

Is there an epistemological place for a possible social educational agency?¹

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At a time that one could call the beginning of my academic career I wrote my first book (*Escola e Sociedade, que Relação? – School and Society, what Relationship?*) in which I attempted to identify and contextualise some educational situations and decisions which occurred in Portugal during the dictatorship of the “New State”². As I had already studied works which had previously been developed by other authors, it was clear how much - also in this case - the orientation of educational events and educational choices seemed to be strongly conditioned by the restraints imposed and directed by the political and ideological structures that were being consolidated at the time. Of these restraints I identified, among many others, Decree No. 15.365 of April 1928, which suppressed simultaneously: the Law Faculty of the University of Lisbon, the Faculty of Letters of the University of Porto, the Pharmacy Faculty of the University of Coimbra and the Horta High School.

¹ This article is based on a paper presented in Los Angeles, USA, October, 2002.

² The ‘New State’ was created by the 1933 constitution at the beginning of the dictatorship of Prime Minister Salazar.

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This decree also limited and established conditions for enrolment in Lisbon, Porto and Coimbra high schools. Although there had been pronouncements in 1927 favouring “a large number of pupils whose economic situation prevents them from acquiring the culture that is indispensable to modern life” (Decree No. 13.619), there were further restrictions brought about by the measures taken in the following two years, in which primary school syllabi were reduced, and the explanation given was that the aim of this school level should be limited to “knowing how to read, write and count”. At this time compulsory schooling was also reduced from 5 to 3 years, primary school teachers’ salaries were reduced, the prestigious *Escolas Normais Superiores* (Secondary Teacher Training Colleges) were suppressed (they were replaced by the Pedagogical Sciences Course, plus a two-year training period at the high schools of Lisbon or Coimbra), the *Escolas Normais Primárias* (Primary Teacher Training Colleges) were replaced by the *Escolas do Magistério Primário* with curricula that were reduced “to the elements that are considered essential” and which could be attended by students who had only 4 years of schooling (which meant that there were primary school teachers who had only a total of 6 years of schooling).

These are just two examples chosen among many measures taken at the time, which show the darkness that was falling on the Portuguese educational system during the dictatorship. They also show that a close relationship can exist between the ideology that shapes the central power and the decisions that are made in the field of education.

I found other identical situations during the course of that study which, as I have already said, constituted the beginning of my work on educational problems. That study, in fact, left profound marks on me.

Similar but different

While preparing this paper, which now symbolises the end of another long leg of my academic activity, I suddenly became aware of a curious coincidence: again now, just a few months after our new government has taken over, decisions have been firmly announced, in the name of the need to save money and improve education, which awaken echoes of the other measures I have just referred to. Let me remind you that soon after the new

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government took over, it was declared that the *Instituto de Inovação Educacional* (Institute for Educational Innovation) would be suppressed, recurrent education would end as well as the INAFOP (Trader Training Institute), the reform of Secondary Education would be suspended, the budget for Higher Education would be reduced, the seconding of teachers which enabled them to take part in projects would be suspended, there would be only one teacher in charge of the Projects Area as well as in Supervised Study, etc., etc., etc.

It is pointless to continue this list which, to tell the truth, bears incredible resemblance to the pretexts and decisions that were devised and carried out at another different and distant time. I am not trying to say that history repeats itself. As a matter of fact, if I dare to mention this set of situations it is only because they are a pretext for me to meditate once again on a problem that I have been pursuing throughout my professional life: that of the relationship between structure and agency. This issue has always interested me, even before the publication of that first book I referred to above. Throughout my working career I have taken slightly different positions as regards that issue: at the beginning, I mainly believed in the possibility of agency; later, I became conscious of the constraining importance of structures; and, more recently, my work has been focusing mainly on the complex and tense situation which exists between structure and agency.

Structural power in new times of agency

Now, at a time when there are signs in Portugal that structure has a destructive power, and when sudden decisions by the central authorities seem capable of destroying and suddenly erasing projects and organisations that had been consolidated by means of hard and praiseworthy work over many years, one should start raising some disturbing issues: in this complex relationship that perhaps exists between structure and agency, is it at all possible, in circumstances such as the present, to exercise some autonomy out of the sanctuary of “never to come true” utopias? In fact, such times make us instinctively doubtful of the possibility of any functional autonomy (cf. Fritzel 1987) within structures, which assert themselves and become

increasingly inflexible, especially to carry out their “power to command” (cf. Murphy, 1982).

