National Policies and New Forms of Social Regulation within the Framework of Europeanization

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Fátima Antunes is a professor at the University of Minho (Portugal) with a PhD in Sociology of Education. This book presents her doctoral thesis focused on the sociology of educational policy, thus addressing educational policies as specific objects of study. Since it goes deeper in a specific area of knowledge, mobilizing complex key inputs, it will cause difficulties to the work of reviewer. Nevertheless, given the quality of the work, it is worth the effort of carrying out such a task (even so, it can be seen as simplistic compared with the density of the book). Consequently, my proposal is to offer the reader a coherent description of a first-rate work, rooted in theoretical perspectives and empirical research, and critical reflection.

Focused on a case study – the process of the foundation and development of a Vocational Schooling subsystem in Portugal – the thesis is one of the first Portuguese works relating globalization and European integration, and the educational policies, with regulation as the key conceptual framework. The very theoretical and empirical issue is the relationship between the policy formulation and the processes of implementation and re-contextualization through the actors’ discourses and practices (Barroso, 2006, p. 17). The author stresses the innovative nature of this policy resulting from globalization processes. The discussion is focused on how this policy can be understood as a particular case, in Portugal, of transnational processes of globalization and European integration, therefore being the expression of a globally structured agenda of education.

The book is divided into three parts.

PART ONE: Looking for the Common Changes: some social science works and studies
Chapters 1 & 2

In the first part, the author presents the theoretical-conceptual and interpretive framework, mobilizing different contributions from the social sciences: the Roland Robertson (1990, 1992) view of the world-as-one-place; the world culture theoretical framework, designed as world institution theory.
(Fuller & Robinson, 1992, p. 11), or world system theory (Schriewer, 1996, p. 41), or world institutionalism (Dale, 2000b, p. 429); and the capitalist world-economy as it is advocated by Wallerstein (1995). According to the author, those theoretical inputs – being associated with the hypotheses of flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1990) and flexible specialization (Piore & Sabel, 1990) and with Manuel Castells’ (1998) theory of the Network Society (namely, the crisis of the nation-state and the rise of the network state in the framework of the new transnational modes of regulation) – make it possible to capture contemporary changes as singular moments of a long process. Moreover, they can help to explain the different sides of globalization, its complexity and changeability. The word ‘globalization’ is viewed as inconclusive and vague, but essential for the best understanding of the social changes of the contemporary world. Antunes attempts to systematize the contours of the debate surrounding the processes of globalization, therefore perceiving the current phenomena as rooted in the past.

PART TWO: Education, Globalisation and Europeanization: new institutions and educational processes

Chapters 3 & 4

In this part, the author examines the relationships between the processes of globalization and educational changes, by reference to a specific theoretical approach – of a globally structured educational agenda proposed by Roger Dale (2000a,b). The aim is to explain the uniqueness of national processes and their linkages with transnational and global dynamics. Accordingly, she discusses the impact of the European Community / European Union (EC/EU) in education and the dissemination and appropriation of guidelines and models, but excludes the uniformity of processes and outcomes as a necessary corollary of such dynamics (p. 117).

Chapter 3 develops around prospects of Europeanization of national education policies, as well as around the formation of a global common ‘referential’ to such policies. The inquiry takes place around the way education is defined by the EU and the implications of these processes on EU countries’ education systems. The process of founding Vocational Schools is examined in the light of these prospects. The foundation of the Vocational Schooling subsystem in 1989 is an innovation embedded in the framework of a national agenda for education, which is globally structured for two reasons: first, because it is included in the set of problems caused by global phenomena; and second, because the answers to these problems are also bounded and supported by global relationships of an economic, political and ideological nature. Therefore, the articulation of national and EU policies (Europeanization) and the promotion or strengthening of a global European ‘referential’ for public intervention (convergence) in education contribute to the configuration of a globally structured agenda. In the case under analysis, this takes place through the provision of models of problem definition and production of responses, and through the provision of means and mechanisms of action for public intervention that are selectively targeted for these options and priorities (pp. 178-179).

