

Contribution to the analysis of educational reforms: theory and ideology under the hegemony of the neoliberal State

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Introduction

A burning question for the sociological theory of education, and more broadly for education, is the analysis of educational reforms. In general, the discipline's studies have subjected to the basic premises of theory the concrete analysis of the contexts of economic, political and social changes and transformations in which educational reforms take place. Thus, it is necessary to develop reflections that seek to contribute to the effort to construct theoretical and methodological elements that give an explanatory basis to educational reforms, so as to overcome, on the one hand, deterministic or structuralist interpretations and, on the other hand, ethnographic or interactionism approaches.¹ While the structuralism of the former contributes to the conceptualization of school and reform as a "black box," the voluntarism particularism of the latter would limit the analysis to the immediate educational-school context.¹ In the following topics, we will try to contribute to this discussion by initially briefly addressing issues related to the constitution and transformations in the structure and contents of educational systems. Next, we will discuss the emergence, in the context of hegemony of the neoliberal State, of the concept of reform as ideology and within this movement, the ideology that, in general, accompanies the proposition of educational reforms.

Transformations in the structure and content of educational systems and explanations of the "necessity" of educational reforms

The deterministic theories establish that the transformations in the structure and the contents of the educational system would be subordinated to the organic necessities of the society. Bonal¹ identifies three aspects: the first one, originating from the functionalism, Durkheimian root, indicates that educational reform would be an expression of the balance necessary for the maintenance of the moral order of society; the second aspect considers that the reforms would express the technical needs of the productive system, and here are grouped the interpretations of the techno-economic functionalism and the correspondence theory; finally, the reproductive theories, according to which the reforms would be expression of the appropriation of the legitimacy of cultural transmission effected by social classes or fractions of ruling classes. Ethnographic or interactionism interpretations, in turn, assign a fundamental role to the strategies of adaptation and resistance of the educational actors, that is, the daily interaction that takes place within the school institutions would be the explanatory basis for the educational change. However, these interpretations - first focused on macrosociological analysis and second on micro-sociological analysis-only offer a partial approximation and explanation of educational reforms, lacking a theoretical elaboration that takes into account the dynamic relationship of these two levels of analysis.² The overcoming of this limitation would require the deepening of the study of the role of the State from the logic of the

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elaboration of social policies-among them the educational policy - and of the conditioning factors of its implementation in concrete contexts.¹

The concrete analysis of educational change requires the consideration not only of the social function of education to the process of capital accumulation-through the formation of the necessary workforce and as a socialization mechanism that prepares workers for wage labor-but¹ In this way, the capitalist state's own legitimizing needs and the contradictions that characterize the attainment of its objectives are incorporated.

According to Bonal¹ & Dale² we consider that educational reforms are articulated with the logic of redefining the structure and role of the State and are therefore part of the process of legitimizing a new model of education. public intervention in social policies. In the same direction, Gimeno Sacristán³ argues that the educational reforms of the 1990s-under the paradigms of equity, quality, diversity and efficiency, and influenced by market rationality-would promote a reduction of the state presence in social policies and, at the same time, a kind of concealment or shadowing of the exercise of power within educational systems. In this way, the current educational reforms would be a kind of public policy that would bring with it the idea of the disappearance of politics as a project of global transformation.³

However, the origin of the school is related not only to the reproduction of the social division of labour and class structure, but also to the regulation of power relations and to the political apparatus itself. Thus, since the late nineteenth century, mass education has become a central policy for the formation, organization, consolidation and legitimation of national states.^{4-6,1} Historically was developing one educational policy model by which the State would provide the distribution of means and resources and, through the action of the political and educational institutions, establishing the organization and functioning of the school apparatus for the population. Throughout the twentieth century, mass public education-coexisting with greater

¹Bonal¹ and Ramírez⁶ direct the focus of their analysis to the process of constitution of the public school in the context of the formation of European national states, whereas Popkewitz⁵ directs his attention to the process verified in the North society at the turn of the 19th century to the 20th century.

