructivist approaches in contemporary political analysis have attempted to explain the role of ideas and ideational processes. It has been argued that while these approaches can potentially be brought to bear on the research questions set out in this thesis, and while they do offer something of a path towards an answer, they suffer from a number of significant weaknesses. Most notably, these include a dualistic understanding of the relationship between the ideal and the material, the assumption of a rationalistic and autonomous subject, and finally, an inadequate conceptualization of language and discourse. It has been suggested instead that ‘quality’ is to be understood not

simply as a master signifier and nodal point, but also as something constructed by and through the arguments that have resulted in its decontestation, and that examining this process is something best achieved through a linguistic and rhetorical turn.

In the final sections I have tried to show that this is best achieved through the approach of poststructural discourse analysis, based on the work of Laclau and Mouffe. As others working from that base have argued, this is a body of theory potentially able to demonstrate how ideas are coupled with interests and it thus offers a means of investigating the political processes by which meaning is fixed and how the process of articulation is played out (Griggs and Howarth 2002). To bend a line from Laclau, what is contended here is that a good part, although not the whole, of a royal road to understanding 'quality', is to be found by way of a poststructural discourse theoretical analysis. The next chapter sets out the framework and method for building that road.

### **Chapter 3 Theory, Methodology and Method**

In the previous chapter it has been argued that the political analysis of 'quality' must proceed by way of a rhetorical turn. It has also been argued that the most suitable theoretical framework for such an enterprise is to be found in poststructural discourse theory. The outline provided of that theory thus far has indicated that this involves the use of a particular conceptualization of discourse and discursive structures, which are seen to be formed from different types of signifiers. Before proceeding to apply this theoretical framework to the analysis of the research questions with which this thesis is concerned, it is necessary to explore this theory and its related concepts in greater detail. This chapter therefore provides a critical outline of those concepts and it will be argued that the rejection of economism and the development of a poststructuralist concept of discourse enables the development of a powerful explanatory framework for policy analysis. However, it will also be argued that while PSDT offers the best theoretical framework for the research tasks set out in this thesis, it is open to criticism on a number of grounds. Most important in this respect it is argued, is the restricted treatment of rhetoric evident in PSDT. This chapter posits that the political analysis of 'quality' requires a broader notion of rhetoric and a more extensive use of rhetorical concepts than is provided for in PSDT, and that this opens the way to a version of PSDT which is more sensitive to the role of agency. The chapter therefore continues to discuss the nature of rhetoric and the emerging field of rhetorical political analysis, outlining the concepts and the methodology which will inform the study that forms Chapters Four to Six of this thesis, and showing why they are relevant to my research questions. The chapter concludes by outlining the concepts from both PSDT and rhetorical political

analysis (RPA) which can be applied to the interpretive analysis of the policy concept of 'quality', and the method to be used in this study.

### **3.1 An outline of poststructuralist discourse theory**

As argued in Chapter Two, the theoretical framework best suited to answering the research questions with which this thesis is concerned, is PSDT. That theory can be best summed as an attempt to present a new conceptualization of hegemony, one which is decoupled from the economism in some Marxist theory (Martin 2022:64). PSDT was developed by Laclau and Mouffe during the 1980s as a reformulation of Marxist social theory, in response to what its authors perceived as the failures of that tradition to adequately explain the politics of the time. While the inspiration for this work was provided by Gramsci, Laclau and Mouffe went beyond his modifications to the base/superstructure model and extended his arguments about class with the rejection of economic determination in the last instance. This led them to the radical conclusion that there are no essential principles to social organization and that divisions within 'society' can arise on the basis of not simply class, but a plurality of social features (Howarth 2000:110).

This thesis will argue that while this has been an extremely beneficial theoretical development, it begs the question as to why a class related discourse, as evidenced by the discussion of education policy in England in Chapter One, has been such a persistent feature in British politics. It will be argued in this chapter that the answer to this question lies in the fact that, in making the case for contingency and plurality, Laclau and Mouffe neglected to fully consider those conceptual resources

available in poststructuralist theory which suggest the importance of, not only contingency, but also a discursive and rhetorical path dependency in hegemonic practices. It will be argued here that rather than debating whether PSDT can be applied or adapted to institutional analysis, what advocates of this approach can more usefully do is demonstrate how a rhetorically informed PSDT challenges our notion of what constitutes both institutions and institutional analysis, and that it is this which can enable a poststructuralist analysis of 'quality' (cf. Moon 2013, Panizza and Miorelli 2013, Jacobs 2018).

### **3.1.1 Society: the impossible object of analysis**

An outline of PSDT must start with explaining how 'society' and the social is understood within this theory. Laclau and Mouffe argue that "society is not a valid object of discourse" (1985/2014:97) and maintain that "society is an impossible object of analysis", (Howarth 2000:113). One of the things that is meant by these phrases is that society is a construction; what we call 'society' is the result of sedimented social relations established over time through struggle and repetition, and which "establish a horizon for meaning and action which is recursively validated by social agents and thus possess a relatively enduring character" (Torfing 1999:305). This however begs the question as to the place of politics in this theory. In this respect, another claim made by Laclau and Mouffe is of the so-called 'primacy of politics' over the social. To make this claim is to argue that social relations are to be seen as the outcome of political decisions and not vice versa. The first of these two claims has been seen as conceiving of social relations in a voluntaristic manner, but I concur with Torfing's response to the effect that for this criticism to hold, it would have to be

taken that politics is radically separate from the social. This is untenable; the political and the social are not mutually exclusive and are to be seen as overlapping, or as Torfing puts it in Derridean terms, as standing between two extremes and having the status of a hymen. Nor does the sum of these two claims imply that the primacy of the political simply inverts the Marxian view of the relation between the state and civil society. As Torfing reminds us, the value of this approach is that it indicates that politics should not be reduced to, or conflated with, the state, and the notion of 'politics' and 'the political' cannot be narrowly understood as belonging to any particular institutional space; it constitutes instead, "an all-pervading dimension of the social fabric" (Torfing 1999:71).

It is from these arguments that a distinctive ontology emerges. Given that 'society' is impossible, what we come to understand by that word and concept, is constructed and it is contended that this arises through the practice of articulation. This can be put simply as referring to "the idea that people give meaning to the world around them by combining and connecting certain words, objects, ideas and concepts in specific ways when they speak or act" (Jacobs 2019:298). However, the concept is more complex than this formulation, helpful as it is, suggests. As Laclau and Mouffe emphasise, articulation is any practice which establishes a relationship between what they term 'elements', and importantly, this practice modifies the identity of those elements (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2014:91). This said, elements are rather unsatisfactorily defined in PSDT, and Howarth notes that they are defined in ontological terms by Laclau, but that these definitions vary somewhat (Howarth 2000:118). Other commentators appear to take the meaning



of the concept as unproblematically referring to 'unfixed discursive elements', and understand it as a referent to any object. Thus, to use an example from Jacobs, the signifier 'dagger' is an element and when it is articulated with other elements in a discursive moment, it becomes what we know and understand to be a weapon, rather than say, a tool used for cooking (Jacobs 2019:299). This seems to imply that elements are to be regarded as simply the objects which when signified, become moments within a discourse, but Howarth's point still stands as a warning note of the problematic potential of the concept. It also raises the issue of the need to distinguish between the ontological and the ontical levels, an issue to which we will return further below.

### **3.1.2 Articulation and nodal points**

What we may take from this is that the practice of articulation is a social and a linguistic practice concerning the construction, channelling and constraining of meaning. This practice is carried out in a context where actors create and draw upon signifiers in order to make meaning. As explained, elements may be signified through discursive moments and they are then transformed into either floating, or empty signifiers. The difference between these two forms is that floating signifiers overflow with meaning and are available as resources for any hegemonic project; they are "up for grabs" (Griggs and Howarth 2002:103). In contrast, empty signifiers have been 'captured' by hegemonic projects, and emptied of precise content. The argument is that they then represent a range of different meanings to different groups and are therefore seen as functioning to link together and unify the different elements in what is termed a discursive formation. An example might be the signifier 'democracy' or 'quality'. It is therefore contended that empty signifiers unify

and sediment meaning and so are crucial to hegemony. Once again however, as Howarth argues, the precise ontical status of the empty signifier is unclear, as is the relation between this concept and that of nodal points (Howarth 2000:119).

The nature of meaning in this discursive environment is such that there is always a surplus of meaning; it is simply not possible for meaning to be permanently fixed and discourse can in this sense never be complete. This has profound implications for political and social activity; it means that, as Laclau and Mouffe perhaps rather awkwardly put it, "society never manages to be identical to itself" (1985/2014:100) . This phrase can be understood as suggesting that the conception or image any society has of itself, is of course, a construction, but constructions are hard to sustain. A certain image or representation will be constructed and represented by dominant discourses and voices, but, since societies are precisely 'impossible', that is they are constructions made from large and diverse groups of people, these dominant discourses will always be open to subversion from other quarters. The practice of articulation is therefore to be understood as involving the construction of what are termed 'nodal points', which partially fix meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2014:113).

### **3.1.3 Hegemony, antagonisms and logics**

It is thus through the articulatory practices which sediment signifying chains that discourse is constituted and this brings us to the concept of hegemony. Laclau and Mouffe's critique of Gramsci's notion of hegemony and the role it gave, albeit in modified form, to class, opened up a path to a very different view of the concept. Hegemony refers to political leadership and PSDT sees this as something which is

achieved through the expansion of discourse. As a discourse expands, it binds in more categories and identities into its purview, and partially succeeds in fixing meaning around nodal points. Hegemony is also to be seen as something which is achieved by a group in the course of pursuing its interests. Moreover, a poststructural view of hegemony rejects notions of a centre. Hegemony is therefore seen to be a certain type of political relation: "it cannot be conceived as an irradiation of effects from a privileged point. In this sense, we could say that hegemony is basically metonymical; its effects always emerge from a surplus of meaning which results from an operation of displacement" (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:128).

Importantly however, hegemony emerges in a field which is riven with antagonisms. The latter can be simply described as that which arises when actors are unable to attain their identities and their interests (Howarth 2000:105), but we can go further than this. As Laclau and Mouffe argue, antagonism is not simply the result of contradiction; it is where "the presence of the 'Other' prevents me from being totally myself" and they state that this relation arises not "from full totalities" but from the impossibility of their constitution (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014:111-2). This last point is important to note. It is also complex; we are told that antagonism cannot be apprehended through language, because language only exists as a way to fix the very thing which antagonism subverts, that is, the full positivity of being. Since the social only exists as an incomplete form, antagonism reflects and constitutes the limits of the social. Laclau and Mouffe conclude that antagonism is the negation of a given order and the limit of that order, and this being so, the limit of the social is given as something "subverting it,

destroying its ambition to constitute a full presence” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014:113). This comment speaks to the importance of antagonism as envisaged in this theory. It is precisely because discourse is threatened by antagonism that it has to be shared negatively by those situated within and constituted through the discourse. A further point and some examples help to illustrate the import of this claim. Firstly, it is important to bear in mind that what is at issue is an inter-subjective process whereby what is termed a ‘logic of equivalence’ acts so as to construct a unity amongst different negative identities. Howarth for example, provides the example of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, which made several different oppressed groups equivalent to each other in relation to a white racism. This shared negation thus subverted the original terms imposed under the apartheid system. At the same time however, the discursive order was expanded through a logic of difference, that is, a logic which broke chains of equivalence and allowed the incorporation of differential subject positions into a relational totality in an attempt to dissolve antagonisms (Howarth 2000:107). Laclau and Mouffe note that the logic of equivalence introduces negativity into the field. A hegemonic discursive formation is therefore an articulated totality of differences, and as the authors conclude, the limits only exist “if the systematic ensemble of differences can be cut out as *totality* with regard to something beyond them”, and means that “it is only through negativity, division and antagonism that a discursive formation can constitute itself as a totalizing horizon” (Laclau and Mouffe, 2014:130, original italics).

Having discussed the main conceptual components of PSDT, we are now able to move forward to a consideration of how

this conceptual array can be applied to provide the basis of a framework for the political analysis of the policy idea of quality.

### **3.2 PSDT: Class, language and institutionalization**

The previous section has shown that PSDT can provide a theoretical framework for political analysis; this section aims to demonstrate how that framework is one which is highly relevant to the needs of the interpretive political analyst investigating 'quality'. As we have seen, PSDT conceptualizes discourse as a constitutive and non-determinist practice, avoiding the theoretical hazards associated with deterministic theoretical accounts and opening up the way to a new form of political analysis. From this, we can take it that hegemony is to be seen as something that is achieved by groups, that is, by institutionally and collectively organized political actors, but *not* by classes, in the course of pursuing and constituting interests. This is relevant to the concerns of this thesis, since, as the evidence in the chapters which follow will demonstrate, from the mid-1970s onwards 'quality' was presented by political actors from across the political spectrum, as a policy idea which would serve the interests of all those involved with schools, and the interests of the nation and the state. We have also learnt that in the context of hegemony antagonism arises when political actors are unable to attain their identities and interests. We should also acknowledge that interests relate to identities, and that identities are in turn, strategic constructs, albeit that they are constructions sedimented in varying ways in different conjunctures (Griggs and Howarth 2019). It is thus in light of these points that we must here refer back to the concept of 'forms of assessment', as discussed in Chapter One.

It has been argued in Chapter One that interests are not to be regarded as given by or reflecting social structural location. However, it has also been pointed out that this should not be taken to imply that the social structural locations of political actors are unimportant. Political actors may sometimes make assessments of their interests in making decisions. At the same time, since the interests which political actors are aware of, are themselves the products of assessments made by other political actors, they are inter-subjective constructions. Here we must recognize that the forms of assessment referred to by Hindess, are very much to be understood as being paramount in informing and directing strategic political action. If political actors are to be considered as theorists (Palonen 2005), in order to understand their actions it is necessary to examine and engage with the assessments that they act with. We must therefore not neglect the fact that political actors will have ideas, not only of their own interests and identity: they will also act on the basis of assessments of and theories about, the identity and interests of those 'Others' who they perceive to constitute 'society', and, in the case of politicians, whom they claim to work for and represent. The outcome of these inter-subjective processes is the very constitution of interests. Whether such assessments made by politicians are or become discursively dominant, is a matter for investigation and in respect of 'quality', is something that this thesis will attempt to answer in the course of addressing its key research questions. Nonetheless, politicians may not see themselves in this detached manner; through the frames of political ideologies, they may see themselves instead, not only as acting as representatives, but as serving, rather than dominating, other citizens. All of the points made above pose

the scope of the interpretive challenge for this research. What will be argued in this section and those that follow, is that the careful application of concepts drawn from both PSDT and the study of rhetoric, as well as a methodology and method implied by and congruent with those concepts, provides the means to meet this challenge.

In order to achieve this, further inspiration can be drawn from other sources. The agenda set out by Griggs and Howarth (2002) is most useful in this respect. As those authors point out, PSDT offers a middle way between the primacy of ideas and the primacy of interests, and it therefore points to the possibility of developing explanations which can shed light on the role of political actors in the process of policy change. These authors also note the importance in such work of the empirical study of the formation and dissolution of political identities and the analysis of hegemonic practices in the policy process, making reference to the important role of social antagonisms in constituting identity and drawing political frontiers between actors (Griggs and Howarth 2002:110). In this process, as these same authors observe elsewhere (2017), interests are always the interests of particular actors; they are connected to social subjects and their identities and they are to be understood in the context of the hegemonic and articulatory practices of creating discourse coalitions. This point serves to underline the importance for any study of 'quality' concerned to address the research questions identified in this study, to focus on forms of assessment.

### **3.3 PSDT: a rhetorical turn**

While all this points the interpretive political analyst in the required direction, what it leaves unsaid is the method by

which to travel. In this respect, what PSDT provides, as should be evident from its concern with discourse, is a linguistic and a rhetorical turn. We have already discussed the distinctiveness of Laclau and Mouffe's approach to discourse in Chapter Two and we have seen that this is a view which does not accept an ontological distinction between the linguistic and the non-linguistic. The implications of this are far-reaching and concern the very referent of the term 'society'. Thus, Laclau and Mouffe make the claim that: "Synonymy, metonymy, metaphor are not forms of thought that add a second sense to a primary, constitutive literality of social relations; instead, they are part of the primary terrain itself in which the social is constituted. Rejection of the thought/reality dichotomy must go together with a rethinking and interpenetration of the categories which have until now been considered exclusive of one or the other." (2001:96).

In this regard PSDT can be seen to have benefitted from the revival of rhetoric in the last quarter of the twentieth century, which had made its presence felt across the humanities and social sciences (Simons 1990). This thesis is in agreement with the view that such a turn is a beneficial one for political analysis, for in directing us to a concern with rhetoric, it enables a focus on the persuasive aspects of discourse. This includes a recognition that argumentative rhetoric is vital part of the process by which political actors "come to believe something in the first place", (Finlayson 2007:551) a point of no little significance in relation to the focus of this research on the connections between ideas, interests and forms of assessment. As others have noted, PSDT argues against the view that rhetoric is in any way trivial, or mere surface gloss which can be dismissed in order to focus on 'reality'. Instead,



PSDT views the tropological movements of rhetoric as “an essential dimension of all social relations” (Howarth and Griggs 2006:29). PSDT is therefore an approach which perceives all concepts to be shaped by metaphoricity, since it is this which constitutes the primary terrain of the social. The significance of this is readily explained with reference to the concept of hegemony. For hegemony itself is to be understood as metonymic in its operation, since the stabilising of hegemonic practices must be organized around empty signifiers, as described earlier, and that process will involve the creation of new totalities by way of the disarticulation of previous formations (Howarth and Griggs 2006:29). This is not, as explained earlier, to reduce ‘all to language’; it is however, to insist on the centrality of language and rhetoric.

PSDT therefore, is said by some to draw a certain analogy between language and society, and this enables it to “draw upon the *full range* of literary tropes and figures to explain a range of social phenomena and events” (Howarth 2000:117, my italics). Nevertheless, as Howarth argues elsewhere (Howarth and Griggs 2006), central in this rhetorical turn is the role of catachresis. Catachresis is defined by the latter as a “transfer of terms from one place to another when no proper word exists”, and is taken as the misapplication, or the creative misapplication of a word (Howarth and Griggs 2006:32, Howarth 2000:116). These and other senses of the term catachresis, can be translated more simply; it concerns the process of naming, and is vital to hegemonic practices since it creates new meaning. Laclau though, is more emphatic and bluntly states that; “catachresis = rhetoricity = the very possibility of meaning” (2015:169). Laclau elaborates this formula further, stating that “no system of

signification can close itself otherwise than through catachrestical displacements” (in Howarth 2015:100). In the same place, Laclau summarises the chain of reasoning lying behind that claim. It is argued that since language is differential, signification requires closure. Closure however, requires limits and a limit cannot be drawn without positing some entity beyond it. Moreover, as the system is one of differences, what lies beyond the limit can only be something which has been excluded. Exclusion however, works in a contradictory way; a system of differences is made by the very process of exclusion, yet through that process, differences are made as Laclau puts it, not only differential, but also equivalential to each other. It is thus that the systemic totality is seen to be something which is both impossible and necessary. Therefore, to represent what is an impossible object, a particular difference must present the impossible totality in concrete form. This, Laclau maintains, is what arises through catachresis, and it is through this hegemonic operation that empty signifiers are produced (2015:100).

Although there are significant caveats to be made regarding the particular form of the rhetorical turn taken by Laclau, what is argued here is that the authors of PSDT were entirely right to take a rhetorical turn. For as PSDT contends, it is through rhetoric that political actors can create and put into action new meaning, and hegemony is constructed by means of such rhetoricity. Hence, it is rhetoric which is constitutive of the ‘impossible object’ of society. For the purposes of this research, this means that the theoretical framework provided by PSDT is to be regarded as a particularly useful conceptual basis for the political analysis of ‘quality’. This is not merely because ‘quality’ itself is to be understood as rhetorical; it is

because 'society' itself is, as we have established above, rhetorically constituted. To fully grasp this point however, we must briefly refer back to the arguments of Chapter Two. In that chapter, the 'remarkable coincidence' between Freeden's morphological approach and post-Marxist developments in ideology, was noted. The point made was that the concept of decontestation, as a redescription of Laclau and Mouffe's concept of hegemony, opens the way to a view of ideology which acknowledges not just that ideologies are partly constitutive of the political and the social, but also, that ideological expressions are responses to ongoing situations.

At this point moreover, it is also necessary that we remind ourselves of Freeden's observation that political ideologies are bridging devices between contestability and determinacy and that they provide political actors with the maps of social reality which they use to guide themselves (and attempt to use to persuade and guide others) through engagements and arguments with political opponents. It is also important to reiterate the point that this thesis aims at a post-Marxist account of hegemony and has previously ruled out the notion of class hegemony. As has been argued, this is not to reject the notion of class, but rather to insist that from a poststructuralist stance, class too, is to be understood as a discursive structure. This moreover, as noted earlier, is not to be seen as idealism, but rather is to be understood in terms of Laclau and Mouffe's radical materialism. Yet, this said, the idea of class refuses to lie down and die, precisely because it is a discursive structure and political actors continue to refer to it and use it, to reactivate or re-describe it in various ways, for various purposes, at various times and places. The traces of this signifier can never be eliminated.

This is therefore not in any way a thesis in denial of class per se; it does however invoke a very different understanding of class and thus, of politics, policy and the political. What we must take from this is the implication that the processes by which political actors learn about and engage in the practice of social mapping referred to by Freedon, refers to the very same process that Hindess hints at in the term 'forms of assessment'. If the political analysis of 'quality' is to be examined with the aim of answering the research questions enumerated earlier, then an approach which offers, as Griggs and Howarth put it, a middle way between the primacy of ideas and the primacy of interests, seems entirely appropriate. This is what an approach based on PSDT, with a rhetorical turn, offers. For, in directing us to study the use of figurative language, these approaches direct the interpretive political analyst to examine precisely both what constitutes the political, and how it is constituted.

### **3.4 PSDT: institutions and institutional change**

These points set out some of the key advantages of a PSDT approach, but there is one further beneficial aspect which I argue must be acknowledged, although it is one which is somewhat contested. This is the ability of PSDT to provide an explanation of the role of institutions in the policy process. To make this claim however, is to challenge the criticisms levelled against Laclau and Mouffe by significant voices in the political-sociological research community, namely Nicos Mouzelis and Bob Jessop. These are important and longstanding criticisms, but there are also more recent debates around the 'problem of institutions' from those who are supportive of PSDT (Hansen 2008, Moon 2013, Marchart 2014, Larsson 2015, Jacobs 2019). These will all be

addressed in this section and it will be argued that the PSDT can provide a basis for institutional analysis.

We may start with Mouzelis, who argues that Laclau and Mouffe's PSDT effects what he terms the 'displacement of institutional analysis' and identifies a dismissal of the agency/institutional structure distinction. Yet, while Mouzelis is happy to concede that institutions are discursive – "I agree with their view that all institutional arrangements, whether durable or not, are discursively constructed" - what he cannot agree with is the linking of "discursive construction with fragility and precariousness" (1988:113-114). What is clear from this is that Mouzelis does not agree with the ontological position taken in PSDT, that is a poststructuralist conception of discourse and structure. On this particular issue then, we have a problem of incommensurability which is not open to resolution by empirical means (Hay 2002).

A further line of criticism is however, more amenable to empirical debate; this concerns the character of institutional change. Mouzelis is struck by the resilience and continuity of institutions and argues that change and "extremely slow transformation" can be seen "only in the very *longue durée*" (1988:114). I argue however, that this reflects a misunderstanding of change. The evidence of this thesis is that institutional change is to be seen as a continual process, such that the political analyst must embrace the need to comprehend change and continuity. This is not to deny the significance of conjunctural moments, but it is to argue that even in the most seemingly pedestrian of times, the practice and fabric of political-institutional life is continuously renewed and changed, a view which I argue is to be contrasted with the idea of a punctuated evolution (Hay

2002:163), and which I contend, is more compatible with Laclau and Mouffe's notion of the impossibility of society.

However, the criticisms levelled above are persistent, and they have been amplified and developed by Ngai-Ling Sum and Bob Jessop, who take the view that the Laclauian approach is one which ignores "the emergent path-dependent specificities of various institutional orders and their forms of articulation in favour of a 'pan-politician ontology'<sup>14</sup> that insists on the permanent possibility of reactivation of sedimented structures" (2013:132). For these authors, this simply introduces another form of essentialism; it reduces the social to politics and ontologizes the political, in a theoretical framework which cannot distinguish in material terms, between capitalist and non-capitalist economic practices, institutions and formations (2013:180).

In regard to the issue of the primacy of the political, as Sum and Jessop make no substantive point in that regard, simply signalling their disagreement, there is nothing to refute. However, for the sake of clarity, it can be noted that we have already established that to assert the primacy of the political is to argue that social relations are shaped by political decisions, yet at the same time to insist that the social and the political overlap and are not mutually exclusive. There is also a further point of logic to be made here; politics is not derivative of something beyond politics, of some object which is not itself political. Political decisions are therefore not to be understood as derived from, for example, a pre-given social rationality or pre-given interests. Rather, the relationship works in the opposite direction, with social rationalities and

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<sup>14</sup> Sum and Jessop reject the primacy of the political.

interests being the outcome of political decision-making at multiple levels and sites.

A number of other important criticisms are levelled in the brief comments and quotations from Sum and Jessop mentioned above and while I will not deal fully with all of these immediately the reader should note that the issues these points relate to, run throughout the thesis and are brought together in Chapter Seven. For the moment, it must suffice to say only that this thesis rejects the view that PSDT must necessarily neglect 'path-dependent specificities of institutional orders' and one of contributions this thesis aims to make is to demonstrate the value of PSDT in the elaboration of a rhetorical path-dependency and a poststructural institutionalism. This hinges on precisely the ontology which Sum and Jessop, along with Mouzelis, are so resistant to; an ontology, which, as we noted in Chapter Two, posits not only the inherent instability and undecidability of discursive structures, but vitally, the element of continuity reflected by a pathway, trace, or mark and the iterability of meaning.

It is for this reason that we must reject Hay's institutionalist take on path-dependency: "the order in which things happen affects how they happen; the trajectory of change up to a certain point itself constrains the trajectory after that point; and the strategic choices made at a particular moment eliminate whole possibilities from later choices while serving as the very condition of existence of others" (Hay 2008:65). In the view of a poststructuralist stance as set out thus far, operating with a different ontology, it is clear that this is far too simplistic and is to omit the very role of argumentative action itself in constituting political action. Thus, and to the

contrary, this thesis will argue that *it is the order in which things are said, which in turn makes things happen and affects how they happen*. The trajectories, constraints and the strategic choices which follow and eliminate other options, are rhetorically constructed and what we can helpfully refer to in order to understand this, is in fact a discursive and a rhetorical path dependency (Grube 2016).

Therefore, in turning to study the hegemonic structure which we know as 'quality', this thesis will argue that there is no necessary contradiction for PSDT in referring to, and analysing, institutions. In the light of this theory, institutions are important, but as PSDT tells us, they are not to be regarded simply as 'structures'; rather they are to be seen as sedimented discursive structures. This must include that most controversial of institutional structures, the state. For, although Laclau and Mouffe do not offer a theory of the state, and reject the notion of a centre, this does not preclude examination of the state in the guise of a complex ensemble of rationalities and discursive structures. As others have pointed out, the state is to be seen, not as a single institution, but as a series of *practices*, and in view of the theory of hegemony, it is "both a site *and* an outcome of political practices" (Finlayson and Martin 2006:163, my italics). It is this ensemble of practices moreover, which is a site of strategic codification, and it is "the state' which is the 'holder of the monopoly of official naming, correct classification and the correct order" (Bourdieu 1985:734). The argument of this thesis is that 'quality' is one such process of state codification; of naming, classifying and ordering and that the most appropriate way to study these processes of naming, classifying and ordering, is to be achieved by way of both linguistic and rhetorical turns.



How these classification processes are politically organized involves the examination of institutions and institutional processes, yet as we have seen, the nature and existence of institutions is something which PSDT stands accused of neglecting and/or misconstruing. However, as more recent scholarship indicates, such claims are contestable. It is true that Laclau and Mouffe provide little in the way of detail as to how political analysts should study institutions, but that they are considered important in PSDT is beyond contention. As Laclau and Mouffe put it in a passage critical of the Althusserian notion of social relations as totalities: “We on the other hand consider social relations as aggregates of *institutions, forms of organization, practices and agents* which do not answer to any single causal principle or logic of consistency, *which can and do differ in form* and which are not essential to one another” (1985/2014:89, my italics). There is then, a consideration of the role of institutions within PSDT and this is to be understood as positing institutions as sedimented and objectified discourses (Howarth 2000, Jacobs 2019). However, to grasp how institutions function, we must consider one further concept in PSDT; dislocation.

### **3.5 The role of dislocation**

In PSDT all discursive structures are seen to be dislocated, that is to say, as incomplete. Discursive structures are dislocated by contingent events that cannot be symbolized or represented in a discourse and so the process of dislocation disrupts and destabilizes extant orders of meaning. This means that dislocation is to be related to the production of antagonistic relations between political actors. However, it also has implications for institutions, since, as Moon argues, identifying the logics of equivalence and difference in political

actors articulatory practices, in the context of antagonist relations, “provides a route to identifying intra-institutional antagonisms, power strategies and resultantly non-formal relations and dominant formal interpretations” (Moon 2013:118). Moreover, dislocation is to be seen as a key concept for understanding how the resultant tension from dislocation shapes what we must see as “*political change* in institutions” (Panizza and Miorelli 2013:309, my italics). This is an important insight since it indicates that dislocation makes institutional change possible and that it too, is political. It also tells us that institutional change does not need to be simply seen as driven by ‘great’ or exogenous events; dislocation is a permanent feature of discursive structures, is ‘internal’ to discourse, and is contingent. The implication of this is that in order to understand institutional change, we need to examine discourse and discursive change, of which ‘quality’ would appear to be a prime example.

The argument of this section then is that PSDT forms a viable and coherent explanatory framework for institutional analysis. It is true though, as some have claimed, that there is a risk that theoretical applications drawing on PSDT may neglect the political importance of everyday institutions, given Laclau and Mouffe’s focus on populist movements and a tendency to characterise institutionalist discourses as dominated by a logic of difference, such that there is little room for antagonisms (Panizzi and Miorelli 2013:307, Laclau 2005/2018:154). However, this is not a necessary bias within the theory, and Moon is therefore right to insist that identifying the logics of both equivalence and difference in articulatory practices provides “a route to identifying intra-institutional antagonisms and power strategies” (Moon

2013:118). As we will see in later chapters, intra- and inter-institutional differences within the state ensemble are by no means strangers to antagonisms between insiders and outsider 'others', and are an important aspect of, and reason for, the study of 'quality'. This is a route, furthermore, which is to be understood as being constructed by way of various objects; not simply signs, but also ideas and, most importantly, arguments (Finlayson 2007).

### **3.5.1 A rhetorical turn for PSDT**

This thesis therefore aims to make a contribution to recent work taking a PSDT approach by applying this last insight. For although recent work recognizes the usefulness of a poststructuralist ideational turn, it does not connect that up to a focus on arguments and the 'argumentative action' through which arguments are formed, constructed and put to political work. That work has acknowledged that PSDT recognizes the dynamic and performative role of ideas in power strategies (Moon 2013) and that ideas are not to be seen as "finished concepts exogenous to the phenomenon under analysis" (Panizzi and Miorelli 2013:304), and that they can instead be seen as explanans, rather than explanandum, of institutional change (Larsson 2015). Yet this last point is also recognized in DI and CI, as we have discussed in the previous chapter, so it is unsurprising that the recent contributions from Moon, Panizzi and Miorelli, and Larsson, all call for some form of integration and theoretical pluralism between institutionalist theory and PSDT. However, as the arguments I have presented in Chapter Two show, such efforts are doomed to failure because they attempt to reconcile ontologies which are incommensurable (Jacobs 2019). Thus, attempts to synthesize are untenable and as I have argued above, unnecessary. However, partly in order

to eliminate some of the perceived inadequacies of PSDT in regard of institutions discussed here, some have developed and argued for a middle level theory of logics (Glynos and Howard 2007, Jacobs 2019, 2020). This is not a line of development which I wish to follow.

In contrast, the view taken here is that PSDT can best proceed by enhancing, sharpening and deploying its rhetorical turn. In order to understand why such an approach is advantageous, we must turn our attention back towards the issues of ideas and interests. As has been argued, the role of ideas in PSDT can be seen to be of considerable importance, for it not only highlights the processes involved in the construction of meaning in this theory, it can also be used to direct a focus on the role of institutions in hegemonic practices, something which has been somewhat neglected within PSDT to date. Thus, as we have seen, for PSDT the role of ideas can be seen as providing a route towards creating institutional change. However, as we must recall from our earlier discussions, PSDT also sheds light on the unsustainable binary opposition in regard to the privileging of either ideas or interests (Griggs and Howarth 2002). We have also seen that from the perspective of a poststructuralist approach, the severing of ideas and interests from context, is unwarranted.

This is extremely interesting and productive with respect to the political analysis of 'quality'. For the argument here is that this analysis makes the examination of the forms of assessment used and created by political actors something which provides a vital insight into the construction and operation of hegemony. Moreover, the point that PSDT should bring firmly to our attention, is that the identities, and

the interests with which they are associated, are political identities. Yet this feature appears somewhat muted in the various contributions discussed above. However, since hegemony is to be understood as rhetorically constructed the contention here is that the study of 'quality' provides an important opportunity to develop an understanding of the construction of such political identities. To explain this we must draw upon two further concepts from PSDT; myth and social imaginary, which both ensue from the play of dislocation and antagonism. Myths are narratives which suture dislocations; they provide ways of 'reading' new situations. If they are successful in this role, a myth may be transformed into a social imaginary, that is: "an unlimited horizon for the inscription of any social demand" (Torfinn 1999:305). What is contended here then, is that over the period of this study, the political identity of class was re-described, as a result of the efforts of various political actors. In that process, 'quality' was the myth, and it has been transformed into the social imaginary of neo-liberal meritocracy.

This section has argued that the best theoretical route to understanding that process is by a PSDT attuned to institutional analysis. It has further argued that such a form of PSDT is to be achieved by way of a rhetorical turn. We now need to consider as to how PSDT can best effect that turn and must therefore seek a methodology.

