The Uneven Development of National Education Systems in the West

The formation of national education systems in early nineteenth-century Europe marks the beginning of modern schooling in western capitalist societies. With the coming of the school system, education became a universal and national concern, embracing all individuals and having effects on all classes in society. Learning became irreversibly equated with formal, systematic schooling, and schooling itself became a fundamental feature of the state. The national education system thus represented a watershed in the development of learning. It signalled not only the advent of mass education and the spread of popular literacy but also the origins of ‘state schooling’ – the system which has come to predominate in the educational development of all modern societies in the twentieth century.

As an institutional form the national education system had a long period of historical gestation. Educational innovation had been a feature of all western societies since the Protestant Reformation. There were numerous seventeenth-century blueprints for national systems and in the eighteenth century the first inchoate attempts to realize these were pioneered by absolutist monarchs such as Frederick V in Denmark, Maria Theresa in Austria and Frederick the Great in Prussia. They lacked the resources to make their reforms effective but they certainly prefigured later developments with their provision of state funds for public elementary schools and with the enactment of legislation on compulsory attendance. However, it was during the French revolutionary era and the decades that followed that these embryonic national systems were first consolidated and given permanent institutional forms – initially in Prussia and France, and soon after in a host of smaller continental states, such as Switzerland and Holland. Thereafter, the broad parameters of reform in national education are clear: they involved the development of universal forms of provision, the rationalization of administration and institutional structure, and the development of forms of public finance and control.
National networks of elementary schools were consolidated with the help of the state, and gradually free tuition and compulsory attendance laws ensured universal childhood participation; secondary education expanded from its tiny elite base and progressively incorporated more modern curricula and pedagogy; technical and vocational schools proliferated, albeit unevenly, to meet new industrial demands. As educational provision expanded, so it also became more regulated and, by degrees, more systematic in organization. Diverse institutions were unified into a single structure, increasingly administered through an integrated educational bureaucracy and with teaching provided by trained staff. An age-graded, hierarchical system developed whose component parts were systematically linked and complementary, in time to become part of an ‘educational ladder’ whose different rungs were articulated through regulated curricula and entrance requirements. Lastly, educational control passed increasingly to the state. As public schools came to predominate over private and voluntary institutions, governments ineluctably increased their influence on education. Whether through central or local authorities, the state increasingly controlled education through the allocation of funds, the licensing and inspection of schools, the recruitment, training and certification of teachers and, in varying degrees, through the oversight of national certification and standard curricula.

These changes represented a decisive break with the voluntary and particularistic form of learning which had preceded them, where church, family and guild had provided for their own needs. As Michael Katz has suggested in his essay on the origins of public education in the United States, this change was radical and far-reaching:

By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the organization, scope and role of schooling had been fundamentally transformed. In the place of a few schools dotted about town and country, there existed in most cities true educational systems: carefully articulated, hierarchically structured groupings of schools, primarily free and often compulsory, administered by full-time experts, and progressively taught by specially trained staff. No longer casual adjuncts to the home and the apprenticeship, such schools were highly formal institutions designed to play a critical role in the socialization of the young, the maintenance of social order, and in the promotion of development.¹

The creation of a set of institutions solely devoted to education, and involving a putative monopoly of formal learning and training for diverse occupations, thus signalled a revolution in the concept and forms of education and a transformation in the relations between schooling, society and the state. Education not only became a mass phenomenon; it also became a central feature of social organization.