or lesser participation of the private sector, subjected to more rigid or more flexible control mechanisms - has advanced towards a greater universalization of education and the achievement of ever higher levels of schooling to larger portions of the population, the more that the nation-state in each concrete case approached the model of the welfare state. In this model of state intervention in education, called by Gimeno Sacristán³ as a “classic model”,

[...] educational policy, as an expression of a rationality emanating from the general interests of society, extracted its legitimacy by democratic representation, organizes the education service, provides resources, regulates the ways of managing it, regulates its contents and gives the school - basically its teachers - the capacity to produce the educational service within certain limits and under certain controls. Teachers, in turn, direct the goals of their professional action on recipients (families and students) converted into recipients of a basic right.³

This model of educational policy, supposedly universal and democratic, however, carried with it the mark of a historical social order and became a target of criticism. In the analyzes oriented from the field of structuralism and in the interpretations of sociological theories of reproduction, the school was seen as an ideological apparatus of the State, which, under the mantle of universalist rhetoric, maintained the class division characteristic of capitalist society or as an institution that through the identification of school culture and culture of the dominant classes and under pedagogical authoritarianism contributed to reproduce the structure of class relations.⁷

It fades to the scope of the present work the deepening of the discussion, both of the classic model and of its criticism. However, following Gimeno Sacristán³'s reasoning on the relationship between educational reforms and the current changes in the structure and role of the state, under neoliberal hegemony, it is relevant to discuss whether the arguments presented by those who defend a new model of education policy are justified more by defects found in the application of the classic model of educational policy or if the justificatory arguments of the current reforms could be more correctly interpreted as a retreat from the proclaimed objectives of universalization and democracy of the classical model that were historically translated by the slogan “education, all and duty of the State. “ The crisis of the so-called State of Social Welfare and the emergence of the neo-liberal conception of State in the 1980s determined, at the level of state action in education, a change in the orientation of educational policies that we can synthetically characterize as a transition from the slogan previous to a new one: “education, a commodity that can be acquired in the market according to the availability offered by suppliers and the needs and possibilities of consumers”. Under this market connotation, the social function of the educational process would be to support the process of capitalist accumulation and produce social consensus that would guarantee an ideological context favourable to its continued expansion.²

In the neoliberal model, the state reduces its intervention in social policies and begins to play the role of referee in a game in which it seems to not take sides. Converted into a manager of the competition process, the State relinquishes its responsibility to guarantee by its direct action the essential services of education, health, transportation and other that are regulated by market mechanisms. More freedom for the market and greater efficiency are the arguments used to refute the intervention of the State in social policies and to promote the privatization of public services and infrastructures. In the educational

field, neoliberals assume that the reduction of the rigid and heavy structure of the public system of unitary education could distribute more quality education to all,³ since it would be optimized the use of public resources supposedly wasted by the excessive bureaucracy and uniformity attributed to the previous or current model of state intervention.

Gimeno Sacristán³ calls the neoliberal state action in the field of education a “postmodern model” of educational policy. Decentralized and regulated according to the market rules in which customers and suppliers relate to the supposed freedom to choose what, how much and when to consume, this model attributes to education the same characteristics attributed to the other goods available in the market. Summing up his criticism of this formulation, the author concludes that in the deregulated fields of education - whether it is the education system in general, the curriculum or the management of schools - there is no inexorable flow of freedom, quality, efficiency, autonomy, participation, creativity, diversification or debureaucratization. Dominant interests and groups, rather than individuals and local communities, can take control ceded by the state and the rationality denied to the overall project and the vertebrate system as a unit. Thus, the withdrawal of the state does not produce more freedom, but more inequality and lack of control in a deregulated market where power is less visible.³

The question of the visibility of power in society, or of the way of “doing politics”, is present in the genesis of the mass school with the development of liberal democracies of the West in the nineteenth century. The modern state had the task of shaping a particular type of individual, endowed with a particular rationality: “The problem of governance involved not only the construction of the adult citizen, but also the production of a child capable of self-government and developing as responsible adult, productive and well socialized.⁵ In this way, the school, through the process of individualization of social relations and pastoral techniques, sought to determine the organization of subjectivities, constituting a more sophisticated and subtle way of doing politics. It is part of the process of social regulation that binds the citizen to the state-and the power underlying the processes of government-and is exercised in two levels of management: on the one hand, for the direct recognition and supervision of the school by the State; on the other hand, by the very social and epistemological organization of the schools in which a moral, cultural and social discipline of the population takes place.⁵