### **3.6 From the ontological to the ontical: rhetorical political analysis**

The argument of this chapter thus far, is that the ontological approach described in the previous section sets out a compelling and coherent framework for the political analysis

of 'quality'. However, it is beset by one particular methodological disadvantage. This refers to the 'methodological deficit' noted by researchers otherwise sympathetic to Laclau's project (Howarth 2000, Finlayson 2004, Jacobs 2018). In this section, I will explain the nature of this lacuna in PSDT and set out the solution to this problem presented in this thesis.

The methodological deficit apparent in PSDT is reflective of both Laclau's particular academic interests and the inevitability of an intellectual division of labour. Nevertheless, Laclau's approach to methodological issues may appear at times somewhat dismissive. In an internal memorandum distributed to PhD students at the University of Essex in the 1990s, Laclau refers to the 'myths' of the case study and of methodology, and he advises his readers that if they have "any illusions concerning methodology, my advice is to read P. Feyerabend's 'Against Method', which will dispel them very quickly" (Laclau 1991). However, lest this be seen as an incitement to a cavalier methodological anarchy, it should be noted that Laclau also qualified this statement, stressing that it did not imply that methods do not exist for dealing with, *inter alia*, the logic of argumentation, rhetorics and syntactic and semantic analysis. The implication of this must be that those wishing to labour in this particular vineyard cannot dispense with methodology, a view with which I am fully in agreement.

Nevertheless, as David Howarth has argued, Laclau provides a set of concepts which are too thin and formalistic to be of great practical use in empirical work (Howarth 2000:116). However, this arises because Laclau and Mouffe intentionally focused their critique of Marxism on an ontological level.

They thus draw upon a distinction made in Heidegger's philosophy between the ontological, that is the claims and assumptions as to what exists in general, and the ontical, which refers in contrast, to the specific sorts of phenomena which exist in any particular circumstance. For this reason, PSDT is set at an abstract level and the discursive approach is not concerned with the particular details of any specific institutions, practices, discourses or objects (Howarth 2000:112). Critique on this point was not something which duly concerned Laclau; he was largely content to pursue his interests in 'social ontology' and leave application to others (Laclau in Critchley and Marchart 2004:321).

However, this has presented a problem for researchers who have sought to articulate a middle or meso-level theoretical framework in order to 'operationalize' the theory. One influential attempt to provide such a framework has been the 'logics of critical explanation' presented by Glynnos and Howarth (2007), acclaimed by one recent study as "highly promising for the elaboration of a more complex notion of institutions within Discourse Theory" (Jacobs 2018:393). However, this is not the approach which will be taken in this thesis. To the contrary, I am in agreement with the assessment made by Marttila (2015), which finds that the 'logics' approach is in fact, not so much an attempt to operationalize PSDT, but is better seen as a discrete project. In this project, as Marttila avers, logic, which is one of several key concepts in PSDT, becomes the most important notion and I argue that in doing this, the linguistic turn affected by Laclau and Mouffe is, to say the least, blunted. However, before elaborating this point we must consider several more specific criticisms relevant to this study made by Marttila.

Marttila's critique points out, *inter alia*, that the logics approach keeps us at the same level of abstraction as PSDT. Thus, the logics approach appears to superimpose theoretical concepts "arbitrarily and effortlessly on empirical material" (2015:123). While its advocates argue that the logics approach does require engaging with the self-interpretation of subjects, Marttila's claim is that it is not explained how social practices and empirically observed phenomenal properties can be related to the different types of logic, and therefore connecting the notion of logics to observable empirical phenomena becomes problematic. Further, there are a number of methodological issues including a lack of explication of the analytical and methodological stages relevant to empirical observation and the matter of how analysts may identify social practices related to logics. The upshot of this is that logics appear variously to be "suspended in mid-air" and "in an epistemological state of limbo" and thus it seems reasonable to conclude, that the analytical function of logics "could just as well be played by the concept of discourse" (Marttila 2015:120). For their part however, Glynos and Howarth argue that although logics can be identified only indirectly in the form of relatively regular patterns of discursive articulation, this is not to be seen as remaining at an ontological level because social logics are "coterminous with the social practices and contexts they inform and make possible" (Glynos and Howarth 2008:13). On this point, the analysis in this thesis is one which insists that what is coterminous with social practices and contexts is not such deductively posited social logics, but rather language, and therefore political analysts searching for a meso-level analytical framework must look elsewhere.



In contrast to other attempts to operationalise PSDT as indicated above, this thesis argues that the best analytical framework, one that will enable the examination of ideas in politics, as well as the arguments in which they feature, is provided by rhetorical political analysis (RPA), (Glynos et al 2009, Finlayson 2007, Martin 2014). To embrace this notion of rhetoric however, is to depart somewhat from the conceptualization of rhetoric presented in work by Laclau in his own writing and elsewhere with Mouffe. As has been noted above, there is a claim that PSDT draws on “the full range of literary tropes and figures” (Howarth 2000:117), and yet at the same time, Laclau insists that what rhetoricity means is a focus on catachresis. In particular circumstances, where there is a breakdown or ‘retreat’ of a differential or institutional logic, then, “in those cases, the name becomes *the ground of the thing*” (Laclau 2005/2018:100, my emphasis). This however, is a view of rhetoricity which has been challenged with the claim that Laclau presents a restricted notion of rhetoric which is problematic, not least in its handling of agency. As the quotation above indicates, Laclau takes a particular focus on catachresis and one criticism levelled is that this stance, albeit qualified, does not give sufficient emphasis to the fact that the ground is unstable. Laclau, it may be argued, leans too much on structuralist influences, at the expense of a poststructuralist iterability. Hence, Laclau’s focus on catachresis conflates the ontological and the ontic and in positing catachresis as the ground of the thing, casts it as a form of closure. Yet, this is to make hegemony the source, rather than the outcome of rhetoric (Kaplan 2010:277).

A further critical point is that Laclau’s approach commits him to a transcendental view of language and rhetoric, severed

from its concrete use (Butler 2000). As Butler argues, the empty space envisaged by Laclau is highly problematic for his theory. If it is this space which is filled by political meanings, then that is to posit “an exteriority of politics to language that seems to undo the very concept of political performativity that Laclau espouses” (Butler 2000:34). Butler concludes that the space is empty only because some of the ‘content’ from which it has emerged is suppressed and the pertinent question is, “where is the trace of the disavowed in the formal structure that emerges?” (Butler 2000:34). The approach to rhetoric in this thesis is one which is in agreement with the thrust of these criticisms and the shift to a focus on iterability facilitates a move towards the concrete, opening up the prospect of an agentively attuned poststructuralism “free of human conceit” (Kaplan 2010:277). The focus on iterability is also one congruent with the ambition of this thesis to create a poststructural account of institutional change and rhetorical path dependency.

### **3.7 Methodology**

It is for these reasons that the approach to rhetoric found in RPA forms a suitable methodology for the political analysis of ‘quality’. Methodology is not to be confused with method; its task is to provide the researcher with clear principles as to how a piece of research should proceed (Hay 2002:63). In this regard, RPA is exemplary in providing a clear set of steps which must be followed in order to take the researcher directly to the concrete (Finlayson 2007). Since RPA identifies the significance of the object of the argument, rather than merely ideas, it requires that the analyst first identify what must be a corpus of *argument*, rather than simply a corpus of text, as in other interpretive approaches, such as critical discourse analysis. This does not have to consist of any

particular form of text and may include not just speeches<sup>15</sup>, but also various types of documents, including official documents such as the White Papers used in this study. A second step is to identify the context from which such texts are drawn. This is termed the 'rhetorical situation' and here the primary aspect that must concern the researcher is the setting of the identity of the participants (Finlayson 2007:554).

This is most pertinent to the theoretical considerations discussed previously, since it underlines the particular suitability of RPA for the research questions which concern this thesis. For as has been argued through the course of this chapter, the process by which political actors learn and engage in what Freedon has identified as a practice of social mapping, is the very same process indicated by the term forms of assessment. This is related to the construction of hegemony, since, as we have seen, antagonisms arise when actors are unable to attain their identities and their interests. Since hegemony is constructed by institutional political actors, pursuing and constituting their own interests and those of others, the route to understanding the political construction of policy, and in particular the policy idea of quality, is by way of examining the forms of assessment made by political actors. This also requires us to acknowledge that interests relate to identities, and that politically constructed identities are in turn strategic constructs which are sedimented in institutional sites. As PSDT, despite its problematic approach to rhetoric, correctly informs us that hegemony is metonymic, in order to pursue the research questions set out in this thesis, it follows that we must take

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<sup>15</sup> A point acknowledged by James Martin (2014:1).

a rhetorical turn, since this will provide the means to construct the figurative maps of social reality by which institutions and the institutional political actors embedded within them, navigate and construct policy.

The third step set out in RPA enables us to do precisely this by directing analytical attention to the forms of argument deployed in political and argumentative action, and to the arrangement, style and delivery of such argumentation. From this perspective, the first task in rhetorical analysis is to identify the issue or point at stake. Clearly, this closely follows the concept of framing and the ability to define the point or focus of an argument confers advantage and in a political context sets an agenda and the boundaries of the argument (Finlayson 2007). On this matter, classical rhetorical theory identified four distinct forms of argument; arguments of conjecture, definition, quality and place/circumstance. It also categorized rhetorical argument into three genres, identified by Aristotle as the forensic, the epideictic and the deliberative, concerned, in turn with prosecution or defence, praise or condemnation, and with the assessment of alternate courses of action. In context of contemporary politics, these are highly applicable concepts which enable the political analyst to investigate both generic features of policy discourse, but also to observe 'historically-shaped, institutionalised, forms of talk manifested as rhetorical style' (Finlayson 2007:556), a key matter of concern for this research. Investigation on these planes potentially enables the political analyst to develop explanatory accounts which illuminate not simply how discursive structures, political identities and the antagonisms which shape policy are constructed, but also how it is that

the arguments by which such processes take place are persuasive.

This last point indicates that one of the virtues of RPA is its agentive focus, and a range of other concepts enable RPA to use this recognition to probe further into the substantive form of arguments, showing how they are created. The concept of arrangement for instance, takes rhetorical text and speech to be arranged, or orchestrated, for particular purposes. Arrangement is said to give 'presence' to rhetoric and it does this by selectively emphasising and de-emphasising particular points. Relatedly, the way a policy narrative is arranged for example can make a considerable difference to how it is received, promoting notions of causality or implying that some events are natural, and thus naturalising sequences of political events (Finlayson 2007:555-7). Another important argumentative device is the deployment of commonplaces, that is maxims or stock themes which are commonly accepted and enable a speaker to show that "the course of action you are endorsing ought to be acceptable to anyone who already endorses such general principles" (Skinner 1996:15).

A further key concept reflecting this agentive focus, is the use of figures or tropes. There is some debate as to how many forms of trope exist, but four 'basic' tropes of metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony may be identified (Vickers 1988). As Vickers informs us, citing Quintilian, a trope is "the artistic alteration of a word or phrase from its proper meaning to another' and this is something which involves not only words but 'our thoughts and the structure of our sentences" (Vickers 1988:30). Thus what tropes do is shape and legitimate particular ways of

understanding events. It is in this sense that tropes are constitutive of our world. Metaphors such as 'Broken Britain', for example organize our thoughts in particular ways and in politics can enable the development of chains of reasoning that can frame and reframe the objects and purposes of policy; they are thus to be seen as generative metaphors (Schon 1979). Metonymies in contrast, perform the rhetorical function of associating or ordering by relating one thing to another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and thus the examination of metonymic tropes enables the construction of the figurative maps of social order employed by policy actors. There are of course, other tropes; particularly relevant for this study is the trope of paradiastole, the re-evaluation of an action by replacing one evaluative description with a rival term (Martin 2014:81). More simply, this is re-description, and as argued in Chapter One, this thesis will argue that this was a trope intimately connected with the rise of 'quality'.

Finally, the agentive and persuasive focus of rhetoric is reflected in the concept of the appeal. This is a central concept in rhetorical theory and draws our attention to the fact that rhetoric has to be presented to an audience and is an attempt to persuade them; here we may remind ourselves of Fish's observation that in doing this, the intention "is entirely strategic" (Fish 2017:200). In what is therefore, a strategic relationship, the classical rhetoricians identified three forms of appeal, or proof that speakers could make; *logos*, *ethos* and *pathos*. These three terms can be translated as referring to reason, character, and emotion respectively. In analytical terms the appeal is important since it directs attention to the "forms of argument and reasoning that exceed the strictures of the syllogism", that is to say arguments which employ enthymemes – quasi-logical

arguments using only some parts of a syllogism (Finlayson 2007:553). This is significant since it means that we must understand that arguments themselves are shaped by contingencies and the response of audiences and opponents in a continual cycle of the formation and development of what is termed argumentative action.

This outline has attempted to indicate the considerable richness and depth that RPA may bring to an interpretive analysis of the policy idea of 'quality'. My claim is that this form of analysis provides a methodology far more extensive than Laclau's narrow tropological take on rhetoricity, for the rhetorical is concerned with much more than naming, important as that may be. All that remains now is to consider what method can best serve this methodology.

### **3.8 Close reading: a method for RPA**

The political analyst seeking to investigate argumentative action is confronted with a number of potentially useful methods and the method chosen will depend upon its suitability for the particular research aims. Jacobs (2020:59) for example, was concerned to "detect the articulations that form a regular discursive pattern", and thus opted to use the method of topic modelling using a large corpus of textual data. This was used to trace words and phrases appearing in the same texts but simultaneously absent in others with the aid of a computer modelling program. Marttila (2016) by contrast, with the primary analytical aim of giving visibility to discourses and discursive materialities observable in subject roles and institutions, turns to the method of situational and positional mapping, enabling him to display conceptual information in diagrammatic form. While these are only two examples, I suggest that they are sufficient to indicate that

political analysis is far from often being “a case of stating and re-stating things which are obvious but rarely reflected upon” (Hay 2002:129). On the contrary, in terms of method, political analysis is rather a matter of the researcher identifying, sometimes in an innovative way, techniques which align to their theoretical and methodological assumptions and to their specified research questions and aims. The results of such work may be far from obvious, and they may challenge common sense, a matter of some importance in the field of the political.

### **3.8.1 The sources used in this study**

The views set out in this chapter have taken a distinctive methodological approach in attempting to apply PSDT. In using RPA to take a rhetorical turn, this research will focus on the arguments by which various political actors advocated, promoted and put into action the concept of quality in education policy. In order to achieve this, I therefore required sources and methods which would provide direct and easy access to this argumentative action. In terms of sources, access to argumentative action relevant to ‘quality’ was most readily available in the form of government White Papers. White Papers are a public statement of government policy and plans for legislation and are introduced at the beginning of the parliamentary process which leads to legislation. As such, these are collectively authored documents; while the greater part of the writing is the responsibility of the relevant Minister and civil servants, the document is published in the name of the government under the convention of collective responsibility. Thus, studying the development of policy through White Papers, affords the political analyst a means of tracking the rhetorical pathway forged by the argumentative action of political



actors, allowing the study of the construction and course of policy arguments and the outcomes that they produce.

The position taken in this thesis is that these documents reveal a great deal about how and why the political institution of the executive saw 'quality', and why they saw and understood it in the way that they did. Although White Papers do not necessarily reveal a great deal of detail about debate in government circles prior to the publication of a White Paper, and while they do not tell us about subsequent debates through the legislative process, they nevertheless provide a rich source which can indicate official thinking on 'quality' at strategic moments. This source was therefore a highly appropriate one to turn to in order to address the research questions posed in this thesis. Moreover, given the need to understand 'quality' in the context of institutional change, a diachronic approach was necessary. For this reason this research uses a sample of sixteen White Papers, ranging from 1983 to 2016 (see Table 1).

**Table 1**  
**White Paper Corpus**

<b>Reference</b>	<b>Command</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Party in Government</b>
DES 1983	Cmnd 8836	1983	Teaching Quality	Con
DES 1985	Cm 9469	1985	Better Schools	Con
DES 1991	Cmnd 1536	1991	Education and Training for the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century	Con
DfE 1992	Cm 2021	1992	Choice and Diversity: a framework for schools	Con
DTI 1996	Cm3300	1996	Competitiveness Creating the enterprise centre of Europe	Con
DfEE 1996a	Cm 3315	1996	Self-Government for Schools	Con
DfEE 1996b	Cmnd 3486	1996	Learning to Compete: Education and Training for 14-19 year olds	Con
DfEE 1997	Cm 3681	1997	Excellence in Schools	Lab
DfEE 1999	Cm 4392	1999	Learning to Succeed	Lab
DfEE 2001	Cm 5230	2001	Schools Achieving Success	Lab
DfES 2003	Cm5810	2003	Twenty-first Century Skills	Lab
DfES 2005a	Cm 6476	2005	14-19 Education and Skills	Lab
DfES 2005b	Cm 6677	2005	Higher Standards, Better Schools for All	Lab
DCFS 2008	Cm 7348	2008	Raising Expectations: enabling the system to deliver	Lab
DfE 2010	Cm 7980	2010	The Importance of Teaching	Con/LD
DfE 2016	Cm 9230	2016	Educational Excellence Everywhere	Con

This sample covers the period when 'quality' came to the fore in the 1980s and the institutional changes which have persisted up to recent years, and represents around one-third of all White Papers on education published over this period<sup>16</sup>. The claim in this work therefore, is that the discussion of the arguments for and about 'quality' analysed in this thesis, presents an accurate, if not a wholly complete (such a thing would be an impossible object), reflection of what was being argued about 'quality' by political actors at these particular moments. The White Paper corpus has been supplemented with political speeches and other documents<sup>17</sup> which provide further detail of argumentative action at other strategic moments on the part of individual politicians.

### **3.8.2 The method used in this study**

Having identified the sources to be used in this thesis, the analysis required a method which would provide a reliable means of identifying the features of argument discussed in the previous section. In this respect, the demands of my research questions, in contrast to the other studies in PSDT mentioned above, called for a focus on the detailed structure and figures used in arguments, rather than a focus on individual words or concepts. Moreover, in order to gauge how arguments were constructed and how they changed, and to glean as much contextual depth as possible, this was a

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<sup>16</sup> The sample also includes one White Paper from the DTI, selected because it contains discussion of the relationship between education and industry.

<sup>17</sup> Interpretive political analysis inevitably involves researchers in the selection of textual material, yet frequently those practising this form of analysis neglect to explain how material was selected or assume that the significance of a speech or a document is axiomatic (see e.g. Marlow-Stevens and Hayton 2020, Singbeh 2023).

The selection of documents and other sources in this work was guided by my wider reading and knowledge of events and by intensive reading of the White Papers. Decisions to include speeches and other texts were justified by their relevance to the research questions and my assessment of their significance in the context of the particular moments. Clearly these judgements can be challenged, but I have endeavoured to make both claims and supporting evidence and criteria as clear as possible.

research task which required a highly qualitative method. For this reason, the method used in this study is that of close reading, a form of focused reading used in literary studies and the humanities and developed from the work of literary critic and rhetorician I.A. Richards in the first half of the twentieth century. Given its emphasis on the interanimation of words, that is, the view that the meaning of words must be understood in the context of what Richards termed the 'immediate verbal environment', the prime example of which is metaphor (Richards 1936), this is a method highly suitable for use with RPA and the study of 'quality'. In the context of this particular research project, close reading provides a method enabling the identification of the structure of argumentation and the use of metaphor in the texts examined, thus enabling the three research questions concerning this thesis to be investigated.

As has been argued above, a poststructural stance and a sceptical approach to methodology is not to be equated to a lack of concern for rigour and precision. Yet in this respect, studies using close reading or textual sources in general may sometimes be somewhat vague in detailing the protocol used. This is unhelpful as it makes it difficult for readers to assess claims and difficult for other researchers to adapt and test the methods used in their own research. Therefore, to be clear, this study used close reading as a method to examine the texts referred to above in three distinct stages. In the first reading, all the White Papers were read through in one sweep, in order to gain an overview; only brief notes were made and passages which appeared most relevant to the research questions were marked. The process of reading was guided by the concept of the five canons of rhetoric, which directed the researcher to search for argumentative

claims, the arrangement of the text or speech, the techniques of language and the figures used, the delivery or performance and the form of presentation (Martin 2014:52, Posch 2017:3-4). Marking or 'coding' each text was initially rudimentary, but this was an iterative process and with each document read and increasing understanding, refinements were made as some categories and subcategories appeared relevant and others less so. The second stage involved re-reading the documents in a more selective manner, spending a greater amount of time on the most relevant passages of the texts. At this stage, relevant sections were read multiple times in order to reflect, to pose questions and to aid comprehension prior to writing working papers summarising the content of the documents (Ruiz de Castilla 2017). The third stage of reading was conducted during the writing of the thesis. This meant that the writing up process was not reliant on working papers and memory, thus serving to enhance the accuracy of earlier judgements and at the same time enabling further reflection upon interpretive judgements. This process was repeated for the corpus of speeches used in the research.

### **3.8.3 The scientific status of PSDT**

The method described above has been intended to ensure that the research reported here has been carried out in a systematic and meticulous way. However, at the same time, the findings reported here must rely on interpretations made by the researcher. I argue that this must lead PSDT to adapt from hermeneutic theory and to eschew any claims to scientific status. That there is support for such a view from the originators of PSDT seems clear from Laclau and Mouffe's claim that "A scientific approach attempting to determine the 'essence' of the social would, in actual fact, be the height of

utopianism” (Laclau and Mouffe 1985/2014:129). I share this scepticism of scientism, and therefore argue that the findings of this research are to be evaluated not with the aim of verification, but rather of validation, where validation is seen as “an argumentative discipline comparable to juridical procedures of legal interpretation. It is a logic of uncertainty and of qualitative probability” (Ricoeur 1991:159). This is to argue that there is no ‘correct’ interpretation of the texts and arguments examined here; this would be to misconceive the notion of post-empirical truth. The aim of, and the challenge for the interpretive political analyst, must therefore be to demonstrate that the interpretation offered is the best possible interpretation of the meanings used by political actors. The ‘truth’ offered by such a process will be one that is necessarily probabilistic, but this uncertainty can be attenuated if the analyst indicates how and why interpretive decisions have been reached and the sources upon which such judgements are based.

It follows from this position that the research questions concerning this thesis are not to be expressed in the language of science, nor should the approach adopted in this thesis to be reduced to either a deductive, an inductive, nor even, an abductive methodology. Elements of all three may be identified in the assumptions guiding this research. I argue that this was necessary, since grappling with this topic required a flexible methodology and I wished to avoid pre-empting findings or constraining the investigation, either by way of generating hypotheses, or by selective observation. In taking this position, there is no intention of claiming a more neutral or objective status. The point is rather to advocate a radical methodological pluralism. Against those approaches that attempt to adapt PSDT to a critical realist

ontology (Glynos and Howarth 2007, Jacobs 2020), I argue that this is more in keeping with Laclau's view that critical realism is not to be rejected entirely, but is merely, "one of the possibilities for discursively constructing the real" (Laclau and Bhaskar 1998:10). Thus, in this research, the primary aim was not to identify causes, but rather reasons. The argument in this chapter is that the methodology explained here and the method of close reading are the means which most effectively fulfil that broad aim. This is not to deny, as Peter Winch has clarified, that reasons may also be causes, but rather to insist that this recognition means that we have to acknowledge that explanations by way of reasons are not of the kind that science seeks (Winch 1958/1990:xxviii).

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has set out the key concepts presented in PSDT and argued that this theory provides the best framework for the political analysis of 'quality'. The reason why this is so, hinges upon the 'remarkable coincidence' between the concept of decontestation in Freeden's morphological approach and PSDT's concept of hegemony, which acknowledges that political ideologies are partly constitutive of the political and the social, but also, vitally, are responses to ongoing situations. It has been further argued that the processes by which political actors learn about and engage in the practice of mapping social order, as discussed by Freeden, is the very same process referred to by Hindess in the concept of forms of assessment. This suggests that the way to understand 'quality' is in the context of the playing out of antagonisms where political identities based upon class are re-described on new terrain.

At the same time however, it has also been argued that these processes are institutionalized. It has been argued that previous attempts to synthesize institutionalism with PSDT or to create a middle level theory by way of the logics approach have been untenable and that a preferable alternative is to take a rhetorical turn informed by RPA. The approach of a poststructuralist institutionalism may start from the recognition of the importance of the trace; as in the case of class, the traces of a signifier can never be eliminated, but they persist and transform in various ways or may be reactivated. It is thus argued that iterability suggests the possibility of what critics of PSDT, such as Jessop, deny; a rhetorical path dependency and the insistence that it is the order in which things are said, which in turn makes things happen and affects how they happen. However, finding a way to put this analysis to work has been frustrated by both the methodological deficit in PSDT and the form of the rhetorical turn taken in PSDT. It has been shown how this methodological deficit is remedied by the approach of RPA, which provides a meso-level theory able to illuminate the argumentative action hinted at but not identified in PSDT, in great detail. The final element required by the interpretive analyst of 'quality' is the method of close reading and the sources of official views and arguments for 'quality' in White Papers and political speeches. With these elements in place, the political analysis of 'quality' can commence.



## **Chapter 4 The Construction and Institutionalization of 'Quality' From Thatcher to Major**

In the early 1990s Stuart Hall argued that the neoliberal transformation of the public sector could be explained as having occurred in three waves (Hall 1991). These were preceded by institutional reform, detaching operations and using market mechanisms to force people and services into the private sector. Three waves then followed. The first wave saw the imposition of "Thatcherite shock troops", a new echelon of public sector managers, acting as a "New Model Army" and who, "whatever their private political inclinations", were prepared to restore managerial prerogative and institutionalize a new regime. The second wave consisted of "business people", recruited into the "governing strata" in order "to tutor and public institutions into the mysteries of the market calculation" (Hall 1991:14). This, Hall laments, recruited "a whole generation of Benthamite simplifiers into positions of strategic power and influence" (Hall *ibid*). The third wave consisted, Hall argued, of independent consultants, "called in to advise on the implementation of efficiency measures<sup>18</sup>" (Hall *ibid*). Yet Hall is clearly bemused that in the face of such sweeping change, where students have been re-described as customers, that "not a shot has yet been fired" (Hall *ibid*). This chapter contends that what Hall neglects, and what can partly account for his puzzlement as to the apparent lack of resistance to the 'Thatcherite Revolution', are the arguments about 'quality' by which such changes were wrought. As has been argued in Chapter Two, 'quality', just like any other political policy idea, has to be understood genealogically, and as that chapter has

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<sup>18</sup> The accuracy of this analysis is contestable. As explained in Section 4.6, the technology of the board was not formalized until 2010, and Hall glosses the point that the 'Thatcherite shock troops' were not necessarily new public sector managers, but those already in position who were persuaded to be complicit with the new regime. See also May, T. (1994).

shown, the core of the idea of 'quality' can be traced well back to the development of the state in the nineteenth century. To understand the more recent origins of 'quality' however, it is necessary to look back to the political context of debates about education policy in the 1960s and 70s. This chapter will argue that three key moments can be identified in the construction of 'quality' and that the chain of meaning and the narrative created during this period constructed a rhetorically dependent path of institutional change and hegemonic practice, itself reflective of previous rhetorical and discursive structures. The chapter argues that it is from these key moments that political actors making arguments about 'quality', informed and shaped by assessments of schools and people, were able to decontest hierarchy and inequality, to institutionalize 'quality' and to create an ideational architecture supporting a fantasmatic<sup>19</sup> neoliberal vision of meritocracy.

#### **4.1 Kairos, exigence and 'quality': the construction of a crisis in education in the 1970s.**

The 1970s is commonly understood as a decade of crisis in the UK and this is reflected in political and historical literature (Hay 1996, Robinson et al 2017). However, this notion has to be understood critically and in the light of more recent historiography, which argues for the view that the very notion of 'crisis' was itself a constructed narrative and can be seen as part and parcel of an ideology of decline (Tomlinson 1996); something which political parties were able to use as a weapon in the course of strategic political action (Budge 1993). The context in which political debate on education in the 1970s followed a period of expansion of educational provision in the 1950s and 1960s. However, that expansion had been contested and problematic.

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<sup>19</sup> The word 'fantasmatic' here is used in its ordinary sense and is not intended to imply any endorsement of the notion of 'fantasmatic logic' as discussed by Glynos and Howarth (2007).

The publication of Circular 10/65 by the DES at the behest of the Labour Government in 1965, requesting Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to prepare plans for conversion to a system of comprehensive schooling, was the first of several key interventions during these decades. Although the policy was opposed by Conservative politicians, this was not initially an easy policy to oppose, since many LEAs under Conservative control were not opposed to comprehensive schooling. However, this situation changed over the following years.

To understand how that situation changed it is necessary to turn to the notion of crisis. Crisis has been defined by Colin Hay as a condition where “failure is identified and widely perceived, a condition in which systemic failure has become politically and ideationally mediated” (Hay 1999:324). This is further elaborated to argue that crisis is a moment of decisive intervention, defined as “merely that which alters the conditions, whether material or *merely* discursive, which sustain the narrative of crisis” (Hay 1994:249, my italics). While from a poststructuralist viewpoint, there must be queries over the notion of ‘systemic failure’ and of course, over the dualism of the material and the discursive, the broad notion that crisis is discursive and that a narrative of crisis may constitute an object in need of decisive intervention, and that it is at such points that a new trajectory may be imposed on the state, is one which is of use to the present analysis (Hay 1996:254).

However, what may be added to this concept are the two notions of *kairos* and *exigence*. The relationship between these two notions is an important concept in RPA. It has been argued that the rhetorical situation is one of a determining *exigence* which demands a response and calls rhetoric into being, which I argue are to be seen as synonymous with ‘crisis’. However, political

actors deploying rhetoric are also to be seen as the constructors of a situation, and in doing this they are constrained in various ways. Political actors can be said to be partially 'forced' to act by a situation, but how they do so in part depends upon their 'own' abilities and judgements, albeit that these too are constructed products, not the creations of autonomous subjects. In attempting to persuade an audience, the successful political actor will avoid disrupting the 'parameters of the community', and will be attentive to the appropriateness of the words they choose to the time and the place (or in classical terms, the *kairos* and *stasis*) in which they make a rhetorical intervention (Martin 2014:95). In doing this, selection of the argument (in rhetorical terms, the topic or *topos*) is of great importance. If this is judged appropriately, it reduces the distance between speaker and audience such that an audience is open to re-assess the situation or exigence and see it in the light set by the speaker, and here, as Martin indicates, ideas play a key role in amplifying some aspects over others, as "projectile-like ideas" shift perspectives on a situation, and generate "associations that trigger particular reactions" (2014:96). It is the argument of this section that 'quality' came to be just such a projectile-like idea in the context of the 1970s.

Thus, the political context of the late 1960s, when as we have noted, Conservative opposition to Labour education policy was at first somewhat muted, was changed by a series of interventions. Notable in this respect was the publication of the Black Papers from 1969-1976. The Black Papers were a series of pamphlets produced by an energetic and well-connected group of Conservative activists and their polemical outpourings were disseminated and popularised in the tabloid press and other media of the time. In terms of interventions of the type indicated by Hay's definition of crisis and by the rhetorical notion of exigence,

three key moments can be identified in the debates on education policy in the 1970s; the William Tyndale affair which played out from Spring 1974 until 1976, Sir Keith Joseph's Edgbaston speech in October 1974, and Prime Minister James Callaghan's 'Ruskin speech', in October 1976. All of these events were interventions that altered the conditions sustaining a narrative of crisis and helped to impose a new trajectory on the state; a trajectory structured by arguments concerning the political idea of quality.

#### **4.1.1 The William Tyndale Controversy**

The first of these exigencies concerns the controversy which arose over a dispute between parents and teachers, between different groups of teachers, and between the school and the local education authority, which in this case was the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). The dispute concerned the use of somewhat controversial teaching methods at William Tyndale Junior School, a north London primary school. These methods became the subject of complaints from parents and from a minority group of 'traditionalist' teachers on the school staff and the dispute led to a sharply falling roll at the school. As a consequence, the school management sought assistance from ILEA, calling for 'urgent action to re-establish public confidence in this junior school' (ILEA in Davis 2002:276). However, ILEA was slow in responding to requests from the school management for assistance and then reluctant to get involved in the dispute. This approach appears to have been a result of ILEA's own organisational complexity and mismanagement, allied to its own inspection culture, which preferred to interpret inspection as a supportive rather than as a corrective function. The dispute attracted considerable media interest and dragged on for some time, ending in a five month public inquiry which dismissed a number of senior staff at the school and found ILEA "censured for neglecting its ultimate responsibility, under the 1944 Education

Act, for the conduct and curriculum of the school" (Davis 2002:276). What is important for this study however, is not just what happened, but what was said in all this activity. What was said, not just in the media, but in political debate, was that children were being indoctrinated by teachers linked to the far left, that children were being used for "experiments", and that "freedom led to chaos" (Davis 2002:282-3, Glasgow Herald 17.7.76). This was not only however a matter of language; it was also a matter of discourse in the sense of language and practice. Thus, on substantive points of political debate, the dispute prised open and brought to the fore a number of issues that critics were able to exploit and use to change the course of the narrative: the rights of parents vis a vis schools, the right of schools and parents vis a vis the 'producer interests' of LEAs, the right to manage, the right to inspect (and correct), and the right of LEAs to intervene in the running of schools.

For these reasons the William Tyndale case, which Davis judges to be probably the most embittered education controversy in post-War Britain, can be regarded as an important moment, of crisis. For what these events prompted, was "the adoption nationally of a more interventionist approach to methods and standards by central government and, in the process, a diminution of the autonomy of LEAs"(Davis 2002:275).

Having said this, Davis is entirely right to caution against attaching undue significance to the happenings at one primary school in London. However, rhetorical analysis of further source material helps to shed more light on the developing context by demonstrating how political actors were able to further elaborate the arguments set out in a particular rhetorical moment. The analysis of two key speeches from the same time shows how political actors representing the two main political parties did this,

and in analysing these rhetorical interventions, support is provided for the argument that the Tyndale affair did move the state towards an “acceptance of the Black Paper counter-revolution” (Davis 2002:292).

