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The History of Education in Antiquity and Its Teaching: Epistemological Problems

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Abstract

This essay is a critical exploration of the condition of teaching of History of Education in Antiquity, a topic of manuals and disciplines in teacher training courses. In the approach to the content, it becomes evident both the ethnocentric character of the histories of philosophy and culture born in the nineteenth century and the utilitarian and moralistic purpose that justified their condition in the curricula of teachers' schools. This article also addresses the relative abandonment and lag of research on the subject when new theoretical-methodological perspectives in this field emerge. Finally, it is pointed the challenges to the persistence of this traditional form in the face of the epistemological and identity insurgencies of contemporaneity.

Introduction

In places such as France, Switzerland and Prussia, the history of education emerged as a teaching subject and became part of the corpus of knowledge and moral values considered necessary for teaching, especially for professional practice in insurgent national education systems (COMPÈRE, 1995). In the disciplines of Pedagogy that, from the mid-19th century onwards, emerged in universities and teachers' schools, not only were pedagogy and philosophy directly associated, but so were philosophy and history, indicating the expectation that it was possible and desirable to extract a philosophical meaning from the long-term evolution of educational facts to guide the pedagogical and moral choices of the present and the future (WARDE; CARVALHO, 2000).

As the teachers of these subjects became specialized, many became authors of authorial manuals or compilations of texts. With frequent use and successive editions, the manuals became books of significant circulation, going beyond the immediate purpose and the original target audience. From *textbooks* for use in classes and support for students, they became part of library catalogues, pedagogical museums and, when exchanged on work trips, international educators' fairs or at the great world's fairs, they crossed national borders to be read and appropriated and culturally re-signified, either in their original languages or in translations.

These works served as a script, inspiration, or even a model for works by other authors throughout the world, engendering a circularity of references that led to its consolidation as a particular genre. A classic case, studied by Gondra e Silva

(2011), is the manual of the American Paul Monroe, in which both the Brazilian New School writer Afrânio Peixoto, author of *Noções de História da Educação* (1933), and the Catholic Theobaldo Miranda Santos, of the homonymous book (1945), gathered inspiration and references for the elaboration of two editorial successes of the Companhia Editora Nacional – which published, in addition, the translation of Monroe's work, *History of Education*, in 1939, whose circulation reached, between the date of the release of the first edition and 1987, ninety thousand copies (VIEIRA, 2011).

The historiography that dealt with these and other contemporary manuals (GONDRA; SILVA, 2011; VIEIRA, 2011) converges in pointing out as ordinary and most evident characteristics Eurocentrism, evolutionism and presenteeism, that is, the search for "lessons from the past" that could guide the professional and pedagogical conducts of the present. In the case of Peixoto and Santos, analyzed by Vieira (2011), they were works written by polygraphers, erudite and self-taught in various fields, initially graduated in liberal professions who became professors in teachers training and higher education. When exercising their profession, they became authors of manuals on the History of Education. According to Vieira (2011), both affirm, or get across that their texts were direct consequences of their teaching activity. This relationship implies significant aspects of its form and content. Firstly, they aimed at an uninitiated public in the middle stage of formation for teaching. From the representation of an incipient public derive the simplification of language, the "didacticization" of the content and the dispensation of the apparatuses of proof and referencing proper to historical writing. Its practical objective based on the "moralizing" function historically attributed to the discipline (Warde; Carvalho, 2000), led to the judging of educational actions and pedagogies and the conversion of the past into "lessons" to guide pedagogical conducts of the present and for the future (VIEIRA, 2011). Thus, the history of education appeared as a far-reaching spatiotemporal panorama, based on the evolutionary chain of ideas and events that would have accompanied the pace of Western civilization, from the so-called primitive groupings to modern industrial civilization. "In other words, the logic that presides over the structuring of the narratives [of both works] is the representation of the process of evolution from the most primitive and irrational pedagogies to the most elaborate, logical and effective" (VIEIRA, p. 2011, p. 94).

An Ethnocentric History of Culture

Heir to Enlightenment humanism, this linear and rationalized conception of universal history consecrated Classical Antiquity as the cradle of civilization, in which the origins of pedagogical conceptions and contemporary forms of school and education systems, such as "primary school," "secondary education," and "curriculum" are sought.