In agreement with the argument about the depoliticizing nature of the educational policies of the neoliberal state,³ and that this is a sophisticated way of doing the policy that seeks to reduce the presence of the State in social policies⁵ however, that such policy is not exempt from resistances and contradictions. The complexity dimension of the process of social change that constitutes an educational reform is such that in the course of the process that goes from the discourse that promotes the need for reform to the evaluation of its results, there are innumerable and differentiated mediations involving subjects so that each concrete reform may express elements of greater or lesser linkage to international milestones or national milestones, as well as expressing a greater or lesser degree of conflict and negotiation between classes and social groups of a particular society at a given juncture. In addition, it is necessary to consider the difficulty of the first order, which is to establish rigid temporal, spatial and conceptual frameworks for an educational reform, since an educational reform is not an isolated or isolable phenomenon, but a social phenomenon in relation to other phenomena social policies.

Our previous statement does not suppose that any theory is valid, depending on the point of view. That would be to fall into pure relativism, so to the liking of postmodernism, in which fragmentation and the loss of referents replace the structuring of thought and history. The challenge is, in each case, to identify those explanatory frameworks that assume a preponderant role in relation to the others, and, as such, to elaborate a theoretical reflection that is as close as possible to reality. Therefore, before beginning the examination of the strict content of a given educational reform, that is, the laws and measures that give them materiality, it is necessary to analyze the discourse that presents and justifies it, seeking to show from there the existing links between its frames conceptual, content and conditioning factors.

Reformas ideology and reform and educational ideology

The objective of apprehending the connections between the discourse and the concrete social process seeks, in fact, with regard to educational reforms, to look at the two dimensions of the phenomenon: material and discursive. There is, in fact, the reality of educational reform, that is, concrete public policy exists, as is the case with the various educational reforms conducted by the Brazilian State in the 1990s. These are verifiable, for example, by the approval of a set of laws and other legal-normative instruments and by the actions that implement them in the various educational and educational institutions. However, there is also the ideology of reform, that is, the justifying and evaluative discourse of it. It should be emphasized here that the separation between the spheres of conception, explication, action and result itself is merely analytical, since they are not distinct and/or sequential phenomena but inseparably constitute a social *praxis* private. In this way, action and ideology are equally imbricated. The separation that we make here is, therefore, a mere methodological resource. With regard to the ideological dimension, we will discuss in this work the general concept of ideology and the particular character of the ideology of educational reform.

The ideology

It is not our intention to proceed to an in-depth discussion of the complex concept of ideology and the multiple meanings attributed to it in the debate of the social sciences. Within the framework of the present work we are interested in defining certain limits that characterize the use of the concept in the particular field of historical-social phenomena that conform the educational reforms. In "The Phenomenology of the Spirit," Hegel⁸ established an organic conception of the dialectical-historical movement by assuming that wholeness results only from manifestations of the spirit. Hegelian idealism conceives that every historical and determinate, therefore finite, reality would result from the manifestation of the spirit, absolute and infinite. That is, the historical becoming is conceived as "the series of phases that crosses the consciousness". From Hegel's⁸ philosophy it could be understood that this or that set of values or conception of the world-elements that define an ideology-could arise or be constituted free and abstract from the plane of ideas. In this respect, Marxist analysis establishes an important mediation and, by linking the manifestations of thought to the plane of concrete reality, points to the speculative character of Hegelian phenomenology. Marx⁹ emphasize the pertinence of Hegel's⁸ dialectic in what he considers that concrete can be reproduced in thought, but criticizes it when it confuses the possibility of reproduction of concrete on the spiritual plane, with the very production of concrete itself from the elaboration

of thought. As the *German Ideology* rightly states in pointing out the disconnect between Hegelian philosophy and concrete reality, the assumptions from which we start are not arbitrary, nor dogmas. These are real assumptions that one cannot do abstraction except in the imagination. [Our premises] They are the real individuals, their action and their material conditions of life, both those already found by them, and those produced by their own action.¹⁰