What can be done against this “power to command” that is so rashly exerted by the system’s centres? What possibility exists to act and to resist? What margin of autonomy can exist for social actors at the periphery of the system to fight for what they believe is important to implement, to maintain, to improve, and to develop? In an obvious tension between structure and agency, everything seems to point to the fact that in some specific cases the power of the structures is such that it will not be easy to fight back and alter the course of events.

In a now classical article from 1982, Murphy suggests some interesting ideas that allow us to look at this issue in more depth. In the article he argues that, when this kind of situation is analysed, it is the way in which the concept of “power” is used that leads one to accept that those who decide have almost unlimited possibilities to control the development of events. And this is so because the situations that emerge show every time that, in certain circumstances, the structures purposely take decisions and then exert their “power to command”. That power is served by strong means which will directly control situations in order to enforce the orders.

However, Murphy goes on to draw our attention to the existence of other forms of enforcing power even in these situations, which despite being less explicit and apparently less violent nonetheless do exist and have always been used very efficiently by dominating structures, at lower costs and in circumstances where it is easier for the authorities to legitimise their actions. This is the case, for instance, of the “power to constrain”. Though it also has great influence on the potential of the organisations to function, this form of power is easier to bypass, precisely because it is less explicit and, even more importantly, more likely to be related to internal contradictions of the structures. That being the case, and should it be possible to identify those contradictions, these entities become a little more fragile. Murphy stresses that these two types of power co-exist, although analyses frequently point especially to the first one and conclude that it is impossible to resist it.

This idea to dismantle and shred the concept of power may be a suggestion for a potentially more promising practice in the attempt to understand the problem of the relationship between structure and agency. Can one admit that it may be useful to “shred” this relationship, which

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seems to be full of examples where the destructive power of the structure seems to annihilate any possibility of agency from the start? This seems to lead to the suggestion that, instead of attacking the issue of power enforcement by structures in general, unhappily accepting the impossibility of any agency whatsoever, one should try to ask a few questions in order to more clearly identify the problem one is trying to face: what do we mean when we talk about structures and agencies?

What kind of *structures* are we talking about? Do we have in mind economic dominating structures, which exert their power over the State, limiting and controlling its capacity to act? Or the State, politically and ideologically structured, acting on the organisation and functioning of the educational system? If it is the decision-making force of economic structures we are talking about, what are we really considering? Global economic issues? European ones? Southern European ones? Regional ones? Are we talking about what is decided when mysterious groups such as that of the “richer countries” get together in great secrecy to make decisions about problems that concern us all? Are we talking of measures that are apparently taken by the State alone? By the State’s representatives in Civil Governments? By local authorities? Or of the power of the directors of different organisations where we find ourselves and/or where we work? Or of a combination of at least some of these?

This list of questions could certainly go on. But the types of questions to be asked do not end here. In fact, different questions could be asked about other aspects of the problem: are these structures perfectly coherent among themselves in relation to the interests they defend? Is it not possible that the multifaceted functioning of such a vast and heterogeneous group of entities will inevitably generate some contradictions, conflicts, even malfunctions within itself? And is it not possible that these conflicts of narrower or broader dimensions can occur even between the interests of entities that are apparently coalescent and in tune with the goals to be achieved?

Is it not a fact that these same conflicts and contradictions that can occur within the structures, which are apparently more solid and even apparently monolithic, may affect their capacity to exert power? Does it mean that if they are duly explored they will facilitate the appearance of some possibility of agency by those who are apparently totally dominated by the structures and struggle to believe in the potential of agency?

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When one talks of *agency*, it will be necessary to ask: agency by whom? By stronger or not-so-strong, well-organised or not-so-well-organised political parties? By trade unions? By citizens' organisations, some of which have proved to be quite important lately (let us mention, for example, the anti-globalisation movements which have managed to upset the functioning of summits intended to decide on issues that directly concern us), by ecologist, feminist, ethnical and nationalist movements, etc? Which conflicting forces are felt at an "Earth Summit" among all the interests that are represented there? What type of capacity of agency can be contentiously generated at a World Social Forum? What can happen, even to official structures, when the different organisations grow slightly apart from global and/or governmental decisions? What can happen at local government level, which is organised around a slightly divergent project that is, nonetheless, common to some of the elements that make up its direction? What can happen at a training institute, a training centre that has reflected on and decided collectively to fight for an educational project at a school, even in a classroom? Will this not create even there, in that tiny world, an environment for differential participation and for distinct autonomous situations just because of the relationship that the different teachers slowly develop with their students?