The tradition of teaching in the history of education encompasses the linear, evolutionary and Eurocentric notion of history and the Ciceronian character of history itself (*magister vitae*), leaving significant marks, accompanied by the authors' attachment to the "pedagogical ideals of the societies of the past," embodied in reformist master-philosophers, scientists, educators and politicians, rather than vestiges of informal educational or nonintentional practices, or even unrelated to the knowledge of written culture (literature, philosophy, sciences), with which the societies of the past formulated and transmitted the characters that defined their forms of socialization and their traditions.

The valorization of the elaborated forms of culture, that is, the set of the "higher" manifestations of the "human spirit," such as literature, the arts and ideas (in this case, philosophical and pedagogical) reveals the "classical" conception of the history of culture in the works of three historians from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century: Matthew Arnold, Jacob Burkhardt and Johan Huizinga. According to these authors, literature, ideas, symbols, and feelings were found only in the Western "tradition," a part of the legacy that tied Greco-Roman Antiquity to the dominant nations of Western Europe (BURKE, 2000). In this "grand narrative" of Western culture and its canons, the European educated elites spoke of themselves, legitimizing their "rights to superiority" over human groups that lacked precisely "culture" (BURKE, 2000, p. 242).

The conception of "culture" as a "spiritual" part of an extensive set of political, economic, religious, technical, moral or social achievements by which Western societies assert their superiority over the "primitives" corroborates the understanding of Western culture as a component of "civilization," a meaning that Elias (1994) attributes to the English and French elites. This concept would correspond to the "consciousness that the West has of itself", expressing the "pride in the importance of its nations for the progress of the West and humanity" (ELIAS, 1994, p. 24-25). Manifesting the self-confidence of the peoples who, in previous centuries, established borders, languages and national identities and who expanded to colonize distant territories, this self-image was the basis for the European imposition of a "civilizing process" based on its own symbols, values and behaviors, as if they were proper to all human beings (ELIAS, 1994).

Moreover, because the concept of civilization "refers to something that is in constant motion, moving incessantly 'forward'" (ELIAS, 1994, p.24), it is immediately identified with the "modern" and "progress," therefore, as an inexorable march of humanity. In fact, as Wallerstein (2007, p. 29) points out, the process of expansion of European states, marked by military conquests and intense economic exploitation, "disseminated something invariably called civilization, economic growth and development or progress." Always "in favor" of time and in possession of what would be best for humanity, the European nations made culture a component of their colonizing and imperialist projects, which, based on centuries of military conquest, economic exploitation and acculturation, imposed "universal values" on the "barbaric" peoples.

The History of Ancient Education and Historiographical Renewal

Successive generations of teachers of philosophy and history of education have learned to understand them as a cumulative and fruitful succession of *philosophical insights*, from Socrates to Dewey, and as a long and progressive journey of pedagogical consciousness and efforts to consolidate the school as the institution depository of the task of educating peoples, or like its effective and positive form. It is a story aimed at the future, that is, to guide a pedagogical action by the meaning attributed to it by an omniscient narrator, therefore, a philosophy of history. It follows that the interest in the history of education in Antiquity would consist in the search for the illuminating legacy of the Greeks and Romans for the problems of the Western educator in contemporary times. To guide his reflections to actions, it was up to him to select positive aspects and detect mistakes in the pedagogical consciousness and its concreteness, to identify educational models of the remote past, such as those differentially attributed to Athens and Sparta, the political-educational projects and utopias, such as Plato's and Aristotle's.

Throughout the consolidation and configuration of the discipline in Brazil, especially from the 1960s onwards, systematic research at the academic level paved the way for the history of education to find its niche separately from the philosophy of education (BONTEMPI Jr., 2015). With the development of graduate studies, from the 1970s onwards, both disciplines became curriculum subjects for teacher training, as well as fields of academic research oriented to the production and dissemination of new knowledge, this time based on scientific procedures controlled by communities of specialists (WARDE; CARVALHO, 2000). In the case of the history of education, the interest of researchers was almost entirely focused on the history of education in Brazil, especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to the detriment of the so-called "universal history" and, consequently, of the history of education in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. Due to disciplinary tradition, however, these contents continued to be taught in the teaching of the subject in undergraduate courses and, not for a fortuitous reason, by professors trained in Philosophy. Progressively outdated in relation to the themes in the history of Brazilian education, these, under the double creative influx of direct documentary research and theoretical-methodological renewal (which, from the 1990s onwards, had the prevalence of the so-called "new cultural history", of French origin, and of the "social history of culture", of English matrix), the themes related to Antiquity and the Middle Ages, with very few and localized exceptions, they have been relatively little impacted by the effects of historiographical updating, remaining oriented to themes and approaches traditionally based on panoramic manuals of the history of pedagogy or history of pedagogical ideas.