In the preface to *The German Ideology* of 1844, Marx and Engels note that idealism led men to conceive of their representations as reality in themselves. It is in this aspect that they propose to realize the reversal of idealism. While Hegel's philosophy conceives history as the result of the action of "a man walking on his head," Marx's philosophical thought reconstitutes, as a synthesis, the dialectical unity of history, as the production of the "man walking on his legs."¹¹

A few years later, in the famous preface to *The Critique of Political Economy* of 1859, Marx⁹ elaborated with more rigor and precision the bases of his materialistic dialectic, by which he established the inversion of Hegel's⁸ idealism: In the social production of one's own life, men enter into determinate relations, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a determined stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the actual basis upon which a juridical and political superstructure rises, and to which certain social forms of consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and spiritual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, it is their social being that determines their consciousness.¹⁰

Marx⁹ considered the existence of an intimate connection - historical and inseparable bond between the material production of life and its spiritual elaboration, that is, the production of ideas, representations and consciousness. To satisfy the material needs of life and to produce one's own survival, to produce new needs, to reproduce oneself and to establish new relations with others and with nature-transforming and transforming oneself-which implies establishing new relations of production, power and property, which correspond to a certain degree or stage of development of the productive forces. This dynamic constitutes the historical becoming, the ontological essence of the social being. In it, consciousness is built, in the interpenetration of each of these dimensions of the history of humanity. Consciousness is not, as Hegel⁸ wanted, the absolute and abstract spirit, but the historical consciousness, constructed and forged in the historical "continuum" or, as in the lapidary synthesis of Marx and Engels,⁹ "man is as produced ". Human consciousness is, therefore, a social product and not, individual, external or abstract, as idealism supposes. When he uses the concept of ideology, does so by placing it in the field of representations and consciousness and articulating it to the social relations of power and property or, more directly, to the class structure of society.

The ideas of the ruling class are the dominant ideas in every age... The class which has at its disposal the means of material production disposes at the same time of the means of spiritual production. The dominant ideology, therefore, represents the values of the ruling class at a given time, but it does not do so by presenting them as the particular and historical interests of a particular class, but as general conceptions of the whole of society, lending them the form of universality and presenting them as the only rational and universally valid.⁹

Thus, by separating the dominant ideas from their producers and from the relations of production in which they occur, the history of an era, in particular the history of capitalist society - which is the domination of social classes-is conceived only as domination of ideas.² It is important to emphasize that the Marxian analysis reiterates the symbiosis relation that characterizes the “ideological expressions” of thought and the historical material reality, composing the totality of the social metabolism. Even with the development of capitalist industrial production, where the social and technical division of labor is accentuated,⁹ do not admit the possibility of a rupture between these two dimensions, even though the production process appears split into material labor and intellectual work. On the contrary, they consider that the development of the material basis of production (productive forces), the development of social relations or forms of societal organization, and the development of human social consciousness are permanently and intrinsically related. However, the capitalist production process generates contradictions between these three dimensions. With the social division of labor, there is also the unequal distribution of its product, both quantitatively and qualitatively: material products and knowledge. Real contradictions, to which the idealists seek to construct explanations from ideology, theology, philosophy, and morality. Nevertheless, even when consciousness seems to be able to emancipate itself from practical consciousness and proceed to the elaboration of pure theory, philosophy, morality, etc., there is no rupture between representation and materiality, since the representation produced expresses the conditions and contradictions of materiality. That is, [...] even when this theory, this theology, this philosophy, this morality, etc. are contradicted by existing relationships, this is due only to the fact that existing social relations have come into contradiction with the existing productive force.⁹

The bourgeois state functions as a mechanism for regulating and maintaining these contradictions. It is not a general proposal of society, but a part of it, precisely the one that is dominant, and its legitimization consists in making it appear general and collective interest that which is specific and particular, of a certain social class or hegemonic block. According to the Marxian analysis, [...] the practical struggle of these particular interests, which constantly and in a real way collide with collective and illusory interests as collective, makes necessary control and practical intervention through the illusory general interest as a State.⁹