Chapter 4 is developed around the perspective of a globally structured agenda for education. To that extent, the processes and structures by which an agenda for education is created are highlighted, as well as the ways in which these problems, priorities and issues are translated into measures of educational policy, (re-)configured and implemented through (and by) the dynamic of the educational institutions. Here, the works of Roger Dale (2000a,b) and Jenny Ozga (Dale & Ozga, 1991[1986]) are mobilized as an attempt to identify the issues of the national political agenda for education and the processes of globalization. The analysis is focused on the relationships between the globalization phenomenon and education - namely, trying to identify what happens to the numerous dimensions related to the explanation of policies: the importance of the source (or the structured set of relationships, institutions and social processes where the main driving forces of a given measure or set of measures can be located); the scope or extent (the mandate – that is, the prevailing conceptions about what it is desirable to achieve); the ability (what is achievable through the system and the government – that is, how it should be coordinated and what institutional arrangements should be pursued); and the standard (the operating modes and characteristics of education practices) (p. 183).
The following issues are outlined as incorporating the national political agenda for education: (a) the polarization of educational services; (b) the expansion and weakness of educational citizenship; (c) the re-contextualization of education facing the world and the work institutions; (d) and the new modes of educational provision.

As for the polarization of educational services, the foundation of a set of networks of institutions responsible for different tasks and with different purposes for targeted audiences, therefore providing goods and services that are also different, is stressed. As the author states: ‘In this sense, the foundation of Vocational Schools shows how the global trend to a new form of State action – the State of competition – was articulated in our country’ (p. 233).

The expansion and weakness of educational citizenship is considered an integral orientation of the national political agenda, deriving from global political and economic changes that led to the state of competition. The expansion is promoted because schooling tracks and certification in secondary education are extended; the weakening occurs because, even so, beneficiaries have this right - the ‘particularistic’ nature of this policy stratifies them. That is, the educational service has no equivalent social value when compared with regular education, and the beneficiaries don’t have the benefit of it in terms of conditions of parity with the beneficiaries of regular education (p. 234).

Concerning the re-contextualization of education facing the world and the work institutions, this results from the ‘visible concern with the foundation of institutions that incorporated guidelines and / or devices to promote both vocational mobilization and socialization, as well as to manage the insertion of young people in labour work’ (p. 234). The solutions seem to apply to issues related to the performance management of students, and the changes in the economy and production system that changed the wage relation with which they will probably be confronted (p. 235).

Finally, the new modes of educational provision are considered a remarkable trend of the national political agenda for education in the period in question, and include autonomy, privatization, state regulation and various forms of social mobilization (pp. 235-236). The author highlights the new roles played by the state in the provision of education and social welfare: even though the state remains at the centre of regulation, and controlling the system, it is no longer the only (or the main) protagonist. Moreover, the intervention of other actors reveals the ambiguous nature of the processes involved in the emergence of an Articulated State (p. 237).


Chapters 5, 6, 7, 8 & 9

This section of the book is devoted to institutions and educational practices. The author discusses the agenda for education embodied in the foundation of the Vocational Schools subsystem.

In chapter 5, the author characterizes the two schools that integrate the case study, and in the sixth chapter she moves on to discussing how the demand for integration of new students affects the way they function. According to the different actors, three institutional features come out that contribute to the students’ increased sense of belonging to school and learning. These dimensions are presented as defining: a different school (based on guidelines and practices that transform it into a stratified, therapeutic institution, and where the reference to labour market is the moral basis, a symbolic reference); an education concerned with results (that is to say, not concerned with the suitability of pedagogical action, and thus not challenging the students’ social inequalities). On the contrary, the idea is to manage these inequalities and the flow of students with the objective of minimizing bad results. This way, new opportunities emerge to access diplomas, while, however, not contributing to the strengthening of students’ citizenship); and pedagogy for different students (there is an emphasis on technical and practical knowledge, with linkages to the labour world. Essentially, the relevance of knowledge is associated, in both schools, only with employment, making evident the lack of a relationship to knowledge and learning that is essential in order to attain knowledge and cultural awareness) (pp. 281-336). Through these dimensions, the author reconstructs the guidelines and practices developed in both schools in order to deal with the challenges taken up by the public they host.
The seventh chapter deals with a set of practices and guidelines developed in the schools under analysis, as well as with students’ perceptions and projects about their future concerning labour and the labour market, both related to the construction of socio-vocational identities. The diversity of students’ interpretations and the significant influence of the Vocational Schools training process in the formation of students’ perspectives are highlighted. According to Antunes, the schools’ guidelines and practices may well affect students’ perceptions about the labour market, and students show themselves available not only to recognize the game rules, but also to play the game in congruence with the teachers’ expectations (pp. 360-361).

