
Europe: education remade

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ABSTRACT Educational reform in Western Europe continues to be accompanied by high levels of contestation and conflict. The article discusses the terms of current conflicts in France and Italy, exploring the main lines of government programmes, and also the kinds of opposition they have encountered.

In the eyes of policy, the transformation of European education systems has become essential. Economically, education change is deemed vital to the successful emergence of knowledge economies. Politically, educational institutions and their cultures are seen as unhelpfully residual, providing a home to beliefs and practices that are not aligned with new priorities, and whose removal from the scene is strongly desired.

The consequences of these orientations are visible everywhere, but they are not the only forces presently shaping the world of education. The reforms that follow from the new policy framework have been met in many parts of Europe by defensive mobilisation of those who work in schools and universities – and such mobilisation has often resonated with a wider public. At the same time, and more spectacularly, country after country has been shaken by protests and uprisings that have at their core the grievances of generations currently studying in schools and universities, or recently graduated from them. The condition of precarity that these movements address extends beyond educational boundaries into questions of employment, housing and social security; but it is often educational experience, its promises and disappointments, that fuels protestors' angry critique, and generates demands for change both institutional and social.

In addressing these issues, this article does not attempt a cross-European survey. It focuses instead on events in two European countries, France and Italy, where educational conflict has been especially strong, and goes on to draw some comparative connections with English experience.[1] Its concern is not only to delineate the new policy landscape of these countries, but also to reflect

on the resources, intellectual and political, that opposition to policy has been able to develop and deploy.

France: the Sarkozy balance-sheet

In France, a rhetoric of educational change featured strongly in Nicolas Sarkozy's 2007 election campaign and in the agenda-setting work of his first few months in presidential office. In a 'lettre de mission' to his first education minister, Xavier Darcos, Sarkozy outlined clear policy ambitions. 'With extra resources, and with the more persistent use of guidelines and controls', he told Darcos, 'you will be able to offer more support to those schools that admit students experiencing the greatest educational difficulties'. As a result of such support, Sarkozy expected that the level of student failure – measured, for instance, in tests at the end of a Key Stage 2 equivalent – would fall from 15% to around 5%. At the same time, Darcos was instructed to award schools greater flexibility and autonomy, particularly in terms of budget-setting and of the development of a curriculum appropriate to the needs of their student intake. The 2010 abolition of the *carte scolaire*, a set of regulations that had allowed a measure of external control over school admissions policies, was seen as vital to the further development of school autonomy. The quality of teaching would also be reformed: teacher training would be improved through the closure of specialist institutions and the placing of a stronger emphasis on the academic strength and subject knowledge of trainees.

School autonomy, raising standards, remaking the teaching force: these are, of course, the preoccupations of policy-makers Europe-wide, but, as the sociologist Pierre Merle points out in a recent article in *Le Monde*, the attempt to realise them involves contradiction and difficulty, especially in the context of an overall social programme that is focused on to austerity (Merle, 2011).

The most evident contradiction is between the verbal commitment to fighting inequality, and the all-too-palpable determination to cut tens of thousands of jobs – those of teachers, and of educational support workers of various kinds. Since 2007, of every two posts left vacant by retirement, only one has been replaced: the overall figure for job cuts when Sarkozy's (first?) term comes to an end in 2012 is likely to be 60,000. Merle suggests that such cuts are felt most strongly in areas of educational and social disadvantage. Government demands that education realise the 'world-class standards' required by competition in the global economy, but its funding policies, Merle maintains, undermine any such ambition. In this Merle speaks for the majority of the 'world of education' in France.

This failure to develop any convincing response to school failure on the part of many working-class students is not only a product of cuts. Merle notes that choice-based policies have combined with new types of project and institution to break up the unified model of college-level education. Such projects include '*internats d'excellence*', offering places to talented students from 'disadvantaged' backgrounds, and the CLAIR programme in which schools –

again those based in '*banlieues defavorisées*' – contract with government to deliver quantifiable attainment-based objectives. For Merle, these projects offer at best a limited growth in meritocratic advance, at the expense of a fundamental fracturing of the national education system, a development that can only increase social stratification. In this judgement, he joins those who have observed the gathering speed of processes of 'educational apartheid', where class and ethnic inequalities are reinforced by a school system in which parental choice intensifies patterns of spatial segregation (Ben Ayed, 2009).

