

Book Reviews

Government of the self. Pedagogical modernity and disciplinary enactments of the secondary school pupil (last quarter of the 19th century — mid 20th century), by Jorge Ramos do Ó.

MYTHS

The first story could only be Rousseau's. His *name* is at the origin of myths and counter-myths of the contemporary pedagogical debate. The illusion of the “good savage” fed — and interestingly continues to feed — controversies that seem only to have two sides: for or against. In the anxiety to reach a justification one loses the possibility for understanding. And, in particular, for historical understanding. If we read the second book of *Émile ou de l'éducation*, in which the young teacher is advised to “govern without precepts, and do everything without doing anything,” Rousseau explains that in the most up-to-date models of education, “the master commands and thinks that he governs, when in fact it is the child who is governing.” In this game, the child deploys all his energies “to save his natural freedom from the shackles of the tyrant.” And, usually, he ends up on top. This is what leads him to criticise this education, which he would later call “traditional”, recommending that teachers follow the opposite direction: “always lead your pupil into believing that he is the master, when, in fact, you are.” “There is no domination as perfect as that which maintains the appearance of freedom, because as such one captures the will itself,” continues Rousseau who concludes with an idea long forgotten by the commonplace *for* and *against*: “The child should do only what he wants; but he should want only what you want him to do; he should not take one step forward without you having planned it; he should not open his mouth without you knowing what he is going to say.”

The second story brings us to the start of the 20th century. The words of Chesterton, in his *What's Wrong with the World*, about the useless distinction between education that comes *from inside* and instruction that is imposed *from outside*: “It is certainly possible to *extract* from the child shrieks and grunts. To do so it is enough to pinch or shake him, a fun but cruel hobby that is afforded by many psychologies, but we have to wait and keep vigil with much patience before the English language flows forth from him. This we have to teach him, and that is a full stop to the matter. [...] the *educator-extractor* is as arbitrary and coercive as the *instructor-disseminator*. [...] The only result of this whole pompous and precise distinction between the educator and the instructor is that the instructor inserts into the child what he wants, while the educator allows the child to come out with what he wants. Intellectually, the two instances of violence are equal, just like physically, as regards violence, the effect of pulling or pushing is the same.” Chesterton does not stop there with his provocative reflections, destroying the useless dichotomies about our burning debates, going so far as to state that “the advocates of free education prohibit more than old-fashioned educators.” And he explains himself with a strong criticism of doctors, psychologist, eugenicists, scientists and other people who modern law endows with authority to dictate laws to their fellow citizens: the old village master hit the pupil who did not learn grammar, but afterwards sent him out to play in the playground; the modern scientific master follows him to the yard and forces him to play educational games and healthy exercises!

The third story combines the other two. It is an extremely interesting text from the main author of the New Education movement, Édouard Claparède. In his time the school and the educators were heavily criticised for the leniency they showed. It was claimed there

was no authority, that society was lurching into decadence, originating to a large degree from the fact that children only did what they wanted, and were not required to make any effort, fulfil any obligation. Patently, Claparède explains that in the active school, children do not do *everything they want*, but *want everything that they do*, which is very different. In his opinion, *functional education* does not leave the child to his own spontaneous interests. In fact just the opposite. The new didactics “should transform the future aims of the school programmes into the present interests of the child”. Claparède therefore establishes a subtle distinction that the critics of puerocentrism always ignored: it is not the “child” who is at the centre of the system, but rather the “pupil” (i.e. the child in a learning situation). John Dewey dedicated a large proportion of his writing to explaining that the pedagogical question is not confined to the “children” or the “teaching materials”, but the *relations* between one and the other. In other words: we can oblige a child to go to school, we can impose lessons and tasks, but we can never teach him what he does not want to learn.

And so? Are we condemned to inertia or manipulation. No. We are forced to make a lucid and rational effort. Avoid the simplistic refusal to enter into a specifically pedagogical reflection, limiting oneself to repeating, decade after decade, the same banalities. Avoid the disproportionate reductive pedagogy, based on naivety and innocence. We have the duty, at least, to try to understand. To look to the *present instance*, and from there, explain that *everything that is may not have been or could have been another way*. As such, history opens up the future for us and invites us to lay new foundations of pedagogical reason that is able to break free from the “modern conceptions” that dominated throughout the 20th century.

AMNESIA

There are many forms of amnesia in the educational debate. Two have been particularly active in Portugal: the amnesia of excess and the amnesia of absence. The *excess* shows itself through the constant presence of nostalgia, whose success depends on the “forgetting” of history. The idealised image of a school that never existed, apart from the melancholy memory of an “imaginary past”, is glorified, erasing everything that may disturb the harmony of the portrait. The *absence* can be detected in a technocratic discourse that intends to look to the future. The recent phrase of an ex-minister of education exemplifies this point well: “The over-exercising of memory can be dangerous. Because we have to act for the future, creating ruptures.” It would be difficult to find a better definition for technocratic politics,

which is always “prospecting”, and which has been a feature of government in the educational field in recent decades.