We are fully aware that the search for possible answers will not produce, through metaphors, tools that can be used for heuristic purposes. However, a good metaphor can illustrate. It can make a confusing event easier to understand, it can translate some meaning or clarify a complex situation, which is difficult to present in any other way. Therefore, in a bewildering context such as this one, where one is trying to describe and imagine effects resulting from situations where there is a confrontation between different types and levels of structures that hold the power (and are eager to exert it) and social actors, groups or institutions which simmer in more or less peripheral areas trying to find places where they can exercise relative autonomy that could be vital to them, in such a context a metaphor, even if naive, could perhaps be a worthy aid.

Let us picture ourselves on the shore of an apparently clear, calm and permanent lake, bordered by sandy, muddy and quite dense vegetation, with rocks emerging from the water, where plants and animals settle in and sometimes find shelter. Let us imagine that the surface of the water is

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suddenly and repeatedly upset by accidental events of different origins, from stones of different sizes rolling down, from sand falling in different places and at different moments and from the unexpected jump of a frog or a fish or an insect which lands on the surface of the water. We will then observe numerous shock waves of different sizes and intensities which increase, move away, crisscross, wash against the shores, ebb, draw near and invade the semi-immersed rocks in a disorderly way. We will even see the shores, which once had looked solid, crumble down, causing new upheavals on the surface of the water that had once seemed so calm and peaceful.

When we describe the image of a lake which is upset by various events, our aim is to evoke a situation which can be considered symbolically similar to what we have been describing: a social and educational context that suffers the impact of multiple situations, actions and reactions of different origins, having to give in to different intentions which may have very different intensities. Can this image stress how reductive it is to try and find “the cause” which is directly responsible for any of these effects? Can this metaphor illustrate how naive it is to think that only one type of intervention will be able to alter a whole course of events? However, (and recalling Brecht) might it also suggest that the shores that confine rivers and lakes (especially those which are tumultuous) are not so mighty, inalterable and totally domineering?

Analysing the decision-making phenomenon can also be a door leading to a deeper understanding of this vaster phenomenon of the tension between structure and agency.

In a recent work (Cortês, Magalhães & Stoer, 2001) we attempted to categorise different forms of action according to the type of relationship one establishes with change, for instance in accordance with the major or minor alteration one tries to make and according to whether one intends to act upon the symptoms immediately or to focus on more or less distant causes. To refer to those different forms of action we used the (quite metaphoric) concepts of “surfing”, “piloting” and “managing”. We suggested that the word “surfing” should be used to refer to those forms of action where one is particularly interested in controlling situations and thus worried mainly with the short term. “Piloting” would designate forms of decision in which one resorts to tactics but also designs strategies, as one pays more attention to medium term causes and events than to symptoms, as in the first case.

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“Managing” designates mainly a form of decision that tries to go beyond and find the origins of problems rather than focus on their most immediate effects, seeking long-term effects instead. These were the three “ideal types” of decision-making we were able to characterise. But we soon became aware that these different ways of facing change are frequently mixed, at least partially, and may, for example, result in forms of action in which the typical aspects of what we have called “managing” may co-exist with aspects that this map attributes to piloting situations.

These analyses, which show some of the complex aspects of decision-making, have allowed us to better understand the component ‘action’ of the vaster issue of the structure-agency relationship. They have enabled us to understand that not only the will to act or the capacity to make decisions or even the ideological orientation of the agents is responsible for the actions developed. Throughout this work one becomes aware of the importance of a complex set of situations which interact and which depend not only on the social actors and their hybrid nature (which reveals itself differently in different situations), but also on a combination of events that take place during the development of the action.

Therefore, an awareness of this turbulence that always seems to characterise the course of events requires one to be extremely cautious in any attempted action. One cannot choose a naive action; on the contrary, the choice should be in favour of forms of intervention where one constantly tries to establish the difference between visible effects and deeper, sometimes well-hidden, roots, where one can decipher the interests at stake and the interactions of more or less explicit powers, where moments and zones of fragility in the structures can be emphasised, thus making it possibly easier to achieve some effects.

The possibility of assuming a quality of agency is therefore structured on a set of concerns where strategies are favoured that are cautiously construed and considered adequate for each situation to be encountered, rather than tactics that are conceived on the spot, as we affirmed in the work previously mentioned.