#### **4.1.2 Educating the poor: quality and equality**

A second key moment in this period occurred as the Tyndale case was prominent in the news agenda, when Sir Keith Joseph, a potential leadership contender for the Conservative Party (which had just lost the October 1974 General Election), gave a speech to an audience of Conservative Association members at Edgbaston. The exigency of this speech was Joseph’s desire to pitch as a leadership contender, and he used it to give a broad summary of the state of the nation, which included a diagnosis of the problems in education and a prescription for solving them. For Joseph, the starting point on this matter lay with “the imposition of a uniform state monopoly over education” (Joseph 1974). Any claim made against a state monopoly is of course, immediately open to critique that the petitioner seeks access to privilege, a counter-argument which Joseph went to some lengths to rebut. Thus, he argued that his aim was not to seek advantage, but on the contrary, for the widening of choice. Moreover, the point was buttressed with the claim that choice is not something to be offered exclusively to certain classes; it is to be made available to all citizens, including “the talented children of the poor” (Joseph 1974). However, while one commentator notes Joseph’s predominant use of logos (Garnett 2015), what is most notable here is the use of pathos; the argument for choice is set in contrast to those who wish to use children “as guinea pigs or spare parts for social engineers to experiment with” (Joseph 1974). Here Joseph draws upon a stock phrase and accusation cast in the Tyndale controversy. At the same time, what is revealed in a particular social map; a social and political imaginary. The

changes in schools are most damaging, said Joseph, “in *poorer districts* among less gifted children”, and increased education budgets had led to increasing, not decreasing levels of “delinquency, truancy, vandalism, hooliganism, illiteracy [and a ] decline in educational standards. Some secondary schools in our cities are dominated by gangs operating extortion rackets against small children” (Joseph 1974, my emphasis).

However, Joseph’s rhetoric also identified a pathway by which Conservative education policy was ultimately able to craft a persuasive appeal to the electorate. For the calls for a return to standards and selection were cleverly couched in a language of opportunity and freedom from bureaucratic constraint, again, as we have seen, themes which were being aired through the Tyndale controversy. The calls made by Joseph played on popular and populist myths of working class fecklessness and the naivete and hypocrisy of middle class radicals. Joseph’s approach also offered a persuasive means of countering the accusation that Conservative policy sought to buttress privilege by appealing to notions of individual choice and opportunity and turned the critique onto his political opponents. Joseph concluded his critique of the middle class beneficiaries of university education with the rhetorical question, “If equality in education is sought at the expense of quality, how can the poisons created help but filter down?” (Joseph 1974). This is the first mention of ‘quality’ in the period covered by this research and the linking of quality and equality was a line of argument which endured in the discourse, and was developed by various political actors, not just in the time immediately following the speech, but throughout the period studied in this thesis. Thus, in identifying this line of argument, Joseph’s speech marked another key moment which articulated and altered the conditions sustaining a narrative of crisis. Here again, we can see the beginnings of a trajectory of ‘quality’ which



would gradually become imposed upon the state. It was moreover, a highly significant moment in that it identified 'quality' and equality as necessarily opposed concepts. The implications of this point in the arguments and policy debates which followed, were to be profound.

#### **4.1.3 Callaghan's Ruskin Speech**

The final intervention to be discussed here is Labour Prime Minister James Callaghan's 'Ruskin Speech' (18 October 1976). This speech was given in the context of the intense debates of the previous two years and Labour's 1976 Education Act, requiring LEAs to accelerate plans to implement comprehensive schooling, was scheduled to receive the Royal Assent within the forthcoming month. Labour had also announced its intention to withdraw support for the Direct Grant. Moreover, the Bullock Report on reading standards in schools, published the previous year, although in tone moderate and optimistic, had nevertheless stated that national averages probably obscured a decline in areas with what were described as severe social and educational problems. Thus, this was an intervention into what has been described as a "propaganda crisis" (Simon 1999:449). It was an attempt to stifle Conservative criticism of the Labour government, as well as, to "wrest the populist mantle from the Conservatives" (Chitty 2014:40). Thus, it seems reasonable to claim that the speech was intended to reassure an audience well beyond the Labour Party (Whitehead 1987). The speech is to be understood therefore, not simply as an attempt to stifle Conservative criticism; it was also attempting to steal Tory clothes on education policy, and in this respect it was an attempt to link national issues of accountability and improvement to the values of the labour movement (Meredith 2015), rather than to the values of opposing political parties. It was therefore a strategic intervention.

This speech set out an argument for more rigorous standards, for teacher accountability, and for monitoring teachers. The limitations of the education provided at that time were clearly identified; "I am concerned on my journeys to find complaints from industry that new recruits from the schools sometimes do not have the basic tools to do the job that is required" (Callaghan 1976). This was a line of argument elaborated with the down to earth view that producing well-adjusted young people who were unemployed due to their lack of skills, was not useful, showing Callaghan as very much drawing from the same "reservoir of general concepts, claims, explanations" as his political opponents (Finlayson 2018). However, this was not the only source of the ideas in the Ruskin speech. Callaghan also made the point that it was necessary to achieve "as high efficiency as possible by the skilful use of existing resources" (Callaghan 1976), a view which faithfully followed the approach set out in the briefing document (commonly referred to as 'the Yellow Book') he had been supplied by the DES earlier in the year, and which set out a centralising vision of a 'core curriculum'. This in turn is to be understood in the context of bureaucratic conflict between the Department of Education and Science (DES) and Her Majesty's Inspectorate (HMI). The DES was in favour of promoting the idea of a core curriculum, consisting of a core of five academic subjects and a vocational version for those deemed average or below average. In contrast, HMI, staffed not by generalist civil servants but by career educationalists, argued for a 'common curriculum' composed of vocational, technical and academic strands to which all pupils would be entitled. The briefing document, the so-called 'Yellow Book', did not simply promote a more centralist vision, it also made a claim that the DES should give a firmer lead in policy development, something which can be seen as "a clear bid for greatly enhanced central control" (Simon 1999:449-50). It is therefore from the DES, by way of the Ruskin speech that we may

discern an emerging focus on efficiency. For the core curriculum was a bureaucratic approach to education, “principally concerned with the ‘efficiency’ of the state education system, and with the need to *obtain accurate and precise information to demonstrate that efficiency*” (Chitty 2014:149 my emphasis).

#### **4.2 Inventing the argument about ‘quality’: the rhetorical path towards a national curriculum.**

While the points above form a beginning for the rhetorical political analysis in this work, they are not sufficient. For, as has been explained earlier, this thesis is based on a poststructuralist approach which posits meaning as undecidable. This is to argue that the meaning of the concepts which political actors construct and use in the course of conducting politics are temporarily fixed through a process of contestation. For the political analyst therefore, meanings and the construction of meaning are things which cannot be understood without a consideration of the historical and social context in which they are created and used. A further important consideration is that since meaning is undecidable, what an argument is about may not be immediately obvious to the participants. It requires work, or political and argumentative action on the part of the actors, to determine this, and how what may be termed the issue, the seat, or the substance of the argument is determined, is itself a product of argument.

In order to understand these processes, the interpretative political analyst has no choice but to dig further, something which can be aided by a recourse to the analytical categories developed in classical rhetorical theory. In this light, the arguments discussed in the previous section emerge as arguments concerned in all of the cases, with predominantly arguments of what is called, rather confusingly for this study, arguments of quality (Martin 2014:56). This means that what was overwhelming at stake in the three

cases discussed above, was not so much a dispute over the truth of accusations made, i.e. that 'progressive teachers' were teaching in new ways, or that many school leavers did not have good qualifications and were not well prepared for working life, nor the facts of these cases. The argument was rather about the nature of those acts, since all parties, in the main, did not dispute the empirical facts about school performance or what was happening at William Tyndale. It was therefore a dispute about the appropriateness of what was going on in schools, about whether it represented 'high standards' and whether - to use Sir Keith Joseph's terminology - both schools and pupils reflected 'quality'. This modest move is highly informative, since, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca tell us, what is termed the 'loci of quality', the basing of an argument on the grounds of the quality or nature of something, is a form which is inextricably bound up with justification for hierarchies of various types (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969/2008:80). As these authors also explain, the matter of finding a justificatory basis for hierarchies only arises when they need to be defended. Given the context when, as has been noted, educational provision had expanded and developed rapidly through the 1950s and 1960s, it appears compelling to argue that the expansion of provision and changing ideas about standards was clearly perturbing for the various constituencies concerned, albeit for differing reasons. It is in this way then, that we may say that what in classical rhetoric is termed the *inventio*, or the discovery, of the argument, came about, and that we can argue that it was concerned with, in some way and despite surface appearances, with hierarchy.

#### **4.2.1 Problematization and Framing**

It is however, not merely the form of an argument which has to be established; the same point applies also to the substantive content. In this respect, rhetoricians bring our attention to the

fact that rhetoric directs the attention of the audience towards some things and away from others (Finlayson 2007). This is to bring into play the concepts of framing and problematization. These are important for they shape what an argument and a problem is seen to be, as well as creating connections between events, explanations and policies in ways which make all of these objects and the proffered solutions appear to be “possible, plausible and natural” (Finlayson 2007:555). However, it is important to note that the two terms ‘framing’ and ‘problematization’ although sometimes used loosely and interchangeably, reflect different theoretical approaches. Framing reflects an interpretive tradition and emphasises autonomous subjects engaging in the shaping and framing of a particular problem. In contrast, the notion of problematization draws upon a Foucauldian approach, in which “the analytic focus is ‘on the forms of problematization themselves’ (Foucault 1986:11-12), rather than on social actors as problematizing agents” (Bacchi 2015:3). This later approach is therefore one which directs our attention to problematizations in the context of policy as products of governmental practices, and which insists that problematization refers to ways of thinking that emerge from practices rather than people as agents. Thus, à la Foucault’s study of madness, it is by examining practices that we may see how ‘quality’ was thought about and problematized, what was done through it and what it has come to mean. The implication of this is that the governmental categories which we think of as ‘entities’ or objects, are “produced from the very same categories which create them as categories”, that is to say, practices of measurement and comparison (Bacchi 2015:4).

This last point suggests that we must turn to consider the role of various institutions in the invention of the argument about quality, and as the account above indicates, two key institutions in the

crisis of this period were the DES and HMI. What we can see in that account are the beginnings of competing definitions of 'quality'. From the DES, in the 'Yellow Book' which informed the Ruskin speech, we see a concern with central control and efficiency, as well as the information or data required for such control, offering a way of measuring and calculating 'quality'<sup>20</sup>. In contrast, the view of 'quality' likely to emerge from HMI, as events were to prove, was one seen through the prism of professional connoisseurship (Education Committee 2011a); it can be deduced that the good or excellent school was one where practice and the curriculum met what professionals deemed as the needs of all pupils. Finally, Joseph's vision of 'quality', echoed by the Black Papers, was a hierarchical one. In this view, quality was about the standards attained, as well as behaviour. It was also not uniformly distributed throughout the population and was evidentially not to be found amongst 'the poor'; although there is a reference to 'the talented children of the poor' (Joseph 1974), the context suggests that this subgroup are to be seen not as a majority, but as a minority<sup>21</sup>. Thus, the undecidability of 'quality' played out from

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<sup>20</sup> As evidenced by the following excerpts from the Ruskin speech:

"There is a challenge to us all in these days and a challenge in education is to examine its priorities and to secure as high efficiency as possible by the skilful use of existing resources."

"Let me repeat some of the fields that need study because they cause concern..... what is the proper way of monitoring the use of resources in order to maintain a proper national standard of performance; then there is the role of the inspectorate in relation to national standards."

"I take it that no one claims exclusive rights in this field. Public interest is strong and legitimate and will be satisfied. We spend £6bn a year on education, so there will be discussion. But let it be rational. If everything is reduced to such phrases as 'educational freedom' versus state control, we shall get nowhere."

The text of the 'Yellow Book' is available at <https://www.education-uk.org/documents/yellowbook1976/yellowbook.html>

<sup>21</sup> Alan Finlayson (private correspondence) has made the point that Joseph does not directly say that people are of varying quality. This is not my interpretation of the speech. Joseph makes extensive use of commonsensical

this period onwards through the argumentative action of these institutional actors, and it was through this process that a dominant meaning of quality was periodically reactivated and sedimented.

#### **4.2.2 Arrangement, Proof and Appeal**

This takes us a considerable way towards understanding how 'quality' could be simultaneously justified and used as a justification by political actors. More will be said about problematization in a moment, but at this point it is appropriate to note that RPA also directs our attention to three other aspects of rhetoric which throw further light upon how arguments in general may be justified: the arrangement, the standard forms of proof and the appeal. A brief consideration of these elements, following the explanations provided by Finlayson (2007) enables us to see how it was that 'quality' was made to appear an appealing and logical solution to a particular problem. The idea that the arrangement or ordering of a narrative is of importance is amply illustrated by Hay's analysis of the rise of Thatcherism, where the constructed narrative was arranged such that Thatcher herself appeared as the heroic 'response' to crisis (Hay 1996). In the case of 'quality', what transpired was the assembling and

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and stereotyped views of the working class, and using the official categories of the time, also refers to social classes 4 and 5. He makes a sweeping judgement about intellectual ability, referring to "poorer districts among less gifted children" and his comments on the threats to 'our human stock' make his views about the quality of different people very clear: "a high and rising proportion of children are being born to mothers least fitted to bring children into the world and bring them up. They are born to mothers who were first pregnant in adolescence in social classes 4 and 5. Many of these girls are unmarried, many are deserted or divorced or soon will be. Some are of low intelligence, most of low educational attainment. They are unlikely to be able to give children the stable emotional background, the consistent combination of love and firmness which are more important than riches. They are producing problem children, the future unmarried mothers, delinquents, denizens of our borstals, sub-normal educational establishments, prisons, hostels for drifters." The qualifications, 'some' and 'unlikely' which we see here, are not sufficient to refute the assessment that what we see are direct generalizing statements as to the 'quality' of particular named groups in the population.

ordering of a narrative of decline entailing both moral and economic elements. As Andrew Gamble has observed, the Thatcherite project called for both an economic *and* a moral revival, and reforming education became central to the 'Government's concept of supporting family life, and to fostering social discipline and cohesion' (Gamble 1988:137). What may be added to Gamble's insight, is that 'quality' was the political idea which played a key role in that project. Moreover, such a project for economic and moral revival was a line of policy argument presaged in Sir Keith Joseph's insistence that "the standards and self-discipline to which we are brought up first at home and then at school", were the key determinants of an individual's future (Joseph 1974). Thus, the arrangement which we see in these strands of a narrative as it was being constructed in the 1970s, was one whereby educational failure was seen as the product of comprehensive schools; it was argued that this represented a lowering of standards and consequently led to economic decline. Moreover, as we have seen, this was a narrative which was adopted across party lines and used by Callaghan, who despite his explicit rejection of "Black Paper prejudices", reached the blunt conclusion that "there is no virtue in producing socially well-adjusted members of society who are unemployed because they do not have the skills", a view entirely compatible with the gist of what had quickly become the dominant narrative (Callaghan 1976).

This developing narrative, which justified a shift to 'quality' as a key policy idea, was itself rhetorically justified through the use of what are termed commonplaces. As Quentin Skinner has explained, the notion of commonplaces can be understood as referring to "general maxims or stock themes" which can be applied to a case, or it may refer to more general forms of abstract reasoning which are applied to individual cases (Skinner



1991:113). In this second case, political actors may search for the 'places' or the *loci communes*, where arguments are to be 'found', that is, the place where the headings needed to have in mind, if "we are to have the best hope of recalling the general maxims apposite to our cause", may be obtained (1991:114). As is pointed out elsewhere, in practice, what this means is that political actors draw upon definitions, similarities, comparisons and other structures of argument, in the attempt to prove their case (Finlayson 2007). In the case of the invention of 'quality' in the 1970s, what we see in the sources discussed above is the deployment of the commonplace of cause and effect; poor educational standards, poor state schools and poor quality teaching are seen as the cause, and economic decline and a breakdown in social order is the effect. At later points in the rhetorical trajectory of the arguments for 'quality', other commonplace structures were found useful by other political actors, but the argument from this evidence is that it was the postulated connection between educational cause and economic effect which enabled the concept of 'quality' to gain political traction.<sup>22</sup>

Running through both of these elements in the argument about what was in the process of becoming the policy idea of quality, as indicated above, was a highly visible concern with morals. It is in this context that we must come to consider what some argue is the most important aspect of the rhetorical situation; setting the identity of the participants (Finlayson 2007:554). This is something which is particularly reflected in the form of appeal made by the rhetor and RPA follows classical rhetoric in identifying three modes of appeal: ethos, pathos and logos. Appeals to ethos

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<sup>22</sup> See Chapter 6 for examples of other commonplaces. On the matter of causality, 'quality' could also function so as to make arguments about cause and effect themselves more credible.

refer to the speaker's character or authority, pathos to an attempt to persuade by appeal to the emotions, and logos to an appeal to logic. On this last point however, it is to be noted that rhetoric relies upon enthymemes, or "quasi-logical" arguments that employ only some parts of a syllogism or rely on premises that are probable rather than certain" (Finlayson 2007:557). Elements of all of these forms may be evident in a given speech or text, but usually some will be used more than others dependent upon context and form of rhetoric used.

In this regard, the speeches reviewed above are revealing. The appeal in Joseph's speech is one which is strongly based on ethos; Callaghan's Ruskin speech in contrast, may be seen as based more on an appeal to logos, though it does involve important elements of pathos and ethos. In Joseph's speech the appeal is directed to those who define themselves in sharp contrast to the groups he targets for opprobrium; criminals, hooligans, the feckless, and the hypocritical, extremists and socialists. Those appealed to are therefore, as is signalled at the end of the speech, "people like you and me", that is, by implication, self-ascribed honest and reasonable people, and as stated, it is up to such people to turn the situation around (Joseph 1974). In Callaghan's speech, in contrast, there is a competing attempt to ground the authority of the speaker and his message, in reason; what is called for Callaghan said, was "a rational debate based on the facts" (Callaghan 1976). Elements of pathos are evident in the references to youth employment and the speech reflects something of Callaghan's own ethos as a working class man who 'worked his way to the top', by way of reference to the instrumental importance of education in acquiring gainful employment; we are invited into a world where people are reasonable, sober and diligent.

### 4.2.3 Politics, decline and substandard schools

Yet at this point, the political analyst must refer to the political ideologies informing these speeches. For Callaghan, this appeal was couched around a notion of collective state paternalism: “What a wise parent would wish for their children, so the state must wish *for all its children*” (Callaghan 1976, my emphasis). This could only clash with the collective context of nationalist paternalism offered by Joseph’s speech, and resonated in a different direction altogether; that excoriated by Joseph in his vision of those such as the postulated single parents ‘dependent’ upon state welfare. What we see at work here, then, are two competing forms of assessment. Both assessments resonated with notions of class identity, but they were not explicitly couched in class terms, and while one evoked a logic of difference, the other evoked a logic of equivalence. It is of course the former logic which came to predominate for reasons which will be elaborated later; for now what is most significant is that it was precisely these enthymemes which were embedded in the legislation set out in the first two White Papers of the Thatcher era in 1983 and 1985, and which structured subsequent debates and legislation. The first of these documents, ‘Teaching Quality’, it asserted that ‘the teacher force, some 440,000 strong in England and Wales, is the major determinant of the quality of education’ (DES 1983:3).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> This text cites the concerns from HMI reports of substantial mismatch such that ‘initial teacher training courses are not always sufficiently closely geared to the needs of the schools; and some teachers are asked to undertake teaching programmes in parts of the curriculum for which the specialist elements of their education and training have not prepared them’ (DES 1983:2). The text therefore reflects a moment when the role of the state can be seen to be gradually changing to one of quality management and the restriction of producer interest, presaging the development of the NPM. In this text ‘quality’ can be seen to refer directly to the efficiency and effectiveness of teachers, yet it still resonates with surplus meaning, particularly in relation to the class position of teachers and carries perlocutionary force.

As later chapters will demonstrate, this was to activate an enthymeme which was to run through, and shape debate throughout the period studied in this thesis. In the second White Paper, 'Better Schools', other key elements in the argument for 'quality' can be seen to coalesce. We are told that "quality of school education concerns everyone", and that the reason why standards must be improved is because "Britain's place in the world has changed"; a Britain moreover, which is more complex and diverse and where the tempo of technological change has speeded up (DES 1985:1). Here we see the emergence of an ideology of decline. This was not however, the only element of the argument for 'quality'; a form of assessment was to the fore as an element of the problematization. If teachers were to be seen as the key determinant of 'quality', the reason this was such a problem was clear since: "Many examples can be found of high standards achieved in schools in widely *different* circumstances by pupils of all abilities. If the standards achieved in these schools could be achieved at all schools in similar circumstances, the quality of school education would rise dramatically" (DES 1985:3, my italics). Thus, the form of assessment at issue here, although not explicitly named as such, was in terms of the social class of pupils; just as we saw was the case in 1902, social class was either unaccepted as a valid concept, or could not be named without risk of appearing patronising or inegalitarian. It was further asserted that an improvement of such a scale was both realistic and necessary, "in order to protect the nation's prosperity and well-being and to give all individuals fair scope to develop and exercise their talents" (DES 1985: 3).

It is these two lines of argument which have set the lines of debate for political approaches to education in England since the 1970s and which have helped to identify and articulate 'quality' as the central problem; a problem which has been from the outset

focused on the deficiencies in performance of teachers, schools and certain groups of people. The solutions offered to solve this problem have followed from that problematization, itself something constructed through the prism of the forms of assessment we have discussed, and have therefore focused on improving the 'quality' of all three of these objects. However, as other commentators have noted, the pace of the changes by which such solutions were created and put to work during the first two Thatcher administrations, was gradual (Aldrich 1992). Thus, the two White Papers discussed above, put in motion a relatively modest amount of legislation, but that set the path for what would follow. The first Education Act of the Thatcher administration receiving the royal assent in July 1979, abolished the duty to give effect to the comprehensive principle. In other legislation which followed from these two White Papers, LEAs were required to publish policies, parental power was enhanced, assisted places to independent schools were introduced, and the Secretary of State (SoS) was given the power to impose terms in respect of pay and conditions on teachers. Arguments about 'quality' had thus provided politicians with the means to legislate a shift of power away from the periphery and towards the centre. This was a tendency which was to be accentuated in the third term, with a major intervention in the shape of the National Curriculum and the institutionalization of 'quality' which it represented and promoted.

#### **4.3 Quality, antagonism and the National Curriculum.**

While there is much highly informative scholarship on the history of the National Curriculum (Chitty 2014, Jones 2003, Simon 1999, Aldrich 1992 and 2000, Johnson 1989), what all such accounts have omitted is the vital role played by the policy idea of quality in the politics effecting that political change. Nor can the political analyst be content merely to say that 'quality' provided politicians

with a means of shifting power to the centre; what is important is to understand why 'quality' was able to be so effective in achieving that end. The argument of this section is that the reason why 'quality' was such a powerful idea, lay in its ability to contest rival political ideas and in enabling politicians to 'resolve' antagonisms; from this came the hegemonic political agency required to institutionalize 'quality'. These attributes are well illustrated by an examination of some of the issues and arguments which arose in the course of legislating for and implementing the National Curriculum.

As has already been explained above, it was Sir Keith Joseph who had skilfully traced a path centred on the concepts of excellence and choice and his period as SoS for Education (1983-87) saw increasing intervention based on those lines of argument, as exemplified in the White Papers of 1983 and 1985, through the management of teachers and a reduction in LEA powers. However, by 1986, Joseph's particular style and approach was waning, and other Conservative politicians sought ways to boost the party's electoral appeal; he was therefore replaced by Kenneth Baker, considered to be a better communicator, and during the 1987 General Election campaign, Margaret Thatcher was to call for and promise "a revolution in the running of the schools" (Chitty 1991:330). In this context, the concept of quality became a political resource and tool of further value. For as one educational historian has argued, it was this agenda which helped to change the political mood from a sense of the lacklustre moments of a second term into "a vigorous prelude to a third term" (Chitty 1991:337). However, in making arguments for a National Curriculum, Baker was carrying on from a position staked out by Joseph, promising to raise standards and extend choice, but also arguing that the complacency of too many educationalists, "has left our national educational performance

limping along behind that of our industrial competitors" (Simon 1999:540). Moreover, in presenting the 'Great Education Reform Bill' for a second reading in the House of Commons, Baker was enabled to take the strategic step of throwing James Callaghan's words back at the Opposition, to his own party's advantage: "Lord Callaghan was alive to this more than ten years ago when, in his Ruskin college speech, he drew attention to the need for change. But the so-called great debate produced no action" (Hansard HC Deb 01 December 1987).

The increasing utility of 'quality' was a consequence of the fact that it was able to decontest contentious concepts. In this context, that meant that by invoking 'quality', political actors had been able to decontest the promotion of difference and choice in education. This is to say, they were able to create support for a hierarchical educational system, while claiming to be acting in the interests of equality. This was a notable achievement, though it was not unprecedented; the 1944 Education Act for a while managed to bring off a similar feat by way of the notion of 'parity of esteem', whereby the tripartite system of grammar, technical and secondary schools, was regarded by many politicians across the political spectrum to be not about selecting pupils for better or worse schools, but simply a matter of catering to different intrinsic aptitudes. In the period studied here, the arguments made at first in the name of standards, and subsequently for and by 'quality', served a similar function, decontesting difference and choice, and thus hierarchy, through the very simple step of arguing for high quality teaching in all schools and in identifying the source of inequality of outcome in deficient teachers, schools and local authorities. This was something made all the easier by the doxa that there were many such deficiencies, a doxa reinforced, as the William Tyndale case demonstrated, by a media focus on generalizations from single cases and by the fact that

neither the lay population, nor politicians, were necessarily highly skilled in discerning between status and substance in the matter of educational practice. However, 'quality' did not just enable politicians and other political actors to decontest other concepts and thus win arguments, and then proceed to legislate; it also enabled them to resolve antagonisms and, vitally, to institutionalize the very concept of 'quality' itself.

#### **4.4 Institutional struggle: HMI and OFSTED**

The creation of the National Curriculum was not of course, solely the outcome of the contingent strategizing on the part of Conservative ministers in the second half of the 1980s. As noted earlier in this chapter, a centralizing vision and ideas about a core curriculum had been articulated within the DES between 1976 and 1977, and had helped to shape Callaghan's Ruskin speech. The idea of a national curriculum had also been mooted within HMI and by educationalists for at least two decades prior to 1988 (Aldrich 1992:61). Furthermore, as we saw in Chapter One, the process of institutionalizing 'quality' in the British State can be seen to have begun in 1974, through the means of the BSI and as argued in that chapter, this suggests that it was a problematization of industrial competitiveness rather than welfare problematization which was the driver of neoliberalism in the UK (Gibson and Henrikson 2012). This is a form of problematization which is clear in the evidence discussed thus far in this chapter, and it bears upon both the first and the third research questions which concern this thesis. In working towards answering those research questions, this thesis takes the view that the political analyst should adhere to a view of the state as an ensemble. It is therefore important to examine how the National Curriculum and the idea of 'quality', which was central in structuring the drive towards that goal, was construed by different institutional elements within the ensemble. To this end, the struggles which



ensued between Ministers and other Conservative groups in respect of HMI and OFSTED, following the passing of the Education Reform Bill, are illuminating.

Conservative politicians had seen the concept of a National Curriculum as a viable means by which to achieve their policy goals of pursuing the standards agenda as well as the economic and moral revival central to the Thatcherite project. However, in line with New Right thinking, the market was seen as the way to achieve these policy goals, and the National Curriculum was seen as a centralised bureaucracy, contradictory to the market approach and therefore inefficient and a curb on freedom of choice (Chitty 2014:53). For the government however, there was a practical problem in that it became clear during the course of 1991 that the National Curriculum would require regular school inspections on a mass scale. This was for both bureaucratic and political reasons: the administrative rationale was the need to assess students and monitor progress, while in terms of political strategy it was necessary to demonstrate the success of the policy, by way of an improvement in school performance. However, the programme of mass inspection required to gather such data was a task well beyond the capacity of HMI, with a staff of 480 inspectors in 1991 (Thomas 1998:420).

Nor was this the least of the problems which HMI posed for government. The role of HMI has been described as that of an 'interpretive community', and it was seen as "an authoritative interpreter and re-interpreter of policy texts" (Lee and Fitz 1997:41). For Conservative politicians, including Kenneth Baker, this meant that HMI could be described as "the priesthood" of the DES, itself a department "among those with the strongest in-house ideology", which "represented perfectly the theory of 'producer capture' " (Baker 1993:168). These were views also

echoed by Baker's successor, Kenneth Clarke, who was responsible for the White Papers published in 1991 and 1992 and the important legislation issuing from them. It was this legislation which created Ofsted and the new funding and regulatory agencies, institutions which as we will shortly see, acted to sediment a dominant meaning and practice of 'quality'. For Clarke and government in general at this moment, the implementation of policy was not helped by an inspectorate which was "running around the country critically commenting on them" (Bolton in Thomas, G, 1998:45). Unsurprisingly this ran counter to the robustly independent view of the Chief HMI of the day that the proper role of the Inspectorate was one which would "be able to provide it [government] with the professional information, advice and judgement necessary for developing, pursuing and evaluating its policies for education", (Bolton 1995). Thus, the second way in which HMI was problematic related to the ability of government to have control over policy, reflecting more general debates amongst political analysts, as to the reasons for the development of NDPBs in the 1990s. While those debates can be distilled down to the view that NDPBs were either the product of the self-interested action of civil servants in expanding bureaucratic structures (Dunleavy 1991) or were driven by politicians seeking to enhance their own power (Marsh et al 2001), the examples discussed here suggest that in fact, both factors were in play.

The final way in which these intra-state relationships are important, concerns the different forms of assessment which different groups applied not just to each other, but also to the public they served, and how these impacted views about 'quality'. For Conservative politicians, the idea that social class differences could explain differences in school 'output' was rejected. However, this clashed with the view from HMI; it adopted a methodological approach it termed 'match', through which

inspectors claimed to be able to know what level of work pupils in different social contexts were capable of (Lee and Fitz 1997). Through the lens of Conservative empiricism, this methodology was clearly not only incorrect, but also unnecessary. These different assessments and judgements about social groups and their capabilities, created a situation where politicians did not trust the judgements of the official inspectorate at precisely the moment where decisions had to be made as to how to manage the institution – the National Curriculum – which had been created in order to solve what had been problematized under the label of ‘quality’.

The solution devised to resolve these problems was to retain, but vastly reduce HMI, with the intention that it was to act as a purely regulatory body and contract out inspection to private providers (Thomas 1998:420), for the reasons on the grounds of market ideology as discussed above. According to this plan, school governors would be given the power to appoint any provider they chose, the only stipulation being that government requirements for regular inspection were fulfilled. However, it became apparent during legislative scrutiny that this solution would be hamstrung on the grounds that permitting schools a free choice could lead them to select the services not of the ‘best’ or most professional inspection team, but of those which would provide the judgement which schools were most comfortable with; clearly the market could be gamed to serve vested interests and Conservative ministers were unable to come up with a persuasive argument to refute this. As a result of this objection, Government was forced to compromise and concede that a new agency would have to be created, with the role of HMI retained, but somewhat reshaped as a regulator. The administrative need was for an agency that would ‘issue contracts, ensure quality control and assurance, collect, collate and analyse inspection data, commission reports and

enquiries into aspects of the system, and to produce such reports and documents as required by DfEE and ministers' (Lee and Fitz 1997:47). What resulted was therefore, a reformed and reduced HMI, with the role of advising a new agency on inspection and standards, while the new agency, OFSTED, contracted out the hard routine work of inspection to subcontractors. Senior ministers were resentful of this, but others held out the hope that policy advice and guidance from the new agency, OFSTED, would be 'at best very muted' (Lee and Fitz 1997).

#### **4.5 Assessing the population**

However, to understand why these events happened in this way, we must examine the rhetorical political action. In this case, Conservative politicians were influenced by, and able to draw upon the rhetorical and ideational resources produced by the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), the think tank founded by Margaret Thatcher, Keith Joseph and Alfred Sherman. As Clarke's autobiography makes clear, in drawing up his plans for the 1992 Education Act and the reform of inspection, his thinking was guided by a CPS pamphlet written by a Conservative supporting LEA Chief Inspector, John Burchill. This had been brought to Clarke's attention by his advisor, Tessa Keswick, later to become a Director of the CPS (Clarke 2016). Burchill's pamphlet argued that school inspection was not at all objective and that a fresh cohort of inspectors "will have no brief to expound particular views or theories of education" (Burchill 1991:9). Burchill recommended that inspectors should not be recruited solely from the teaching profession, and should include recruiting "representatives from other professions, business, industry or finance, who could demonstrate an *understanding of how to control quality* in public services" (Burchill 1991:7, my emphasis). This was not the only step required for Burchill however; the key element in this prescription was that the "state monopoly of inspection", the right

to define and judge what counted as a good school, had to be removed. Burchill therefore argued for a complete privatisation of inspection services. As we have just seen, these were proposals which Clarke, no supporter of 'progressive education', was happy to promote, but unable to implement without modification of the market principle. The attentive reader may question whether this was rhetorical political action and the point here is that it was precisely that, for pamphleteering is an old, but by no means extinct, genre of political argument. What we see in Burchill's pamphlet is a vigorous argument based on ethos; he is for the ethos of the tried and trusted conservative educational traditionalist, such as himself, and impugns the efficacy of those he sees as progressives. Here we must remind ourselves that in the early 1990s, it is likely that for these political actors, the context of the 1970s, and of the Tyndale 'scandal', was still resonant.

This rhetorical political action was moreover, amplified in the aftermath of the 1992 Education Act, through the publication of another CPS pamphlet, *Inspecting the Inspectors* (Lawlor 1993). In this publication, concerns with ethos are also to the fore and Lawlor's assessment of the type of people who form the staff of the educational bureaucracy is negative in the extreme, identifying such people as the cause of the problem of low standards in education: "The danger now is that future inspection will be undermined by virtue of being run by the same people and inspectorates as managed previous LEA and HMI inspection" (Lawlor 1993:18). Such people, Lawlor complains, support progressive values and so in recruitment, factors such as race and gender count towards appointment such that "there will be openings for candidates in such dubious subjects as environmental education, equal opportunities, health education, media studies, outdoor education, and personal and social

education" (Lawlor 1993:19). What was needed, Lawlor argued, drawing upon a common metaphor, was 'new blood' in order to avoid the perpetuation of old attitudes<sup>24</sup>. Those suitably qualified to carry out such work, would be teachers and professionals, who were retired or 'scholars, literary figures; historians and scientists from outside the world of education; married women educated and with good honours degrees' (1993:22). While the lines of argument exemplified by these two pamphlets were somewhat side-lined by the creation of OFSTED it is important to note that they did not simply evaporate. The two ideas that there was a state monopoly on judging the 'quality' of schools, and that certain groups within the state were of insufficient calibre and possessed of an illogical and perverse set of values, were to be reactivated in 2010 when the Conservative Party came to power in coalition with the Liberal-Democrats and set out to reform OFSTED.