Unlike what came to preside over the curricular renewal of the history of education in Brazil, which in this century began to include transnational and connected perspectives, leading to the updating of knowledge about the history of education in Europe and the Americas, the history of education in antiquity did not benefit from the "going to the sources" movement. Nor has it been refrigerated by the problems of social history and culture, especially regarding the study of social practices and representations related to knowledge and socialization in different historical-social configurations. Only recently, historiography has received the breath of decolonial epistemologies, which question the essentialist foundation that established racial and cultural linearity between Classical Antiquity and the colonialist and imperialist nations of the modern and contemporary eras.

As Veyne (1983) points out, all historiography depends doubly on the problems it formulates for itself and on the documents at its disposal. The Brazilian educational historiography that emerged from the tradition of textbooks came up against considerable obstacles: the absence of traces of classical antiquity in the national territory, in archives or under the ground, and the sclerosis of its problematic, that is, that of revealing how the educational ideals and values that should preside over the contemporary school had germinated in the "Greek world". Very little studied in current historiography, it remains, however, in manuals and teacher training courses, offering the historical antecedents of the school and the curriculum, the modes of systematic transmission of organized knowledge and codes of the written language, the philosophies and worldviews from which pedagogical and social organization ideas and utopias would have derived.

Critical Questions About a Narrative Example

There was no doubt that Greece was an ancestral heritage of Western culture, either because it had "invented" key institutions, such as democracy, or because it established, through the systematic use of alphabetic writing, the civilizational abyss that would separate prehistoric peoples from those properly historical (GOODY, 2015, p. 11-13). Greece, especially Athens in the classical period, would have created, moreover, a model of human formation that we should consider as the founder of our own (NUNES, 1975), as long as we neglected its misconceptions and exoticisms, such as the fact that the Greeks believed that the sea was violet (VEYNE, 1983).

For professors with lengthy training in disciplines associated with philosophy and history of education in Brazilian universities, as early as the 1970s, Greece was a generalized representation of Athenian society in the classical period, duly shadowed by the "Spartan mirage" constructed, in fact, by the Athenians themselves as a critical and instructive antithesis (MOSSÉ, 1998). Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, were consecrated as the first philosophers of education, in contrast to the sophists, who, antecedents of the "first teachers," were skilled in teaching beneficial knowledge to the well-educated children but ignorant of what, according to those philosophers, mattered for the formation of man (MOSSÉ, 1998, p. 108).

In a chapter published in 1975, Ruy Afonso da Costa Nunes, then a professor at USP's School of Education, seeks to present the origins of the "middle school" in a collection by Moysés Brejon, a kind of manual for the discipline Structure and Functioning of 1st and 2nd Grade Education. According to Nunes, the Greeks of the classical era would have elaborated the "Western conception of the formation of personality, which encompasses the directed development of man's physical and spiritual potentialities" (NUNES, 1975, p. 21), which is why he began his historical essay there. The Greeks would have lived a first period of exclusive concern with the training of warriors and rulers, offering the teaching of gymnastics, poetry and oratory to the young people of the class exempted from work by the institute of slavery. From the fifth century B. C., the sophists emerged, who received the wealthier young citizens for the preparation of politics, charging for the teaching of these and other subjects (MOSSÉ, 1998, p. 108), such as arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music (NUNES, p. 21-22). To the sophistic "school," whose most influential name was that of Isocrates, and which took care of the formation of the orator and the politician, he opposed the Platonic one, founded on philosophy as a formative ideal for the government of society that he had devised in *The Republic* and *the Laws*, in which each person would receive education according to his caste, "established by intellectual capacity and not by social heredity or by birth" (NUNES, 1975, p. 22).

