

EDUCATING EUROPE: AN ANALYSIS OF EU EDUCATIONAL POLICIES¹

This chapter analyses educational policies in the European Union. Because the unionisation² process is taking place on so many different levels – ranging from the local to the national, and the national to the global (and vice-versa) – it is possible to undertake this project with reference to any number of dimensions. This task is also complicated by the interconnected processes of Europeanisation and globalisation, as well as the temptation to oppose nation-states to the European Union, “localism” with “cosmopolitanism”, etc. (Bauman, 2001; Breckenridge *et al.*, 2002). The layer which we have chosen intends to build the European Union as the main explanatory level of analysis. In fact, it is necessary to determine the nature of this unprecedented political entity, in order to apprehend its influence in the formulation of educational policies. Adopting this perspective, we hope to displace and replace ourselves in the European political debate, opening the possibility for new questions and understandings.

Too often there is a tendency to participate, without pause for critical reflection, in the programmes and initiatives originating from Brussels. Our intention is to consider European educational policies as an *object of study*, in the general context of political organisation within the European Union. The point of departure is a metaphor, articulated by the EU Spanish Presidency (first half of 2002), that education is to be considered as the *fourth pillar of the European construction*. Building metaphors are a fixture of the language circulating with reference to EU process – the (re)construction of Europe. Frequent references to “laying foundations” and the idea of a “common house”, are coupled with descriptions of policymakers as “architects” and “masons”, even as Europeans themselves are portrayed as “onlookers” who must “wait” until the process is “completed before they can appreciate its quality” (Commissioner for Economic and Monetary Affairs, Yves-Thibault de Silguy, cit. in Shore, 2000, p. 2). We could add other metaphors found throughout EU texts: walls, benchmarks, barriers, as well as various

¹ The first draft of this text was written while I was a visiting scholar at the University of Oxford (Michaelmas Term, 2001). The final version was concluded in the year 2002, as a Visiting Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University (New York), a stay which enabled a collaboration with William deJong-Lambert, a PhD student in Comparative Education. I wish to thank my colleagues for an intellectually productive and challenging time, as well as the Fulbright Foundation which granted me a scholarship for my stay in New York (January-June, 2002).

² We are using the term “unionisation” to refer to the myriad processes involved, at every level, in the creation of the European Union.

metaphors of “space” and “circulation”. The popularity of metaphors is obviously related to the fact that the European Union does not have strong political roots and locations, and needs to compensate for this with an appealing rhetoric and mobilising images. Not all metaphors, however, are equally useful or captivating. As Evelyn Keller explains in her work on biology: “The effectiveness of a metaphor, like that of a speech-act, depends on shared social conventions and, perhaps especially, on the authority conventionally granted to those who use it” (1995, pp. xi-xii).

The reference to education as a *fourth pillar* is thus a conceptually meaningful move, signifying an attempt to isolate education policy as primary in the context of EU policy-making. It is this important transitional moment which we will attempt to grasp in our text. We begin in the first section with an introduction to the current state of European affairs, moving from the debates of governance to issues of citizenship and the role played by education. The second section deals with the concept of the European educational space; here we use a metaphor of “states of matter” to describe the evolution of educational policies, particularly post-Maastricht Treaty. Finally, in the last section we focus on the *Detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe*, approved in 2002, arguing that it establishes a new tempo for European educational policies. The text closes with a coda, advocating the presence of critical thinking in the European space – a thinking which avoids the acceptance of unionisation as inevitable. Such fatalism, together with the feeling that “things” are happening independently of the will of European citizens, can lead to a disenchantment with politics, which could transform reverie into nightmare.

1. THE STATE OF EUROPEAN AFFAIRS

This paper starts a process responding to the disenchantment of many of the Union’s citizens. Alienation from politics is not just a European problem, it is global, national and local. But for the Union it represents a particular challenge. Given the deep level of integration already achieved, people have similar expectations for the Union as they have for domestic politics and political institutions. But the Union cannot develop and deliver policy in the same way as a national government (*European Governance – A White Paper*, 2001, p. 32).

Recent debates on European governance have been characterized by a malaise about the present situation, and a sense of disillusionment with regard to the future of Europe. An “heroic” account of the European past is defined in terms of a *longue durée*, from which a contemporary heritage is derived, as well as a recent past, originating in post-War prosperity and producing half a century of peace and progress. However, one can still determine a definite alienation from politics and disenchantment with the European project. This juxtaposition of opposing attitudes requires an understanding of the amalgamation of discourses and complexity of networks, operating throughout the European space. The White Paper on *European Governance* is constructed in terms of openness, participation, accountability, effectiveness and coherence; nevertheless we believe that it in fact accentuates the “opacity” of the European Union, namely in terms of the incapacity to understand

the decision-making processes and the role of the different national, sub-national and supra-national institutions.

The political crisis with regard to the way in which policy is implemented is also a “crisis” in the intellectual thinking, that is in the way in which Europe is discussed and apprehended. This debate takes place in a language strongly influenced by the media and by an expert-discourse that tends to homogenise “problems” and “solutions” (Nóvoa, 2002). A first tendency is evident in the setting of the political agenda by the media, with a recurrent dramatisation of educational matters, in which the portrayal of problems and the framing of questions is used as a method of imposing solutions. An “instant democracy” is forged according to opinion polls and public surveys, creating the “society of the spectacle”, to use the concept coined by Guy Debord. This latter notion has been characterised by Michael Hardt and Toni Negri as the construction of an artificial coherence, a spectacle which while in fact orderless, “functions as if there were [...] a point of central control” (2000, p. 323). The exposure to “objective” estimators of public opinion transforms politics into public spectacle, negating the possibility for critical discussion.

A second tendency, that in part overlaps the previous one, is represented by the figure of the expert, and the circulation of a discourse in a transnational mood. The mobilisation of experts circulates a rootless, location-less, international discourse. We are thus presented with a “new Babel”, consisting of terms including “globalisation”, “flexibility”, “new economy”, “zero tolerance”, “multiculturalism”, etc. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000). Dressed in an impressive “moral conformity”, there is an interesting unanimity in this debate, that recurrently uses terminology such as rigour, efficiency, accountability, responsibility, autonomy, market, choice, and customers, to address educational matters. The diffusion of these concepts necessitates that they be banal enough to be universally accepted as solutions for every problem. As empty rhetoric they create the illusion of a common agenda which, because it belongs to no one, can be described as belonging to everyone.

In recent years a large amount has been written on EU issues. This literature has, however, more often been obfuscating than illuminating, not only because the authors become lost among the myriad institutions and levels of decision making, but also because they adopt (implicitly or explicitly) a position *pro* or *contra* EU policies. From our perspective it is necessary to move from traditional explanations, embedded in “international relations” or institutionalist approaches, and adopt more sophisticated conceptions underpinned by historical and comparative thinking. Peter Van Ham refers to our present epoch as one in which “geographical entities are less fixed and (most) no longer seem to control their destiny” (2001, pp. 1-2). He therefore criticizes dichotomous conceptions of international relations as incapable of providing us with an understanding of the changing political, social, economic and cultural landscape. We will argue that *governance*, as the central concept that has been used in current discussions about the EU, cannot be taken for granted and must be critically analyzed. In fact, as Mathias Albert puts it: “It may very well be that it is exactly the advances made in theorizing about governance (without government) that are part of the problem in advancing the theorizing about democracy in the European context, because it has led analysis *away from the state too soon*, trying to adopt new notions of legitimacy for new forms of governance

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