

Book reviews

Alves, Natália (2009). *Inserção Profissional e Formas Identitárias. O caso dos licenciados da Universidade de Lisboa* [Professional insertion and forms of identity. The careers of Lisbon University graduates]. Lisbon: Educa & Unidade de I&D de Ciências da Educação

The recent publication by Natália Alves has to be read in continuation and articulation with the book by the same author, published by Educa e Ui&dCE in 2008: *Juventudes e inserção profissional* [Youths and professional insertion]. The two correspond to a PhD thesis presented and defended in 2007, at the Faculty of Psychology and Education Sciences of Lisbon University, entitled: *“Inserção profissional e formas identitárias. Percursos dos licenciados da Universidade de Lisboa”* [Professional insertion and forms of identity. The careers of Lisbon University graduates]. Editorial criteria and constraints dictated the separation of what is, by definition, a single unit. While the previous work presented the results of a theoretical construction of the object of study, this book outlines the results obtained from processing the empirical data in relation to the case study concerning the graduates of Lisbon University.

Each book has its merits in its own right and can be read separately. But it is well worthwhile, as was written in a literary appraisal¹, reading and not losing sight of the overall unit of “an essential work to understand the relationships between education and work, in general, and more specifically, the specificity they acquire in the background of insertion into the job market of young graduates”. In the previous volume “an adroit construction” was carried out between the construction of a theoretical framework of analysis and the definition of a problematic, which had the following underlying topics: on the one hand, a more up-to-date and complete review of the

“sociology of professional insertion”; on the other hand, the specific characterisation of the field of professional insertion of university graduates, in the backdrop of the “massification” of higher education that predates both the consequences of the “Bologna” process, and the effects of the worldwide economic recession that hit home in the last quarter of 2008.

The book that is now presented to the public enables one to draw the conclusion that in the sample under analysis, a linear path between the condition of being a student and obtaining a stable job is reserved for only a minority of graduates. The norm will increasingly be, in different degrees and through different methods, for precarious employment not to be a sporadic experience, but rather an authentic “way of life”. Although obtaining a university degree continues to give an individual a big competitive advantage in the job market, it is less and less effective in preventing paths that entail insecurity and uncertainty. The empirical research carried out confirms, therefore, the end of a virtuous relationship between long academic careers, degrees and social status that characterised the golden age of Fordism. It is worth remembering that the classic research carried out by Raymond Boudon (1973) showed that this virtuous relationship, between a degree and social status, was far from being a necessary relationship. The interaction between the two systems — the production of degrees and employment or social positions — puts different, relatively independent philosophies into interaction. The democratisation of access to education, namely through the “massification” of higher education, is not a generator of jobs, meaning that its “effects” in terms of social mobility will be hypothetically wide-ranging and even contradictory.

At a time when the educational systems are going through a time of uncertainty, in societies of “risk”, the young are “condemned” to undertake longer academic

paths, without any guarantee that the degrees will be profitable. For everybody, remaining in the educational systems is equivalent to being placed in a “car park”, in a situation in which an over-production of degrees clashes with a scarcity of jobs, especially those that come with a stable contract. For the less qualified, as a degree gradually becomes the compulsory level of schooling, they will see their employability reduce the most and at the quickest rate, and the gains are hard to make out. For the more academically schooled, qualifications (especially a higher-education degree) will increasingly become indispensable, but its value remains unknown; it will be viewed as a “necessary evil”. Based on a meticulous conceptual apparatus, Natália Alves aims to study “the individual processes of insertion, as an expression of forms of identity, of socio-professional worlds which intertwine institutional thinking, which define the objective spaces where these processes take place”, as well as the “biographical logics that endow them with meaning and intelligibility.”

The nature of the starting question of the research, as well as its formulation, which focuses on the “how?” instead of the “why?”, translates in methodological terms into the construction either a path of professional insertion, or a form of identity. While the former is based on an extensive analysis, using statistical processing, the latter involves an approach of biographical inspiration, materialised into the analysis of a documental “corpus” of the graduates’ narratives. The theoretical concepts of the professional path, identity and the form of identity are tributaries of the theorisation carried out by Claude Dubar (2000), who rejects an “essentialist” perspective of the concept of identity and defines the notion of “form of identity” as the result of the relationship between two processes of identification (“toward the self” and “toward the other”), which leads us to an approach of the interaction between biographical contexts and paths. Also from the technical point of view, inspiration is clearly drawn from the processing of the biographical narratives in the structural analysis proposed by Dubar and Demazière (1997) and in the epistemological point of view that these authors construct as regards the “statutes of the word of the actors”. This direct influence is the result of collaboration and direct and systematic contact, since the mid 1990s, with the research team led by Claude Dubar in the “Printemps” Research Laboratory (Versailles University — Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines).

With regard to the empirical results, the work of Natália Alves is extremely rich and pertinent. It brings new data and original forms of analysing and producing intelligibility about a terrain which is, by definition, “quicksand”, and which calls for the institution of permanent modes of observation. The method that, in its broadest sense, transversally structures the whole study which explains the “absence” of a methodological chapter, enables the production of intelligibility and the

construction of a “formal” theory that describes and interprets the crossing of professional insertion paths with biographical logics. It is the underlying methodological option that lends meaning and pertinence to a piece of work that, to produce a lucid addition on the phenomenon, calls for the construction of typologies, a procedure that for some constitutes the substance of sociological research (Schnapper, 1999).

A major contribution of this research, in the methodology field, resides in demonstrating the fertility of a “polytheist” methodological approach, which clearly disassembles the persistent existence of “false quarrels”, such as that which opposes the quantitative and the qualitative (cf. Boudon, 1984).

Thanks to its pertinence, its theoretical solidity and its methodological rigour, this publication by Natália Alves enriches our body of research in educational sciences and represents a benchmark contribution in the field in question.

ENDNOTES

1. See the literary appraisal by João Barroso, published in no. 8 of the *Sísifo* journal (<http://sisifo.fpce.ul.pt>).

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