REVIEW ARTICLE

THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS

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This work has already been widely acclaimed as "a major comparative study" (T. B. Bottomore), "a landmark in the sociology of education" (A. H. Halsey), "a gargantuan and impressive socio-historical enterprise" (J. Eggleston), "a major achievement" (New Society), even as "the most important contribution to the sociology of education since the second world war" (The Economist). Both its comparative scope and its historical sweep are certainly exceptional. Indeed it analyses the origins and development of State educational systems in England, Denmark, France and Russia. Despite their widely different educational histories, cultural traditions and structural characteristics, these countries share one essential common feature. "In none was the initial emergence of an educational system the result of foreign domination or territorial redistribution... [Therefore] their different forms of national education developed in response to internal pressures not to external imposition" (Archer, pp. 42-43).

The erudition required to carry out such a fourfold historical and comparative study stands in sharp contradistinction to the ethnocentrism and narrowly-focused modernism characteristic of the sociology of education, as it developed in Britain in the post-war period. Yet, impressive as the wealth of detailed information provided is, it should not be interpreted as an indication that this scholarly book follows the idiographic approach of conventional comparative education. Educationalists guided by such a perspective have tended to exhibit an overriding preoccupation with the outlining of institutional arrangements which obtain in each society investigated. To the extent that they draw cross-national comparisons or parallels over time, their emphasis on historical uniqueness and their correlative fear of hazardous generalizations result in accounting for differences mainly by a focus on cultural variables and for similarities by frequent references to cultural diffusion. At the descriptive level, they pay tribute to the positivist concern for inclusiveness: like Mr. Gradgrind, they believe that "Facts alone are wanted in life." Yet this reluctance to select from the factual material available coexists somewhat uneasily with a willingness to rely – for explanatory purposes – on such elusive concepts as "national character" or such
ideal typical constructs as "traditional values". The contradiction in which comparative educationalists are thus enmeshed is a product of the estrangement, in the 20th century, between historiography and the sociological conceptualization of history. It can only be overcome by rejecting the assumption whereby the "hard core of science consist(s) of facts" (Wolin, 1961, p. 361). The corollary of this rejection is the recognition that the historian and the sociologist are equally in need of devising "analytical modes of appraising the facts" (Cahnmann and Boskoff, 1964, p. 4). While the first requirement implies a critical reappraisal of the positivist legacy bequeathed by the 19th century, the second entails an acknowledgement that guidelines for the study of social facts within complex social wholes and within prolonged historical sequences can be found in the sociological tradition of the "founding fathers".

In the last century, comparative and historical sociology was founded on the construction of typologies, recognised by their authors as "conceptualizations rather than realities" (Martindale, 1959, p. 61). Though neither institutions nor a fortiori whole societies can ever, in their complexity, be reduced to a specific type, comparisons between them or between stages of their development can only be drawn by relying on a typology to select relevant characteristics rather than by merely listing obvious features. Admittedly, throughout the 20th century, growing doubt about the inevitability and even about the definition of progress has made the arrangement of types in evolutionary sequences less and less intellectually acceptable. Ever increasing methodological sophistication has prompted damaging attacks on the insufficient concern of early sociologists for scientific adequacy or for the "comparability" of the material they used, and their excessive reliance on the verification procedure. Yet - despite the questioning to which they have been subjected on both philosophical and methodological grounds - the typologies of "grand manner" sociologists remain "more intellectually responsible than they appear on the surface" (Martindale, 1961, p. 61). Although the gap between sociology and the philosophy of history has grown wider in the 20th century, they continue to provide the only viable and fruitful alternative to the collection of anecdotal information. Insofar as the contrast between selective sociology and inclusive history, between the generalising and the particularising discipline is increasingly recognised as superficial and downright misleading, the inter-disciplinary relevance of this legacy ought to be more widely recognised. After all, "what distinguishes the historian from the collector of historical facts is generalization" (Elton, 1958, p. 20). Historians do not differ from sociologists in their commitment to the search for regularities, since, unless a pattern can be detected in facts, it becomes unavoidable to acknowledge the randomness of events. Sociologism is the only escape from scepticism (Aron, 1961, p. 159).

Yet, haunted by the fear of invalid generalizations, researchers in historical and comparative education have shown themselves to be insufficiently aware of the risk that descriptiveness will ultimately amount to meaninglessness. The danger that occurrences treated as unique will be construed as accidental and yield no lesson is not necessarily exercised by the use of the comparative method. It is not only in Euclidian geometry that parallels never meet. In educational history, the stress on the uniqueness of national systems is only relieved by references to foreign intervention or systematic imitation. Either process is imputable to a unique concatenation of events conducive to the imposition of political domination or the acknowledge-