

Editorial

Ephemeredes and the urgent reinvention of historic memory

In Catholic Europe, Portugal was the first country to institutionalize a public and laic education system, still persisting to our days regardless of changes and different political regimes. Precisely 250 years ago Jesuit expulsion practically urged the Marquis of Pombal to replace the Company of Jesus in the direction and organization of the ‘minor schools’, that is, all non-University studies. In fact, immediately afterwards this governor issued a law in June 28, 1759, thereby producing a reform and creating the Directory-General of Studies in order to administrate this newborn public education reality. For over a century, this organizational body has been successively restructured, its name changing accordingly until it became a Ministry.

As António Nóvoa puts it, Pombal’s heritage was based on three major principles already set out in the 1759 law: (i) secularization, which places Education in the sphere of competence and tutelage of the State; (ii) uniformization, which implies the design of a school network set to cover the whole country and therefore fit to outline a new dynamic of socio-economic development irradiating from great urban centres; (iii) statization, presuming the coordination of the system to be left to the responsibility of a Director of Studies. The agitated years of Liberalism would thereafter amplify and enrich Pombal’s policies by adding new requirements brought about by the French Revolution which were to do with gratuity, laicism, and compulsoriness.

As regards Institutional Evolution, transience is the main feature of former Ministries — the Ministry

of Public Instruction only subsisted during 1870 and the Ministry of Public Instruction and Beaux Art from 1890 to 1892 — until 1913 when the Ministry of Public Instruction was definitely instituted. The 1st Republican period was characterized by a plead for the supremacy of the principle of *Education* over the principle of *Instruction*. Of course this has never been a question of mere change of name. For the democrats, speaking of the Educator State would then mean defending a new concept of pupil education. As such, it shouldn’t be restricted to the intellectual dimension, as had been before since the 18th century, but rather comprise physical and moral development so as to obtain active, disciplined and productive citizens. Anyway, the designation Ministry of National Education would not be adopted until the ‘Estado Novo’ reached its apogee, corresponding to this desire to manage populations by extending the competences of the school institution.

The purpose of these lines is not only to show to what extent the State weighs upon our lives but also to unveil the persistence for over a century of a unique pedagogic meta-narrative governing the thought on the aims and means of the school institution. It seems quite obvious to me that the education system and its supporting set of ideas have not changed at the same pace as the *new society* it was supposed to raise. That is why I think time has come to ask and try to answer two apparently simple questions: (i) what is the origin of the educational insights and organizational options we presently take as granted and therefore unquestionable? (ii) what political strategies and social

and cultural hierarchies does school serve and materialize?

I wonder then if there is a possibility of genealogical interpretation, or to be more precise a ‘history of the present’ as expressed by Michel Foucault, which might lead us to face or even question internal long-held convictions on the nature and destiny of our school model. It is as if the transition from past to present and future could be reorganized according to different rationales. I’d rather think of a specific rationale capable of showing that most of our objects have actually been historically built, piece by piece, hence compacting very different and supposedly disconnected or disentangled traditions — the Jesuitical and Republican traditions, for example —, always at the service of the construction of a cultural elite which has and still continues to conceive itself as so distinctive — like a high clergy or noble rank of modern times —, defending the democratization of education but simultaneously affirming their cultural dignity against huge masses of excluded pupils. This is, indeed, a critical position. However, it seems indispensable to me at the particular time we are living in, when growing sectors of Portuguese *intelligenza* reiterate the school crisis theme with unprecedented vehemence while nostalgically dreaming of reaching back to a golden age. A sort of lost paradise where public powers and a few educational actors would have supported each other in a sweet harmony as a counterpoint to a present time ruled by the decadence and barbarianism characteristic of ungovernable masses.

It is in this process of simultaneously political and symbolic struggle that the historian role can help to re-equate the debate and combat this sort of fascism of convictions that stabs us all in our own heart. The fact is, an experienced researcher is aware that any heritage is plural and will always be nothing but analytical construction. Defending a capacity of invention at the service of a perpetual expansion of memory makes all the sense to me — a persevering exercise, mostly performed out of scene but nevertheless a fierce weapon against the discourse of unique certainty, solution and truth. Only ingenuity would make us suppose historians’ imagination is rooted in the past. On the contrary. They think of what most suits them. And I would also add: their job is to dare to think against what most suits them. By the way, this makes me recall the following Jacques Derrida words: ‘to save life in its finite time, heritage requires us to re-interpret, criticize, displace, that is, to actively intervene so that a transformation which deserves the name can take place and something can happen from the unforeseeable future. My wish is like the wish of a tradition addict who would be very happy to get rid of his/her conservatism’.

JORGE RAMOS DO Ó
(Lisbon, 22th December 2009)

Translated by Filomena Matos