#### **4.5.1 Redescribing Class**

Until that time however, what was sedimented and institutionalized through the idea of quality were particular assessments of the recipients of 'quality' education, and these, though less antagonistic and obtrusive, were no less concerned with and based upon judgements about social difference. This is evident from a close reading of the 1992 White Paper, *Choice and Diversity*. This White Paper reflected a continuation of John Major's attempt to differentiate his government from those of Margaret Thatcher and to this end it involved a mix of privatization and what can be characterized as a "traditional Conservative belief in the self-evident values of a meritocratic society" (Chitty

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<sup>24</sup> Here ethos serves not simply to provide authority to the speaker, or in this case, the writer, but also to shift the argument on to moral grounds. It is also about what sort of people, that is to say, what class of people, should have power.

2014:55). This of course involved an emphasis on the importance of equal opportunities, an emphasis made by an appeal to pathos: "I am not prepared to see children in some parts of this country having to settle for a second-class education [...] each has but one chance in life" (DES 1992: v). However, as the title of the White Paper made clear, this was not an argument against what were considered to be different choices. In this way, diversity was presented as an alternative to a pejoratively framed uniformity, with the argument that uniformity presupposes "that all children are basically the same and that local communities have basically the same educational needs" (DES 1992:1.15). What is also important in a text is what is not said, and in this document, what is not mentioned explicitly, is class or social class. What is found instead throughout the text are various euphemisms, such as 'social disadvantage', 'large housing estate areas', and frequent references to the geographical location of 'disadvantage', by way of phrases such as, the 'inner city areas', inner city disadvantaged areas', and 'inner city LEAs' (DES 1992:123, 117, 110, 116, 13, 18). However, having said this, the school population and school are referred to in terms of a pathologizing gaze whereby the problematic cases are isolated to particular localities. Thus, having identified truancy as a particular problem, readers are told that truancy often triggers criminality and that "This problem is often at its worst in our inner city or large housing estate areas" (DES 1992:1.26). However, there is the possibility of redemption, since 'beacon schools' exist in such areas, and these are "the schools to which parents flock" (DES 1992:1.26). This is an appeal to logos and in rhetoric that of course means that it involves a quasi-logical argument which employs "only parts of a syllogism" or relies on premises that are "probable rather than certain" (Finlayson 2007:557). Thus, while there is an established social scientific literature which maps out the links between truancy and criminality (see e.g. Farrall et al., 2020, Berg 1997), this text

presents the reader with an enthymeme whereby the following chain of reason may be activated: areas of low socio-economic class and high levels of deprivation will have high rates of truancy, and will therefore be likely to have high rates of crime and this is caused by poor quality schooling. In this way the cause and effect commonplace that schools are responsible for social disorder and inequality, first activated in Sir Keith Joseph's Edgbaston speech, justified and authorized policy reforms, was incorporated into legislation and was institutionalized.

#### **4.5.2 The Myth of Leaders and Led**

A close reading of the other White Papers of this period elaborates these lines of argument and highlights that what is at work in these texts is a social myth of leaders and led. In its Laclauian sense, the concept of myth indicates new "spaces of representation", which attempt to cover over dislocations (Howarth 2000:111), and this is precisely what is found in these texts. Thus, in the White Paper, *Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (DES 1991), we are told that a 'revolution' has occurred in education and training over the past decade, but while good progress has been made, "this is not good enough". What is needed is a skilled workforce able to "take on the international competition and beat it" (DES 1991:2). To do this, what is said to be the 'artificial divide' between academic and vocational qualifications must end and to do this, the 'barriers to opportunity', which are said to be the result of bureaucratic organization on the part of educational professionals must be swept away: "We want to knock down barriers to opportunity. We want higher standards. We want more choice" (DES 1991:2). The solution to this problem was to come from reforming the organization of training and instigating programmes run by 'top business people', and enabling employers to play a greater role as leaders of training (DES 1991:2).



This line of argument is reinforced in another White Paper in the context of a narrative of decline (*Competitiveness – Creating the Enterprise Centre of Europe*, DfEE 1996b). Here we see the deployment of pathos through the argument that the proposed changes to the organization of education and training programmes “are the building blocks with which Government is creating a comprehensive improvement in standards to correct over a century’s under-performance” (DTI 1996:34, my emphasis). This appeal however, is tied to a further appeal on the basis of ethos, for in order to rectify decline, we are told, we must look to the creation of free standing agencies, which need targets and effective monitoring, but also “first class people” (DTI 1996:119). The leadership of such people will help the United Kingdom (UK) become “world class” since they will “unlock” the potential of people (DTI 1996:148); these subjects are described as “innovative”, and “continuously seeking to introduce new products and services” and as “able to constantly learn from others”, and it is these personal qualities “of prime movers in an organization that largely determine that success” (DTI 1996:22).

It is notable moreover that this argument is explicitly linked to particular interests. The introduction to the text argues that costs imposed by Government must be kept to a minimum, “so that success is rewarded” and that low levels of public expenditure “give the private sector more room to create wealth” (DTI 1996:16). And in this context, it is stated that public servants “need to understand how the world is changing” (DTI 1996: 116), and that in such a competitive economic environment, high quality public services are vital. Moreover, since “Enterprise in the private sector pays for public services”, value for money is “essential to keep the burdens on enterprise to a minimum” (DTI 1996: 116). The social myth of leaders and led set out here was

therefore very clearly and explicitly one linked to the notion of a hierarchy, but this was a hierarchy which was justified on the grounds that it was fair and would create "a level playing field" to ensure "fair competition" (DfEE 1996b:45).

#### **4.5.3 Ethos, ability and failure**

The principles flowing from these persuasive and productive lines of argument, as well as the leitmotif of 'choice and diversity', were also faithfully mirrored in the final White Paper on education in this period, *Self-Government for Schools* (DfEE 1996a). Thus in this text, 'quality' enabled politicians to argue effectively for diversity by appeals to logos, which emphasised the need to maintain the momentum for improvement by changing structures, i.e. the ways in which schools were organized, governed and funded. The grounds for such changes were that these would allow schools more 'freedom' and 'independence', particularly in terms of financial organization and decision-making, and this would promote 'quality' and further raise standards. In the context of this argument, the White Paper set out proposals to increase the number of Grant Maintained (GM) schools, and the encouragement of more grammar and specialized schools. It is on this point that the basis of such arguments on the grounds of ethos become evident. The White Paper pays what can be seen as lip service to the quality of comprehensives, noting the "many excellent comprehensives", and even states that the sharp distinction between grammar schools for the best and comprehensives for the rest is "outmoded", since what is envisaged is an "enriching choice" (DfEE 1996a:36,3). The argument against comprehensive schools is that they are said to neglect the fact that children have different aptitudes, abilities, needs and interests (DfEE 1996a:3, 5) and it is added that parents want diversity and choice. Yet it is asserted that while GM status can benefit all types of school, it is

particularly attractive to those that are “successful, enterprising and well-managed”; the claim is that deregulation will enable such schools to respond “imaginatively and flexibly to the developing needs of their communities” (DfEE 1996a:7). While this class-based ethos is valorised, however, it is argued that grammar schools have provided opportunities for children from all backgrounds, and therefore that “it is right to have schools which can focus all their efforts on stretching the most able” (DfEE 1996a:43).

Several social assessments are implicit to these arguments on the basis of ethos. The claim that GM is attractive to schools which are “successful, enterprising and well-managed”, indicates an implicit privileging of particular social categories, while a negative assessment is made of schools not classified as successful, and speaks to the social antagonisms discussed further above (DfEE 1996a). Socio-economic class categories are more complex than the view of ‘class’, such as it is in these texts, is depicted, whereas these texts seem to recognize only crude distinctions, between leaders, ‘top class people’, and the led, and between schools which are ‘successful’ and those which are ‘failing’. This is to gloss over the finely graded distinctions which characterise the terrain. The assessments made of pupils in grammar schools is likewise, one which must be challenged. The idea that such schools can focus on stretching the ‘most able’ is an interesting enthymeme; it depends upon the assumption that other schools are unable to cater for so-called ‘mixed-ability’ intakes, but also upon a concept of ‘most able’ which implicitly classifies academic skills as superior to other skills and which is entirely contestable. Finally, the White Paper’s comments and proposals make an extremely negative assessment on the capability and role of LEAs. As we have already seen, the assessments made in critique of LEAs, were very much founded on a rejection of the alleged ethos of that group. This line

of argument can be seen to reach something of a culmination in this White Paper, which set out plans to reduce the role of LEAs to hubs of service provision. From henceforth, they were to be positioned in effect as 'relay' runners in a circuit where the chief currency was data, but with no power to 'control and run' schools. LEAs new role was seen to lie in three tasks: direct intervention, target setting, and service (but not curricular) inspection.

#### **4.6 The institutionalization of 'quality' and the production of truth**

All of this political and rhetorical work was enabled by the concept of quality, and what these texts were creating was a signifying chain of meaning, a chain of economic reasoning the meaning of which was fixed entirely by the nodal point of 'quality'. However, to fully understand just what political work the concept of quality enabled political actors to do, it is necessary to stand back for a moment from complex theorization and survey the field in terms of what institutional changes were enabled through the legislation issuing from these White Papers and the situations and events discussed above. From this perspective, the six White Papers discussed in this chapter enabled a range of legislation which created the administrative architecture necessary for the running of a new 'quality' regime. This section must, by necessity, be selective, since the aim here is not to provide a comprehensive coverage of all educational legislation passed during this period, but only to highlight what is relevant to an understanding of the means of constructing and administering 'quality' policy.

In this regard, it is notable that these changes took place over a period of just under a decade, as political actors made changes opportunistically and in response to demands and events. The institutionalization of 'quality' can be seen as developing over the course of three administrations: Thatcher's third administration

(June 1987-Nov 1990), and Major's two administrations (Nov 1990-April 1992 and April 1992-May 1997)<sup>25</sup>. In the first of these periods, the Education Reform Act of 1988 (ERA), marked a sea change in how education was run throughout the UK. Unusually, this legislation was not preceded by a White Paper, and was the outcome of rapid policy making prior to the General Election of 1987, where the political requirement was for an education policy which would appeal to Conservative Party members and politicians, and have popular appeal to the electorate (Simon 1999:527). Nevertheless, the ERA put into effect the critique of quality and standards which we have discussed earlier in this chapter. Thus, the ERA saw the introduction of inter alia, the National Curriculum, the creation of new categories of school, such as GM schools and City Technology Colleges (CTCs), the Local Management of Schools (LMS), a new financial system which necessitated that the management of funding was removed from LEA control and handed directly to schools, and requirements to publish performance and inspection data. This represented the dismantling of a 'national system, locally administered', which Kenneth Baker had 'derided as "maverick, eccentric and muddled" (Simon 1999:531) in a speech earlier in 1987, and the beginnings of a regime whereby school data could be gathered and published. It was in this way that arguments about 'quality' and standards enabled and formed a concentration of power, by way of a national curriculum, at the centre of government.

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<sup>25</sup> This is a long period of political time, but my argument is that across it, actors produced and reproduced common rhetorical lines of argument, reflecting a rhetorical path dependency and thus it has to be analysed in this way. A reshaping of conservatism is also evident through this period (see Hall 1993, Hay 1996:160-166). I tentatively suggest Hay's verdict, that 'Majorism thus represents continuity in terms of the inherited structures of the state precisely because it represents change in terms of its mode of political rationality', may be open to some refinement on the basis of the institutional change discussed in this chapter. The findings in this and subsequent chapters, tell a story of continual institutional change.

Two further periods of institutionalization followed during the second Major administration, based in part on an agenda set out in the White Paper 'Choice and Diversity'. This White Paper reflected the choice and diversity theme which we have seen was created in the 1970s by Sir Keith Joseph. Also important however, were the ideas and arguments set out in John Major's 'Citizen's Charter', a policy initiative which Major had created in the belief that a big idea in domestic policy was required in the run up to the General Election of 1992 (Thomas 1998). This document drew heavily on the concept of 'quality' and applied the concept across government and the public services and gave particular prominence to privatization, competitive tendering, belief in the market mechanism and "giving more power to the citizen" (Cabinet Office 1991:2). As in 1988, a substantial policy initiative was introduced in the context of an election campaign. As we have seen, in this case plans for fully privatizing inspection had to be modified as a result of political opposition. However, the changes made were substantial; if the ERA had marked a sea change, the institutional changes of the 1990s embedded 'quality' into a new educational regime.

In this second stage of legislation new inspection agencies were created in schools and in further education (FE). This resulted in new institutions and new practices. The Education (Schools) Act of 1992 reformed HMI and created Ofsted, with powers to inspect schools on a regular basis. In FE, another piece of legislation created the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), responsible for both funding and inspection, whereby the concept of quality enabled the creation of a system of three policy levers: formula funding, regular inspection, and statistical performance data (Fletcher et al 2015). However, as will become apparent in the next chapter, this efficiency was more apparent than real. In

the school sector, the creation of Ofsted and the institutionalized practice of collating results data into league tables (Leckie and Goldstein 2017) and another new agency, the Funding Agency for Schools (FAS), in 1992, provided perhaps a less elegant, and certainly a more antagonistic means of measurement and performance management. Nevertheless, this was to prove an effective disciplinary mechanism with which to implement policy and govern schools. A third set of legislation in 1996/97 was essentially concerned with consolidating the previous legislation. Most importantly this concerned inspection and the arrangements for putting schools into 'special measures' following failure to provide an acceptable standard of education, giving schools more power to enforce discipline, and requiring parents to sign 'home-school agreements'.

In sum, what political actors using 'quality' as a basis for arguments to reform education had constructed by the end of the second Major administration, was a new institutional arrangement which, rather than monitoring and measuring something which already existed, in fact produced the truth of 'quality'. For this was a set of reforms which had institutionalized and embedded the concept of quality in new inspection agencies and procedures. Schools and FE colleges were now to be assessed and funded on the basis of their ability to manage 'quality' and to satisfy the performance targets by which 'quality' was to be identified. These were changes which coincided with the rapidly increasing use of the term 'evidence-based policy', reflecting the empiricist principles<sup>26</sup> which political actors deployed to defend their policy choices. This enabled a highly simplified and quasi-logical argument to be promoted by way of comparison. The quasi-logical

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<sup>26</sup> Of course, political actors claims to empiricism must be challenged since they existed within an ideological horizon.

line of argument was that since some schools in so-called 'disadvantaged areas' could be successful, that is, achieve government set targets, the independent variable in question must be the schools themselves, and the solution was therefore to improve the quality of the schools and teachers. Prima facie, this is plausible, and it is certainly one way of reading tabulated correlations of socio-economic class and educational outcome. It was to be, and remains, a highly persuasive and in fact, a hegemonic point of view.

Thus, what was achieved by this institutionalization of the political concept of quality, was the embedding of a concept which exemplifies an "ethical and political vision that is dominated by an idea of competitive activity, that is, the production of inequality" Davies (2014:310). To be clear, this is to claim that 'quality' is to be identified as an absolutely key neoliberal political concept, (a point which appears to be neglected in the education policy and public administration literature). It is for this reason that we can observe tensions within the Conservative articulation of 'quality' in this period: in the lead to the 1992 Education Act, we have seen how some Conservative actors were reluctant to see the creation of what they perceived to be a state monopoly. Indeed, Lawlor, whose pamphlet *Inspecting the Inspectors* was discussed earlier, referred to the concept of quality in a sceptical tone; the preferred term in Conservative discourse was of course, not 'quality', but 'standards'. The idea of quality however, easily gained predominance because it was a more powerful ideological tool, since unlike 'standards', it could decontest inequality; and in any case, it could subsume and co-exist with the idea of standards.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Alan Finlayson (private correspondence) has suggested that there is a case for arguing that the displacement of 'standards' by 'quality' reflects a shift in focus on the part of government, from outcomes to the management of the procedures which produce outcomes, and that this is more suited to neoliberal governance. I can see the appeal of this point however I would argue that this is simply too neat and underestimates the continuing importance of hierarchy



The institutionalization of 'quality' was extremely successful and persuasive, not simply as Hall contended, because it depended on importing a compliant 'New Model Army' into already existing institutions (Hall 1991:14), but precisely because in decontesting inequality, 'quality' enabled the generation of support for reform and the creation of new institutions from across party political boundaries, and a new mode of governance. This no doubt is one of the main factors which made it possible for many educationalists and others who could not necessarily be seen as natural Conservative Party supporters, to be persuaded to serve in these institutions. While the desirability of personnel with business or financial experience working in the new agencies was increasingly being expressed in legislation, Ofsted, the FEFC and other agencies, continued to recruit staff from the education service and the civil service, rather than business. The institutionalization of the technology of the board and with it, the recruitment of business personnel into government (on an unpaid, non-executive basis), did not occur until much later, in 2010 under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition (Barratt 2015, Cabinet Office 2010). It was therefore the case, as Freedon argues, that the political ideology of neoliberalism "appeared under a conservative protective mantle" (Freedon 2003:95). This is an important point, for it was the use of conservative notions of fairness, and an ethos of fairness, as discussed earlier, which enabled the political space into which 'quality' was pitched, to be

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in conservative thought and in the Conservative party. Notions of standards are very persistent and are in fact incorporated, subsumed and re-described within the notion of 'quality'(see Chapter 6). Moreover, it is unhelpful to drive too firm a wedge between standards and quality, for as Pring has commented, 'Quality is reflected in the standards, explicit or implicit, to which reference is made when performance is judged' (Pring 1992:5). Standards and quality are logically related and 'quality' in fact permits more pervasive and subtle forms of hierarchical standards. Nevertheless, this said, at this moment, (as the discussion on this point demonstrates), we do see tensions within the Conservative party between those who emphasise standards and others who are content to embrace the more neoliberal term, 'quality'.

exploited in such a way as to decontest hierarchy and inequality. This 'quality' was able to do, by creating the ideational architecture supporting a fantasmatic vision of meritocracy.

This was something which political actors did by recourse, not simply to argument, but to arguing with and constructing policy through the lens of forms of assessment. I argue that this was evident through the debates of the 1970s as articulated through the Black Papers and the William Tyndale controversy. These debates were not merely concerned with differences of educational philosophy; they were manifestations of social antagonisms and it was these situations which the speeches of Keith Joseph and James Callaghan both responded to and constructed. My claim is that the forms of assessment at work here were constructed on the basis of class antagonisms. As we have seen was the case with Joseph's speech, the form of assessment was a crude one which implied that it was only a minority of state school pupils (and therefore, those of lower social class origin) who were 'talented' with the clear implication being that the mass were lacking talent, as well as being inclined to criminality and promiscuity. Callaghan, though arguing from a different political position, nevertheless also envisaged limited horizons for state school students: schools were to equip them merely for "a job of work" (Callaghan 1976).

Decisions about education policy were subsequently informed by such commonplace assessments of social class and institutionalized. These simplistic views of social class supported a view that what was at fault were the institutions serving the population. Hence what we have seen in the White Papers examined in this chapter, is a confused and contradictory approach to class. There are for example, assertions which imply that social class is not a significant factor since schools in "widely

different circumstances” can achieve high standards (DES 1985:3), yet at the same time ‘disadvantaged areas’ are identified as problematic (DES 1992:123, 117). Moreover, alongside these negative assessments, we also find more positive assessments with respect to grammar schools, which we are told can focus on stretching the ‘most able’. This assumes however, that such judgements of ability are pure empirical findings, not social constructs (DfEE 1996a). We have also seen that forms of assessment played a key role in the critique of the 1992 Education Act within the ranks of Conservative supporters. While that critique was concerned with inspection and the control of ‘quality’ in education, there was also a very clear moral and class element to it. As Sheila Lawlor’s pamphlet made clear, this was not primarily an argument about methods; it was concerned above all with the social class of those deemed able to assess the ‘quality’ of schools (Lawlor 1993).

The concept of quality was therefore not necessarily synonymous with social class, but it was an idea which in enabling and promoting the classification of objects, activated commonplace enthymemes and drew upon commonplace forms of assessment. What the examples discussed in this chapter show however, is that at the same time it also provided a tool which would enable the strategic redescription of social class through the construction of new inspection categories and classes of school.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the construction and institutionalization of ‘quality’ arose through three key moments in the 1970s and thus, that it was the order in which things were said and argued, which made things happen and affected how they happened. The neoliberal political and policy idea of quality,

it has been argued, was highly effective because it enabled political actors to decontest hierarchy and inequality and was therefore an immensely powerful strategic resource for political actors. It also recast the role of the state. This goes some considerable way towards answering the research questions with which this thesis is concerned. The first question is concerned with how and why political actors used 'quality' as a political concept. Thus far, the answer to the first part of that question is that political actors used 'quality' firstly to problematize a perceived political and policy area and subsequently, they used it to provide a solution. The second part of this question is more complex. However, on a first level, what this chapter has shown is that political actors used 'quality' because it was something provided by the ideological resources available at that time and it enabled politicians to make appeals to different constituencies; to those already committed to support Conservative policy, it promised an emphasis which was easily reconciled with demands for order, discipline, tradition and standards. To others not committed to support the Conservative Party, it offered the promise of opportunity and mobility. To educational professionals and civil servants, it offered a project which was highly compatible with the beliefs of those who valued equality. Our second research question raises the issue of what ideational processes were involved in the construction and articulation of 'quality'. On this matter, this chapter has indicated that 'quality' enabled the activation of several enthymemes which were persuasive because they were rooted in contemporary doxa. In terms of the third research question, how 'quality' was related to interests, what must be recognized in the first instance, is that contra many Marxist accounts, we can see that rather than interests being obscured by political actors, they are in fact highlighted as a topic of political argument. The concept of quality in the period discussed served as an ideological guide, not to obscure, but to

construct interests, although this is certainly not to argue that in such arguments, power was not at play. Thus, what we see is 'quality' being used by politicians as a weapon with which to criticise the vested 'producer interests' of LEAs and other 'producers' of education, and yet at the same time, offered as a solution which would serve the common good, since it would create 'a level playing field', and ensure 'fair competition'.

However, these answers only constitute a beginning for this enquiry. They inevitably raise a host of further questions for the interpretive political analyst, not the least of which is what became of 'quality' following the fall of Major's second administration and the end of eighteen years of Conservative government. Whether a political idea so clearly linked to conservative and neoliberal principles could have any further utility to a set of politicians ostensibly driven by an entirely different political ideology is the subject of the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5 New Labour: Quality in a Modern and Civilised Society**

In the previous chapter we have seen the role played by the policy concept of quality in three moments over a long period of change. We now come to consider the role of 'quality' in the politics of New Labour. This role came about in a rhetorical situation in which New Labour was able to identify and construct a new exigence requiring an urgent response around the familiar narrative of decline. However, the meaning and use of 'quality' was by no means settled in 1997, as New Labour came to office, and what is found is a drawn out and incremental institutional change. There was to be further contestation as to how best to define, measure, and manage the concept of quality, and this justified further institutional change throughout New Labour's period in office, as political actors at different levels competed for effective political control of the concept.

In the field of British politics, to talk of institutional change in the context of the rise of New Labour in the 1990s, is also to engage with debates about political change and the influence of Thatcherism (Hay 1999). The position taken here is that New Labour represented not continuity with Thatcherism, but rather an extension of it (Jessop 2007, Hay 1999), and as this chapter will attempt to show, revised Thatcherism through the prism of its own ideological sources and forms of assessment. As has been argued elsewhere, the concept of modernization was of major importance in this ideational action (Finlayson 2003:176-7). The crucial theory driving New Labour thinking, it is argued, was an uncritical adoption of the concept of globalisation and the existence of a knowledge economy. From this it was deduced that the policy requirement was for flexible, post-Fordist knowledge workers and a modernizing state. Vitally, this modernizing narrative was seen to necessitate a politics whereby "the practice

of Total Quality Management in the firm, extends into government and out into the management of communities” (Finlayson 2003:139).

One contribution which this chapter attempts to make however, is to insist that what is particularly important to note is the reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationship between the two signifiers of ‘quality’ and ‘modernization’; the chains of meaning formed through these two signifiers indicates that the two concepts were coeval. As Finlayson observes, one aspect of the ideological significance of modernization was that its apparent necessity helped to naturalize Blairism; yet the argument of this chapter is that what the concept of quality shows is that this function was itself the consequence of a broader ontological assessment. It was precisely a consequence of the ability of ‘quality’ to re-describe inequality and hierarchy, so useful to Conservative politicians, as we have seen in the previous chapter, which enabled New Labour to create a discourse where, “by happy coincidence....[...] the old divisions of society and state are gone” (Finlayson 2003:139). The argument of this chapter therefore attempts to build upon the latter comment, and to demonstrate that from the perspective of New Labour, the UK in 1997, was a society to be understood as populated by individuals of differing qualities and from different communities. It will be argued that though this assessment could appear as unattached to any narrative of class, it did nevertheless constitute a particular logic of class and it was this which was an important driver of the ‘quality’ in education policy. The chapter will therefore proceed to examine several key moments in this rhetorical process. It will be argued that the deployment of the concept of quality through these key moments, did much more than enable political actors to produce the people required for a knowledge economy; it also justified the centralization of state power over education.

## **5.1 Blair's Conference Speech 1996: A New Age of Achievement**

The first key moment to be identified in the New Labour era is Tony Blair's conference speech in 1996, before the general election of 1997. Previous research has argued that the function of political speeches in the course of political action has not been systematically researched (Finlayson and Martin 2008). Yet since speeches can shed considerable light on political institutions, the articulation and circulation of ideologies, and upon political strategies, to neglect these resources is to lose sight of vital elements of political and argumentative action. This form of evidence was drawn on in the previous chapter and is useful once again in the particular case of Tony Blair's annual speech as leader to the party conference in 1996. This was a speech given in a distinctive context; party speeches are ritualized moments in British politics but they are also strategically important since they are moments when party leaders attempt to persuade a broad audience of the validity of their message, and are 'fundamental to the ongoing affirmation and reaffirmation of party culture and identity' (Finlayson and Martin 2008).

This was certainly true in the case of this speech; Blair had been party leader since July 1994, and although Labour had gained a poll lead under Blair's leadership considerable political energy was expended in updating the party's aims and objectives, notably changing the wording of the party's well-known Clause IV. By October 1996, with a general election widely expected in the Spring of 1997, the party leader's speech presented an important opportunity to affirm the party's identity and to persuade both party members and a national audience that Labour, or 'New Labour' as the party had been re-named, was, in Blair's terms, ready for government. This speech achieved this in several ways



and, it will be argued here that it was not only a key moment in affirming the identity of 'New Labour'; it was also a key moment in a distinctive articulation of 'quality'.

There has not been a great deal of systematic study on the political impact of Blair's speeches, but it has been suggested that Blair's style of oratory relied predominantly on ethos and pathos in preference to logos, and tended to be deliberative or epideictic (Bennister 2015). In the case of this speech however, while these aspects are evident, so too is a particular use of logos, in the setting out of the basic elements of what can be considered New Labour's economic theory. It can therefore be noted that another important potential function of the party conference speech, is not simply to affirm party culture, but also to articulate and affirm a partisan assessment of the current situation and how it is to be explained; an attempt to set down a 'party line'.

#### **5.1.1 Blair's use of ethos and pathos**

The first way in which this speech achieved these ends, was through the use of an epideictic form of persuasion. The speech commenced with the acknowledgement of debts and with thanks, as Blair praised previous Labour leaders and thanked John Prescott, the deputy-leader at that time, for his support. Such comments were primarily aimed at unifying the whole party, but they were also strategic in terms of Blair's own leadership. For in appearing to portray him as a humble supplicant before both the party and indeed the country, they served to intensify his leadership (Finlayson and Martin 2008:455).

What we see here then is, as Finlayson and Martin also point out, a powerful rhetorical technique which positions the audience in relation to the speaker in such a way that they are likely to be more receptive to the speaker and to the rhetorical strategy which

follows. In this case, Blair's performance as supplicant is enhanced further by the ethos he deploys elsewhere in the speech. Given Blair's own personal history, authenticity was a sensible strategy. He acknowledged his own privilege and the fact that he "was not born Labour", making a virtue out of the fact that he would not pretend he "had a deprived background" (Blair 1996). From this position, Blair staked a claim to his socialist credibility through an anecdote about his attendance at the funeral of a character much more symbolic of traditional Labour values; the robust and reputedly hard-drinking former Labour treasurer and one-time leader of the seaman's union, who had died in the previous year, Sam McCluskie (Blair 1996, Pattinson 1995). It would perhaps, be difficult to find a character better able to personify the ethos of traditional Labour. As Blair explained, McCluskie's daughter bestowed a keepsake (a small piece of red ribbon) upon him despite his protestations that he did not know McCluskie that well, and that "a lot of the time we didn't see eye to eye" (Blair 1996). To this, McCluskie's daughter replied, "I know that, but in your souls you want the same thing, a better world", which provided Blair with the next two lines in his speech: "That is it. That is what we believe in" (Blair 1996). In this way Blair appeared to be aiming not only to affirm the unity of the party, but also the authenticity of his own Labour identity. By enrolling McCluskie's traditionalist Labour persona to endorse his own political identity, Blair was attempting to neutralize his own upper middle class identity. What matters, as Blair was arguing, not through his own words, but through those of an unimpeachable character referee, was that 'we' (this inclusive 'we' enrols his audience) want 'the same thing'; thus, an identity of interests between party leader and the wider party has been constructed and affirmed.

### **5.1.2 The appropriation of 'quality'**

If such an appeal appears somewhat transparent, it must be recalled that the path towards it had been carefully prepared by the epideictic persuasion that preceded it. This opened up a line of argument whereby 'quality' was appropriated to consolidate the redescription of class. In order to see that this is so, we must first draw upon several points made by others, and apply them to the current analysis. Thus, firstly as Finlayson and Martin note, referring to Blair's final party conference speech, his use of ethos was not simply a device, it was "the very substance of his argument" (2008:457): I suggest that this is a point which also pertains to this speech. Secondly, others have noted that Blair's leadership style was highly personalized and that a vital element of that style was the "projection of the leader as the embodiment of a changed 'new' Labour Party" (Bennister 2015:159). The point to be added here is that this personification also embodied and projected a "cross-class appeal" (Theakston 2002:310), or indeed, even, a classless appeal.

### **5.1.3 Blair's claim to quality**

The key claim of this section is that all three of these points were strands in the argument of this speech which had at its core, a claim about 'quality'; a claim, that 'quality' was the key to transforming the fortunes of Britain and all its citizens. For the substance of this argument was that the ethos of the leader, the party, and the entire population, was one full of potential, capable of improvement, and eminently realisable. The reason this was so, Blair argued, was firstly based upon an ontological claim; it was because 'we' were living in a time of 'extraordinary, revolutionary change at work, at home, through technology, through the million marvels of modern science'. It followed, Blair argued, that this necessitated the creation of a new age of achievement in Britain, in which all the people could share. However, Blair continued to claim that since this was an "era of

global markets”, in contrast to the Conservatives, Labour would not accept a future for Britain as a “low-wage, low-skill and low technology economy”. For Blair, on the contrary, it was the case that ‘We will compete on the basis of *quality* or not at all’ (Blair 1996, my emphasis). This does not remain at the level of a purely economic argument however, for near the end of the speech, Blair says of Labour, “we knew we could do better” and that “Britain too, can do better. Britain can be better than this” (Blair 1996). The rhetorical function of these lines in the speech thus act so that ‘quality’ is embodied not just in the person of the leader and the party program; the interweaving of the personal and the political carries a perlocutionary force, rendering ‘quality’ as a performative concept: “Think of the possibility of change [....] Let us call our nation now to its destiny.[..].a Britain united to win the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (Blair 1996). This is not to argue that ‘quality’ was the only concept at work in this speech, nor to deny that Blair had broadened the meaning of the term. It is however, to claim that this concept was being put to direct political and performative work.

There is an ideological element to this, and as Finlayson has observed, “Blair believes in our potential to be a profitable enterprise again, but not through out-dated bossy housekeeping and mean management. He wants to *encourage us all to be part of the team* devoted to total quality” (Finlayson 2002:597, my emphasis). The points us directly to the concept of quality which we have already met in Chapter Two: that promoted by management theorists in the 1980s, as exemplified by Tom Peters. We have seen the rhetoric and ideology drawn from that literature at work in the Conservative pairing of ‘choice and diversity’; this was a conceptual pairing also adopted by New Labour, and so too was the rhetoric and discourse of management. As articulated by Peters and others, the rhetoric of

quality can have a wide political appeal, as it is not simply anti-bureaucratic, but also anti-hierarchical and anti-authoritarian, and aspirational. It should come as no surprise however, that the focus on liberty integral to this rhetoric comes at the cost of a marked lack of understanding of the concept of democracy and the complex relationship between the two (Finlayson 2002).

This tells us a little more about the ideological functioning made possible by 'quality', in this speech, and more broadly. It is not simply that 'quality' de-contests inequality, it also acts so as to conflate liberty and democracy, at the expense of the latter. This in turn suggests, that the ideological function of 'quality' is not, as Gillies (2008) argues, to mask inequality. An alternative might be to claim that equality in fact is reduced to 'quality' (Udagawa 2013), and *prima facie*, there is some merit in such a view. However, in the context of a rhetorical political analysis, this thesis argues that it is more accurate to understand the ideological function of 'quality' as one serving to construct an equivalence between equality and quality, an approach which opens up, rather than closes, the analysis, since it invites us to consider how such an equivalence (which is like all meaning, unstable) is achieved, maintained and functions, rather than to postulate a single, baptismal act of naming.

#### **5.1.4 Quality: a heresthetic moment?**

It can be concluded that this speech marked a crucial moment, not just in the revival of the Labour Party and its progress towards government, but in the trajectory of 'quality'. The claim here is that it was 'quality' which was a vital conceptual component in this speech, since if Blair was able to become the embodiment of New Labour, it was 'quality' which enabled such symbolization. For as well as enrolling the persona of traditionalist Labour in the form of Sam McCluskie, Blair also evoked the persona of what

later came to be termed 'Mondeo man', drawn from an anecdote about the self-employed electrician he met while canvassing in the 1992 General Election, whose "instincts were to get on in life" (Blair 1996). This latter is of course, a sentiment entirely in keeping with the notion of continuous improvement, which is a central element of 'quality' and is applicable not simply to institutions, but to people. Moreover, this was of a piece with the chain of argument in the speech, whereby the putative existence of a global economy, required competing on the basis of quality, and quality therefore, was synonymous with a concern with improvement and 'getting on'.

