

What if improvement of youth's employability veiled new forms of social inequality?

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ABSTRACT:

The term employability has been imposing itself as a universal category for labour market analysis, and as an hegemonic referent for employment policies and more recently even for educational policies. The introduction of such a term in official educational discourse is inscribed in a logic of individualization and individual responsabilization and in a growing trend towards privatisation of social problems. However, employability also legitimates the strengthening both of vocational branches for all and of specific measures for only some: popular-class youths with school trajectories of failure and at risk of dropping out. In this paper we will try to prove that in Portugal the vocationalization of the educational system is the result of a State voluntarist policy which does not find an echo in an entrepreneurial fabric that continues to invest in cheap labour as a competitiveness factor whereas simultaneously relegating to a secondary plan the discussion about its own role in social (re)production and in the creation of "smooth" forms of exclusion.

KEYWORDS:

employability, social inequality, initial education, professional insertion.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the word “employability” in public discourses represents a paradigm shift which requires clarification before any analysis of the way Portuguese educational system responds to the so-called need to enhance youths’ employability. Placing employability in the centre of educational policies represents a change in the debate about education and its relationship with society in general and economy in particular. Until the crises of the seventies, education was viewed as a key tool for the reduction of social inequality and as an indispensable condition to ensure economic growth. Increase in unemployment, particularly among young people, is at the origin of the vocationalization of educational systems and brings forth to the political agenda the discussion about the role of politics in the struggle against this phenomenon. Recent introduction of the term employability in educational discourses represents a shift in the paradigm that has been guiding social policies and is inscribed in a logic of individualization and individual responsabilization and in a growing trend towards privatisation of social problems. However, employability also legitimates the strengthening both of vocational branches for all and of specific measures for only some: popular-class youths with school trajectories of failure and at risk of dropping out. In this paper we will try to prove that in Portugal vocationalization of the educational system is the result of a State voluntarist policy which does not find an echo in an entrepreneur-

ial fabric that continues to invest in cheap labour as a competitiveness factor whereas simultaneously relegating to a secondary plan the discussion about its own role in social (re)production and in the creation of “soft” forms of exclusion.

Some considerations about the employability concept

The term employability has been imposing itself as a universal category for labour market analysis, as an hegemonic referent for employment policies and more recently even for educational policies. Like many other words currently in use^a, this too is the object of an overall semantic consensus eluding any kind of definition. Yet, such consensus is merely apparent. Polysemy of the employability concept is evident in the different definitions produced in the scientific field, in its use as an action category of employment policies^b and in the meanings attributed by OECD and the European Commission^c. According to the aims guiding our reflection we will exclusively deal with the concept’s genealogy and its scientific meanings by following Gazier works (1990, undated) very closely. This author identifies seven different versions of employability: *dichotomic employability, socio-medical employability, manpower policy employability, flow employability, labour market performance employability, initiative employability and interactive employability*.

Dichotomic employability dates back to the beginning of the 20th century and has its roots in USA and Great Britain. It has been used by public services to classify people inserted in the labour market

or asking for public assistance in two categories: employable and “unemployable”. The first category comprised all those who were valid and ready for work; the second one comprised those who were not ready for work for several reasons, being therefore candidates to social welfare. In practice, in Gazier’s words (undated, p. 10), at stake is “an elementary tool of poor people partition and response to an urgency situation”.

In the fifties and the sixties three new concepts of employability emerged, having a quantitative approach in common whereas keeping untouched the social group of reference: unemployed people^d. *Socio-medical employability* was the first to emerge in the fifties in USA, Great Britain and Germany. Through a battery of tests, it seeks to measure the distance of job seekers’ physical, cognitive and mental characteristics to job requirements. *Manpower policy employability*, developed in the United States from the sixties onwards, is nothing but an extension of socio-medical employability, although in this case balancing the distance of job requirements to individual attributes embodies another dimension: social acceptability. From this perspective, according to Gazier (1990, p. 579), employability is “an individual’s attractiveness to an employer, measured by scales, combining skills and behaviour items and privileging professional integrity”. Common to both these versions there is a purely individual concept of employability based on a logic centred on the idea of aptitude deficit. Conversely, flow employability, of French origin^e, represents an alternative to individualistic supply-centred approaches, which had been dominant until then. French employability, as named by Gazier (1990), focuses on the overall conditions of demand. This version corresponds to the differential probabilities of leaving unemployment, according to classical socio-demographic features and general economic conditions. This version of employability comprises two conceptually distinctive types of employability — *average employability*^f and *differential employability*^g — and takes as a unit of analysis the group of unemployed people and not the unemployed individual. On placing the accent on the collective factors of unemployment, this conception of employability breaks with the psychologizing deficit-based perspective that shapes the other conceptions to be

committed to a socio-economic perspective that takes into account economic cycles and the way different categories of workers are differently affected by labour market regulation modes.