In the eighth chapter, the author identifies a hidden qualification agenda by a plurality of logical and socio-educational processes: the construction of the training provision, the attempt to adapt it to the needs of business companies, the importance of the vocational profile of courses, and the practices and experiences of moving towards labour contexts. Here, Antunes makes a good review of a set of works relevant to the study, such as the production of socio-historical linkages between training and work, and the approaches to the relationship between education and work undertaken in the field of social sciences – namely, the classical perspectives of Durkheim (1984) and Gintis & Bowles (1988). The analysis that had been carried out since the 1970s (the era of criticism) of the economic and educational crisis. and also of the theoretical renewal with new questions and new directions, was particularly drawn from studies about qualification.

The last chapter (Chapter 9) is devoted to the labour work insertion of young people as one of the vectors of the mandate assigned to the subsystem of vocational education, as well as in the guidelines and practices developed in both schools. The theoretical approach adopted and the empirical data support the view that the Vocational Schools under study act as mediator agents involved in managing transition to work. In effect, Vocational Schools develop a set of guidelines and practices with the sole purpose of giving their students direct access to labour work. It is achieved in two ways: first, through the articulation of the processes of labour work insertion, and local business companies’ recruitment processes; and second, by including specific contents in vocational training that match the knowledge and skills used in local companies (p. 439). Moreover, both institutions develop specific conditions on the mobilization of a young labour force and on the achievement of qualification related to the change of a Fordist wages relationship (Boyer, 1987). The author explains the materialization of changes in regulation modes as follows:

The formation of Vocational Schools as a part of the mechanism for transition training in our country, assuming the management of the students’ integration in labour work, enables us to sustain the viewpoint that we are facing the emergence of new dimensions and / or configurations of education participation in social regulation. (p. 449)

Conclusion

As a result of global movements that have proved crucial to the construction of an agenda for education, a set of trends emerge in the two schools under analysis. Fátima Antunes identifies a process of re-contextualization of EU policies and the emergence of a global European ‘referential’ for national policies. She stresses the promotion of models to define problems and solutions in education, revealing state options for government action in the manner of State of Competition, Articulated State and network State (away from the Fordist mode of regulation and the development of the Welfare State model). The tendency towards these new forms of state action enhances the state’s role as central actor in the emergence of new forms of social regulation. Moreover, she associates global processes with changes in the role of the state and with the changes found in the constitution of the wage relationship ‘linked to movements of individualization of the biographies and social reproduction’ (p. 462).

The foundation of the subsystem of Vocational Schools in Portugal in 1989 appears to be consistent with these redefinition models, which are part of a global European reference for national education policies. This policy took place within the framework of a long restructuring process of schooling at the secondary level, which embodied a trend for a mitigated educational neo-liberalism (Afonso, 1998) and influenced the educational national political agenda (structured by global processes) between 1987 and 1993.
Critique

This book is essential for a better understanding of the interactions arising from the processes of globalization and European integration, and the production of national education policies. The author attempts to combine the state-centred approach, proposed by Roger Dale (2000a,b), and the studies based on the political cycle of Bowe & Ball with Gold (1992), thus focusing on several ‘moments’ of the policy under study, as well as on the heterogeneous dynamics of the process, and its contradictions, ambiguities and interactions.

The thesis is of great theoretical consistency and is an excellent contribution to the field of the Social Sciences and Education, with a relevant input of analytical perspectives developed in Sociology of Education.

The author concludes that:

[the emergence] of a new mode of regulation was promoted and mediated through the formation of common agendas and priorities among the Member States, and EU agendas and policies, and even the (national) re-contextualization of these policies, showing itself as emerging modes of Europeanization of national policy in education in the period between 1971 and 1992.

(p. 455)

On the basis mainly of Dale’s works, the construction of the object of research is achieved through the viewpoint of a globally structured agenda for education, especially exploring the ways in which the European Union is assumed to mediate some ongoing transformations. From the methodological point of view, the intensive and comprehensive work on data collection, processing and analysis, with particular care towards the issues of reliability and consistency, is clear. The richness and heuristic capacity of conceptual tools deployed allowed the author to produce evidence-based conclusions. Nevertheless, it would be interesting to know (as, indeed, the author herself leaves open in the text) whether the trends highlighted in the study were (or were not) consolidated in the subsequent years, as well as which characteristics these trends assumed, and, if consolidation did occur, which sectors and public schools were affected.

In short, an indispensable work in the field of education.

References


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