This speech also set very firm parameters on what any future arguments in regard to education and the economy, and the relation between the two, were to be about in a future Labour government. As has been observed in the previous chapter, an important aspect of any rhetorical situation is to determine what the argument is about. This speech made it very clear that arguments about education would be about improving the quality of education, hence the emotional thrust of the well-known repetition (epizeuxis) of education in this speech; the entire purpose of such repetition is to emphasize a point and in doing that, which is a use of ethos, an emotional charge is given to the speech.

Another rhetorical process evident in this speech is that of 'dimension manipulation'; this refers to the process of managing the policy or political space, or framing, and is concerned with the way in which politicians attempt to deny their opponents the 'space' to create an argument. It may also refer to a 'deliberate attempt to structure political situations so that opponents will either have to submit or be trapped' (Bennister 2015:168). As Finlayson and Martin point out, political issue space can be

transformed if some activity which appears to be 'natural' is redefined as open to human agency (2008:452). However, this process can also work in the other direction, as it does in this speech, where Blair posits the 'natural' given of a global economy as something beyond human intervention, and which can only be responded to by means of the policy concept of quality and an 'age of achievement', wherein the nation would be united in a national quest for improvement. What 'quality' enabled New Labour to do on this point then, was to capture the centre ground, and it achieved this by appropriating the concept of 'quality', which had been generated as a policy concept by Conservative politicians, as we have seen in the previous chapter. In doing this, the appeal of this speech was broad; not only did it appeal to, and affirm, the unity of the Labour Party, it also reached out to a wider, national audience (Bennister 2015). This was something enabled by 'quality'; it could appeal to very different constituencies, since it was composed of multiple strands of thought and could be presented as anti-bureaucratic, anti-authoritarian, but also anti-hierarchical.

I suggest that these elements in the speech indicate that it can be characterised as a heresthetic moment. The concept of heresthetic draws upon Riker (1986) and the elaboration of this concept effected by Finlayson and Martin (2008), which construes heresthetic as a changing of the issue space within which a proposition is debated. We can see the central proposition that the English education system required improvement and that the way to do this was through the policy concept of quality, being reframed at this moment; it is moving from being a purely educational policy space, to one which is primarily defined by economic needs in the context of a global economy. Political arguments linking education and the global economy were by no means new at this point, but what makes this rhetoric and this

moment heresthetic, is that Blair explicitly re-describes education as an economic activity. This is clear when Blair says, “Well give me the education system that is 35th in the world today and I will give you the economy that is 35th in the world tomorrow” (Blair 1996). This was a sentiment which Blair had also articulated in his conference speech in 1995, where he described education as “the best economic policy there is for a modern country” (Blair 1995), a view repeated in a speech in 2005 (Reay 2008:644)<sup>28</sup>. Heresthetic is therefore to be seen as a process rather than an event, and the speech and the quotes above suggest that the change of the previous decade was indeed creating a new issue space. This was a space which, as we have seen, was leading to the creation of not only new ways of thinking about education policy, but also new institutions and the relabelling of older institutions.<sup>29</sup>

## **5.2 Excellence in Schools: the argument for a ‘crusade for higher standards’**

The introduction to this chapter has argued that the problematization adopted by New Labour in the late 1990s was one which placed the concept of modernization and the narrative of decline foremost in its own appeal to the electorate. It has also been argued that there was a reciprocal and reinforcing relationship between modernization and ‘quality’. As we have seen, the importance of this lay in the ability of ‘quality’ to decontest inequality and hierarchy, naturalizing Blairism and

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<sup>28</sup> Reay (2008:648) cites a speech by Blair in 2005 which uses the phrase, given at the City of London Academy on September 12, 2005 and published on the Downing Street website. There is a dead link to this speech.

<sup>29</sup> Witness the relabelling of the Department of Education in 1992: 1995-2001 Department for Education and Employment, 2001-2007, Department for Education and Skills, 2007-2010, Department for Children, Families and Schools, and since 2010, Department for Education. This testifies to a political and rhetorically path dependent process.



enabling New Labour to create a discourse which eliminated old divisions of society and state. This section draws from a close reading of New Labour's first education White Paper, *Excellence in Schools*, with the aim of demonstrating how it was that the concept of quality was articulated in such a way that it was able to carry out this political role, and sets out the rhetorical means by which such articulation was wrought. It is argued that in doing this, the publication of *Excellence in Schools* constituted a pivotal moment in the New Labour era, creating a template for education policy throughout the period and beyond. This document framed how education was thought and argued about by politicians across party lines from this moment, and what dominated that thinking and argument, although it could be conceived of in different ways, was the concept of 'quality'.

In examining this document however, it is to be noted that White Papers do not only serve the function of setting out plans for legislation to be debated through the legislative process; they also help political parties marshal their own forces and at the same time they 'speak' to other political forces. In doing this, White Papers also inevitably reflect past arguments and project into, and shape, future arguments. They provide not only a valuable guide to the ideas and the sources of ideas used by politicians at a particular moment, but also, a point of origin for those ideas and arguments which follow them: in the field of political argument, ideas are not to be understood only in terms of context. They are also co-textual objects, and 'splendid isolation', or pure originality, even if political actors claim it or aspire to it, is not possible; the traces of past arguments cannot be eliminated.

Both of these features are apparent in *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997) and given the comments above, it is logical to start with those ideational features and policy ideas which New Labour

adopted from its Conservative predecessors. In this respect, several policy ideas were notably similar; the emphasis on the importance of education as in the national interest, the description of economic change, the dissatisfaction with educational standards, and the attribution of the cause of low attainment as poor quality education. Thus, this White Paper asserted that the prosperity of the UK depended on ensuring “that everyone is well-educated and able to learn throughout life”, and it echoes the view of the Major government in its 1991 White Paper, *Education and Training*, where, despite improvement, education and training “was not good enough” (DES 1991:1), and it was stated that “the average student is just not good enough” (DfEE 1997:6). The reason given as to why improvements in education are required, is once more, familiar from previous White Papers; “We face new challenges at home and from international competitors, such as the Pacific Rim countries” (DfEE 1997:7). This echoes (albeit with a more specific focus, and as we have seen, using a distinctive economic theory), John Major’s foreward to *Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in 1991, where the concern was to build “the skilled and motivated workforce that we need to take on the international competition and beat it” (DES 1991:1) and the aim in *Choice and Diversity: a framework for schools*, published in 1992, to become “the best in Europe” (DfE 1992:5,53).

### **5.2.1 Teachers as the key determinants of educational success**

As to the causes of poor educational performance, *Excellence in Schools* presents the doxa that teachers are the key determinant of educational outcomes. This is a view which runs consistently throughout the White Papers discussed in this thesis. It appears in the first White Paper discussed in this study, *Teaching Quality*, where it is bluntly stated that “the teacher force, some 440 strong in England and Wales, is the major single determinant of the

quality of education”, (DES 1983:3). Towards the end of the period studied here, it appears again in *The Importance of Teaching*, where it is stated in the form that “The first and most important lesson is that no education system can be better than the quality of its teachers” (DfE 2010:1). It is also an argument which is to be found in the report made by the management consultants McKinsey in 2007, influential not only on New Labour thinking, but also on that of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition which came to power in 2010, and in a book by Michael Barber, a key New Labour official and Head of the Standards and Effectiveness Unit in the DfE, which was created in 1997 in order to oversee the implementation of education policy (Coffield 2012, Barber 2008:30).

This doxa forms an important point in the argument for ‘quality’, but an RPA approach invites us to examine the logical status of such arguments. To make such an argument is to turn education and schools into a ‘black box’; the school is seen to be a neutral space, where teachers may go about their technical work unimpeded, as we have seen above, by the “old social divisions of society and state” (Finlayson 2003:139), since they are no longer believed to exist. It is also to neglect an alternative from the field of educational studies that in fact, “the most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows” (Ausubel 1968). This is not to deny the agency of teachers; on the contrary, and notwithstanding its origins in cognitive psychology, such a view enables the work of teachers to be seen in a political and social context, for what a student already knows, depends, of course, on prior teaching, but also, upon socio-economic class and social situation.

However, it was and remains this ‘teacher-centric’ view of ‘quality’ which is rendered more persuasive, precisely because it accords

with the commonplace view and with common sense. It has proved useful for politicians for that reason and because it provides a diagnosis and solution which is simple and persuasive. On this line of argument, if schools are 'bad' or 'fail', it is because the teachers are not good enough, so the solution must be to either improve or replace them. The premises on which such arguments are based are not easily interrogated, especially perhaps in the context of contemporary political debate, and attempts to challenge them face the difficult task of trying to overturn what appears to be common sense. This rhetorical effect of 'quality' is what Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca refer to as 'presence' (2008:115-20). What the latter mean by this is that all arguments are selective but the presentation of selected elements implies that those elements are important and this 'endows these elements with a presence', that is these elements are placed in the "foreground of the hearer's consciousness" (2008:116, 142). The effect of presence is to act "on our sensibility"; the simplest way to create it is through repetition, and the significance of what is seen most often, becomes exaggerated (2008:116, 144). This is precisely what we see with the repetition of the argument that teachers (and thus schools) are the key determinants of educational success.

### **5.2.2 Pathos and the crusade for standards**

This is not however, the only rhetorical device deployed in *Excellence in Schools* and the grounds of the appeals made in this White Paper are also important. Pathos is used to great effect, as is evidenced in the references to economic competition which are used to justify the need to modernize the education system and make improvement "continuous" (DfEE 1997:23,34,65). On this point, the references in *Excellence in Schools* to economic competition are emotive and perlocutionary, pointing out how far the UK educational attainment levels are behind other developed

countries performance, (DfEE 1997:6,14) and echoing Blair's words in his 1996 speech, "give me an education system that is 35<sup>th</sup> in the world today and I will give you an economy that is 35<sup>th</sup> in the world tomorrow" (Blair 1996). The use of pathos to discuss the economy is matched by pathos used in reference to those who, it is suggested, stood to lose if 'quality' policies were not adopted. Thus readers are told that, "we must overcome the spiral of disadvantage", since, echoing John Major's comment that "children only get one chance" (DfE 1992:v), "the Government is determined that children should get the good education *they deserve*" (DfEE 1997:1,8,31, my emphasis).

This use of pathos, which is a pervasive feature of the text, is introduced and indeed, amplified by David Blunkett's appeal to readers in the foreword, which asks them to "join with us in making *the crusade* for higher standards a reality in every classroom and every household in the country" (DfEE 1997:2, my emphasis). The use of the lexical metaphor of 'crusade' in this sentence is repeated later in the text, where it is stated that a 'Standards and Task Force' unit set up in the DfEE would serve to promote the policy, "carrying the crusade to every part of the education service" (DfEE 1997:30). The use of the word 'crusade' in such contexts is common and dictionaries tell us that it refers to 'vigorous campaigns for political, social or religious change', or long and determined attempts to achieve something which the speaker strongly believes in (Cambridge Dictionary 2023). However, it also has other meanings<sup>30</sup>. It refers to what for many are long forgotten historical events which may have little political or social resonance for secularized populations in England.

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<sup>30</sup> There is also a resonance with the comment from Harold Wilson's speech at the Labour Party Conference in October 1962; 'This party is a moral crusade or it is nothing'. Source : <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780191843730.001.0001/q-oro-ed5-00011621>

However, it can also be understood as an offensive term, referring to those who have no religious belief, or who do not have the same beliefs as the speaker. No doubt New Labour politicians would have been quick to refute the idea that they were using the term in any way that could be perceived as offensive or divisive. However, as has been established in Chapters Two and Three, words are also signs, and meaning is unstable. Thus, the use of the lexical metaphor of 'crusade' carries traces of these older meanings, and resonates with notions of a struggle or a 'holy war' between 'true believers' and 'heathens', or as the Latin roots of the word 'infidel' indicate, a binary classification of the faithful and the unfaithful.

### **5.2.3 Educational apartheid and a civilised society**

These resonances are far from irrelevant for an understanding of the politics of 'quality'; on the contrary they seem entirely apposite given the ethos which the text tells us is required for this 'crusade' for standards. The requisite ethos, is "a 'can-do' profession" and "good teachers will understand the best methods of teaching and know how to use them"; good schools and LEAs will pursue excellence and raise standards continually, and make partnerships with business and voluntary and public organizations (DfEE 1997:1,5,29,43,59). It is in these spaces that the desired ethos is to be found. What this rhetorical strategy does however, is to create logics of equivalence and difference between those who support the policy and those who do not, such that those in the latter category are easily rendered as the 'infidels' who are beyond the pale on at least two grounds. Firstly, those who were against 'quality' as articulated by New Labour, could be positioned as seeming to be arguing against any improvement in the education system. Secondly, such critics were open to the criticism that they were opposed to improving the life chances of pupils from the 'disadvantaged' social groups who use state

education; they could thus be cast as inegalitarian and defending producer interests. Such rhetoric effectively provided New Labour politicians with arguments with which they could successfully counter all possible critics: Tory critics of their policies, criticism from within New Labour from those usually characterised as 'the left', as well as educational professionals in schools, local government and the civil service who might find fault with policy detail. The concept of quality was central to this strategy, but underpinning it in this text was an appeal to pathos, based not simply on the idea of a 'crusade', but on a notion of living 'in a civilised society' (DfEE 1997:1,5,11).

This latter point about civility was an appeal which could most straightforwardly be understood as exemplifying New Labour's claimed values; the claim was simply that all pupils, whatever their social position, deserved a good education and the view that the education system should "benefit the many, not just the few" (DfEE 1997:10). Towards the end of the text this critique is repeated and amplified, with the use of a phrase used by Blair in his 1996 conference speech; the educational system is seen to be far from being civilised, and is identified as a system of "*educational apartheid*" (DfEE 1997:72, Blair 1996). The use of this emotive phrase reflects a use of ethos and can be seen to reflect the mobilisation of a logic of equivalence.<sup>31</sup> It is an attempt to unite diverse groups in support of New Labour policy and to say, 'We are not like this'.

Such statements appear clearly reflective of the socialist and communitarian elements in New Labour thinking. However, the

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<sup>31</sup> As will be discussed in Chapter 6, this is a phrase which Conservative politicians make considerable use of in the years to come. It was also referenced by SoS David Blunkett in the period covered by this chapter (Blunkett 1997:2)

most straightforward understanding of a text does not necessarily capture its most important meaning. For the neoliberal concept of quality, which required and demanded improvement through competition, enabled these elements, in concert with the notion of a 'crusade', to work in an entirely different direction; as both a performative demand to support that movement and at the same time a negative assessment of those who, for whatever reasons, declined to support such a crusade. These people and institutions were, by implication, uncivilised and antediluvian. It was in this way that 'quality' enabled New Labour to absorb both conservative and neoliberal concepts within a policy programme that could also make seemingly credible claims to be progressive and egalitarian. The idea of being 'civilised' can therefore be seen as having a negative meaning, as a political form of gaslighting, which was criticising those whose very interests it claimed to be acting in; hence the scorn poured by Blunkett upon those parents and schools deemed to be less than enthusiastic about New Labour's policies. The currently fashionable term, 'gaslighting', seems entirely appropriate in this context, given that the term is seen to be reflective of unequal power relationships and referring to something which is done for the benefit of the 'gaslighter'. For what some schools, teachers, and communities were being told by this text, was not just that they were failures, but that their failure was the result of their own deficiencies.

#### **5.2.4 Modernization and the case against uniformity**

In *Excellence in Schools*, failure is not however seen to be purely something which applies only to individuals or groups; it is also understood to apply to institutions, namely the comprehensive system. Thus, this White Paper begins with an account of how it was that the comprehensive system came about. This presents a familiar story; Britain's mass education system is seen to have come about as a result of economic competition with France,



Germany and the USA and the idea that education is a strategy for national prosperity. We are told that it was right to introduce the National Curriculum in the 1980s – “albeit that it was 20 or 30 years too late”, and right also to set up more effective management systems (DfEE 1997 :7). In this light, the problem now however, is that in a time when there are “new challenges at home and from international competitors” (DfEE 1997:7), and given that “knowledge and skills will be the key to success” (DfEE 1997:5), that ‘all-in’ secondary schooling is not sufficient. The solution presented in Excellence in Schools follows the policy line introduced by Keith Joseph in 1974 and developed by Conservative governments through the 1980s and 1990s; it is a policy based on choice and diversity. As stated in this White Paper, all-in uniformity “rightly became the normal pattern”, but regrettably, “the search for equality of opportunity in some cases became a tendency to uniformity. The idea that all children had the same rights led [...] too easily to the doctrine that all had the same ability. The pursuit of excellence was too often equated with elitism” (DfEE 1997:6,7). This formulation, re-describes equality as uniformity, and legitimated New Labour’s adoption and promotion of a policy of choice and diversity.

As the discussion above has attempted to demonstrate, this was something which could not have been achieved so easily, if at all, without the argument for a crusade for ‘quality’ and it had important consequences for the possibilities of equality in the education system it helped to construct. For the concept of quality not only rendered equality and quality as equivalent, it also enabled political actors to represent those deemed to have failed in this system as simultaneously both victims and one of the causes of the problem. This contradicted the argument that teachers were the main determinant of educational failure, but this inconsistency did not matter, since it accorded with another

doxa, which runs throughout the White Papers considered in this study, that state school pupils, with some exceptions, were less academically able than pupils in private schools. This point is open to the objection that the very point which this White Paper, and others, were making, was to assume an equality of ability; this was precisely why criticism of school and teacher performance was necessary. However, to make this argument is to neglect the evidence of the forms of assessment used in this and other White Papers, which, as we will see later in the chapter, are unremittingly negative in their assessment of the worth of those who do not thrive in state education. The argument for a 'crusade' for higher standards, firmly anchored in such commonplace assessments yet at the same time bolstered by the presence afforded by 'quality' (and by its ability to decontest hierarchy) was therefore, sufficiently persuasive to enable New Labour not only to adopt, but to consolidate and extend the hegemony of the neoliberal concept of 'quality', a hegemony which had been initiated under Conservative governments.<sup>32</sup>

### **5.3. Legislating for 'standards not structures': 'quality' and the modernizing of comprehensive schools**

Having set out the main rhetorical features of the 1997 White Paper, we must now turn to focus our attention on the legislation and policy which ensued from that important political moment. New Labour's pledge on education in the 1997 General Election Manifesto, repeated in *Excellence in Schools*, was that "the focus will be on standards not structures" and that "standards are the key to success" (DfEE 1997:2, Labour Party 1997). Also repeated in the manifesto was the promise which Blair had given in his

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<sup>32</sup> This is not to argue that New Labour's crusade for higher standards was uncontested. It was, both within the education profession and by other political parties. However, this contestation was of limited success and the argument was sufficiently persuasive

conference speech in 1996, that competition would proceed on the basis of quality or not at all. These brief phrases reflect the absolutely central importance of 'quality' in New Labour's political ideology; as stated in Chapter Three, it is the order in which things are said, which in turn makes things happen and effects how they happen. Thus, having embraced the concept of 'quality' through the course of numerous speech acts, New Labour set about putting it to work. However, while claiming rugged empiricism, stating that Labour would 'never put dogma before children's education', and that 'What matters is what works', the policy decisions which New Labour legislated, were very much concerned with structures. As has been argued elsewhere, standards and structures 'are interrelated and can only be understood in relation to each other', and moreover, the first major piece of legislation to issue from *Excellence in Schools*, the School Standards and Framework Act of 1998, was "chiefly concerned with structures", with 89 of its 145 sections focusing on the arrangements necessary for new school structures (Chitty 2014:66).

All this is to say that quality at this time, as an idea and as practice, was not simply a rhetorical, but also an institutional phenomenon, and that in order to understand 'quality' it is necessary for the political analyst to trace out the rhetorical-institutional elements of the path which the concept has taken. What is contended here is that New Labour politicians, in adopting the concept of quality, were inevitably bound into the actions, thinking and policies as well as the institutional structures used by their predecessors. In working within this strategic and institutional context, New Labour politicians invariably attempted to shape and change these elements through the light of their own ideological assumptions, preferences and forms of assessment. It is therefore instructive to examine what was done

by political actors in the name of 'quality', and thus, what this concept enabled actors to do. We may start this process by briefly considering New Labour's critique of the Conservative policy which preceded it. As the catchphrase 'standards not structures' indicates, New Labour, saw, and wished to disseminate the view that Conservative education policy had been unduly focused on school structures. This could be justified by reference to Conservative emphasis on the development of Grant Maintained schools and technology colleges, the mass of legislation focusing on these matters, and SoS Gillian Shephard's comments in the 1996 White Paper, *Self-Government for Schools*, that "the Government wants parents to be able to choose from a range of good schools of different types" (DfEE 1996a:2). It could also have been justified by reference to the problems which had beset further education and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC), in the late 1990s, although no explicit references were made to this in *Excellence in Schools*, nor in the 1997 manifesto, and it was not explicitly addressed at length until the publication of the 1999 White Paper, *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE 1999). However, once in office, New Labour set about creating a policy platform which set out a new structure for maintained schools; inspired by and using 'quality' in this broad context, it was able to present its own policies as pragmatic and non-ideological. In short, by implication, they were common sense.

Thus it was that the School Standards and Framework Act of 1998 stipulated a new organisation of three categories of secondary school: community, foundation, and voluntary schools, the last two categories of which could also be designated in a sub-category of special schools. This may appear an innocuous enough typology, and certainly, in contrast to the clear differences indicated by under the 1944 Education Act, which divided the population into the hierarchical categories of academic, technical

and practical, that is so. However, the naming with these terms is of no less political significance. For these different types of school were enabled under the Act, to allow for “the selection of pupils for admission to the school by reference to their aptitude for one or more prescribed subjects” (School Standards and Framework Act 1998, Part III, c2:102). This element of selection was qualified in a number of complicated ways. For example, no level of ability was to be “substantially over-represented or substantially under-represented”, nor could the proportion of selective admissions in any age group exceed 10 per cent (DfEE 1997:35). These and other layers of qualification enabled New Labour to argue that these principles were not selective. Thus, in *Excellence in Schools*, it was argued that “We are not going back to the days of the 11-plus” (DfEE 1997:71).

Yet this point has to be understood in the context of a larger argument, indeed, the core of the argument of *Excellence in Schools* and the New Labour White Papers which followed it: the contention that education required modernizing. As discussed earlier, for Blair, modernization and improvement had to be continuous and were necessary for a knowledge economy. In New Labour’s own terms, this was not so much a critique of the comprehensive principle, but rather a process of modernization, hence the subtitle “Modernizing the comprehensive principle”(DfEE 1997:34). Hence also, New Labour’s defence and invocation of *kairos*; “neither are we prepared to *stand still* and defend the failings of across-the-board mixed ability teaching” (DfEE 1997:35, my emphasis). The negative view of comprehensive schools was clear in references to ‘all-in’ secondary schools in this White Paper, and was amplified in later references to comprehensive schools as ‘bog-standard’, a usage derived from Press Secretary Alistair Campbell’s utterance in a press conference in 2001 that “the days of the bog-standard

comprehensive are over" (DfEE 1997:6, Curtis 2009, Chitty 2014:74). Writing over a decade later, Lord Adonis felt able to use this derogatory term in his account of the development of the academy programme, stating that "the key objective of academies was to replace failing and 'bog-standard' comprehensives [...] with successful all-ability schools" (Adonis 2012:11). The idea of 'quality' of course stands in diametric opposition to the meaning of 'bog-standard' and it is therefore not at all surprising that in the heat of discussion, this adjective should have sprung into Campbell's mind as appropriate to the context. The use of 'bog-standard' is, like 'quality' itself, to be seen as carrying a perlocutionary force, reflecting the form of assessment by which the comprehensive school, in the guise of the 'common school' had come to be seen as something to look down upon, rather than to celebrate. This perlocutionary force reflected both ethos and pathos; the 'bog-standard' school was to be seen as populated by inferior people and the emotion evoked was not so much pity, as scorn for the paucity of the standards in such institutions.

It was then, through these rhetorical means that New Labour's adoption of a policy approach of choice and diversity, and an appeal to 'standards not structures' was persuasive. This represented a policy approach which was very much in continuity with that of previous Conservative governments, although, as we have seen, New Labour did draw upon other ideological sources and could make a persuasive case for its political distinctiveness. This was important not least, for its own party management. In this regard, the argument here is that it was the use of the concept of quality which enabled party managers to persuade MPs and party members that such a policy was worthy of their support. For, in 1995, when New Labour was in opposition, what appeared to many Labour MPs and members as an education policy which

endorsed selection, was, understandably in the context of Labour's historic support for comprehensive education, highly controversial. The particular difficulty in 1995 concerned New Labour's policy document, tellingly titled, 'Diversity and Excellence: A New Partnership for Schools', which at the same time as claiming opposition to selection, also stated that grammar schools would not be abolished. At the annual party conference that year, debate on this topic took an acrimonious turn, which Shadow Education Secretary, David Blunkett was able to quell only by way of a promise: "Read my lips. No selection, either by examination or interview, under a Labour government" (Lawton 2005:138). As has been observed elsewhere, in interviews and speeches Blunkett gave after this incident, it became clear that 'no selection' in practice meant 'no further selection', that is to say, that existing grammar schools would be retained and that selection would therefore, in fact persist, albeit only in a small number of schools (Chitty 2002:97-98).

This was therefore a significant moment in New Labour's trajectory; winning the argument on this issue meant that much more education policy congruent with the theme of 'choice and diversity' was able to be developed and implemented. This entailed a rejection of 'the principles underpinning the era of the 'one-size fits-all comprehensive' and a distinct move away from the comprehensive ideal and towards the notion of a meritocracy. It was the use of the concept of quality which enabled New Labour to take this strategic position, for as we have seen, arguments about improving the quality of education enabled the neutralization and suppression of counter-arguments against choice and diversity by way of the decontesting of inequality and hierarchy. However, if 'quality' enabled and permitted all this, it also required other policies and other institutions; standards could not be set, nor regulated, measured and monitored, without

institutions to carry out that work and without further policies to translate abstract principles into practice. These are examined in the next section.

#### **5.4 Institutional change: The LSC and 'quality' in the Learning Age**

The institutional structure of secondary education in England, as we have seen thus far in this chapter, as well as in Chapter Four, is a complex one. One element of that complexity is the distinction made between the secondary sector and the further education sector (FE). This is a longstanding institutional separation in the English education system, reflecting not just the roles, but also the different statuses accorded to academic and vocational education, and is further complicated by the inclusion of sixth form colleges in FE. The path of institutional change in secondary education is to some degree easier to follow; it is concerned with the creation of Ofsted and the reduction of LEAs. In the case of FE however, political actors were faced with more and different institutions; nevertheless, as the next sections will argue, it was 'quality' which provided political actors with a tool which could be used to force these institutions to comply with policy.

The situation which New Labour inherited after the general election of 1997 found the FEFC, the funding body created by the Conservatives in 1992, mired in crisis, with problems of overspending and serious fraud and corruption playing out through 1997-98 (Denham 2002, Ainley and Bailey 1997). It seemed that college managers in the FE sector were more than capable of being seduced by "the intoxicating air of post-incorporation FE [...] with fat-cat salaries and command-and-control management styles" (Beckett 2001). New Labour responded to this situation in the 1999 White Paper, *Learning to Succeed* (DfEE 1999). The arguments put forward for reforming



the quality regime brought in by the Conservative government elected in 1991, identified the main problem as being “too much duplication, confusion and bureaucracy”, and avoiding direct reference to the maladministration of recent years, made the point that “Too little money actually reaches learners and employers, too much is tied up in bureaucracy” (DfEE 1999:21). The White Paper also noted an absence of effective co-ordination or strategic planning, and reflecting the criticisms identified in the previous section, commented that “the system has insufficient focus on skill and employer needs at national, regional and local levels” (DfEE 1999:21). The proposed solution was to simplify the existing structures and to replace the FEFC and the TECs with a single organization capable of overseeing national strategies for post-16 learning, and to reduce the three existing inspection agencies to two. The proposed new organization, named the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), in combining the functions of both FEFC and TECs, would be charged with “removing the barriers” preventing people from taking advantage of learning opportunities and amongst its chief objectives according to the White Paper would be to “promote excellence” in the provision of education and training and “design systems which deliver efficiency” (DfEE 1999:22).

The reasons given as to why such changes were necessary are familiar, not just from the discussion of Third Way thinking in previous sections, but also, from arguments for ‘quality’ which had been made by the previous Conservative government. In *Learning to Succeed* for example, we are told that productivity in the UK “is lower than in other major economies”, echoing the views in *Education and Training for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* in 1991, and in *Choice and Diversity* in 1992 (DfEE 1999:3, DES 1991:1, DfE 1992:5). To these by now familiar lines of argument, are added New Labour’s particular theory on the information and knowledge

based economy (DfEE 1999:12) and the need for investment in human capital, both key elements of the argument set out in *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE 1997). This included the 'vision' introduced in New Labour's Green Paper, *The Learning Age*, which argued that a new culture of lifelong learning and training was necessary in order to achieve national prosperity; 'standing still is not an option. The world has changed and the current systems and structures are real obstacles to success', and as in *Excellence in Schools*, the modernization that this invokes is the means by which the economy can make a "successful transition from the past' and will contribute to 'sustaining a civilised and cohesive society'" (DfEE 1999:15, 3). This imagined civilised society was also one, which as mentioned, would reduce fragmentation, bureaucracy and duplication. Such a civilised society would also, *Learning to Succeed* asserted, reduce waste and thus "by increasing *value for money* we will release resources and deliver improvements that will benefit the learner", and current funding arrangements were seen to "meet the needs of colleges, not the skills needs of employers and individuals" (DfEE 1999:19,22 my emphasis). This is a line of argument which, as we saw in Chapter One, can be traced all the way back to 1867 and the arguments for efficiency in the 1890s and the first decades of the twentieth century, and indeed, back to arguments against producer interest in the 1970s and 80s.

Reflection on what this reorganization achieved adds considerably to analysis of what 'quality' enabled and drove political actors to do. Most significantly, New Labour's creation of the LSC, driven by a belief in the need to continuously improve 'quality' in the education system, ensured that funders would not work in concert with inspectors<sup>33</sup>. This was already the case with Ofsted and

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<sup>33</sup> See the LSC Annual Report and Accounts 2009-10, which states, 'We believe in continuous improvement, and introduced an evaluation and review

school funding via LEAs, and while the FEFC administrative apparatus may have appeared in 1992 as a credible way of creating a useful lever for government at a distance, as the turn of events came to show, the mechanism could not be relied upon to work efficiently. In reorganizing FE and training funding, New Labour had attempted to reset the relationship between FE colleges, training providers and government, stipulating that individuals, employers and providers should be responsible, respectively, for improving their own skills, those of their workforce and for providing high quality education and training. The role of government would be to steer the system (1999:15).

However, while the ambition was that this would lead to a successful phase of quality improvement in education, the LSC, like its predecessor, ended in some disarray amid financial crises and was dissolved in 2008. As others have shown, from inception, the LSC was beset by confusion on a number of issues: the clarity of its role, its relationship to the Treasury and the DfES, and not least, its role in relations to 'quality' (Coffield et al 2005). For our purposes, what is most relevant is the role of the LSC with regard to 'quality' and on this point, it is noted that there was "widespread confusion and rivalry within the sector about which organization has (or should have) responsibility for quality assurance and quality improvement" (Coffield et al, 2005:646).

To clarify, while the FEFC Inspectorate was disbanded and the new LSC had no remit to inspect colleges, this did not mean the organization had no responsibility for monitoring the 'quality' of FE colleges. This was indeed a key part of the LSC's remit (Coffield et al 2005:632) and it was managed by way of monitoring various performance indicators concerning for example, the numbers of

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framework so that we could measure the success of our Programmes through our online learner management system' (LSC 2009-10:12).

students achieving a Level 2 qualification or completing an apprenticeship, and the percentages of teachers in FE holding a professional qualification (LSC 2004, LSC 2005). However, the ability of the LSC to monitor 'quality' led to tensions in its relationships with colleges and other education providers. We have already touched upon this point, in noting the contradiction of 'quality' policy which expected specialist schools and others to form partnerships and yet at the same time pressing the need for competition. The LSC found itself at the centre of such contradictions, and as Coffield et al observe, this brought the LSC up against "institutional self-interest, where headteachers, governors and middle class parents are very unlikely for example, to give up their small and inefficient sixth forms without a public fight" (Coffield et al, 2005:644). Conflict however, was also easy to find in dealings with the FE sector, as occurred when the Director of the LSC, in the course of an interview on the BBC Radio 4 Today programme in October 2001, was later quoted as saying "We reckon about 40% of the provision across the whole of the sector is just unacceptable in terms of the quality of the learning and the provision which takes place", (Kingston, 2002). As Kingston suggests, this comment was taken to mean that the grade of 'satisfactory' was not satisfactory, and unsurprisingly led to strong expressions of concern from sector representatives, followed by a public apology in the national press from the Director (Kingston 2002).

### **5.5 Can't get no satisfaction: the demise of the LSC**

For the purposes of this study, this moment reveals a particularly important aspect of 'quality'; it demonstrates the radical instability of both the meaning of 'quality', and the terms used in attempts to classify it. While we cannot be surprised that the Director of the LSC went on to defend a view of 'quality' as continuous improvement, vital for economic success, and thus

entirely congruent with the policy articulated in *Excellence in Schools* and *Learning to Succeed*, (Harwood 2001), what this incident demonstrates is the difficulty the LSC had in talking about and implementing the concept of quality. For, in querying the suitability of the classificatory term 'satisfactory', the Director was simply reflecting debates playing out within this institution as to how the 'quality' of FE colleges was to be classified. Prior to April 2001, the FEFC had used a five point scale with the categories of 'excellent, good, satisfactory, some concerns, serious concerns'. Throughout late 2001 and into 2002, the LSC was keen, following the comments of its Director, to reclassify these categories and proposed a different five point scale: "outstanding performance, effective performance, acceptable performance with scope for improvement, performance gives cause for some concerns, and performance gives cause for serious concerns" (Kingston 2002). These categories were duly confirmed in October 2002 (LSC Circular 02/19) and although the LSC could not inspect colleges, it could review performance twice a year using these categories and make judgements as to the 'quality of provision', thus informing funding decisions.