It is inevitable to return to Chesterton and his denouncement of the “romance of anticipation”: “It seems that we arrange ourselves in order not to understand what happened and we immerse ourselves, as a kind of relief, in explanations about what is going to happen.” The British writer says that there are certain men “who look enthusiastically forwards, because they are afraid of looking behind them,” suggesting that the major projects of the future were always firmly grounded on a view of the past: “Man is an unsuccessful beast, with his feet pointing forward and his face looking backwards. He can create an exuberant and gigantic future, provided that he is thinking of the past. When he tries to think of the future itself, his mind is reduced to a pinhead whose idiocy some call Nirvana.”

Forgetfulness has been the condition needed for political practices based on the reforming principle marked by educational planning and by anticipation of the future. The dominating pedagogical conceptions, which are either fed by a positivist scientific discourse or derive from a certain militant voluntarism, also survive owing to the effort to forget. As if innovation could only occur out of nothing, without roots and without history. In taking this option, it is precisely *change* that makes it impossible. Because without thinking about oneself, without a transformation of our histories and references, everything remains the same. Thomas Popkewitz is right when he suggests that most of the current discourse about educational change contains the germs of its own denial.

Articulating principles of a “scientific pedagogy” with processes of regulation and control of pupils, the modern pedagogical discourse has dominated the discourses on education. The intellectual task is not to deduce its accusation or argue for its defence. It is rather to make an effort to modify ways of thinking, to introduce new perspectives and interpretations, to formulate ideas that are not yet thought of. Historical reflection does not serve to repeat what we already know. It serves to challenge beliefs and convictions, inviting us to look in unexpected directions. It serves to fight against amnesia...

PEDAGOGICAL MODERNITY

In his book, Jorge Ramos do Ó puts forward a historical reinterpretation of *pedagogical modernity*, focussing especially on the topic of *integral education*, which is part of a wider discussion on the attitudes, moods and behaviours of the pupils: “The thesis of this thesis is that the so-called middle teaching saw *conduct* as its

major pedagogical problem and *culture itself* as its most important occupation.” I would like to point out in this preface two central issues of his work: the role of the *psy specialists* and the importance of the *governing of the self*.

Psy specialists — Jorge Ramos do Ó explains the emergence, from the end of the eighteenth century, of a positive knowledge that brought psychologists, doctors, hygienists and other “experts” of the prophylaxis of society and of the “soul” of children and the young into school culture. This heterogeneous group of specialists, coming from a variety of origins and different career paths, became *speakers of a common pedagogical language*, dictating new realities in the way of thinking and describing education. Georg Kerschensteiner (1921), one of the most influential authors of New Education, establishes a distinction between “the Pedagogy teacher and the pedagogical teacher”. The German educator intends to point out the difference there is between the “theoretical” researchers, who occupy themselves with pedagogical reflection, and the “practical” teachers, who only demand from themselves sensibility and pedagogical tact. The consolidation of this panoply of disciplines, with a clear *psy* framework, but also involving medical, social and many other fields of knowledge, allows the production and dissemination of knowledge and discourses that construct a new concept of the pupil at the same time as defining the margins of a *school model* which would become dominant: *The one best system*, it was called by David Tyack (1974). Also here, as described by Jorge Ramos do Ó, a *history of powers* made compatible is played out: instead of a linear domination, what we have are networks of actors, translating and adapting common concepts. This interpretation is coherent with the studies carried out by John Meyer and the Stanford team, especially when they argue that the major changes that occurred in the development of the worldwide curriculum throughout the 20th century are linked to the action of these specialists: “Each of these changes, alterations in learning how to read, valuing of science or expansion of mathematics, reorganisation of the teaching of the social sciences, development of art teaching and physical education, etc, is the product of a theoretical elaboration in the education field, whatever its origins in terms of powers or interests.”

Governing of the self — Jorge Ramos do Ó chose a title that allows several readings, even if they all merge into a concern about how modern pedagogy attempts to feed the *free initiative* and the *personal responsibility* of the pupil: “The disciplinary question occupies the centre of the narrative. And the ethical material is presented in accordance with a pedagogical principle according to which each student should, at the same time, be the subject of his own education.” The *governing of the self* is illustrated, from the first pages, with quotes that

are located in the time of two essential generations to understand this process: the 1880 generation, present in the writing of Élie Pécaut dated to 1887 (“The object of education, we should never forget, is to educate the child for independence and make him able to govern himself”) and the 1920 generation, stimulated through the inevitable Adolphe Ferrière, in a text written in 1921 (“Moving from obedience to freedom is the central problem of moral education, when we face it from the viewpoint of the principle of authority”). The whole argument can be read based on this idea, which directs one to the *control of the soul* of the pupil. Its most obvious affiliation can be found in the Anglo-Saxon authors inspired by Foucault. One only has to remind ourselves of the titles of some books from the “library” of Jorge Ramos do Ó — *Rewriting the soul* (Ian Hacking), *Fighting for the soul* (Thomas Popkewitz), *Governing the soul* (Nikolas Rose) — that re-work the key ideas of the French philosopher: “Power is only exercised on *free subjects*, and while they remain *free* — we are talking about individual or collective subjects that stumble on a field of possibility where several conducts, several reactions and several modes of behaviour can take place.”