From the eighties onwards, three other formulations of the employability concept have also emerged. Unemployment growth leads to the setting up of a wide range of employment policy measures and programmes. In this new context, according to Barbier (2000), employability is transformed not only in an action category of employment policy organizations and operators, in a situation of mass unemployment, but also in an indicator to evaluate its impact. Therefore, *labour market performance employability* appears as a descriptive notion internationally used to evaluate the success or failure of a given training or re-employment programme^h, by calculating time spent in finding another job, multiplied by the probable length of total employment time, multiplied by the probable hourly gains. This highly instrumental concept of employability is the synonym of “being able to earn one’s living through labour market participation” (Gazier, undated, p. 11).

Other two concepts of employability date back to the end of the eighties. Here again these concepts reflect the discussion that opposes those who plead for an analysis of employability which takes socio-economic dynamics into account to those for whom employability is an individual quasi-ontological attribute. *Initiative employability* belongs precisely to this latter category, which has been prevalent and gained renewed vitality with the diffusion of neoliberal ideology, particularly in US and UK. Defined by Gazier (undated, p. 11) as “marketability of cumulative individual skills”, this concept places the accent on the worker individually considered. In his opinion, at stake is the development of individual creativity and responsibility and his/her capacity to build and mobilize the social resources they need to keep a job or get a new one. It is no longer enough for a worker to merely fulfill the tasks assigned to him as it was some decades ago. Nowadays, they have to invest in their work objectively and subjectively, develop marketable employability skills, and become self-entrepreneurs. Initiative employability is therefore a characteristic of atomized and flexible individuals, capable of job rotation in an increas-

ingly deregulated labour market. On its turn, *interactive employability*, which comes from Canada, though keeping the emphasis on the individual and his/her skills, admits that individual employability cannot be dissociated from the way of functioning of the labour market. In this sense, rather than a condition, employability is a process built through the interaction between individual strategies and resources, on the one hand, and macro-economic dynamics and business strategies, on the other hand.

However, whether it is true that there is a formal consensus on the interactive concept of employability and that in the scientific field some approaches have been developed which operationalize this concept's different dimensionsⁱ, it is also true that unemployment growth, its structural nature and the consolidation of neoliberal thought have been contributing to the settlement and even strengthening of an individualistic perspective of employability. McQuaid and Lindsay (2005, p. 205) refer precisely to this trend when they argue that “interactivity, supposedly at the core of this concept, seems to be replaced by a singular focus on the individual and on what can be named as ‘employability competences’”. This criticism to an hegemony of the individualistic conception is also shared by sociologists like Charlot and Glassman (1998) and Ebersold (2001). In their opinion, such hegemony is part of a more global process of individualization and individual responsabilization highlighted by several sociologists (Beck, 2001; Dubet & Martuccelli, 1996; Ehrenberg, 1991, 1995; Giddens, 2001) and having as its corollary what Wallace and Kovatcheva (1998) name as a growing privatization of social problems.

Linked to unemployment from the beginning, individual employability is nowadays assuming a new centrality in a context of structural mass unemployment and governments' incapacity to generate employment. With no possibility to influence supply directly they see themselves restricted almost exclusively to the field of demand, either related to employment policies or to education-training policies. Improving individual employability appears as the only political response within neoliberal ideology capable of tackling with a paradoxical mass unemployment. Mass unemployment is simultane-

ous with the overall growth of school qualifications (Beck, 2001; Canário, 2005; Castel, 1999); it affects not only low— but also top-qualified people and it is no longer seen as the result of low economic growth but as inherent to the very model of economic growth, as Boltanski and Chiapello (1999) have so well evidenced and the profits of national and multinational big companies do not cease to confirm. Accepting the inevitability of unemployment as a condition indispensable to the growth of both national economies and companies' profit rates goes hand in hand with the diffusion of a discourse that can't help “blaming the victims”, and where employability is the word that confers the necessary scientific legitimacy and veils the structurally antagonistic interests of capital and labour. In fact, explaining unemployment by exclusively relying on lack of employability skills is hiding the social and economic effects of this new phase of capitalist accumulation. Therefore, in a context where job shortage and increasing wage flexibility reign, placing the onus of unemployment on unemployed people and exclusively linking it with lack of employability skills means mystifying a problem, which is complex by nature and whose resolution asks for much more than compensatory and palliative measures.