In this sense, for GRAMSCI, the possibility of elaborating a conception of a world different from that of the dominant, that is, the elaboration of an ideology or critical consciousness is confused with the consciousness of our historicity. To create a new culture, a new intellectual and moral order, presupposes not the discovery of “original” truths, but the elaboration of new concepts about a certain historical reality.¹¹ However, “*catharsis*”, which in the author’s view is precisely the moment of transition from the economic to

the ethical-political, from the objective to the subjective, from structure to superstructure, is only possible within certain historical conditions. Thus, considering the ideology as “cement” of a particular societal organization or “historical block”,³ In other words, considering that the production of ideologies is bound to its own historicity, Gramsci¹¹ stresses the importance of Always remember the two points between which this process oscillates: that no society places tasks for the solution of which no longer exist, or are in the process of appearing, the necessary and sufficient conditions; -and that no society ceases to exist before it has expressed all its potential content.¹¹

It is with these references that we will analyze the discourse and practice of educational reforms. As a complex of social relations situated in the field of superstructures, education plays a legitimizing role in corporate organization. However, considering that the distinction between structure and superstructure is purely didactic,⁴ discourse and educational practice, as a field of mediations, are at the same time legitimators (form) and achievers (content) of the hegemony of a particular historical model of capital-labour relations, that is, education is part of a set of beliefs and values and practices that compose and legitimize a conception of the world. As part of this conception of the world, and as an undisputed project of the Nation-State in the consolidation of the bourgeois state,⁶ education, and more specifically school education, will become a collective practice and state-related issues.

The ideology of educational reform

The discourse on the centrality of education plays a strategic role in legitimizing state policies in times of social change, and this function is one of the most important features of educational reforms today,¹ that is, a kind of cultural or ideological basis for the intervention of power. Thus, when we experience times of systemic crisis under the dominance of financial capital, as in the current stage of capitalism,¹² the role of legitimating the social order played by the school is elevated. In this particular, educational reforms are, in neoliberal ideology, justified as a worldwide process of unquestionable, indisputable and inexorable character. Presented as technical and rational programs of educational policy, with the arguments for modernization, quality improvement and scientific criteria, the current educational reforms are a kind of totalizing proposals. They would therefore be valid intervention programs, tolerable, feasible, politically correct, limited to the possible and the needs of the present, executable without too much alteration of the fundamental coordinates of reality.³ This sense of continuity of the present order, unrelated to a project of global change is also emphasized by Popkewitz⁵ in his research on American educational reforms in the nineteenth and twentieth century’s. The author identifies in those processes “... a clear emphasis on the stability, harmony and continuity of existing institutional arrangements-not change.” Educational reforms would be management improvement programs, a new framework for the maintenance of the same essence that would bring with it the underlying belief that “[...] the objectives

²“Once the ruling ideas have been separated from the ruling individuals and, above all, the relationships that are born of a given mode of production phase, and that it comes to the result that in the history of ideas always dominate, it is very easy to abstract from these ideas ‘the idea’ etc. as the dominant in history and to this extent conceive all these particular concepts and ideas as ‘self-determination’ of the concept that develops in history. It is then also natural that all the relations of men can be deduced from the concept of man, of man represented, of the essence of man, of man. So did the speculative philosophy. Hegel himself confesses at the end of the Philosophy of History which ‘considers only the progress of the concept’ and which exposes in history the ‘true theodicy’ ”.⁹

³According to Gramsci, “structure and superstructure form a ‘historical block’, that is, the complex-contradictory and discordant-complex of superstructures is the reflection of the set of social relations of production”.¹¹

⁴Considering “The conception of a historical block, in which, precisely, material forces are content and ideologies are form - this distinction between form and content being purely didactic, since material forces would not be historically conceivable without form and ideologies would be individual fantasies without material forces”.¹¹

of existing social relations are appropriate and only need to become more efficient".⁵