Remaking the school system also means the reshaping of the educational workforce. More is involved here than changes to initial teacher education. As in England, a cult of leadership has developed, which seeks to concentrate powers of initiative at the level of management – the CLAIR programme, which enables heads of educational establishments to recruit teachers on short-term contracts, tied to performance objectives, is a case in point. This is part of a more general trend to discount the value of teachers' work, unless it serves the purpose of carrying out government decisions. The space for autonomous initiative has shrunk, especially as ZEPs (zones of educational priority) are replaced by projects of the CLAIR variety. Specialist expertise – most notably in relation to inclusive education – is set aside; the introduction of competence-based curricula and record-keeping, reinforced by testing, has become a powerful engine of pedagogic orthodoxy. As a background to these forms of regulation, the official status that educational workers have enjoyed as state employees is more and more called into question.

Italy: the Gelmini reforms and their aftermath

In 2008, the Berlusconi Government published both a programme of educational reform, and a new financial law aimed at cutting educational spending. The former embodied much of the new educational orthodoxy – school autonomy, regulation of the work of schools through a testing system, diversification of upper secondary education and so on. But it is the latter project that has formed the major part of government policy, and that has provoked continuing waves of opposition. Cuts have been severe: the financial law aimed to eliminate 133,000 jobs in education and good progress is being made towards this target: the 2011/12 budget envisages 25,000 fewer educational workers, 20,000 of them teachers (Intravaia, 2010; Cobas-Scuola, 2011) . The consequences have been felt in larger classes, the enforced redeployment of teachers into administrative roles, and a freeze on progression through the salary scales (merit pay being the preferred alternative to seniority). The teaching of students with special needs has been particularly affected. So, too, have features of the Italian primary system which had once been seen as markers of its progressive nature: the '*tempo pieno*' which guaranteed all-day classes for early years children, and the allocation of three teachers to every two classes – a measure that Mariastella Gelmini, the education minister, wanted to replace with a one class, one teacher system, the '*maestro unico*'. In response to

the wave of protest that greeted her proposals, their rougher edges were smoothed out – in some circumstances, the *'tempo pieno'* would be retained, and the *'maestro unico'* would not be implemented. It is plain from frequent parental protests, however, that *'tempo pieno'* classes are vastly oversubscribed: the responsibility for childcare and early learning has, in effect, been handed back to parents (Intravaia, 2010).

Hampered by opposition, desperate to respond to parents' pressures, and lacking the capacity of the French state to transmit general principles into operational practice, Berlusconi's Government has made its main impact through the ferocity of its cuts more than the effectiveness of any programme of restructuring. Nevertheless, as in France, there exist, alongside the cuts, particular kinds of educational ambition. A system of pupil testing is intended to regulate the curriculum and focus the work of teachers: the militant minority union Cobas-Scuola (2011) has pointed to the potential links between the evaluation system and merit pay proposals of a sort that Italian teachers have opposed for more than a decade. Cobas has challenged the testing proposals in the courts, and won a ruling that participation in the work of testing does not form part of teachers' contracts. This is a small victory, but it indicates something of the difficulties the government of Italy faces in making educational reform stick, in a situation where opposition remains a significant factor.

Responses

These, then, are some of the main features of austerity and restructuring in the French and Italian systems. They have been opposed more strongly than perhaps anywhere else in Europe, and it is worth exploring why this should be so.

For many educationalists in these two countries, their education systems are the sedimented results of historical conflict. In the case of the *école républicaine*, this is well known, and recent controversies over the burqa and the hijab have only – for good or ill – reinforced the point: schooling is a symbolic realm, in which issues of nationality, democracy and the nature of the social order are always at stake. The point can be taken further, beyond controversies about religion and secularism, to consider reference points provided not by the school of Jules Ferry, but that of more recent periods. Opposition to policies of the Sarkozy sort has been expressed in terms that connect back to the social programme of the Conseil National de la Résistance, enunciated in the headiest days of the Liberation (Hessel, 2011): unions have been quick to note that those who uphold the Sarkozy project demand a break, precisely, with the policies of 1945 (Kessler, 2007; Sud-Education, 2010). A more recent point of reference is supplied by the grass-roots efforts to address social and educational equality – efforts that are associated with the energies released by '1968', and later harnessed to the daily work of teachers in projects like those of the ZEP.