In the light of this last point, it transpires that 'quality' can be seen to be an idea which was concerned, not only with the supposed quality of teaching or even more generally schools, but also with efficiency and cost, and hence with the requirement for large quantities of 'performance data' which could be used to assess whether schools, and in this instance, colleges, were fulfilling their role successfully. It is not difficult to appreciate that in such contexts, a category like 'satisfactory', especially where 'quality' was taken to refer to continuous improvement, would be problematic and lead to contradiction, with the LSC's insistence that what the FEFC, with the support of colleges, had adjudged to be satisfactory could not possibly be satisfactory. The LSC's

argument was not entirely lacking in reason; the term satisfactory can indeed be ambiguous and its meaning varies according to context. It was for this reason that the LSC in 2002 had decided to use the alternative categories discussed above; these were attempts to put pressure on FE colleges by removing an ambiguously named grade, intended to drive continuous improvement by substituting the word 'acceptable' and subdividing the 'cause for concern' category.

However, as the LSC, along with Ofsted and the Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI), worked together to develop a common inspection framework in 2007, these issues once again became contested matters between rival agencies. At this point, the LSC, now headed by a new Director and under pressure to expand student numbers in FE, put forward a proposal to adopt a five-point scale including the two categories: 'satisfactory but improving' and 'satisfactory but not improving'. This proposal however, was rejected in favour of Ofsted's four-point scale consisting of the categories 'Outstanding', 'Good', 'Satisfactory' and 'Inadequate' (LSC 2007:14). The adoption of this four-point scale and the decision to retain the grade of 'satisfactory', however, should not be interpreted as a signal of any diminishment in commitment to the need for continuous improvement on the part of Ofsted; on the contrary, the use of a four-point scale made it impossible for inspection teams to regress to a middle category and harder for 'satisfactory' to be perceived as a positive category. Thus, even with the continued use of the ambiguous category of 'satisfactory', the idea of quality remained an unstable idea, but one which could drive college managers behaviour.

However, political situations are never static, and further change in the first decade of the new century meant that New Labour's political actors, having discovered and adopted the tool of 'quality'

in the guise of continuous progress, found that its demands were infinite. Indeed, it was precisely the idea that improvement could and should be continuous which can be seen as leading to the demise of the LSC, as agency managers encouraged colleges to bid for and embark upon building projects far in excess of its capital budget (Foster 2009). As the inevitable inquiry which followed this mismanagement demonstrated, senior managers at the LSC had acted in what may be termed a bureau-shaping manner (Dunleavy 1991), being “mindful of the need to use or lose in-year budgets” (Foster 2009:14). This situation was not however, simply a matter of bureau-shaping behaviour; it also demonstrated the power of the executive, in that the origin of the Building Colleges for the Future programme derived from decisions made in the 2005 Budget. This situation was then exacerbated by the establishment of two new departments (DIUS and DCSF), by way of so-called machinery of government changes made by the Brown administration, which involved splitting the budget between FE and 16-19 education. This, in the words of the Commons inquiry had ‘increased nervousness that resources thought to be ring-fenced for colleges might be diverted to schools, and that colleges feared the impact that the establishment of the new Young Peoples Learning Agency (YPLA) and Skills Funding Agency (SFA) in 2010 might have on their ability to participate in and access new funds (Foster 2009).

As these last points indicate, by July 2009, the Brown government had announced that the LSC was to be dissolved, and another set of institutions would be created to fund FE. The precise chronology of events concerning the demise of the LSC between 2007-2009 is more complex than the paragraph above suggests, but what is important for this thesis is the role of ‘quality’ in the institutional changes referred to. For considerable political effort had been expended in creating both the LSC and its predecessor, with the

aim of enabling government to apply quality management to the FE sector, and yet both NDPBs failed to survive for more than a decade.

The argument of this thesis is that the explanation for this institutional change was not simply that politicians were dissatisfied with the political outcomes issuing from these institutions; in short, they believed that there was a lack of 'quality' in the very institutions created to deliver it. To be sure, the stated intention of 'quality' policy was to improve standards and to provide 'value for money', and by this criteria the LSC had clearly failed, in the eyes of government and most other observers. It therefore had to be reformed or replaced. However, to accept this as the sole reason for this institutional change would be to advocate methodological individualism. On the contrary, the explanation to be developed in this thesis is that the events described above speak to the articulation of class logics and the radical instability of 'quality'. During this period, 'quality' is to be seen as achieving the status of a master signifier and nodal point; the social formations created by New Labour governments, like those created by their predecessors, were built around one particular impossible object (Laclau 1996); that of 'quality'. That impossibility was reflected in the continual oscillation in the meaning of the concept, and indeed thus far, we have seen the meaning of 'quality' shift from the concerns with standards discussed in the 1970s, to an economistic view in terms of continuous improvement and cost and efficiency. It was this instability of 'quality', and its' inevitable contestability, which meant that the LSC and other institutions found it difficult to agree on the categories to be used to grade 'quality' and it was for this reason that the institutions with responsibility for inspection of schools and colleges produced extensive documentation and identified multiple performance indicators, in an attempt to



capture the 'reality' of their desired object. Thus the role which the concept of quality played in the events described above, in the context of the articulation of a logic of class, was to act as a driver of institutional change. As we shall see in the next chapter, the radical instability of meaning of 'quality' and 'satisfactory', meant that problems in assessing 'quality' continued after the New Labour era.

At the same time, what was at play in arguments over which institutional arrangements would secure higher proportions of students reaching particular levels of educational attainment, as has just been said, were logics of class, and thereby logics of equivalence and difference, not simply the beliefs of individual political actors. Thus, while 'quality' referred to the economic terms discussed in this and previous sections, at the same time it reflected and disseminated cultural representations, logics, and interests. The next and final section of the chapter examines these cultural aspects of quality articulated in New Labour discourse, and the consequences of such representations for education policy.

### **5.6 New Labour's forms of assessment and the path to academies: beacons, teachers and the deprived.**

In this chapter thus far, we have seen how the concept of quality enabled New Labour's political actors to decontest inequality and hierarchy and justify institutional change in the name of serving the greater good of national economic success. This involved New Labour arguing the case for, and organising education policy on the basis of 'choice and diversity', and in examining the arguments by which such policy was constructed, the chapter has attempted to highlight the rhetorical means and some of the key moments involved in that process. This has brought to our attention the role of quality in a heresthetic moment, as well as the use of ethos and pathos, and the lexical metaphor of a

'crusade' for standards. The discussion of these features presents an initial response to the first research question raised in this thesis, as to how political actors used 'quality' in the formulation of education policy, and to the second research question concerning what ideational processes were involved in the construction and articulation of 'quality' in education. As regards the second part of research question two, 'why did ideational processes change over time', the brief answer at this point is that this was the result of a different rhetorical situation. This was a situation where there was a need to make 'quality' congruent with Labour ideology and thus it had to be recast to fit with New Labour's economic theory. What remains to be addressed is the latter part of the first research question, that is, why political actors used the concept of quality, and the third research question, which is concerned with assessing the relationship between 'quality' and interests. This section will briefly address these remaining issues.

The beginning of a more complex answer to the question as to why political actors made use of the concept of 'quality' must draw upon the forms of assessment used in the course of strategic political activity. On this matter, the texts examined in this chapter are useful in drawing to the attention of the political analyst the ways in which New Labour politicians perceived pupils, parents, and the communities in which they lived. These categories of people are described in the New Labour texts, in language which appears identical to the pathologizing gaze presented by the Conservative governments discussed in the previous chapter. For throughout the texts examined in this chapter, we find references to these people as "disadvantaged", "deprived", as living in "extremely challenging circumstances", or in "inner city areas under the greatest pressure" (DfEE 1997, DfEE 1999, 2001:14, DCSF 2008). We find also oblique references to

“schools in difficult circumstances”, or in an evocation of pathos, to “those with the greatest need” or groups “who do less well” (DfEE 2001:48, DfES 2003:65, DfES 2005a:44). References are also made in a more managerial register, as in phrases such as, “areas of underperformance”, and “weaker inner boroughs”, where we may find “disengaged parents” and pupils from “deprived backgrounds” (DfES 2005b<sup>34</sup>). Only once is there a reference in more standard sociological terms, to “variation in performance between children who have parents with manual occupation and those who come from a non-manual background” (DfEE 2001:14).

One interpretation of this terminology would be to argue that it simply marks empirical findings and is therefore not to be understood as being in any way judgemental or evaluative. However, this would be to adopt an empiricism which has been ruled out in Chapter One. In contrast, the analysis here takes a post-Marxist approach and contends that social class is to be understood as a discursive structure. The benefit of this can be demonstrated by reference to the rhetoric of class discussed above. The rhetorical effect of the phrases cited, which are spread across five White Papers from the period, is to deflect responsibility for educational inequality and present it such that disadvantage or inequality are assumed to be natural objects. The solution in New Labour education policy, as explained above, was seen to lie in economic growth and the creation of jobs, which would be generated through the acquisition of modern skills, which in turn were to be created by the school. This was an

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<sup>34</sup> The frequency with which a word or phrase is used is not necessarily the most important factor in judging its significance. However, in the 2005b White Paper there are 12 references to deprivation and 15 references to disadvantage. For disadvantage see pages, 12, 28, 35, 41, 42, 44, 45, 55, 57, 65, 74, 78, 79, 96, 114. For deprived see pages, 13, 15, 18, 19, 40, 48, 51, 53, 67, 74, 79, 80.

analysis which entailed that where the desired outcomes did not materialize, it was the school and teachers which would be seen to be responsible, rather than policy or government. The key point for the argument in this thesis however, is that these strategies were informed and guided by the commonplace assessments of social class cited above, for they demonstrate how political actors in New Labour perceived and constructed the society they governed<sup>35</sup>.

New Labour's form of assessment, like that of its Conservative predecessors, did not accept that social class could explain educational inequality and could be a causal factor. This point was made quite explicitly in *Excellence in Schools*: "In some cases *the excuse* has been that "you cannot expect high achievement from children in a run-down area like this", and remarks congruent with this view are to be found in White Papers from different governments throughout the period covered in this study (DfEE 1997:21, my emphasis).

The position argued for in this thesis is that the development of this common political position, across party lines, is to be explained by reference to the antagonisms which must characterise any set of political relations. To be clear, this is to

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<sup>35</sup> Alan Finlayson (private correspondence) has made the suggestion that through this process of argumentation, what arises is that 'the antagonism' is no longer that of economic classes, but rather that it could now be cast as one of professional classes versus the poor, enabling New Labour to present the solution of modernising schools and teachers. My response is that this is indeed an element of what is seen here. However, this aspect was not new and was very similar to arguments and strategies from Conservative politicians before and after this particular moment. Moreover, to refer to 'the antagonism' is reductive; I argue that the evidence from the texts analysed here speaks to the existence of multiple antagonisms. The point I am concerned to emphasise therefore, is that policy decision making on 'quality' in education under New Labour (in common with other governments) was shaped and guided by forms of assessment of the population which were dominated by simplistic and commonplace assessments of class. These broader and I would suggest, more fundamental, antagonistic social and political relationships did not evaporate because political actors strategic activity was constructing a fresh line of antagonism along another axis.

adopt a post-structural position and to reject Marxist accounts positing pre-constituted interests, classes, ideology and the deterministic effects of state structures, as well as Downsian theories of rationalistic party competition (Hay 1999). It is a post-structural approach which best explains the performative contradiction in political actors use of class as empirical description whilst at the same time refusing to accede any role to class as causal power in a more convincing manner. For this approach involves no recourse to determinism or untenable concepts of false consciousness, nor does it involve imposing a narrow calculative rationality upon postulated autonomous subjects. Rather, it shows social relations as I contend they are; both antagonistic and agonistic.

### **5.7 The rhetorical path towards academisation**

As this chapter has attempted to demonstrate, such antagonistic social relations are evidenced in the language and the rhetorical strategies discussed above. It was through the policy concept of 'quality' that political actors embodying such antagonisms, were able to construct a path towards a new form of school which embodied the demands for the new sort of individual seen to be required by the new economy which New Labour had postulated, a knowledge-based economy (Finlayson 2003:139,198). In this respect, the concept of quality offered political actors a valuable tool. This can be seen from a critical reflection on the concept of 'Beacon schools' and the path of policy and institutional change which developed from it. The concept of 'Beacon schools' was an initiative launched By New Labour in 1998 and lasting until 2004. The aim of this initiative was to improve school performance through collaboration and partnership, in order that good practice from the best performing schools in the country could be shared and disseminated to less successful schools. In the 2001 White

Paper the claim from New Labour was that this would 'put teachers at the heart of the continuing drive to raise standards', and that it would enable "our best schools and our best teachers to innovate and so to lead the way in transforming secondary education" (DfEE 2001:56,42).

There are four observations to be made about this policy from the perspective of the rhetorical analysis presented in this thesis. Firstly, it should be recalled that this policy originated under the Major administration; it was mentioned in the 1992 White Paper (DfE 1992:18) and was well established well before 2001, having been operative under the rubric of the Charter Marks scheme. There, in contrast to New Labour, supposed best practice was defined and imposed by experts (Entwistle and Downe 2005). In New Labour's articulation, Beacon schools were promoted in the form of a best practice competition, whereby best practice emerged through competition, and was taken to be exemplified in the practice of 'winning' organisations. This is significant, as it reinforces the stress upon continuity discussed above, but at the same time, identifies change in New Labour's adoption of a neoliberal ethic of competition which could appear as seemingly more democratic than its Tory precursor. Secondly, the Beacon schools selected by New Labour were among the most 'advantaged' state schools in England, having lower proportions of FSM students (in receipt of free school meals) and being amongst the more academically successful schools (Smith 2015:383). This is to be seen as reinforcing the points made earlier about social class, and suggests that political actors were operating with crude and incoherent notions of social class. What we see embodied in the view of social class reflected in the Beacon schools policy, is not socio-economic class per se, but a view of socio-economic class refracted through the crude form of assessment discussed above and deployed by New Labour, and

indeed, other state functionaries. This was a discursive and ideologically informed construction of class on the lines of a crude binary between the disadvantaged and an unmarked identity which is assumed to be normal.

The third and fourth points concern the naming of the policy. The concept of a 'Beacon school' can only be regarded as a metaphor, and what such a metaphor tells us, in the context of the other language we have seen used in relation to schools and education attainment in these White Papers, is that a beacon lights up the area surrounding it, which is in darkness. That metaphor is thus a stark assessment of those attending state schools, which this interpretation suggests is impossible to understand in anything but a negative sense. A fourth and final observation on this matter, is that the DfES itself came to recognize that such naming also antagonized other significant actors, when announcing in 2004 that the programme would not be expanded, it stated that the "Beacon name was divisive and the idea of 'the best leading the rest' was unhelpful in terms of developing useful networks" (Entwistle and Downe 2005:34, Smith 2015:372).

This decision presaged what is to be seen as another significant moment of change, as in July 2004 Tony Blair announced the aim to establish 200 academies, leading to publication in 2005 of the White Paper, *Higher Standards, Better Schools for All: More Choice for Parents and Pupils* (Adonis 2012:xiii, Chitty 2014:81). This was the result of an evolutionary process, as City Academies had been established by the Learning and Skills Act of 2000, with the name of this type of school being amended in the 2002 Education Act. There were different categories of Academy, but all were governed by boards of trustees, funded through agreements with the DfE, and encouraged and permitted to specialise in particular curriculum areas. This was presented as a 're-energising' of comprehensive education (Chitty 2014:82). Yet,

in disposing of the 'bog-standard comprehensive' what had in fact been created were 'independent state schools'. In the context of England, where private schools are known as 'public schools', such a label is to some degree ambiguous in a way which plays in harmony with the perlocutionary force of 'quality' and the hierarchical notion of excellence which the concept can promote.<sup>36</sup> To this ambiguity, more was added, as while the Education and Inspections Act of 2006 banned formal selection in the form of interviews or other selection devices in line with the principle of open enrolment established by the 1988 Education Act, there was nothing to prevent informal selection methods, and indeed, competition between schools meant that there was a strong incentive for such practices to continue (Chitty 2014:83).

Thus, what 'quality' enabled New Labour to construct and institutionalize, was an education system able to produce the civilised citizens believed to be necessary for modernization. It was for this reason that the 2001 White Paper had emphasised the importance of ethos, and when the concept of Beacon schools proved too divisive, subsequent White Papers stressed the need to stamp out 'coasting' and maintain continuous improvement. What had been institutionalized, through the use of the concept of quality, was the view that performance determined the value of people and institutions, and indeed, that it was not sufficient in this society for either institutions, or people, to be merely 'satisfactory'. This is not however, to argue that 'quality' enabled the disciplining and training only of pupils and parents; it was also something which was applied to the management of the teaching profession. New Labour's assessment of the teaching profession was much the same as that adopted by previous Conservative

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<sup>36</sup> As explained in Chapter Two (p2), 'quality' in education policy reflected the use of the concept of excellence in neoliberal discourse and business management (see Boltanski and Chiapello (2018) and Peters and Waterman's book, *In Search of Excellence* (1982/2015)).



governments, teachers being perceived as a group of workers in need of disciplinary regulation if 'quality' was to be improved. This policy approach was evident and reinforced through legislation from the start of the New Labour period, from the creation of a disciplinary General Teaching Council in 1997, to the introduction of performance related pay in 2001/2, and to increasingly stricter regulation of teachers practice through the creation of formal teachers standards. This last development was achieved through a statutory instrument in 2003 (extended by another instrument passed by the Coalition in 2012), resulting in the current Teachers Standards (DfE 2011). These have institutionalized 'quality' into the practice of teaching through embedding the requirement for continuous improvement in the state regulations which all teachers must adhere to: "Appropriate self-evaluation, reflection and professional development activity is critical to *improving teachers' practice at all career stages*" (DfE 2011:7, my emphasis). In this aspect of the use of 'quality' then, it is argued that what the concept induced political actors to do<sup>37</sup>, was to make the disciplining and subjection to performance management of the teaching profession, visible (Page 2013). In this regard, the role designated to 'quality' was identical to that in the sphere of business: the control of a workforce (Hill 1995).

In doing this, however, 'quality' did not merely provide political actors with a means of constructing and achieving political goals; it also constructed a field of interest and this therefore bears upon the third research question with which this thesis is concerned. This has been glimpsed in the above discussion on the changing conditions of work for teachers, but it is also evident in the discussions concerning institutional changes, and not least in

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<sup>37</sup> The Teaching Standards are to be seen as an enactment of 'quality policy' since what 'quality' came to mean in official discourse was the continuous improvement of schools, teachers and educational attainment.

remarks made bearing upon the interests of pupils and parents. For all of these constituencies, 'quality' constructed and re-constructed interests in ways which claimed to promote the greater good. However, the argument of this thesis is that such interests are not to be narrowly understood in classic Marxist terms as class interests; they are best understood, rather, as political interests which are constructed in light of forms of assessment and from which certain logics of class proliferate. In this process, 'quality' itself was not an interest per se, but an idea which enabled the construction of multiple notions of interest. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, but for now, it must suffice to point out to the reader, that the construction of the policy of quality and institutions to administer and govern it, which was intended by both New Labour governments and their Tory predecessors to eradicate the 'producer interest' of civil servants and educational professionals, in fact produced a new, and more complex field of interests. This field included those employed in new governance institutions but also many professionals in schools who were appointed to positions involved with the production and monitoring of 'quality'. It also included parents and pupils who would have to navigate and engage with a new regime of educational governance.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has argued that the concept of quality decontested inequality and hierarchy and that it is this which made it congruent with the forms of assessment articulated by New Labour politicians, whereby social differences were represented in the form of a crude binary between the 'disadvantaged' and an unmarked identity. As we have seen, this meant that 'quality' was highly compatible with New Labour's imaginary, particularly with the concepts of a knowledge-based economy and modernization. New Labour politicians were able to exploit this compatibility to

extend the 'choice and diversity' agenda instigated by Conservative governments, thus bringing about the end of 'bog standard' comprehensive schooling and introducing a far more subtly differentiated form of school organization. It is therefore clear that 'quality', a political idea exhibiting neoliberal principles, had value to politicians usually associated with political ideologies which were opposed to such principles. This finding addresses the concerns of the first research question. The chapter has also discussed the various ideational processes involved in the argumentative action occurring in relation to 'quality' over the period, and it has been seen how various devices, including the use of metaphor, ethos and pathos, enabled New Labour to utilise 'quality' to effect political change. In terms of the concern with interests reflected in the third research question, it has been indicated that 'quality' was used to construct and re-construct multiple notions of interest, cutting across the different constituencies of pupils, parents, and education professionals operating both in schools and in the state bureaucracy. This last point requires further amplification, but it provides for now, a reference point to return to in the concluding chapter.

However, the first research question, concerning why political actors used 'quality', generates a further question. As the chapter has demonstrated, New Labour did not simply continue with Conservative education policy, it extended it. The chapter has claimed that neither Marxist nor rationalist Downsian explanations provide tenable routes to explain this phenomenon, and that a preferable explanation for the ideological flexibility and institutional change analysed here is to be found in the focus of poststructuralist theory on antagonisms and the articulation of a logic of class. These complex issues are to be bracketed for the present. For, given that the responses of political actors to political situations are rhetorical responses to rhetorically

constructed situations, the more pressing issue is to move on and examine the activities of the political actors who succeeded this intensive period of institutional and policy activity.

## **Chapter 6 The 'strong' and 'the weak' and the construction of 'quality' in Coalition education policy**

In the previous chapter it was argued that the policy concept of quality was intimately concerned with notions of excellence and yet at the same time, it also acted to decontest inequality and hierarchy<sup>38</sup>. It was these two features which enabled New Labour to use the concept of quality as both a political tool and a weapon, adapting it to Third Way theory and the needs of a putative knowledge-based economy. We have also seen how these meanings led to a drawn out period of institutional change. This should serve to remind us firstly, that the argumentative action constitutive of politics is a medium of strategic action, and secondly, that path dependency is to be understood as a rhetorical phenomenon. It is with these thoughts in mind that we now turn to examine the construction of 'quality' under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, which came to power following the general election of 2010. This chapter will show how political actors acting in the name of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition formed after the general election of 2010, were able to mobilise the key features of 'quality' noted above, and yet at the same time re-articulate it by way of a different configuration of political ideologies. The chapter argues that it was not simply that Coalition politicians were able to adopt the policy idea of academisation initiated by New Labour, but rather that they were forced to follow this path by what Freeden has termed the "looking-glass manner" characteristic of conservative political ideology (Freeden 1996:337). This is not to deny the agency exercised by political actors, but simply to point out one structural

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<sup>38</sup> In making this reference I am, according to Patrick Dunleavy (Dunleavy 2014), breaking a rule of good academic writing, which is to link forwards, not back. I am in general agreement with much of Dunleavy's advice and views on good academic writing and I can see the logic in this injunction. However, I do not feel that it is necessarily unhelpful or inimical to aiding the reader's understanding to briefly rehearse what has been said before signposting the way forward and that it why I have done it here and throughout this text.

constraint under which argumentative and political action takes place. To this, further structural constraints must also be added: i) the rhetorical path dependency of institutional changes within which Coalition politicians inevitably had to work, ii) the forms of assessment by which they attempted to make sense of the antagonisms in which they were implicated, and iii) the logics of equivalence and difference constitutive of this environment. The chapter commences by surveying the ideational sources from which political actors constructed a response to New Labour's articulation of 'quality' and the rhetorical commonplaces by which this was achieved. It then proceeds to consider the most significant institutional reforms which issued from this response, namely, the reform of Ofsted and its inspection regime and the subsequent changes made to the system of Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). It is argued that the analysis of these changes are of considerable importance for our understanding of the political control of policy, namely, that this is something which is discursively achieved. From this point, the chapter continues by way of a rhetorical political analysis of the 2010 White Paper to consider the metonymic character of the forms of assessment evident in that text and in political speeches of the time, positing that these discursive structures call for further analysis using the conceptual resources provided by post-structural discourse theory. The chapter concludes by discussing the institutional changes brought about through these particular moments, and evaluates their role in the new architecture of 'quality' brought about by the White Paper of 2016.

### **6.1 The response to New Labour: 'Liberal Conservatism'.**

The rhetorical situation in which Conservative education policy makers found themselves and in which they had to work towards the end of the New Labour government which had been elected in 2005, was one which, as we have seen in the previous chapter,

had been dominated by the slogan of 'standards not structures'. It was also a rhetorical situation which had been characterised by considerable institutional change, which had routinized intervention into school practices by way of the government agencies which had been created to promote and regulate 'quality'<sup>39</sup>. However, such measures were immediately open to criticism from Conservative politicians, guided by the ideological traditions commonly associated with that party, on the grounds of excessive bureaucracy and state control. These political actors were thus able to position themselves as the only truly pragmatic and non-partisan exponents of 'what works'. The political contestation here was therefore not over pragmatism and the ability to implement evidence based policy per se, but rather which party could most persuasively present itself as the exemplar of such self-evidently valid criteria; political actors from all parts of the political spectrum wished to portray themselves as good empiricists.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> This had been made explicit in the literature of government agencies. For example, the 2005 LSC Annual Report stated that 'Our job is to *plan* and fund *high-quality education* and training' and 'Our goal is to improve the nation's skills to match the best in the world' (2005,3, my emphasis). In the LSC's 'Framework for Excellence: How the Framework Will Work' publication, it was declared that 'the framework for excellence will improve the *quality* of learning available in the sector and support a common culture of self-improvement among colleges' (LSC 2007, 5, my emphasis). It was also institutionalized in the remit of Ofsted. The 1992 White Paper had made clear that 'quality' was to be at the core of the new agency: 'the immediate task for it however, is to complete for the first time ever a Doomsday Book-like survey of the quality and achievements of all schools' (DfE 1992, 24). The Schools Inspection Act (1996) itemised the role of the Chief HMI, prioritizing 'quality' in first place: 'The Chief Inspector for England shall have the general duty of keeping the Secretary of State informed about - (a) the quality of the education provided by schools in England, (b) the educational standards achieved in those schools' (School Inspection Act 1996, 2).

The word 'quality' was also explicitly (and repeatedly) referred to in the Conservative Manifesto written for the 2010 General Election: 'People expect to be able to make choices about the services they use based on robust information about the quality on offer' (Conservative Manifesto 2010, 52).

<sup>40</sup> In this particular moment Conservative politicians were adapting 'quality' as articulated by New Labour into something which could be represented within the terms of their own political philosophy, as per Michael Freeden's analysis of ideological change. I am grateful to Alan Finlayson for bringing this to my

This said, the ideological traditions and sources drawn upon by David Cameron, the Conservative Party leader, during this period were more complex than this initial observation suggests. In the last years of New Labour's period in office, Cameron identified the situation as one which necessitated the re-positioning of his party and a search for a distinctive 'policy space' which would provide the Conservatives with a policy offer to the electorate which could be presented as superior to that of New Labour. Given that New Labour had clothed itself in a vision of 'quality' that decontested inequality and hierarchy, and which as we have seen, was largely appropriated from previous Conservative governments, this was not necessarily an easy task. Yet, as other scholars have observed, Conservative policymakers at the time were keen to compete against New Labour on its own grounds, particularly on what they perceived as its failure to ameliorate social problems (McAnulla 2010, Dorey et al, 2011) and Cameron was "keen to fit these around a range of existing one nation and neo-liberal conservative ideas" (Kerr 2007:62).

The solution to this problem of political strategy was achieved through rhetorical means. In the first instance, for around three years prior to the 2010 general election, Cameron was consistently engaged in re-presenting and re-positioning the Conservative Party, (tagged by Theresa May as the 'nasty party' in 2002), primarily by referring to himself as 'a liberal Conservative' and calling for a "new liberal Conservative consensus on our country" (Cameron 2007). From around 2008, Conservative policy makers were able to develop this notion using the work of the philosopher Philip Blond, who is credited with

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attention. I would add that what Freedman's account omits to show is how these processes unfold in the course of rhetorical and argumentative action. This chapter attempts to make some preliminary steps in that direction.



devising the term 'the Big Society' (Harris 2009), and whose ideas were set out in his book, 'Red Tory', (Blond, 2010). This latter publication can be seen to have had a pervasive influence on Coalition policy makers, and its influence is particularly notable in the context of 'quality' and education. For, in diagnosing Britain's ills, Blond was critical of what he termed a state monopoly on education, arguing that this meant that the sole purpose of state education becomes a concern with the well-being of the state rather than the student. Blond contended that this had resulted in a narrow and instrumental curriculum, whereby pupils were learning only what would benefit the state, "including the state by way of the market" (Blond 2010:112). Blond claimed that in order to reform a society which in his estimation had suffered a complete cultural collapse, education had to be recast in Platonic terms, as "formation in the good" (2010:110). According to Blond's argument, the curriculum in the contemporary English education system was one which had merged the worst of both left and right, fusing a technocratic approach to sciences and a focus on skills, with 1960s progressive romanticism. This was an approach which Blond described as expressing a disdain for "every historical canon" (2010:174). A better alternative, Blond argued, drawing upon Plato and Augustine, was a curriculum of transcendent value, reasoning that if belief in objective good is separated from virtue, all that can result is the training of "clever criminals" rather than "honest citizens" (2010:114). In the broadsheet press, Blond clarified that it was the politics of equal opportunities which had permitted greater inequality, and remedy was to be sought in a "more radical economic egalitarianism coupled with the recognition of a difference of roles *and a hierarchy of excellence*" (Blond and Milbank 2010, my emphasis).

It is not difficult to appreciate that these themes of educational and cultural decline, the critique of progressive education and a

call for excellence and hierarchy were highly congruent with the values and beliefs of many Conservative policy makers and could be readily co-opted to the construction of a new Conservative policy narrative. However, to this ideational source, one more must be added: *The Orange Book - Reclaiming Liberalism* (Laws and Marshall 2004), which had been published by senior Liberal Democrat politicians. This book represented the views of those on the right of the Liberal Democrat Party, and made clear its opposition to 'nanny-state liberalism', arguing for Lib Dem policy to be articulated as economic liberalism. Furthermore though, and significantly for this study, the book also aimed to appeal to an audience across the whole party, and quoted Vince Cable expressing support for a policy agenda of quality and choice with the proviso that, provided that the state carried out the "central function of ensuring that there is a regime for standard-testing and providing resources for a quality service, there is no overriding reason why the state itself should provide the service" (Laws and Marshall 2004:8). In this respect then, the policy views articulated in *The Orange Book*, reflected views compatible with neo-liberal political ideology, and their ideological predilections were in fact, very close to those of many Conservative politicians when the coalition was formed in 2010. It also indicated a continued role for 'quality'. However, this role was to be predominantly articulated through the lens of Blond's 'Red Tory' perspective, which implied a far from egalitarian notion of 'quality', since the shared and transcendent values necessary for the desired moral settlement it evoked, implied the existence of an elite which was independent from the state and able to supervise its dismantling (Coombs 2011). Identifying both the canon and the good, was a task which could only be carried out by a political and cultural elite.

## **6.2 Constructing a new narrative of 'quality': the role of commonplace themes.**

By early 2010 Conservative politicians had identified and begun to articulate the ideological resources and the key elements of a rival policy narrative on 'quality'. However, this still left these political actors with a great deal of work to do in order to be able to assemble an appealing narrative. This and the following subsection section draw from a close reading of three speeches by Michael Gove in order to demonstrate the rhetorical features involved in this process and to show how a liberal-conservative articulation of 'quality' enabled an argument for educational reform to be framed around claims for eradicating inequalities in educational attainment by improving the quality of state education. The following section will explain the co-textual context in which this discourse was developed<sup>41</sup>.

In the lead up to the 2010 general election, three speeches given by Michael Gove, the Conservative Shadow spokesman for Education, give an insight into the rhetorical means by which Conservative policymakers attempted to persuade party members and the wider public, that there was a problem in English education, and that the Conservatives had a viable solution to it. The significance of these speeches is most effectively grasped by a thematic treatment and a focus on the commonplace notions of freedom and tradition at work in them. The study of commonplaces which deactivate or activate particular enthymemes is an important aspect of rhetorical analysis (Finlayson 2007:557). A 'commonplace' may be a maxim or a stock theme, which is generally accepted and the invocation

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<sup>41</sup> The findings discussed at this point in the chapter are drawn from 3 speeches made by Michael Gove in 2008 and 2009 (Gove 2008, 2009a, 2009b). 'Quality' is also referenced extensively in other speeches by Gove in this period. In the 14 speeches by Gove examined in the course of this research (including the three mentioned above), there were 55 references to 'quality'. Seven of these speeches are cited in this text.

of which, enables a speaker to demonstrate that “the course of action you are endorsing ought to be acceptable to anyone who already endorses such general principles” (Skinner 1996:15). Commonplaces are therefore standard ways of proving something, and they provide general forms of reasoning applicable to many different cases (Finlayson 2007:557). The enthymemes which are activated by commonplaces however, are to be distinguished from the reasons given in strictly logical argument, and they are to be understood as being merely quasi-logical, since they use the parts of a syllogism or premises which are, as Skinner notes, merely probable rather than certain (Skinner 1996:112). However, the point about quasi-logical premises which are validated by way of the use of commonplaces, is that they permit further deductions to be made, and the result of such reasoning is the construction of a chain of probabilistic and quasi-logical, but nevertheless, persuasive reasoning. However, it is important to note that different political ideologies draw upon different commonplaces, and actors may use concepts from different traditions, since, as Freedon notes, “while an ideology and a party sharing the same name are never identical, they are mutually supportive” (Freedon 2003:31). As Freedon has also pointed out, ideologies do not consist of mutually exclusive ideas, but rather ineliminable and quasi-contingent features. Since the construction of rhetoric is always contingent, it follows that policy actors may seek, or stumble on commonplaces drawn from differing traditions. This was evident in 2010, as Gove drew upon the commonplaces of freedom and tradition, and in so doing, reflected both liberal and conservative ideologies.

