

The education system in Switzerland

Summary of the presentation in Paris, 19 June 2008

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1) Introduction

As of the Eighties, capitalism is essential in social fabric and policy in its new form of seizure on the States, with the goal to weaken them. One speaks more and more about “revision of the role of the State”, of “new tasks of the State”. One lowers the taxes, one privatises the public services: this is one of the manners to undermine the State.

The education system is also taken in this trap. One speaks about administration of a school institute rather than of a teaching direction. The public school is attacked at all levels, gradually so that one does not realize too much, but the goal is quite clear. It is necessary to frame what happens in schools in the global analysis of how neoliberalism is transforming Western society.

The public school is weakened by the growing number of private schools, especially managed by the ecclesiastics who often receive subsidies on behalf of the State.

It is also weakened by the many populist declarations which reproach teaching and teachers to be privileged people, because of the weekly schedule and of the holidays. The persons in charge of the state education express themselves with difficulty to support the institution and those which work there.

2) Role of the school

The school plays a very important part in society. It has the task to accompany the pupil in the construction of its knowledge of himself and the world. It concerns also parents of the pupils and through them a vaster public. If it wanted, school could thus be the recipient of a cultural practice of opening, of cultural transformation.

But the seizure of neoliberalism pushes more and more pupils towards individualism and competition, instead of to co-operation and interest in sharing.

One introduces more and more into the collective imaginary the idea that school failure is a fate or an individual fault and one wonders less and less about the causes of school failure and how to face it. Thus the privilege of success is ensured to those which have the “chance” to have the facility to access knowledge, thanks to their way of life and their financial means.

One attacks the nursery school, which has a very important role (and perhaps the most important with the elementary school) for the school future of the pupils, by reducing the budget which is intended to him. One loses here the occasion to intervene pedagogically with a support for the weak children, for whom it is easy to act especially and obtain in the majorities of the situations results, considering and considered that the difficulties are not yet structural. One abandons to organize pedagogy of support to those which are underprivileged at the beginning and for allowing these to better familiarize themselves with the trainings.

3) Training of the teachers

The education system is composed and managed by several competences and people but the main role is given to teachers.

Their basic training is important: it is necessary to go beyond the presentation of the ideal pupil, of his standardized development. It is necessary to speak, at the school for teachers, of difficulties of training, cultural differences, of social differences, of the single-parent families, of children who live in precariousness, children who can be sad, which can have difficulties in socialization, and in communication. It is necessary that the future Master is conscious that the pupil is not asexual, that there is in the class of the girls and the boys, the teenagers and the teenagers. The idealization of a class is the larger danger.

In other words: it is necessary that the future schoolmasters, at any level, know that they must face individuals with their personality and that it will be necessary to hold account of it. They must learn how to be with listening pupils and to lead them to create a group-class where reciprocal knowledge and communication are essential for learning.

Teachers have the right and must have the opportunity of following training courses all along their career, to put themselves under the pupil conditions so that the empathy with their pupils is possible.

4) Political situation of Switzerland

Switzerland is a Confederation of states. The 26 cantons have autonomy, until now, in the management of the education system.

The organization is so much differentiated that it is difficult, for us to explain it.

The chiefs of the departments of the 26 cantons have just presented a project, called Harnos, which would like to partially unify the system (beginning of the nursery school, beginning of primary schooling, structure of the secondary) but also the programs. Oppositions have risen. Our opinion is against this project because for us (canton of Tessin) it is about a reform to the lowest level. We do not want the homologation of competences nor the structure suggested, because in Tessin the nursery school receives 3 year-old children (contrary to the 4 years suggested). The reform also wants a change in the secondary and we are for the maintenance of the duration of the primary education up to 11 years, and for a single secondary.

The Swiss system gives differentiated solutions to what school integration of weak pupils and migrant pupils is concerned. Tessin, the canton close to Italy where there are no "special" classes, presents the lowest percentage in Switzerland concerning the pupils in the special classes (about 2%) compared, for example, to Basle (10-12%). Obviously, in Tessin, there is a teaching service of support which works with the teachers, the parents and the pupils inside the school. The integration of students in difficulty is thus important and one avoids, as long as possible, to put children in special class.

Compared to the reception of the migrants who do not have a command of the home language, one also observes differences: in Tessin, the pupils are introduced immediately into the class corresponding to their age and have the right, moreover, to introductory courses to Italian. In other cantons, there are separate classes of reception. The right parties want to put these pupils well off any regular curriculum until they can speak the language with competence.

Knowledge and capacities which give right to obtaining of the baccalaureate are defined, in the broad outlines, on the Suisse level. Universities are cantonal and partially deprived, and the passage from one university to another, located 80 kilometres away, before was possible but with losses of some six-month periods. Lately, the things changed and collaboration between faculties is a reality.

There are also two federal university schools, the Polytechnic ones of Lausanne and Zurich, but there too the federal boss has just declared that it will be necessary to increase collaboration with the large companies in the field of research and teaching.

5) The Swiss school policy

In spite of the cantonal autonomy, one attends in Switzerland the same influences of neoliberalism in the school system, from nursery school to university, while passing by professional training. Democratization of the studies is weakening. School failures are always a reality and increase or decrease, on the higher and professional training level, according to the needs of the market.

Young women are increasingly present, in higher number than before in university schools, but they are absent or of reduced number in higher education and academics like in research. The church tries with its tentacles to give itself privileges compared to the public school. There are also other private schools, for children of families with high income. The budgets for schools are reduced and particularly for the continuing education of teachers. The number of the pupils per class is likely to increase. Professional training is centred on the specific aspects of the profession and reduces the cultural formation to the minimum, of general interest, which forgets on the other hand the essential importance of the formation of the person and its personality. Universities have adhered to the program of Bologna. There are agreements and subsidies for university research with big industries or companies. The grants have decreased.

In short, an analysis of the education system in Switzerland which shows that capitalism and neoliberalism have no borders and do not respect the neutrality which Switzerland continues to affirm, but in which we never believed.

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