Enhancing competitiveness, combating unemployment and social exclusion, improving employability

In Portugal the term employability has been mainly connected to “treatment” of unemployed people, in general, and long-term unemployed, in particular, therefore being a constant in education-training public policies targeted to this group. Yet, in the field of education the introduction of such a term in the official discursive rhetoric is much more recent and marginal. Improving youth employability is currently emerging in Portugal in connection with three other educational objectives: enhancing competitiveness, combating unemployment and social exclusion. Successively reiterated by different governments along the last decades and regardless of their political affiliation, these objectives have been placing the relationship between education and labour at the core of the political agenda and debate. This education-labour relationship gains renewed

vitality with the persistence of structural unemployment.

In Portugal this has always been a troubled relationship. Materialized in technical education courses until the 1974 Revolution, this relationship between education and labour has always been and continues to be the result of a State voluntarist policy with no echo in a business class who does not privilege vocational training at all, whether initial or continuous (Grácio, 1986)^j, and who continues to believe in cheap labour as a major factor in economic competitiveness. However, it has also been a fundamental tool in response to the growth of social demand for education from medium class and part of the working class, from the sixties onwards, keeping intact national elites' education and recruitment^k. As technical education was the educational strand preferred by popular classes it was extinguished in mid-seventies as a consequence of the ongoing revolution and of the unification process that gave rise to the *collège* in France and to the *comprehensive school* in the United Kingdom.

In the early eighties a new cycle starts in educational policy in Portugal and a new way of looking at the role of education. If it is true that until the economic crises of the seventies education had been viewed as a tool to combat social inequalities and an indispensable condition to ensure economic growth, it is also true that with the growth of juvenile unemployment it becomes invested with a new role: to contribute to decrease unemployment. Both reintroduction of vocational strands in countries where they had been extinguished and reinforcement in the other countries become legitimated from the political point of view by the need to enhance competitiveness in the European economies and above all by the need to combat juvenile unemployment. Ignoring all knowledge produced in the fields of economy and sociology^l, both political discourses and some others produced in the scientific field seek to explain unemployment as a result of educational frailties: education fails in providing youths with a system of dispositions favourable to work (Furlong, 1988); education does not prepare youths with the competences needed for their insertion in active life (Finn, 1985); education provided is too academic and hardly relevant in professional terms (Finn, 1984; Sherman, 1991).

Portugal is not an exception to this trend. That's why current reintroduction of vocational strands in our country or the external flexibilization of education as preferred by Correia (1999) also reproduce the prevailing arguments: responding to the need to enhance competitiveness in national economy and to combat juvenile unemployment caused by low professional qualifications.

Criticism immediately arose against this instrumental and managerial thought of education both in Portugal and in countries witnessing an increasing subordination of education to economic interests. In essence, this criticism is organized around three types of distinctive arguments: political, educational and economic.

From a political point of view, not only is subordination of education to economy criticized as it is the fragmentary conception of social actor where the education of a worker is valued as if the roles of worker and citizen were independent from each other (Correia, Stoleroff & Stoer, 1993). Criticism also arises against the displacement of the locus for the discussion on equality of opportunities from the educational field to the world of labour (Alves *et al.*, 2001). Equality of opportunities is no longer a core reference of educational policy, being replaced by equality of opportunities in obtaining a job.

From an educational point of view, criticism mainly highlights the socially discriminating nature of these educational provisions which tend to become ghettos inhabited by young people from working classes marked by failure-based school itineraries (Alves *et al.*, 2001; Combes, 1988; Grácio, 1991; São Pedro *et al.*, 2002). This fact confers them a second chance character within the educational system, which persists in the labour world with holders of this kind of diplomas having proportionally fewer opportunities in career promotion than University graduates, being more likely to lose their jobs and getting lower profitability from their diplomas (Grácio, 1997; Portugal, 2004)^m. The socially selective nature of such provisions, even stigmatizing in some cases, has recently been strengthened with the creation of specific provisions in compulsory education such as the so-called alternative curricula and education-training programmes. Since they are targeted to populations at risk of dropping out and they are supposed to combat social exclu-

sion and enhance employability, these educational provisions ended up introducing different strands in the nine-year primary education, getting its legitimacy from the inclusion ideology (Correia, 1999). They are thereby contributing to a new semantic reformulation of the concept of equality of opportunities whose referent is no longer the same education for all but different provisions according to different capacities. Since they are part of a process of internal flexibilization of the educational system (Correia, 1999), they also constitute one of the visible faces of the smooth exclusion Dubet refers to, whereas evidencing that any educational provisions targeted to work and aiming at reducing risks of exclusion and enhancing employability are surely meant for those who do not possess the cognitive competences that might enable them to follow a “streamline” curriculum and who almost exclusively come from popular classes and from ethnic-cultural minorities.

