

*Benign Violence: Education in and beyond the Age of Reason.* By Ansgar Allen. Pp 289 + xvii. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 2014. £65 (hbk) ISBN 9781137272850.

Ostensibly this book is a Foucauldian genealogy of state funded education and examination. As such, it is much more a book of philosophical narrative than a history. It attempts to disrupt received perceptions of our contemporary social conditions, reconceiving our selves and our society in such a way as to provoke its readers to think about changing them. Readers of Nietzsche - whose own *Genealogy of Morals* greatly influenced Foucault - will quickly recognise his stylistic as well as philosophical influence on *Benign Violence*. Allen writes in quasi-aphoristic, loosely connected paragraphs, which lend themselves to 'dipping in' as much as a reading from cover to cover. The preface is quick to warn off those expecting an academic text and entirely dismissive of reviewers who would place it in an academic context and judge it by those standards: 'If judges appear, it would be better if the reviews were bad' (p. xi). Unfortunately in this case I cannot give the author the pleasure of a bad review.

Allen's first chapter, or 'collection' as he refers to it, 'Bodies', is the shortest and puts forward an argument for how the subject is, and has for a long time, been constructed by examination. In it he rejects superficial contemporary criticisms of various processes of examination as well as the suggestion that a good teacher does not examine. For Allen these positions miss the inherent logic of examination which is not only an abstract influence on individual lives and educational practice but also a material process which is the defining ontological condition of educational institutions. He argues that to reject this unsettling of the human subject's control over itself is also to reject the inconstancy of what it means to be human. To avoid examination and its influence is to fall back on unexamined 'truths' which are, in fact, abstractions external to the subject. Even though it might be unsettling to accept that the construction of our selves is so determined by examination, to not do so is, for Allen, to have very little understanding of our selves at all.

The second collection, 'Populations' engages primarily with the unacknowledged influence that Allen feels the logic of eugenics and its means of examination has had on education. He makes his argument alongside an exposition of the importance of genealogy, which for him gives us 'an impression of the way in which power conditions us' (p. 70). Here Allen draws a distinction between two Foucauldian terms, disciplinary power and biopower. The former is an influence on the construction of its subjects for their utility while the latter accounts for already existing characteristics of its subjects and attempts to maintain their lives. Allen shows through Foucault that both forms of power can operate at the same time and that both were complicit in the operation of eugenic examination in Nazi Germany, as well as in the examination inherent to modern welfare programs. For Allen these forms of power are not good or evil but rather tools with which to understand the operation of the social.

These first two collections set the scene for the last, 'Meritocracies', which is by far the longest and also the most clearly related to the condition of examination in contemporary society. Meritocracy is described here as a means by which the illusion of individual success can be

presented to all, while inequality continues to grow. In this collection Allen provides searing critiques of formative assessment, the benevolent violence of educators, and attempts at various forms of meritocratic schooling and examination systems. While traditional meritocracy afforded those of different examinable abilities a job which was deemed equivalent, 'fluid meritocracy' is fuelled by contemporary aspirational rhetoric which offers the possibility of success to the individually responsible subject, whose success is not based only on ability but on ability and effort. The duty is then removed from the state in locating and facilitating those with ability, from whatever social background. This change of perception means that lack of success can be put down to lack of effort. For Allen this contemporary predicament in education and society can be seen as both futile and absurd but because it is now so ingrained in our social relations, the entire system must be rejected to rid ourselves of it.

This is a brave and important book which sets forth an intensely claustrophobic analysis of the operation of power in society, creating new precedents for future critiques of education, examination and meritocracy. It provides terms and means with which to better understand contemporary issues and debates, without ever stooping to offer naïve, cheap and easy solutions. It is a provocative and compelling text which demands to be read and responded to. For example, while this is an outstanding example of Foucauldian genealogy, other philosophical approaches might put some of Allen's more general conclusions into question or offer a less resigned outlook. One typical post-Foucauldian criticism might be that, in presenting conditions which supposedly affect everyone, Allen obscures the existence of relatively unaffected outliers (whether individuals or institutions), for whom other conditions might be significantly more affecting. However, even if the genealogical approach of *Benign Violence* might run the risk of only providing one part of the story, it is a part that should not be ignored.