Interpreted from the viewpoint of management efficiency, the change would consist in properly applying to the education systems certain models justified by the economic analysis. Ambiguity and hope reign there: evidence of the application of the new model is in itself considered to be evidence of the quality improvement of the educational system.⁵ alongside identification as a management efficiency program for quality improvement, there is a set of meanings and principles that, associated with the first, make up the ideology of educational reforms. According to³ there are at least four ideas or meanings to emphasize:¹³

- a) Reform as an equivalent of progress: this association, transmitted to public opinion and educational agents, is an attempt to legitimize educational policy as a way to improve or modernize society;
- b) Reform as an unequal relationship in the realm of rationality between "reformers" and "retired": by attributing a messianic and promising character to reforms, reformers are identified as bearers of science, truth and good (prophets) to be extended to others; those who oppose reforms are identified as out of line with progress, guided by wrong, outdated, inefficient and ineffective ideas (heretics); (pseudo-illustrated experts) and those who apply and receive them (teachers, employees, students, the general population), which means a process of delegitimation of theoretical and practical knowledge in exchange of technical-scientific knowledge of specialists;
- c) Reforms as intensive liturgical ceremonies in the face of a less startling practice: the rite of reform fulfils liturgical purpose by raising intense, spasmodic and unidirectional movements, generally conducted from outside and in a centralized and technified way, making it secondary to the plan of forgetting the real movement, "continuum" and with multiple mediations and contradictions, in which social relations in general and educational practices in particular occur.
- d) Reform proposals as "texts" to be interpreted: It is considered that "the educational system is a complex social network with an internal structure, life or culture and with peculiar relations with the external context". The legal mechanisms end up determining a certain rhythm, however, the particular effect in each moment, situation or institution is uncontrollable at all. That is, there is a dialectical relationship of mutual determination between political proposals and reality. Thus, reforms affect the reality of education systems and this ends up conditioning what will be real reforms.¹⁴

In considering that what we assume to be "common sense" about practical knowledge is actually the result of specific power relations, Popkewitz⁵ intends to historicize the "reason" that guides the pedagogical action since the beginning of the school of pasta. In this respect, it highlights four principles - not explicit, but underlying the texts and educational discourses - that function as the "doxa" of reform:

Pedagogy inserted in the rationality of the nation-state: the strategies of pedagogical action are subjected to the political rationalities of the liberal democracies that emerge since the end of the nineteenth century, that is, the action of the State, through the school of masses and other institutions is the legitimating expression of this order;

- a) The relation between the government of society and the government of the individual: the question of the governability of the liberal state involves both the construction of the adult citizen and the child capable of self-government and developing as a responsible, productive and well-socialized adult. The idea of social progress is individualized and aims to shape a particular type of individual, organizing the subjectivities-capacities to think, feel, expect and know the productive citizen.
- b) Redemptive culture of pedagogy: the messianic view considers that social institutions and individuals walk harmoniously and continuously toward more advanced stages. The discourse of science and rational progress inscribes a kind of redemptive culture in the social sciences by which the old confessional practices and the "revelation" as the ransom and salvation of the "soul" were replaced by self-reflection and self-centered moral development individual; in this way, the role of producing social and personal change is to be attributed to the social and educational sciences.
- c) The populism of scientific and social knowledge as salvation of the soul: the conception that neutral, useful and produced professional knowledge under democratic ideals would be at the disposal of society and those who wished to carry out their social interests transforms the social sciences into truth and, consequently, those who had the specialist knowledge of pioneering actors that would bring social progress and the main promoters of social change.

This ideology that has been forming, renewing itself and becoming more complex since the origin of the mass school, has exercised over the years-and in our view, it continues to exercise in the present - a role of legitimizing educational reforms, its alleged inexorability and the superiority of the specialist knowledge of the reformers over the retired. Moreover, by situating the question on the plane of idealization, displaced from social subjects and their history, it also serves the purpose of hindering knowledge about the concrete content of the reforms and their results.^{15,16} Overcoming the phenomenal and approaching the concrete real requires, in principle, the consideration that past or current reforms are based on a historical basis of social relations of power. The challenge of research continues, therefore, to search reality, trying to recompose in theory the historical plot that gives life to the object investigated.

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Conflicts of interest

Author declares that there is none of the conflicts.

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