In this study Jorge Ramos do Ó brings about an important shift in the educational debate. Throughout recent decades we have been prisoners of an antagonism between *relation* and *knowledge*: on the one hand, a certain pedagogical liturgy that champions the relational and sentimental aspects; on the other, an anti-pedagogical crusade that restricts itself to celebrating the past (what past?) and the knowledge (what knowledge?). In focusing his reflection on the problem of *government*, Jorge Ramos do Ó provides us with tools that enable the avoidance of dual thinking, laying the conceptual foundation stones for a new understanding of the pupil and school work.

STRANGENESS

Jorge Ramos do Ó presents us with a notable work, involving remarkable intellectual boldness and arduous historical research. It causes us a feeling of *strangeness*, such do its proposals go against the flow of the most firmly grounded and widespread ideas: in the way he avoids confining himself to the usual political chronologies; in the refusal to follow simplistic ideas and dichotomies, which are comforting but which do not explain; in the construction of an original narrative that brings into doubt a lot of what has been written about the history of education in Portugal.

This *strangeness* can cause two opposite effects, but both undesirable: the effect of rejection or, rather, the impossibility of reading, taking into account that the author suggests analyses that are far from what we believe

we know; the effect of impregnation, i.e. elaborating a way of putting forward problems which we become hostage to. These two effects have been pernicious in receiving many authors. It is therefore important to maintain lucidity and a critical eye, taking advantage of the immense potential of an extremely important work and creating a dialogue with an author who is already today a household name in the historiography of education.

To end this presentation I would like to point out three aspects about the way the research was designed and undertaken: the choice of the theme, the theory-history articulation and the work on the sources.

The choice of the theme. Historically studying pupils seems an obvious option. On the one hand they are the central element of any educational practice or theory. On the other, historiographical reflection has long been drawing attention to the need to “bring the pupils into the portrait again.” There is a clear awareness that they have been a major “absentee” from historical research. But what seems an obvious option is anything but an easy option. It is not by chance that one can find many works on reforms and policies, on institutions and pedagogical ideas, on teaching methods and teachers, but almost none on pupils. Not only are there few documents that explicitly allow a historical analysis of the experiences and the behaviours of the pupils, but it is also difficult to formulate the problem in a pertinent manner that makes sense. Based on a set of previous research works on secondary schools, Jorge Ramos do Ó manages to produce research that is organised entirely around the secondary school pupil. It is an essential contribution, which paves the way for a renovation in historical research into education.

The theory-history articulation. The greatest boldness shown by Jorge Ramos do Ó is linked to the elaboration of a strong theoretical device, which serves as the framework for his thesis. There was a risk of declarative excess suffocating the historical interpretation itself. The risk was controlled and from it sprouted a unique opportunity. Thanks to ordered thinking and fluid writing, the theoretical declarations clearly outline the historical facets, opening up the possibility of a new interpretation on the known facts. From this viewpoint, the work of Jorge Ramos do Ó is a model: its simple reading teaches us that history does not exist without a theoretical dimension and that this does not hinder the rhythm or fluidity of the narrative.

The work on the sources. The most impressive aspect of this research is however, the knowledge and mastery of the sources. Chapter after chapter, Jorge Ramos do Ó presents us with materials recovered from the most wide-ranging places, which are meticulously worked on in a methodological manner. One only has to look at the annexes of the thesis, compiled on the CD-ROM that comes with the work, to see the systematic procedures that were implemented in the identification, collection and analysis of the sources. The organisation of this “archive”, in the material and discursive sense, is in itself an essential contribution that should be duly highlighted.

In recent decades the history of education has developed greatly in Portugal. However, it is fair to say that we have shown little innovation in the choice of themes, in the theoretical elaboration of the problems and in “inventing the sources”. Therefore, I believe it important to highlight these three aspects of the work of Jorge Ramos do Ó. It marks an extremely significant turning point, which we will truly understand as its *signals* begin to clearly appear in the texts of younger researchers.

One can agree or disagree with the theses defended here. One can sympathise to a greater or lesser degree with the way of thinking, of formulating the problems, of writing. But one cannot fail to read this book. It is an essential work, which complies with the purpose of intellectual investigation: to critically question, to identify new problems, to take issue with tenets, to suggest different ways of thinking. This is what defines an *author*. It is these qualities that Jorge Ramos do Ó demonstrates in *Government of the self*.

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Translated by Thomas Kundert

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