The diagnosis of those situations, as well as the creation and development of adequate strategies for each of them, requires, as we said before, constant, patient and penetrating analysis, veritable research work

without which the intervention runs the risk of not having results or even of unchaining effects that are the opposite of those one is trying to achieve.

Therefore, the responsibility assumed in acting is enormous. Considering our field of work, it seems logical to admit that for those of us, who are researchers and teachers, our responsibility will be even greater. And this is so because the nature of our profession itself demands that we use our full capacity to analyse at all times. The more trained we are, the more we are responsible.

At a time when hidden - and sometimes very threatening - hands are played at global, national and even local levels, this responsibility is even greater for those who, due to their professional training, are better prepared to decode and identify the non-explicit situations that surround and beleaguer us at different levels. To **decode**, **interpret** and **denounce** are thus important ways of acting and being committed.

Scholarship with commitment and agency

In what was perhaps his last public interview, Bourdieu (2001) said about “globalisation policies” that “these policies are to a great extent kept secret as regards their production and publicity. Just to identify them before they are put into practice requires a veritable amount of research work. Furthermore, they have consequences that can be foreseen by using social science resources”. Later on he adds that during research there can be no separation between “scholarship” and “commitment”, and that commitment is, under the present circumstances, a duty. However, for Bourdieu only a scientist who works autonomously and according to the rules that are well-known to “scholarship” can produce **committed knowledge**, which is, according to him, the only type of knowledge that can be useful to decode threatening and sometimes covered up situations.

Therefore, one can conclude from his brave words that Bourdieu believes that decoding, alerting and denouncing through conducting thorough research, carefully structured by the rules of traditional “scholarship”, are possible forms of intervention for researchers. In this text, he even talks of the importance of breaking “with a certain number of contradictions that only exist in our minds and are an excuse for the scholar to retreat into his ivory tower”. This is the type who belongs to that group of

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scholars who consider themselves to be “doubly sage because they see their science as good for nothing at all”.

Bourdieu was a scientist and a militant. He was a militant of special causes, particularly in the last part of his life, but he was also a militant mainly for denouncing, for example (and just as an example), the reproductive character of the way schools function, for revealing the inheritance of status and power which results from the type of culture some (and only some) receive gratuitously, principally throughout their initial socialisation, and for his penetrating analysis of different world miseries. All this is a brave example of the ways in which he opened wide the doors of the ivory tower to which he could have retreated as an erudite scientist.

The importance of this type of work is indeed undeniable. I would only like to question whether this is the only scientifically valid way of not staying inside, or even of not going into the ivory tower at all. And this is where it becomes important to reflect on the possibility of the existence of other ways, differently structured from the epistemological and methodological standpoint, to produce knowledge that is also important for working together with those who are in the field and who experience the problems directly. In these cases, we would be talking about knowledge produced “in the heat of action”, developed with the other and not about the other, resulting from that critical, challenging coexistence and from the action research and critical practitioner inquiry processes at the same time.

It is a fact that to intervene militantly and to expect to produce knowledge simultaneously can easily lead to situations where one is blindly engaged and can confuse the desire to produce change with action analysis. It is also true that working side by side with those who are in the field may lead to intervening only in the symptoms rather than penetrating deep into the production of knowledge generated from the situations that one encounters. This has the risk of falling into “benign” action research, which Callewaert bitterly describes as something that is neither research nor action despite claiming to be both. It is something that contributes neither to any real improvement in scientific knowledge nor to any significant alteration of the existing problems (cf. Callewaert, 1998).

On the other hand, if demystifying and denouncing is crucial, then working only at this level may be so cruelly revealing that one runs the risk of pushing those working in the field to strong alibis so as not to act at all. It

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may also contribute to a situation where those who do the practice are disenchanted and bitter when they become aware of a reality so bad that it makes it unbearable for them to act professionally.

We are thus facing two different proposals which have some aspects in common, but which involve some amount of risk: they both refuse neutrality and they are both concerned with guaranteeing the possibility to intervene. These proposals are, as I argued, Bourdieu's "**scholarship with commitment**" and "**agency**" in the framework of a demanding process of critical action-research, here conceptually described as Critical Practitioner Inquiry.

In these two forms of interpreting ways to be engaged, could we not find a tension instead of a dichotomy? I would say that this tension is not new epistemologically, but it seems increasingly necessary to live with.

At the end of this period in my activity, this is the threshold on which I find myself. It is the encounter with a new tension that results from our understanding of the need to meet the different demands of both forms of agency, fully aware of the limiting forces of a whole multitude of structures.

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