From an economic point of view, some research produced in the field of Economy of Education, such as Corson’s (1991), evidence that high costs indexed to vocational programmes when compared to streamline education do not get the expected feedback in what respects individual productivity, thus concluding that in economic terms they are equivalent to streamline education. Other investigations confirm the thesis that this kind of education does not promote these youths’ comparative advantage in the labour market. Two other surveys on the integration in active life of young people who concluded secondary education (São Pedro *et al.*, 2002) and initial vocational training programmes (Carimbo, 2001) evidenced no sharp differences concerning unemployment since: 18% of youths from mainstream secondary education were unemployed, against 19% from technological education, 15% from vocational education and 17% from those who concluded initial vocational training

programmes. Other investigations focusing on recruitment strategies (Moreno, 1998) evidence that Portuguese businessmen continue to prefer recruiting lower qualified youths who complete level I and II qualification programmes and privilege general education, learning skills, motivational skills (commitment and effort) and behavioral skills as selection criteria rather than vocational training.

Concluding observations

What conclusions can we draw from all of this?

Firstly, we can conclude that in Portugal there persists a model of economic specialization that continues to build its competitive advantage on cheap labour. Secondly, we can conclude that on privileging workers’ motivational and behavioral profile companies’ recruitment strategies mainly value individual capacity to invest subjectively in work, which simultaneously means employability and permeability to new forms of work exploitation. Thirdly, we can also conclude that educational policy and business strategies still follow different paths, which is reflected in a fierce opposition between coincident political and business discourses blaming juvenile low qualification for unemployment and low economic competitiveness, on the one hand, and contradicting concrete social practices, on the other hand. Fourthly, we can also conclude that discourses and policies pleading for vocationally based educational provisions are so strongly ideologically biased that they tend to resist any empirical evidence that puts them into question. Fifthly and lastly, we are facing discourses and policies that veil the role such educational provisions play in the reproduction of social inequality by placing the accent on arguments supposed to be ideologically neutral such as economic competitiveness, struggle against unemployment and social exclusion and more recently on the growth of unemployment.

ENDNOTES

1. We mean words like social exclusion, flexibility or lifelong learning which are steadily present in national and international policy discourses and exempt from previous definition.

2. On this sort of studies, please refer to Barbier (1994), in the case of France, and to McQuaid and Lindsay (2005) in the case of US and UK.

3. On this sort of analysis refer to Pochet and Paternotre (1998).

4. Since its origin employability has always been connected to job privation. Employability is therefore mainly a concern of unemployed people.

5. This concept of employability has its roots in Ledrut's pioneer work (Ledrut, 1966).

6. This type of employability is dependent on the economic conjuncture (Gazier, 1990) since the probability of finding a new job increases in periods of economic growth and decreases in recession conjunctures.

7. Differential employability calls for the analysis of social and economic inequalities affecting certain groups of unemployed people and influencing the probability of finding a new job (Gazier, 1990).

8. In Portugal, this concept of employability is frequently known as employability rate and it is one of the most used indicators in the evaluation of quality and impact of initial vocational training programmes organized by the Ministry of Education and/or the Ministry of Labour.

9. As an example, please refer to the suggestion made by Evans *et al.* (1999, in McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005) and to the suggestion made by these latter authors in this same article.

10. Low value attributed to continuous training continues to be a major characteristic of Portuguese businessmen, confirmed in studies more recently carried out (Azevedo, 1999; Moreno, 1998).

11. This process consisted of a path to University through Lyceum.

I'm referring to the different theories that explain juvenile unemployment such as the cycle theory, the competition or queuing theory, the structural theory and labour market segmentation theories (Cf. Giret, 2000).

12. According to recent data from Eurostat and UN, Portugal is the second of EU (15) countries

where inequality in income distribution is higher. Huge wage range, high individual profitability of higher education diplomas, along with the social stigma associated to such educational provisions, contribute to explain their low attractiveness among students.

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Translated by Filomena Matos.