Very much concerned with the formation of the citizen, that is, of the Athenian freeman and slave owner, the history of education fixed its attention on the middle school, whose orientation towards oratory, the arts of war and politics corresponded to a specific clientele (the young men of the established families) and to a "curriculum" of a secondary type for which literacy was a precondition. On the other hand, the education of children remained in the shadows, which, in Athens, was the private domain and was the responsibility of slaves and mothers, invisible figures in the public scene (MOSSÉ, 1998) and lacking the technical or philosophical knowledge of the competing schools of Isocrates and Plato. In the same way, in the history of education textbooks there is not enough information about educated girls or how their mothers did it. Children appear when it comes to explaining education in Sparta, where, from the age of seven, they were

separated from their families to be educated by the city, including female children. The "Spartan education," proverbially austere and rigid, but, for that very reason, disciplining and forming character, was thus presented as a counterpoint to Athenian education, constituting the basis for critics, such as Plato, to imagine an education that balanced the faculties of body and spirit in favor of the organization and defense of the ideal city (MOSSÉ, 1998, p. 109).

Despite the manifest preference of philosophers of education for Platonic "pedagogy," the fact is that "Isocrates' influence on education would be greater than that of Plato," precisely because of the emphasis he gave to rhetoric, a system of thought and expression that the Greeks transmitted to Byzantium and the Romans to the Latin West (MOSSÉ, 1998, p. 110). Rhetoric as a teaching program will be the subject of courses and manuals on the history of education on the History of Rome, when Roman public schools adopted the works and methods of Cicero and Quintilian. According to Nunes, after the collapse of the Greek city-states, that is, in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, a "curriculum with the regular cycle" would have been organized, covering "after literacy, the gathering of literary and scientific disciplines that made up the *encyclios paideia*, with only some variations as to the number of disciplines, and this, according to the school and the master. The schools were private [...] and the teachers received their income from the fees paid by the students, this income varying according to the merit of the teacher and the success obtained by the school."

The recourse to anachronism is evident, either by the mention of school, when the text refers to the craft of private masters, or by the use of terms such as "curriculum," "literary and scientific disciplines," "literacy," and "cycles" which serve to familiarize the reader with a historical society that, in order to correspond to the thesis that the Greeks of the classical era would have elaborated the ideal of human formation of the "Western conception" (NUNES, 1975, p. 21), is represented not only as similar, but as an antecedent. The proposition of the "constant" formed by the composite "culture and school" subtracts the differences and incompatibilities between two configurations whose differences' inventory would be exhaustive in order to establish a common ground in the service of the affirmation of philosophical and pedagogical values that make the "Greeks" a "people-value" (VEYNE, 1983, p. 3).

Final thoughts

Regarding Ancient Rome, Veyne (1983, p. 10) states:

Nothing [is] farther from us than this ancient civilization: it is exotic, I say it is extinct, and the objects brought back by our excavations are as astonishing as the aerolites. The little that has passed on to us of Rome's heritage exists in us in how diluted doses and at what price of what reinterpretations! Between the Romans and us it has been dug an abyss by Christianity, German philosophy, technological, scientific and economic revolutions, and everything that makes up our civilization.

Contrary to the familiarity between ancient civilizations and our contemporaneity, Veyne (1983, p. 5) proposes estrangement when he declares himself persuaded "that the Romans really existed; that is, that they existed in such an exotic and everyday way as, for example, the Tibetans or the Nhambikwara, so that it is impossible to continue to consider them as a kind of people-value." According to the author (1983, p. 10), therein lies the interest in the history of

the ancient Romans: it "makes us come out of ourselves and forces us to make explicit the differences that separate us from it." The canonical position of Greco-Roman Antiquity in the curricula of the history of education, to the detriment of other ancient peoples, of whom we follow without knowing anything, is the opposite of this. It is the expression of an elective affinity between philosophers and educators who, guided by the ethnocentric values that shaped the modern school form and pedagogical knowledge as virtuous creations of "Western civilization," took care to establish a linear and continuous thread with a society that, as Goody (2015) points out, considered itself intellectually and morally superior than its contemporaries.

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