The argument about ‘quality’ constructed by Conservative and coalition policymakers in this period, is best understood as commencing with the use of the commonplace notion of freedom to activate two linked premises. It was claimed that under New

Labour, schools had been denied the freedom to 'innovate' and that pupils in state schools were therefore "increasingly led towards weaker qualifications which limit their opportunities" (Gove 2008) and that they would "increasingly be doing softer subjects which give them poorer prospects" (Gove 2008). This was therefore a critique of both certain types of school and certain subjects in the curriculum, and the critique was reinforced as the audience was told that "more and more of the best independent schools are abandoning state run exams altogether" (Gove 2008). It was further explained that the top public schools, Eton and St Paul's, either did not feature or were bottom in exam league tables because they were moving towards exams such as the IGCSE, which the Labour government did not recognize and which it "won't allow state schools to offer" (Gove 2008). These comments were repeated in two speeches in 2009, one to the Conservative Party conference. Access to academic excellence was said to be "tightly rationed" in state schools in contrast to independent schools (Gove 2009a), and at the party conference, the claim was simply that there had been "a dumbing down of the curriculum" (Gove 2009b). The deduction made from these two premises – that state schools cannot 'innovate' and that independent schools can – is that this alleged rationing of academic excellence is "a standing affront to any notion of social justice" (Gove 2009b). On another occasion, in a speech made to an audience in a former grammar school turned academy in New Cross, Gove made an appeal based on pathos. Here he argued that such inequality meant that "pupils from independent schools are bidding for places at our best universities with the hardest currency – bought for them by their parents", a situation which Gove stated "can't be acceptable to any of us who believe in a genuine meritocracy" (Gove 2008). In sum then, what the activation of the commonplace of freedom had thus enabled, was the construction of a quasi-logical chain of reasoning founded

upon an argumentum ad verecundiam<sup>42</sup>; the authority in this case being the practices of elite schools.

The second commonplace deployed in these speeches was the idea of tradition. This is generally seen as a core concept in conservatism, but as Freeden argues, conservatism's interest in the concept is best understood as a concern with the need to render change safe, rather than as a narrow belief in maintaining the status quo. This is an assessment borne out by examination of Gove's use of tradition in the three speeches considered here. In the context of education, Gove stated that "we learn by using existing knowledge" and explained that this enabled us "to grasp new concepts and insights" (Gove 2008), elaborating in his speech to the RSA that although "traditional academic subjects are changing, new hybrids depend on very able students mastering the *fundamentals* of maths and the natural sciences, of classical economics, of history" (Gove 2009a, my emphasis). However, a further commonplace theme regarding knowledge was also drawn from the conservative philosopher Michael Oakeshott; the idea that "very human being is born heir to an inheritance", consisting of, inter alia, "thoughts, beliefs, ideas, canons, works of art" (Gove 2009a). The deduction drawn from these two premises was that the curriculum must be built on "acquiring knowledge", rather than "more diffuse abstract outcomes", and that "full participation in the common life of our nation depends on a deep understanding of its traditions, past and inherited culture" (Gove 2008). It could of course be argued that what all this demonstrates is a discourse of meritocracy, rather than one which is centred on 'quality'. However, this would be to miss the point that the role played by 'quality' has been to neutralize arguments about inequality and hierarchy. In this case,

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<sup>42</sup> An appeal to authority.

it does that in a complex way, for it enabled Gove<sup>43</sup> to argue that in fact, it was New Labour which had “betrayed the poorest” (Gove 2008). However, Gove is explicit; it was “the flight from quality” which caused this to happen, since New Labour was the “party of devaluation”, which had diluted ‘quality’ by “defining success downwards” (Gove 2008).

This selection of commonplaces thus enabled Conservative discourse to explicitly acknowledge the need for change, and yet at the same time insist upon the importance of a traditional canon. Moreover, both commonplaces, freedom and tradition, fed into appeals based on pathos and ethos, with the former predominating in all three speeches. Thus, social justice was emphasized repeatedly, with claims that “the establishment had betrayed the poorest” (Gove 2008), references to “educational apartheid” (Gove 2009a), to “the poorest children whose chances have been blighted by failing schools” (Gove 2009b), and to “a wall dividing the privileged from the rest” and references to a “Berlin Wall”<sup>44</sup>, (Gove 2008). As we have seen in Chapter Five, this language was not confined to Conservative politicians; Blair had made a reference to educational apartheid in his party conference speech in 1996, and it was written into the 1997 White Paper. The concept was also discussed prior to Gove’s speeches in Adonis and Pollard’s book, *A Class Act* (1998:37). This might appear to offer support for the view that Conservatives were appropriating the language of New Labour and thus indicate support for a Downsian approach, identifying a rationalistic

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<sup>43</sup> This strategy is also evident in the 2010 and 2016 White Papers, where political actors were able to deploy pathos to great effect and articulate what I will term ‘Tory compassion’ (since most of the politicians concerned were Tories). In doing this, predominantly Conservative politicians successfully ‘stole the clothes’ of their opponents.

<sup>44</sup> A phrase repeated three times in Andrew Adonis’s book on educational reform (2012:35, 149, 150).

convergence to the centre. However, a poststructuralist approach emphasizes the role of multiple political actors in the inter-subjective construction of hegemony. Thus, while the adoption of such language reflected the strategic environment in which party competition played out, different groups of political actors used the same or similar language, but, as we have seen before, these were refracted through different political ideologies. What we see in all three of Gove's speeches is an appeal to the emotions, and the illocutionary force is therefore to promote Conservative policies and frame them in a persuasive manner. The commonplaces discussed here thus enabled the construction of a chain of quasi-logical reasoning reflecting a view of educational quality which set elite standards as the 'benchmark'; it implied that independent schools were better than state schools (Gove 2008, 2009a, 2009b), that the best teachers work in the best schools (2009a), that some subjects were more difficult than others (Gove 2008), and that sitting students in rows and wearing school uniform improves discipline and promotes a respect for authority and hierarchy (Gove 2008, 2009b). The adoption of substantial elements of New Labour's language is quite evident in the examples given above. This will be explained further below, but for now it must suffice to say simply that this is not to be explained as a purely tactical or strategic choice, but rather, is something which is to be understood as the result of the ideational forces at play in a particular rhetorical situation.

For now, it can be argued that it was predominantly through the use of these commonplaces that Michael Gove was able to frame a new argument for further educational reform around claims for eradicating inequalities in educational attainment through improving the quality of state education<sup>45</sup>. In arguing that the

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<sup>45</sup> As per the explicit claim made by Gove in his 2008 speech. It was thereafter repeated in subsequent speeches made in government.



education policies and measures introduced by New Labour had in fact produced outcomes which were the precise opposite of 'quality', and had "'dumbed-down" standards and led to "grade-inflation", Gove had constructed a distinctively liberal-conservative critique and re-articulation of 'quality'(Gove 2008). Grade inflation and an alleged lowering of standards were explained as the result of a "devaluation" of the currency of education, and were explicitly said to be the result of the "wrong ideology" and the "wrong people" (Gove 2008, 2009b). It was thus by these rhetorical means that 'quality' and equality had been re-articulated in terms of a logic of equivalence, a matter which we will consider later.

### **6.3 The critique of Ofsted's monopoly on 'quality'.**

While the rhetorical work carried out by politicians by way of the commonplaces of freedom and tradition did much to frame a new argument for reform, meaning is not produced by one speaker alone and is to be seen as a dynamic process (Paltridge 2006:54). A post-structural analysis of 'quality' must therefore examine not just the context of the rhetorical devices and arguments considered above, but also the co-textual context within which they were created. Thus, as noted above, while Blond had referred to a state monopoly on education his was not a solitary voice. Two pamphlets published in 2006 and 2008 by the centre right think tank, Civitas, make precisely this charge in addressing the failures of Ofsted (de Waal 2006, Avison et al 2008). The first of these publications, while described by one distinguished reviewer (Husbands 2007:218-19), as "sloppy", and "easily confused by complex ideas", and who judged that "if it had been marked as a Masters' assignment it would have failed", nevertheless warrants our further attention. For this pamphlet helped to shape much of the coalition policy on education, articulating several of the key

arguments driving that policy and the broader policy on the quality of teaching which was at its centre. Anastasia de Waal's analysis (de Waal, 2006), a critique of policy under New Labour, started, like Blond, with the assertion that education had been monopolized by the state. However, this point was elaborated in a distinctive manner; it was seen to be a monopoly over the definition of the quality of education and it claimed that this acted in such a way that private schools were compelled to emulate state school practices, such as differentiation (where, according to de Waal, it was not strictly necessary), or whole class teaching, thus imposing "the flaws in the state sector on the private sector" (de Waal 2006:ix,51). The result of this, it was argued, was that private schools were not being allowed to compete effectively with other schools, and thus it was charged that Ofsted distorted the market and enforced a "politicized agenda" (de Waal 2006:12). This was an argument about freedom of choice and competition, but underlying it was a claim to the superiority of the 'quality' of private education; it had no need to be governed by the inferior 'quality' measures which applied to the state sector.

At the same time however, de Waal appeared to regard it as purely a matter of empirical fact that "the independent sector has the rigour of the market on its side: poor provision is unlikely to retain custom", thus simultaneously asserting the superiority of independent education and reinforcing the construction of state school practices as inferior to independent practices (de Waal 2006:36, 88). New Labour, it was argued, had shackled 'managerialism within a regulatory framework', enabling Ofsted to achieve a homogenisation of teaching practice by means of a definition of 'quality' as standardized provision and inspected "mechanically, by tick boxes" (de Waal 2006:83, 86). Rebutting the criticism that the success of private schools is founded on a selective intake and superior funding, de Waal countered that

many such schools were criticised by Ofsted for having poor technology and premises, asserting that “very often it is precisely the old-fashioned teaching methods that Ofsted criticizes which account for private school success” (de Waal 2006:97).

These themes were repeated in the subsequent White Paper published by the Coalition government, *The Importance of Teaching*, which set out a critique of what was described as New Labour’s inspection “compliance regime” and “centrally imposed government targets” (DfE 2010:66). In order to remove this state monopoly on quality the coalition government argued that a reform of the inspection system was required and that it should be replaced with a system much more focused on inspecting teaching and learning, rather than “inspecting schools against government policies” (DfE 2010:69). A new inspection framework was proposed which would “focus inspection where it was most needed”, and thus, “the weaker the school, the more frequent the monitoring” (DfE 2010:69, 70). For schools graded as ‘outstanding’ however, there would be no requirement for re-inspection, while in regard of the grade ‘satisfactory’, further differentiation would be required in order to facilitate improvement, while at the same time, under this regime, the concept of contextual value-added, would be abolished.

All this suggests that the view reflected in both Blond’s work and the Civitas report had been influential. Civitas in particular, had proposed a parliamentary inquiry into Ofsted, had recommended that inspection focus on schools causing concern, and had sought the recruitment of serving teachers onto inspection teams and the exemption of independent schools from “DfE regulations on teaching style” (de Waal 2006:98-102). Following the general election in May 2010, the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education duly commenced an inquiry into the role and

performance of Ofsted in August 2010, and before the committee had published its report, Ofsted launched a consultation. Subsequently, a new inspection framework was published in 2012 and it was made clear in that document, that it was not applicable to independent schools (Ofsted 2014:7). The Ofsted Inspection Handbook also made clear a claim to the neutrality of the State on the subject of teaching methodology: "Inspectors must not advocate a particular method of teaching or show preference towards a specific lesson structure" (Ofsted 2014:10). These statements were further reinforced by comments in speeches by Gove and by Michael Wilshaw, appointed HMCI in 2011. These events could be interpreted as evidence that the state monopoly on the quality of teaching was being dismantled and as politicians claimed in the 2010 White Paper, that schools were being "freed from external control" (DfE 2010:8). However, examination of the practice of Ofsted, suggests an alternative interpretation.

#### **6.4 Institutional change and the control of policy.**

Once in power, as the White Paper made clear, the coalition government intended to further extend the autonomy of 'independent state schools' through the rapid expansion of the Academy programme, including the creation of 'Free Schools' (DfE 2010:51). This was a policy idea which was intimately linked to the concept of quality since the assumption in coalition policy was that opening up education to market forces would enable the creation of autonomous schools, freed from local authority control and able to respond to the market, that is, parental choice, thus enabling the pressure of competition between schools to lead to the raising of standards. For 'liberal-conservative' policymakers, the assumption was that parents would choose traditional schools, teaching a traditional curriculum through a traditional pedagogy.

However, the regulation of competition in public sector services requires a mechanism that can be seen to be neutral in monitoring standards. As some education policy researchers have observed, school inspection systems can be used to satisfy governmental demands for transparency, since they appear to be neutral and thus to promise a solution to the problematic task of convincing a public of the quality of schools (Baxter and Clarke 2013:707). However, what this analysis neglects to point out, is that the neutrality of such regulatory mechanisms can be challenged and may become the subject of intense criticism, as seen in the political action under consideration here. Indeed, the Chair of the Select Committee inquiry into Ofsted, recognized that the import of the critique of Ofsted made by Civitas and others, was precisely that it had challenged the impartiality of Ofsted (Education Committee 2011a:42). Significantly, one suggestion made by the Select Committee to solve this, through the appointment of a 'neutral' Chief Education Officer to work alongside Ofsted, was rejected by government, on the grounds that there were other ways to achieve the representation of "front-line" voices within the DfE (Education Committee 2011b:3.1).

This rejection is however not adequately explained on the grounds that ministers had some alternative scheme in mind to give voice to those working at the front-line. On the contrary, the truth was that Ofsted provided "a powerful institutional underpinning for steering the system" (Lee and Fitz 1997:50). This was a device which ministers were clearly not keen to surrender, and evidence for this assessment comes in the form of the observation made that during this period, schools were being pressured into becoming academies through financial incentives (Baker 2010). However, financial incentives or pressures were applied in tandem with pressure through the inspection system. As evidence to the Select Committee testified, increasing use was being made of

Ofsted inspection outcomes as a basis for policy decisions: "For example, schools with 'outstanding' Ofsted grades are being regarded as pre-approved for Academy status, and are to be exempt from further inspection unless there is other evidence that their performance has dipped" (Education Committee 2011a).

The Committee report expressed concern on this practice, deeming that 'the inspection service is being asked to bear too great a weight in policy development' (Education Committee 2011a:19). Yet, in the following years, as the Coalition government sought to expand the number of Academies and Free Schools, the practice continued. Gove's strategy for obtaining 'front-line' voices and expertise in policy was to delegate power to those who shared his "interests, ideology and culture" (Stanfield 2013:46), hence the appointment of Sir Michael Wilshaw as HMCI. Nevertheless, tensions quickly emerged in this relationship. In 2014 Civitas and another think tank, Policy Exchange, made briefings casting doubt on the ability of Ofsted to inspect Academies and Free Schools. The suggestion that some on the political right remained critical even of a reformed Ofsted, was reinforced by the publication in March 2014 of a report on school inspection by Policy Exchange, the think tank founded by Gove and others. The report mirrors the language of Michael Gove's phrases regarding the "wrong sort of inspection" (Gove 2013b), commenting that "there is a consistent pattern in the preferred style of inspectors that comes from a shared background, and which manifests itself subconsciously in the judgements they make" (Policy Exchange 2014:41). The proposed remedies for the perceived lack of expertise of inspectors included a data interpretation test and training in lesson observation using methods developed by the Measures of Effective Teaching Project, sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and created by a team from Harvard University

Graduate School of Education, with the aim of improving the reliability and validity of teaching observation. This emphasis on empirical methodology suggests an underlying view which posits one 'correct' interpretation to be made. In the context of a report which approvingly quoted a defence of teaching methods where "the teacher talks too much, imparts facts or teaches activities that involve factual recall" (Policy Exchange 2014), it seems clear that there was an agenda, rooted in the policy network, to promote traditional, highly didactic and authoritarian teaching methods and to escape the perceived monopolistic imposition of an inferior quality of teaching as classified by the state.

The reform of Ofsted following the 2011 review was claimed to have removed the state monopoly on quality and to have created 'independent state schools'. Yet it will be recalled that the claim of neoliberal theory is that marketization will mean that quality is defined by the customer. What the account of the reform of Ofsted presented here demonstrates however, is the persistent and successful attempts of state officials to regulate and intervene and to impose a particular definition of quality; the state necessarily monopolizes 'quality' in state education. It must be concluded that in fact, quality is not determined by the market, but rather by those elite political groups who are able to effect institutional change. It is not the case, as one professor of education has suggested, that "market forces define and promote standards" and that "quality is what pleases the customer" (Pring 1992). To maintain those two statements, is to proffer an ideological sense, in light of a view of ideology as a "story which justifies the use of power" (Thompson 1984:11). The argument in this section is that, on the contrary, under the Coalition government, what defined and promoted this version of quality and of standards, was a policy network formed by political and social elites, led by a political elite of decision makers who worked to promote a

traditional pedagogy and curriculum; that is what was institutionalized during this period. Yet this was necessary work for such a political project, since as Clegg notes, the nature of delegated power in large organizations is fragile and unstable: “rules can never be free of surplus or ambiguous meaning: they are always indexical to the context of interpreters and interpretation” (Clegg 1989:201). Our next task therefore, is to return to consider what rhetorical devices were used in the attempt to mobilize the Coalition’s preferred interpretation of ‘quality’.

### **6.5. The 2010 White Paper: argumentum ad superbiam<sup>46</sup>.**

The institutional changes discussed above stemmed from the arguments and rhetoric deployed in the years leading up to the general election of 2010. Those arguments and rhetoric were in turn institutionalized not only by the changes brought about by the inquiry into Ofsted, but through the publication of the White Paper, *The Importance of Teaching*, and the legislation which followed it. As we have seen, the promotion of Academies was a key aim of the Coalition government, and to this end, two pieces of legislation, the 2010 Academies Act and the 2011 Education Act, set out the rules for a new educational regime. In short, the Academies Act enabled all publicly funded schools in England to become Academies, which would be ‘independent state schools’, with charitable status, free to set their own curriculum. The second piece of legislation carried out a number of changes, abolishing the General Teaching Council, the Quality and Curriculum Development Agency, and the Training and Development Agency for Schools. It also legislated a further centralization of decision making power: the SoS was given the power to dissolve an FE or sixth form college and to draw up initial

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<sup>46</sup> An appeal to flattery.



instruments and articles of government for new sixth form colleges, and to intervene in cases of mismanagement or failure. This said, the White Paper's emphasis on autonomy was reflected to the extent that HMCI was given the power to exempt schools from inspection, and FE and sixth form colleges in England were to be permitted to borrow money without the permission of the YPLA. These were substantial institutional changes; what must concern us in this section however, is how these changes were made palatable and persuasive in rhetorical terms.

*The Importance of Teaching* starts with the by now familiar claim that "no education system can be better than the quality of its teachers" (DfE 2010:3). This is familiar precisely because it is to repeat a claim made by governments from the beginning of the period examined in this thesis (DES 1986:3). It was also a claim repeated in another text published by the international management consultancy firm, McKinsey & Company, *How the world's best performing schools systems come out on top* (McKinsey 2007). One of the co-authors of this publication, Michael Barber, had served as head of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit under New Labour from 2001-5, and subsequently went on to lucrative and influential posts at McKinsey and elsewhere. The claim is to be regarded therefore, as a doxa with an interesting genealogy stretching across both party political divides and the permeable boundary between the public and private sectors at the highest levels. It is a doxa which greatly simplifies and reduces the factors shaping education systems and the varying achievements of the students who work in such systems. It was this doxa which enabled the construction of a quasi-logical chain of meaning which posited schools as a black box, solely responsible for educational attainment and educational and social inequality, given to derive from ineffective schools and teachers.

It was in this way that the White Paper of 2010 initially identified and problematized education. The reason why the alleged poor quality of the education system was considered problematic, is once again, familiar. Educational improvement was required primarily for economic reasons since it “will define our economic growth and our country’s future” (DfE 2010:3). Once again, the UK was compared unfavourably, to more successful nations, such as Finland and South Korea, which were said to prove that providing more ‘autonomy’ to head teachers was associated with higher school performance. Such freedoms were said to characterise Academies and CTCs, and the explanation given for that success was the claim that freedom enables schools and teachers to ‘innovate’ and to “ensure that educationalists can concentrate on education” (quote marked but unattributed, DfE 2010:4) This is a reference to ‘freeing’ schools from bureaucracy, again, is an idea raised in other White Papers, and which occurred here in the context of exhorting the need to have a “power shift to the front line’, accompanied by ‘a streamlined and effective accountability system” (DfE 2010:4).

This outline of policy intent was one which was aimed to include all schools and students; “no country that wishes to be considered world class can afford to allow children from poorer families to fail as a matter of course” (DfE 2010:4). This commitment to equality was expressed by way of a heavy use of pathos, referring to “the moral outrage of an accepted correlation between wealth and achievement at school; the soft bigotry of low expectations” (DfE 2010:4). This last comment is not presented as a quotation, but it is in fact plagiarized from a speech by George W Bush. What is most important about the comment however, is what the form of the argument reveals about the liberal-conservatism of the time and the political strategy that was being constructed through it.

Thus, the comment on low expectations is followed by the observation that “This vast gap between rich and poor is not pre-ordained”, and “More children from some private schools go to Oxbridge than from the entire cohort of children on free school meals” (DfE 2010:4). This form of language is something which has been identified earlier in this analysis: it was evident in John Major’s use of pathos and talk of social mobility, and in Keith Joseph’s pledges on behalf of the ‘talented children of the poor’ in his espousal of an argument for ‘choice and diversity’ in 1974.

These utterances are to be understood as reflecting a form of action; strategic political action. However, this is not to argue that these political actors were presenting views which they did not believe in, in order to gain political advantage, and it is necessary here to briefly elaborate on the concept of strategic political action. As Hay explains, the concept of strategy developed in his own work and that of Jessop, claims that strategy is intentional conduct oriented to the environment in which it is to occur (Hay 2002:129). In this view, political actors are to be seen as agents who ‘both internalise perceptions of their context and consciously orient themselves towards that context in choosing between potential courses of action’ (2002:129). This is an approach which posits the ‘strategic selectivity’ of context, and is referred to by Hay as the strategic-relational approach. This is to be contrasted with the poststructural discourse approach taken in this thesis, and at this point I wish to note one point of difference between this approach and Hay and Jessop’s alternative. This is to make the point that the latter view neglects an considerable element of strategic action: namely the rhetorical element. This is to argue then, that political actors do not simply internalize perceptions of their context and then consciously orient themselves towards that context; on the contrary, political actors are reflexive beings who are collectively involved in *constructing* perceptions of the

context, intersubjectively, and those perceptions subsequently become the objects of political and argumentative action. Strategic action is therefore to be understood as rhetorical action and the constraints acting upon political actors are rhetorical and discursive structures. This is also to argue, as we see in the moments discussed in this chapter, that political actors are constrained by what has been said and what has been done, prior to their own engagement in political and argumentative action. One immediate objection which may be made against such a position is that it neglects the importance of material constraints, but as argued in Chapter Two, the poststructuralist approach is one which understands the discursive has having materiality. From this perspective what is important is how what some analysts see as the 'purely material' is understood and acted upon, and that is a process which the poststructuralist approach insists is constructed and mediated rhetorically. There is then, no dualism of material and ideas.

In this light, the political strategy of the Coalition involved 'stealing the clothes' of its political opponents. Yet the use of this metaphor in political explanation requires critical reflection. For it seems to indicate that political actors are to be understood as cynically 'borrowing' policy ideas, and that political rhetoric is to be regarded solely or mainly as a means of disguising their true intentions. In contrast, the interpretation presented here is that while political actors were taking ideas used by their opponents, and were keen to create an appeal which was attractive to a broad range of constituencies, such ideas still had to be constructed as compatible and coherent within the ideological parameters of the political parties involved in that construction. Moreover, the adoption of these ideas about social mobility are to be seen not in voluntaristic fashion, as strategic and tactical choices, but as something which the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition

was forced to mirror (Freeden 1996:337). To make this assertion is to endorse Freeden's observation about the core concepts of conservatism, and the development of Coalition policy on 'quality' in the rhetorical situation discussed thus far in this chapter, is one which appears to support that claim in its entirety. How this observation is to be seen in the context of a broader theoretical treatment however, is a topic which will be developed in the final chapter.

Given these analytical points, it becomes less surprising that political actors in this period of government stressed the importance of social justice, the need to reduce inequalities and create equal opportunities. Neither is it particularly surprising that political actors proceeded to do this with some caution, for criticism is easier when preceded by flattery. Thus, the issue of standards in the first few pages of the White Paper is very carefully couched, and there is no direct criticism of schools or the teaching profession. Cameron and Clegg say that the current cohort of trainees is "one of the best ever" and Gove goes further, saying that teachers are "society's most valuable asset", and that there is "no calling more noble, no profession more vital and no service more important than teaching" (DFE 2010:6). This is an appeal to ethos which helps to accentuate the contrast when the real culprit is identified; bureaucracy. Hence readers are told that teachers "consistently tell us that they feel constrained and burdened required to teach the same limited diet to successive classes of young people" (DfE 2010:8). This is a view of quality which can be related to ideas, which though not labelled as such, are clearly much closer to conservative and liberal-conservative ideology, projecting a belief in standards, hierarchy and freedom. Readers are told that the qualifications which have grown are not valued by employers and that schools are simply gaming the system. The Civitas line of argument that inspection has been

reduced to a 'tick box' exercise is repeated, as well as the view that standards are in reality not rigorous enough and do not stretch students. The solution is to give schools and teachers more autonomy and to free teachers from the bureaucratic constraints imposed by centralized state control.

This is not just an appeal to ethos then, it is also an argumentum ad superbiam; an argument which appeals to pride, or flattery, as a prelude to criticism (Fischer 1971:304). Thus the argument in the White Paper, while initially praising teachers, then shifted with a pledge to improve the standard of teachers. This was to be achieved by various means: recruiting only those candidates with a 2.2 degree classification, expanding Teach First, a scheme recruiting students from predominantly elite universities, to train as teachers, and by offering incentives to other groups considered to have the desired, and indeed, the correct ethos, namely, those with a background in business and ex-military personnel (Stanfield and Cremin 2013). Along with these plans, went steps to move teacher training away from universities and base it in schools, reflecting a conservative preference for the practical and cultural and a political antagonism to the university sector. In train with these elements came a traditional conservative focus on order and discipline, reflected in policies to increase head teachers' authority and changes in the appeals system.

#### **6.6. The re-description of 'satisfactory' and the metonymic pairing of the strong and the weak**

While *The Importance of Teaching* proposed numerous changes to the inspection regime, it is important to clarify that it did not suggest that the category of 'satisfactory' should be scrapped. What the White Paper did suggest, was that Ofsted would differentiate within this category (DfE 2010:70). It was the Ofsted inquiry of 2010-11 which led to the abandonment of the term

'satisfactory' as an official category in school inspection. This was something instigated by Ofsted and the HMCI acting in response to the inquiry. We have previously noted that delegated authority in political organizations can be highly problematic, since policy aims may conflict with the ethos, aims and interests of agents; this was clear in the case of Kenneth Clarke's attempts to gain compliance from HMI and the DES. Yet, given what we have already observed concerning Michael Gove's strategy for enrolling front-line voices and delegating power to those who shared his ideology, culture and interests, it can be no surprise that under this political regime, Ofsted could be relied upon as a useful policy lever. This was not new, however, since New Labour and the Thatcher administration (see Hall 1991) had also attempted, with some success, to appoint those sympathetic to their policy goals. What this suggests, in keeping with the poststructural approach of this study, is that institutional power structures are best understood as discursive entities and the political actors working in them, as discursively constructed subjects.

These changes represented a significant policy intervention, enabling government to create a modified inspection regime, better able to enforce the doctrine of infinite, continuous improvement, and thus to accelerate the Academy program. The policy idea of 'quality' had been radicalized, with Prime Minister David Cameron, commenting after the Ofsted inquiry, "I don't want the word satisfactory to exist in our education system" (Coughlan 2012). This appeal echoed that which had been made on the part of the LSC in 2001 (see Chapter 5). On that occasion, however, 'satisfactory' had won the day, but at this juncture, more radical political forces, which found the category 'satisfactory' objectionable and obstructive to their policy goals, were able to expunge the concept from official discourse. This was made possible by several factors: the changed situation and the

political forces at work, nearly a decade of critique by political actors informed by conservative and liberal theory, and the institutional changes themselves. These latter changes had collectively acted so as to embed the notion of 'quality' as continuous improvement throughout the state, and centralized the agencies controlling education. At this particular moment however, change was enabled by a narrative of "the flight from 'quality'" and the "devaluation" of educational currency, and an insistence that traditional standards were the best possible standards and should therefore be promoted and defended (Gove 2008)<sup>47</sup>. Not only could such standards be portrayed as being vital to the national economic interest, but it could also be credibly argued that far from representing the interests of the advantaged, they would be to the benefit of the disadvantaged and thus in the interest of all citizens.

In order to fully understand how this moment came about however, we must draw further upon rhetorical theory and in particular the concept of *paradiastole*. Cameron's comment and the removal of 'satisfactory' as an official grading category represented, was the mobilization of the preferred or correct meaning of a term by way of redescription. The technique of redescription or *paradiastole*, occurs when the meaning of an evaluative term shifts from being used to express approval of an

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<sup>47</sup> The route to this point had been forged rhetorically and 'quality' had been central in that process. Gove's speech of 2008 made explicit reference to the importance of quality and "the world in which quality of education will be decisive"(Gove 2008). He also levelled the claim that "the establishment has betrayed the poorest", at the same time moulding 'quality' to Tory ideology arguing that "the abandonment of a desk and seating arrangement which seemed unduly regimented has actually removed a crucial aspect of order, discipline and hierarchy from the lives of children – for those children who grow up in order, secure and stable homes the loss is less but for those who grow up in disordered, chaotic and difficult surroundings the sacrifice is greater. The one place where they could work quietly, where facts could be transmitted calmly and order was assured has gone in a welter of wallchart construction and chatterbox partners" (Gove 2008).



action or state of affairs, to being used to express the opposite or vice versa. As Skinner has pointed out, processes of redescription occur when the ability of normative vocabulary to “encourage particular acts of appraisal alters in either direction or intensity” (Skinner 2002:180). Redescription presages attempts to change social beliefs and may thus be performative. When such changes in terminology are widely adopted, Skinner suggests, “a whole society may eventually come to alter its attitude towards some fundamental value or practice and alter its normative vocabulary accordingly” (2002:181). This can be achieved, Skinner suggests, by manipulating the criteria for applying an existing set of commendatory terms (2002:151). What we see in the example of ‘satisfactory’ as discussed here, is precisely such a manipulation of criteria. However, in this case, we see that a more radical elaboration of the method is to engineer a change in the use of evaluative terms through the use of the powers of the state, in this case, by initiating a parliamentary inquiry which subsequently prompted a state agency to change its own classificatory terms and rules.

However, while the process of *paradiastole* helps to explain what happened to ‘quality’ under the Coalition government, this concept is not sufficient to explain the rhetorical path to that end. For that, we must turn back to examine the forms of assessment used by political actors in the years prior to, and the early years of, the Coalition. This is to acknowledge that the process by which political actors select commonplaces is not to be seen in voluntaristic terms, yet nor is argumentative and rhetorical action determined solely by political ideologies. In this sense, forms of assessment are to be seen as both constructing and constructed by, political ideologies. Political ideologies and forms of assessment are discrete objects, but they are dynamically and rhetorically related. This is clearly illustrated by the examination

of the forms of assessment utilized in the speeches of Michael Gove, (the Conservative Shadow SoS for Education, who became SoS after the 2010 general election), and in the 2010 White Paper.

For the purposes of this study it is of significance that the focus in RPA on creativity and agency leads to the examination of the construction of meaning, most notably through the device of metaphor. Yet more important for this study is metonymy, since in contrast to metaphor, it performs the rhetorical function of association or ordering, by relating one thing to another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980) and thus, an examination of the use of figurative tropes enables the political analyst to construct the figurative maps of social order employed by policy actors (Geertz 1977). Ordering and making associations, after all, is precisely what political actors are doing in making speeches and articulating policy. The figurative maps which political actors both construct and draw upon in this process, are at once rhetorical articulations and forms of assessment.

The policy narrative in *The Importance of Teaching*, presents a universe which is dominated by one particular metonymic pairing; that of the strong and the weak. Schools, universities, teachers, and pupils are characterised using these tropes; thus the White Paper refers to "our strongest schools", "strong Academy sponsors", in contrast to "weaker schools" (DfE 2010:23, 26, 56, 14). This same narrative was also deployed and developed in other texts, notably in the speeches of Michael Gove, where we are told that a generation ago the world's "strongest performers" in educational achievement were behind the UK (Gove 2010a) and it is "our strongest universities that have warned about the decline in standards" (Gove 2008). In this narrative the terms strong and 'strength' are applied to the most academically successful schools

and institutions and in another chain of quasi-logical reasoning, these are identified as the best led and managed, and the most autonomous (DfE 2010, McKinsey 2008). The White Paper therefore designates these 'outstanding' schools as those which will "lead the way" to academy status, and valorises autonomy as the route to the highest forms of 'quality' (DfE 2010:54).

The paired metonymies of the strong and the weak in coalition discourse are to be interpreted as referring, not only to standards and the 'quality' of particular institutions; they are also a reference to social class and to status. The terms denote social advantage and disadvantage as distilled most powerfully through social class and the liberal-conservative schematic map of social order which emerges from these two juxtaposed ideal-types, is at root, a crude mapping of social inequality and cultural difference. It is upon these broad ideal-types that policy on 'quality' was formulated in this period, and it followed that the 'strong' were constructed as the exemplars of high quality education (Gove 2008, 2012b, 2011a, 2011c, 2012b, 2014a). In this quasi-logical chain of reasoning, the strongest are those who are most autonomous, those individuals and institutions which are least dependent upon the state; thus it is that we see throughout this narrative, positive references to the "top universities", and "independent schools", and are told that the aim of policy is to create "independent state schools" (DfE 2010:51-58, Gove 2008, 2012c), a phrase replete with surplus meaning in an English context. The private sphere is thereby portrayed as the site of greatest virtue; that is where most autonomy is to be found, and thus also the highest 'quality', and this is the benchmark against which all must be judged and accorded value. It was this narrative of the powerful which was put to political work and deployed to justify the exercise of power by the 'strong', quite explicitly when Gove argued that " I don't think you help the weak by punishing

the strong. If you get it right, then by emancipating the strong you can support the weak” (2012a).

The interpretation I have offered here could of course be challenged; it might for example be argued, on empiricist lines, that the use of such terms simply reflects the realities of differences in teaching quality, and ability plus effort on the part of pupils. However, this was precisely the argument made by government. In contrast the argument I wish to make is that such claims, in their dull empiricist certainty, demonstrate a failure of reflexivity and on the part of their creators, an inability to understand their own constructed nature. In this case, it seems necessary to go beyond Foucault; it is not that people ‘know’ what they are doing and simply fail to understand the effects of their activity. On the contrary, political actors may have a very poor understanding both of what they are doing and of the effects of their activity. Thus, as the results of other research suggest, policy makers and others, in constructing and promoting such fabrications were engaged in a circular process of the reproduction of doxa (see Gorard 2006, Von Stumm et al, 2021). Given this, and the textual evidence adduced here, I argue that the best interpretation of the metonymic pairing of the strong and the weak is precisely that which I have rendered; in using these terms political actors were mapping out and (re)constructing the class structure of their society in their own doxic language.<sup>48</sup>

This section has argued that the concept of quality enabled Coalition politicians to re-describe the terms used to classify the

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<sup>48</sup> In Bourdieusian terms, this was a process of misrecognition and raises questions as to the validity of my claims. My response to such questions draws upon the thinking of Skinner and Ricoeur. In short, the goal of ‘correctness’ misconceives the notion of a post-empirical truth. Truth is uncertain and ‘validation is not verification’ (Ricoeur in Gardner 2010:82), and thus, as Skinner remarks, ‘who ever supposed – apart apparently from Derrida – that interpretations can ever hope to provide certainty?’ (Skinner 2008:653).

educational performance of schools, and thereby to set up arrangements which promoted and reinforced the idea of a traditional curriculum, taught by traditional methods in the state sector. The act of re-description and the creation of a new classification scheme also enabled the Coalition to further the policy of academization. In carrying out this political and argumentative action, the ability of ministers to control state agencies was highly significant; Coalition politicians were able to deploy and extend power over the articulation and implementation of policy by appointing individuals who reflected their own beliefs, values, interests and ideology. It has also been shown that the rhetorically constructed form of assessment used and constructed by Coalition political actors, was one which resulted in a crude binary mapping of social inequality and social difference. This binary mapping moreover, is one which has also been evident in the forms of assessment articulated by previous governments examined in this thesis. While these other political actors, from opposing political parties, did not use the same metonymic pairing of the strong and the weak, other binary terms were used to achieve much the same effect, drawing distinctions for example, between rough and other areas, or between "disadvantaged areas" or "inner city LEAs" or "schools in difficult circumstances" and other unnamed areas (Ch4, p19, Ch 5 ,10, 22). This speaks to two points. Firstly, forms of assessment, of which class is but one form, are to be understood as discursive structures. Secondly, that in order to understand and explain the prevalence and role of these structures, we must turn to the conceptual resources provided by post-structural discourse theory. However, this is a task which must be left to the final chapter, as it is now necessary to complete our survey of the institutional path carved by 'quality' following the end of the Coalition and the election of a new Conservative government in 2015.

## **6.7. The continuous pursuit of excellence: Regional Schools Commissioners**

The policy to expand academisation discussed in the previous section resulted in a rapid increase in the number of Academies. In January 2014, 57% of state funded secondary schools in England were Academies; by January 2016 the figure was 61.4%, and by 2022 this had increased to 80%, accounting for 79% of all secondary school pupils (DfE 2014, UK Government 2022). These figures stand as a testament to the success of the arguments waged on behalf of the Academy programme by politicians from the main political parties. However, they also reflect the impact of the policy concept of quality and the related notion of continuous improvement. It is perhaps not exaggerating to argue that the concept of Academies would not have been developed without 'quality', for this concept enabled political actors to promote an agenda of 'choice and diversity' and to present it as entirely fair and meritocratic. It was a policy which was intended to eradicate the 'moral outrage of an accepted correlation between wealth and achievement at school' (DfE 2010:4). There was moreover, a path dependency which led from the development of 'quality' in the 1980s to academisation, but it is to be seen as a rhetorical path dependency (Grube 2016). Contrary to Grube's analysis, this was not merely a matter of an inability to shake off the wording of previous promises. Politicians may sometimes box themselves into corners, but it is more importantly the case that political actors – from all political parties - are engaged in collective action, and the positions which these organizations construct and take in argumentative action produce inter-subjectively constructed outcomes. It is in this more complex sense that the frequently touted reference to Marx's line that "men make history, but not in circumstances of their own choosing" (Hay 2002:117), can be seen as informative, but this

is not to be understood in terms which endorse a rigid structuralist and materialist ontology. Grasping this complexity enables the analyst to appreciate that the Conservative government elected in 2015 was highly motivated to extend the path set out by 'quality', not because of a rationalistic tendency to compete with other parties, nor as the result of rational consensus, and neither as a consequence of Grube's notion of the power of 'sticky words', but rather, on a first level, because such a course of action was compatible with its ideological predilections and political strategy. Nor is mention of the 'motivation' of the Conservative government, to lapse into voluntarism; for on a further level, that motivation was itself a product, as indicated earlier above, of structural forces in the form of the ideological structure of Conservatism and logics of equivalence and difference.

It was for these reasons that the Conservative government in 2016 announced its plan to ensure that 'every school is an academy' (DfE 2016:7). That this announcement was retracted, only to be subsequently restated, reflects the environment of contingency within which such structural pressures exist (Adams 2016, Gunther and Hughes 2022). What is more important for this analysis is the rhetorical means by which such claims have been presented. It is with this purpose in mind that we may direct our attention to the 2016 White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (DfE 2016). This White Paper presents lines of argument which are by now familiar to readers of this thesis; we are told that education has the "power to transform lives" and the introduction by the SoS (Nicky Morgan) draws on ethos, stating that "for me, it is a matter of social justice" (DfE 2016:3). The problem is also framed in familiar terms; despite much improvement, "there still remain too many pockets of educational underperformance" (DfE 2016:3). Autonomy, and academies, are presented as the way to create a new system which will eradicate

this problem, in what is described as school-led improvement led by “this country’s most effective education leaders” (2016:9). This argument is supported by pathos: “Children get only one chance at education and every child deserves the opportunity to reach their full potential.[...]..Access to a great education is not a luxury but a right for everyone’, and the expressed aim is to “create a self-improving school system that prevents underperformance” (DfE 2016:5, cf. DfE 1992).

Making this case for change, as implied by the argument above, involved considerable repetition of previous White Papers. Thus, it is asserted that education will help children from all social backgrounds (nb not classes), “shape their destiny” (DfE 2016:5 cf. DfE 2010,6,7,11,15,44,56), and that education is the “hallmark of a civilised society” (DfE 2016 (ibid.), DfEE 1997:1, 5, 11). The justification for educational reform is that it will make Britain fairer and more cohesive, but at the same time, this will make the country more productive and innovative; all of this is set around a reference to the status of the nation: educational reform and success is “vital to Britain’s position in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (DfE 2016:5).

The forms of assessment evident in this text are continuous with those in other White Papers, and once again reflect the simplified, binary mapping discussed in the previous section. In this text however, social difference is reduced to a geographical phenomenon. Thus, it is claimed that “too many children suffer a poor education because of where they live” (DfE 2016:6). This explanation is not developed, but the White Paper presents numerous maps, setting out the different levels of performance of schooling. These maps do not seem to be interpreted as explicitly identifying disadvantage or inequality as such, although “tough areas” is mentioned once, as is “challenging areas” (DfE 2016:14,



15), but rather as indicating areas of what are referred to as 'strong and weak performance', re-introducing the metonymic pairing discussed in the previous section.

The solution to the problem of underperformance identified in this White Paper, was to extend the principles identified by previous governments, most notably by giving schools "supported autonomy" (DfE 2016:10), and citing the imprimatur of Michael Barber to unleash, rather than mandate, 'greatness' (DfE 2016:9). This White Paper argued that this was to be achieved by way of a plan involving the following elements: better teachers, better leaders, more accountability, and better assessment and funding systems. These were to be achieved by making all schools Academies, with the view that this would constitute a new 'school-led system' and bring about "school-led improvement" (2016:15,18). None of these features in themselves were new; what was new was the way in which they were arranged. What we see here is to be understood as a rhetorical path dependency, and as pointed out in Chapter Two, it was precisely the order in which things had been argued which made things happen, and affected how they happened. The concept of 'quality' had enabled political actors to articulate a policy narrative based on the notions of choice and diversity; it had also enabled a critique of bureaucracy and thus of LEAs, leading to the valorisation of autonomy. The inevitable end of such a critique, as detailed in previous chapters, was a curtailing of the role of LEAs and a consequent reduction in their power; contingency lay in precisely how that process would occur and what institutional forms would be created to carry out the functions necessary for a new and continuously evolving school system, since political actors still required the means to enforce policy.

In the situation pertaining in 2016 moreover, this entailed that further institutional change was required in order to manage the

provision of school places and to monitor the 'quality' of schools applying for academy status. In order to facilitate this, the White Paper set out a new role for civil servants working within the DfE the Regional Schools Commissioners (RSCs). The RSCs had been created in 2014, with a brief to approve new academies and to intervene where there were concerns about underperformance (Foster and Long 2017). The plans for academisation in the White Paper were predicated on the development of academies under the aegis of Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), as these were argued to be more efficient and offer more robust governance and the centralised systems able to deliver significant benefits in quality (DfE 2016:57-59). The White Paper argued for the expansion and modification in the role of RSCs by providing them with new powers of intervention in maintained schools and making them responsible for notifying maintained schools and academies if they were judged to be 'coasting'. This included the ability to take action in the case of schools deemed to lack "strong plans which will lead to improvement" (DfE 2016:113); all of these measures were duly legislated through the 2016 Education and Adoption Act.

This institutional change was therefore brought about at the behest of elected politicians, actors who had been motivated by their dislike of bureaucracy. Moreover, the RSC and the related Headteacher Boards (HTBs), reflected the same operation of power as discussed earlier. RSCs were staffed by full-time civil servants of various types, while HTBs, consisted of four members elected by local academies and four co-opted members from the region. As the White Paper stated, "Regional headteacher boards comprise top headteachers, elected by their peers and appointed for their track records" (DfE 2016:112). The import of these changes is that they demonstrate that institutional change in the British polity may be the outcome not only of crises, but also as

an integral part of the routine and continuous practice of politics. Institutional change should be understood as operating in various ways, including through the exercise of executive power, whereby the individuals appointed to key positions are those who share - at least to a sufficient extent - the interests, ideology and culture of the dominant political actors to key positions.

In sum then, during the period examined in this chapter, the concept of 'quality' enabled politicians to re-describe the classificatory categories and practices used by Ofsted in order to promote a traditional pedagogy and curriculum. The period also saw the development of a new school system, with the modification and tailoring of existing state institutions in order to provide the policy levers politicians desired. Schools were now answerable to the RSCs, Ofsted and ESFA. All of these institutions governed 'quality' albeit in different ways and with discrete remits. The RSCs, with their focus on approving conversion to Academy status and monitoring underperformance, were tasked with maintaining the 'quality' of the Academy 'business model'. As the White Paper stipulated however, their role was to be distinguished from that of Ofsted, which remained concerned with the curriculum and teaching quality, while the concern of ESFA was with the financial aspects of 'quality' (ESFA 2019). After some thirty years of continuous change, local education authorities remained, but their powers were considerably reduced, being left to focus on three main activities: ensuring the provision of places for all pupils, meeting the needs of vulnerable pupils and acting as 'champions' for parents. The claim made by the political actors responsible for these changes was that they were 'unleashing greatness' by enhancing the autonomy of schools and headteachers. The implications of the rhetorical analysis set out in this chapter is that this was not the case. What had been created was a much more rigorously centralized system of state

schooling, and one moreover, which valorised and reflected particular values and served and constructed particular interests, and which although explicitly presented by political actors as Liberal-Conservative ideas, is to be much more readily understood as reflecting neoliberal political ideology.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has attempted to demonstrate the ways in which political actors in two governments were able to use 'quality' as a political tool and weapon. In doing this, it has been argued that while Coalition and Conservative politicians were able to mobilise 'quality' and re-articulate it in order to further promote and develop academisation, such action was constrained by several structures. These included the 'looking-glass manner' of conservative political ideology, the rhetorical path dependent character of institutional change, and the forms of assessment used by political actors. This last structural constraint, which it has been claimed is to be understood as a discursive structure, is particularly important in this study, since it is this which must direct the political analyst towards a post-structural discourse analysis which posits forms of assessment in the context of antagonisms and logics of equivalence and difference. This is a view supported by the discussion of the metonymic pairing of 'the strong and the weak', a discussion which indicates that the foundations of the social are rhetorical (Laclau 2014).

In reaching this conclusion, the chapter has presented a great deal of material pertinent to the research questions which concern this study. In relation to the first research question, it is clear from this chapter that political actors used 'quality' because, like New Labour in 1997, they were locked into a rhetorically dependent path whereby arguments about 'quality' were a key part of the political environment. At the same time, the concept

of quality provided political actors with a powerful tool and weapon. The second research question concerns the ideational processes involved in the construction of 'quality' and how they change over time. In this chapter we have seen evidence that those ideational processes included not only different forms of argument and metonymic pairing, but also the performative use of re-description in the attempt to change social beliefs. Finally, in respect of the third research question as to the relationship between 'quality' and interests, the findings reported in this chapter indicate that there was a strong relationship between the two. Far from being a neutral, technocratic concept, 'quality' was a valuable tool for those protecting, promoting, and constructing particular interests. As this chapter has shown, 'quality' was entirely open to capture by lobbyists and politicians who wished to promote a traditional curriculum and teaching methodology, and those actors were able to successfully institutionalize their preferred meanings of 'quality'. However, while the chapter has addressed these research questions, further, generative questions have arisen from the account provided in this and the other substantive chapters. In broad outline, the generative question arising is precisely how the development of the policy concept of quality is to be explained in terms of post-structural discourse theory. Under this rubric, further questions arise, concerning, in no particular order of priority, the character of 'quality' as a signifier, how we are to conceptualize institutions, institutional change and the state within the framework of PSDT, and precisely how the latter approach can help explain the apparent convergence to the centre implied by the popularity of 'quality' across party lines. Furthermore, given the claim above that 'quality' is to be seen as a neoliberal concept, a question arises as to how political ideologies may be seen to operate in the practice of politics. These questions are the subject of the final chapter.



## **Chapter 7 Conclusion: Quality, Class and Interests**

In this thesis I have used rhetorical political analysis to address the central research question as to how and why the policy idea of quality has been used by political actors. This question prompted two further questions concerned with examining the ideational processes concerned in the construction and articulation of 'quality', and consideration of how this policy concept is to be understood in relation to interests. I have addressed these questions by using the analytical concept of forms of assessment and the techniques given by rhetorical political analysis, but also by drawing upon Laclau and Mouffe's poststructural discourse theory. In drawing towards a conclusion it is argued that while, as the preceding chapters have shown, 'quality' has meant various things in recent political discourse, its most important and dominant referent is as a commonplace reference to social class. It is therefore necessary to remind the reader that it is not, as Reay has argued, that neoliberalism acted to "bury social class" (Reay 2012:592); on the contrary, what has happened over the last 40 years in English education is that politicians and other political actors have been active in describing, re-describing and constructing class. In this reflexive practice they have drawn upon (and constructed) the prevailing forms of assessment and used the language of 'quality'. With this in mind, we can now review the research questions which this thesis has set out to answer.

### **7.1 How and why did political actors use quality as a political concept in formulating education policy?**

The conclusion to be drawn from the substantive chapters in this thesis is that political actors have used 'quality' in several ways. Most importantly however, it can be concluded that 'quality' has

been used to classify objects and has carried a perlocutionary force; when political actors have used it, what they have been doing is trading perlocutionary meanings in the process of engagement in political argument. This was done with a view to persuading a public audience, beating their political opponents, and winning the argument.

In Chapter Four it was noted that finding a justificatory basis for hierarchies only arises when such structures need to be defended (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 2008). The chapter argues that the 1970s is to be identified as just such a time, and that the crisis narrative developed by Conservative politicians and their supporters during that period constructed an exigence which called rhetorical intervention into being. Despite surface appearances, what the *inventio* of that argument was about, it was suggested, was hierarchy, and those promulgating the argument were precisely those concerned with the preservation of hierarchy. As was also pointed out, Gamble's seminal work noted that the Thatcherite project called for an economic and a moral revival, but what it omitted to point out is that the latent political idea which was to play a key role in that project was 'quality'. This view is supported by analysis in the chapter which points to the competing forms of assessment informing political actors during this period, as reflected at two key moments: Sir Keith Joseph and James Callaghan's speeches of 1974 and 1976. What we saw at play in these speeches were two assessments on the part of political actors which resonated with notions of class identity, one evoking a logic of difference and the other a logic of equivalence. Yet, just as had been the case in the debates over the 1902 Education Act, class itself could not be directly named, since to do so would be to risk intensifying antagonisms and the loss of authority and legitimacy. In this context then, 'quality' proved useful to political actors in a number of ways. Firstly,



'quality' enabled political actors to problematize a policy issue and provided a solution. In doing this, 'quality' was a concept which helped to create 'policy space', thus enabling politicians to decontest the promotion of difference and choice in education. This provided support for a hierarchical system, and a means of attempting to resolve antagonisms, and from this followed the hegemonic agency required to institutionalize 'quality'. The concept of quality therefore very much reflected a concern with class on the part of political actors. This is evident from the fact that what was being criticised were the standards in particular schools and the judgements of particular professional groups, as itemised in the CPS pamphlets, and in the debates in the Black Papers, and in the William Tyndale controversy. It was also clear in the redescription of class evident in the 1992 White Paper, amongst other official publications, where class was referred to indirectly through euphemisms such as 'social disadvantage' or 'inner city areas'.

This is to argue then, that 'quality' was used by political actors as a way to classify objects. As noted above, in doing this, political actors created policy space, enabling issues to be problematized and solutions derived. All this is to argue that the answer to the question of how political actors used 'quality' is to say that they used it, in Skinner's phrase, as a political weapon and tool. Thus, 'quality' was a concept which enabled political actors both to strategize and to carry out strategy; with it, they could berate and critique political opponents but also put into action strategies which they believed would further their political goals. This made 'quality' an extremely useful and desirable concept to politicians of all ideological persuasions, as the discussion of New Labour in Chapter Five has attempted to demonstrate. In the case of New Labour, political actors were able to use 'quality' in a similar way to previous Conservative governments, creating policy space and

criticizing their opponents. At the same time, as we have seen, it was also a useful tool for internal party management. As to the 'why' of this research question, as was noted in Chapter Five, vitally, New Labour's political strategists were happy to adopt a concept which decontested inequality and hierarchy since in doing that it enabled them to create a discourse whereby 'old divisions were banished' (Finlayson 2003). The importance of this last step was that it provided support for New Labour's economic theory of globalization and thus its modernization agenda. This was a strategic choice, but it was not one exercised in a situation devoid of structural constraints. In this sense however, it is to be seen as a choice structured by a rhetorical selectivity rather than a strategic selectivity, and thus discursively rather than materially structured. The discursive structures at work here were the forms of assessment which informed New Labour's articulation of policy. While individually New Labour political actors may well have expressed very different views on social class to their Conservative opponents, collectively what the party articulated was identical to Conservative views in two important respects: firstly, it did not accept that social class could be a causal factor in explaining differences in educational attainment, and secondly, in the crude form of assessment which cast people as 'disadvantaged', 'deprived' or as those living in 'inner city areas'. These were terms which had been rhetorically constructed and the concept of quality as applied to them in policy, merely acted to reinforce their use and to produce a certain truth about such categories. Other approaches and other forms of assessment would have been entirely possible and available, but they would have been harder to articulate persuasively, and New Labour political actors lacked either the imagination, the skill, the understanding, or the will, to challenge this doxa.

Under New Labour then, political actors found themselves in a particular rhetorical situation and inheritors of a certain rhetorical path dependency. This is true however, of all the political actors discussed in this thesis, and so must also be applied to analysis of the political change which occurred following the end of New Labour's period in government in 2010. What we have seen in Chapter Six is political actors again using 'quality' as a tool and as a weapon, although they were operating in a new rhetorical situation. What had been created by other actors however, prior to this last period, was a chain of meaning formed around the nodal point of 'quality'. This acted to stabilise a set of dominant meanings as to what constituted a good school, a good teacher and a good pupil. What political actors acting on behalf of the Coalition government were able to do was to apply these meanings and refract them through a distinctly liberal-conservative form of assessment. This brings us to consider answers to the second research question.

## **7.2 What were the ideational processes involved in the construction and articulation of 'quality' in education, and how and why did they change over time?**

The role of ideas in politics and political analysis has been a contested and complex one, but this thesis has argued and will conclude that ideas "should be accorded a crucial role in political explanation" (Hay 2002:213). As we have seen earlier on, a number of political analysts have noted the rhetorical and ideological character of the concept of 'quality', yet this is an observation which has on the whole not been developed, no doubt largely due to the persistence of a Platonic approach whereby rhetoric is understood pejoratively as in opposition to truth. The position which has been taken here in contrast, regards rhetoric as constitutive of truth, and therefore as an object which is not

only worthy of examination, but is in fact something which it is absolutely necessary to consider for adequate political analysis. This is not however, to take a constructivist position as adopted by Hay. The approach to the role of ideas adopted in this thesis is based instead on the concept of radical materiality and rejects the dualism in Hay's critical realist ontology, thus enabling ideas to be seen not only as providing a point of mediation between actors and their environment, but as also constituting that environment. From this perspective, the concept of ideational processes refers to the way ideas are constituted and deployed, and ideas are seen to be important because it is through them that political actors are made aware of and articulate interests. This last insight is derived from PSDT, but as explained earlier, it has been contended that despite claims to the contrary, this body of theory provides a restricted notion of rhetoric. As has been argued in Chapter Three, a more thorough political analysis requires a broader notion of rhetoric and this study has therefore drawn upon the conceptual resources provided by RPA. This approach has enabled the present study to focus on not just ideas, but also the arguments and forms of arguments by which political and argumentative action proceed.

From this approach the thesis has developed the argument that quality is not only an idea, but also a master signifier and nodal point which has enabled the construction of a hegemonic discourse. The rhetorical political analysis set out in Chapters Four to Six has argued that this was the outcome of several key ideational processes. As was explained in Chapter Four, the beginning of an argument or a series of arguments, is a crucial stage, since the arrangement of an appeal directs attention to some aspects of an argument and not others, and sets down what the argument is seen to be about. In this process *kairos* and exigence are entwined; it is not simply that crises emerge

autonomously, but rather that they are constructed by political actors. On this point, Chapter Four offers some critique of Hay's view that it is new ideas that matter more in times of crisis (2002:215). Of course, ideas may appear original, but they always have a pedigree and carry traces of older arguments, ideas, discourse and language. This I suggest is precisely what we have seen in Chapter Five, as throughout the 1970s and 80s, education was reformed by political actors by re-activating old notions of class and hierarchy in a new context. It was evident in the calls for standards, the lament for the demise of grammar schools, and in the critique of the 'progressive left' in education, but the new context in which actors found themselves was one where class and hierarchy were re-described in terms such as 'social disadvantage' and 'inner city disadvantaged areas'. This discourse and language was itself a change from that institutionalized by the 1944 Education Act, with its talk of 'equal but different' and the classification of the population into different aptitudes – the academic, the technical, the practical. This was a form of assessment and as Chapter 5 indicates, what emerged in the 1970s is to be seen as a new form of assessment, one which rejected the discredited psychological categories of the mid-twentieth century, but which nevertheless identified a broad distinction between the advantaged and the disadvantaged. In the 1970s political actors could explain the differences in educational outcome associated with this form of assessment in various ways, depending on their ideological preferences. Shedding the discursive categories constructed and institutionalized by the 1944 Education Act, they might have seen these distinctions as the result of discrimination and unequal access to resources and opportunities, or alternatively, they could explain stratification in terms of individual differences, which they may or may not have regarded as fixed. Having said this, 'quality' itself, was the new element which enabled such constructions; that is to say that it

was a new articulation, albeit of a concept with a history, as elaborated in Chapter Two.

One of the key ideational processes by which 'quality' was constructed and articulated therefore, was through the rhetorical methods of selecting and arranging an argument and the use of ethos, pathos and logos. In the course of this argumentative action political actors drew upon the forms of assessment and the ideological resources available to them. However, this was not the only ideational process at work. As we saw in Chapter Five, when a new rhetorical situation arose in the context of a change of government, New Labour adapted 'quality' to serve its political goals through a heresthetic moment which enabled the construction of a narrative of modernization. This was a narrative which was of central importance not only in capturing 'the centre ground', but in constructing it. The two concepts of modernization and quality were also highly effective in terms of internal party management, since they enabled a policy agenda of choice and diversity to be articulated in a way which made it tolerable if not appealing, across the party, as well as to the wider electorate. In Chapter Six, we saw how in another contingent rhetorical situation, politicians acting on behalf of the coalition government elected in 2010 were able to re-articulate 'quality' through a different set of political ideologies and by means of the rhetorical process of *paradiastole*.

This must lead us to the conclusion that various ideational processes were involved in the construction and articulation of 'quality' in education policy. The concept of quality was not the product of reified forces or structures, nor of impersonal material forces, but rather the outcome of intentional strategic action on the part of numerous political actors. Those actors however, were not acting free of constraints, nor simply as individuals; they were

all bit players, constituted by and engaged in intersubjectively constructed discursive structures. These ideational processes changed over time as different governments, different actors, with different political ideologies, faced different situations and problems; change was continuous. However, there was a common trace through all of this, and that was the trace constituted by a rhetorical political path dependency; collective political actors could not do whatever they pleased, since they were constructed and constrained by discursive structures. These structures were not material, nor purely ideal, nor simply linguistic, as they also involved both formal and informal practice. This is therefore to argue that political actors were constrained by what had been said and done in the past, and by the restrictions on what could be said at the time. This therefore speaks not so much to a Marxist paradigm of conflicting social classes, but more to logics of equivalence and difference (Laclau and Mouffe 1982) and to the dynamics of in-groups and out-groups (Tajfel and Turner 1979, 1986), which can be perhaps more readily open than social classes, to be constructed and organized as collective political actors. This brings us to consider the third and final research question, as to the relationship between 'quality' and interests.

### **7.3 What was the relationship between 'quality' and interests?**

In Chapter Two it was argued that interests are not to be seen as given by or reflecting social structure; political analysis must rather follow Cutler's dictum that political practice does not recognize class interests and represent them, but to the contrary, it is political practice which constitutes the interests it subsequently represents. That chapter then drew upon Hindess' concept of forms of assessment, arguing that in decision making, political actors make assessments of their own interests and those

of others, and in doing so, they use commonplace notions of class. Since individual political actors will make assessments founded on various conflicting and changing reasons, and since decisions are multiple, complex and taken by collectively organized and constituted institutions, articulating forms of assessment will frequently involve disputes with others. It is this context which makes the political environment one in which there is scope then, not simply for dispute, but also for persuasion and as Hindess puts it, "propaganda and other forms of political work intended to change people's assessments of their interests and how they might be served" (Hindess 1987:116). Chapters Two and Three added to this analysis with the argument that the approach of PSDT provides a viable means of overcoming the unhelpful representation of interests as real and material. This theory opened up a middle way between the primacy of ideas and that of interests, pointing to the possibility of developing explanations which can shed light on the role of political actors in the process of policy change.

I argue that the substantive findings presented in Chapters Four, Five and Six present just such an explanation. For what is seen in those chapters is that the concept of 'quality' has served to enable the construction and constitution of a grid of multiple and cross-cutting interests. In Chapter Five we saw that the arguments about 'quality' in the 1970s quickly identified 'producer interest' as the root cause of a decline in school effectiveness, and therefore as the best explanation for poor educational outcomes. The argument made by those political actors critiquing schools moreover, was that their own political action was in the interests of equality, that is, in the best interests of all, and thus served the common good. Furthermore, the justification offered for this critique framed these arguments about interests within a context of economic reason; the key problem with such educational



iniquities, it was argued, was that it meant that the UK could not produce the skilled workforce able to “take on the international competition and beat it” (DES 1991:1).

This was an argument which could be clearly linked to particular interests and it thus takes us back to the question posed in Chapter One and Two as to whether class analysis is tenable. It is not difficult to see how this and similar statements could easily be construed as providing support for Jessop’s arguments for strategic selectivity. However, the argument of this thesis is that such an interpretation would be an error. For what we see operating here is to the contrary, a rhetorical selectivity. This is to make the claim that it was the political and argumentative action carried out by political actors acting collectively, and yet who are not to be regarded as having acted on behalf of, or in the interests of any particular class. To press further though, these were not actions prompted by the operation of an autopoietic system or a material substrate; they were the actions of a collective institutional actor, the government, itself but one element of the institutional ensemble of the state. Nor were they the actions of a class, since, as argued in Chapter One, classes are not actors and notions of interest cannot be regarded as given by or reduced to structural location. In taking action and making claims to serve in the interests of the common good, governments were simply engaging in strategic action and articulating what they believed to be the national interest, informed by their own ideological preferences and their commonplace forms of assessment.

However, what the concept of quality enabled government to do was to constitute a complex grid of interests, including the interests of those who were employed to enforce government legislation about ‘quality’ and to define, measure and administer

the indicators created to identify it. As we have seen, different state agencies and institutions did not necessarily always agree on how to go about these tasks and nor did different governments. If then, 'quality' provided a tool and a weapon for government to use in the strategic critique of what it perceived to be vested interests acting against the perceived 'common good', at the very same time, it was also a weapon which other actors within and outside the state could use in the conduct of strategic political action which both served and constituted their own and others interests. What is argued here is that how those interests were constructed and articulated was the outcome of rhetorical processes, and a rhetorical path dependency, whereby the articulation and calculation of interest was the product of previous debate and political action, and was informed by forms of assessment. As we have seen, the forms of assessment used by political actors involved the appropriation, in reductive and simplified form, of social scientific concepts of social class. At the same time however, we must recall that in politics, social scientific terms are used politically. This was made apparent by the analysis presented in Chapters Five and Six. In the case of New Labour, 'quality' was used not only to repeat the argument against 'producer interests' used by Conservative governments through the 1980s and 90s in order to discipline schools, but also to create an identity of interests between the party leader and the wider party. The political use of social scientific terms was also evident in the final substantive chapter; there we saw how 'quality' was appropriated and used in the re-description of social class and proved to be a concept entirely open to capture by lobbyists and politicians seeking to promote a highly partisan notion of the common good, which in fact privileged a social elite.

To conclude, what this analysis tells us is that ideas and interests exist in a reciprocal relationship and the case of the policy idea of

quality was no exception. This is to argue then, against the view that interests are given by social structure, but rather that they are constructed through an inter-subjective, discursive process. In this context, class and class analysis are still relevant concepts, but only if they are seen as discursive rather than as material structures, as explanandum rather than explanans. In this light, what this study has attempted to draw attention to is the way in which political actors have used commonplace notions of class and forms of assessment in order to justify their policy arguments. What has been found is that while those arguments have all involved an invocation of the common good, political actors have always acted partially, constructing and constituting interests from a position of power. This position however, is not comprehensible as, nor reducible to a class position; it is rather, the position of a *political* elite.

These comments signal some possibilities for both the development of RPA and further research. The approach in this thesis has gravitated towards a use of RPA as something in the form of a political sociology. As such, I suggest that RPA presents the prospect of a means by which political analysis can transform our understanding of political processes by offering a radically constructivist approach to politics and the political, able to surmount the theoretical problems associated with varieties of positivism and institutionalism. In that regard, the scope for research is considerable, and includes further examination of topics such as the rhetorical construction of interests in other fields of political and policy activity and the institutionalization of political and cultural identities. The challenges which such an agenda faces are considerable and will require a readiness to adopt methodological pluralism and wider range of theoretical concepts, but also a willingness to plunder from other sub-fields and perhaps also to cull sacred cows.

## **Conclusion**

This thesis has found that 'quality' has been used by political actors since the 1970s in education discourse in England in two main ways. It has provided a way to classify objects - schools, teachers and pupils - but has also been used as a tool and a weapon, enabling political actors to strategize and to put strategies to political work. It has been argued that the concept of quality was however, not merely an idea, but also a signifier and a nodal point which enabled the construction of a hegemonic discourse through the arrangement of a series of arguments which identified and defined inadequate schooling as the key determinant of national economic prosperity. In constructing, maintaining and reconstructing this hegemonic discourse through the process of argumentative action in different rhetorical situations, political actors were informed by prevalent forms of assessment, and attempted to persuade the public by means of various rhetorical strategies. It has been argued that 'quality' is not therefore to be seen as the product of a reified force or structure, but rather constituted an intersubjectively constructed discursive structure. The arguments, forms of assessment, and institutions and institutionalized meanings produced by political actors through this period, thus constituted a rhetorical path dependency, where the order in which things were said, made things happen and affected how they happened. It follows from this that the relationship between the idea of quality and interests was a contingent one. 'Quality' constituted and promoted a field of interests and privileged certain positions within that field, and it certainly served partisan interests. These were the interests of government and other related groups, those who benefitted materially from the policy of 'quality'. Such groups however did not constitute a social class; they cut across class groups. It also follows that 'quality' did not mask any 'real interests'; rather it

produced interests and what can be seen as a highly contestable claim as to the common good. 'Quality' was successful in making this claim persuasive, precisely because those who benefitted from it were not clearly identifiable as a class. What we must conclude is that what we have seen in the case of 'quality' is not "neoliberalism burying social class" (Reay 2006). To be sure, neoliberalism has been an important source of ideas, and 'quality' is one of them, but this concept has been wielded by political actors who have classified the population in the course of political action within the state ensemble. Thus, the state does indeed operate as Bourdieu has claimed, as holding a monopoly over official naming, correct classification and the correct order. As argued earlier however, this is to be seen in terms of a poststructuralist rather than a Marxist view of the state, for it is the former which recognizes that it is not impersonal transhistorical economic or social forces which act, but rather those actors who act in the name of the state. It is they who construct and institutionalize dominant notions of social difference, and they do this by suppressing rather than expanding the political. In reaching this conclusion, our attention must turn back to Thatcherism. For, while it is to be agreed that Thatcherism brought no " 'blueprint' for institutional change" and was no "instantaneous 'Gestalt switch" ', 'quality' has been a much neglected aspect of the paradigm shift it marked (Hay 1999:46). It was the rhetorical path wrought by Margaret Thatcher and Sir Keith Joseph which re-activated the older meaning of 'quality' as a referent to social class. That is the Thatcherite legacy which we continue to live with today. The rhetorical path set out from that time continues to dominate our lives. We live under the sovereignty of the strong; that is what 'quality' means. What the rhetorical approach adopted in this study indicates is that while the arguments upholding this regime may be highly persuasive,

they are, given the tools provided by rhetorical political analysis, entirely contestable.

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