In Italy, likewise, conflict is interpreted as an episode in a longer history of struggle and achievement. Teachers' classroom autonomy is defended as one of the fruits of the anti-fascist constitution of 1948 (Jones et al, 2007). The establishment of comprehensive education, embodied in the *scuola media unificata*, is seen as a progressive conquest of the 1960s, an unequivocal gain of the Left (Rossanda, 2011). Likewise, the *decreti delegati* of 1974, which introduced measures of democracy to the internal management of schools, and promoted the accountability of schools to their communities, are contrasted with the models of governance represented in current reforms. It is this deeply-embedded association between the school system and popular politics to which Berlusconi pays a back-handed compliment when, routinely, he labels opposition to reform as 'communist'; and it is partly because educational movements are embedded in a living historical tradition that they are still able to achieve a wider resonance (*Corriere della Sera*, 2011)

But of course, policy conflict is not fought only at the level of contending traditions. There are also more immediate issues at stake. A series of local campaigns over issues of job cuts and classroom conditions has punctuated the reform programme of Sarkozy's ministers. Policy changes on testing, the downgrading of support for special needs, and competence-based curricula have been fought by a minority movement of *desobéisseurs* who have risked disciplinary measures and pay cuts to develop resistance beyond the point of statements of opposition into a territory of refusal (Soulé, 2010).

Precarious Ones

In both countries, a series of national movements has involved the education sector more consistently than any other section of the population – against changes to employment law in 2006 in France, against school and university reform in Italy in 2008, and France in 2009, and a massive mobilisation against cuts in pension provision in France in the autumn of 2010. Those employed in education have been prominent in protest but especially significant in most of these movements have been youth.

If education reform lacks popular legitimacy among students, and the youth population more generally, it is above all because it does not deliver on the promise of economic prosperity that is central to its rhetoric of change. This is a problem that pre-dates the recession of 2008. For more than 20 years, levels of youth unemployment in much of Europe have been exceptionally high – according to Eurostat figures, the 2006 figure reached more than 20% in France, Greece and Italy, and nearly 20% in Spain (European Commission, 2008, p. 75). René Bendit, in a survey of youth in Europe, concluded that the problem was structural rather than cyclical; a new social situation had come into being, that of precarity. Precarity cannot be captured solely by unemployment statistics – it embraces issues of pay, job security and career and life-course progression; it prevents individuals from managing their entrances into and exits from the labour market in a way that 'conforms to their expectations'.

The mechanisms of precarity have two kinds of effect (Allen & Ainley, 2011). For some – working-class and migrant youth, with low levels of qualification – they entail near-complete exclusion from secure employment. It is this experience that has fuelled the riots of 2005 in France and 2011 in England. For others, those ‘of high educational background’, precarity relates to a gap between levels of qualification and the types of employment that are available. Levels of educational attainment have risen, and expectations have been heightened, yet access to secure jobs, to housing and to an ‘autonomous’ adult life is harder to come by. The French researcher Frédéric Lebaron (2006) writes in this context about a ‘devalorisation’ of educational qualifications, in which students become both intensely sceptical about the value of their studies, yet also watchful of policies that seem likely both to create further status divisions in education, and to dislodge the hold of some groups on qualifications they regard as essential to the chance of individual career-building. It is from this suspicious perspective that the orthodoxies of education reform policy have been read – and mobilisations have occurred. There is much that the world of education can learn from these developments.

Connecting

The youth uprisings of the last six years are a sign both of crisis and of hope. The student movement has squarely addressed the problems of an education system regulated to death, and constrained by what are presented as economic imperatives – austerity, the payback of debt, and demands of the labour market for flexible labour. As we saw in the English winter of 2010-11, students responded by creating different forms of education – teach-ins, teach-outs (in banks, in railway stations, supermarkets), publications, informal seminars and working groups. There is much here that schools and universities could be refreshed by: the hard question is, whether these institutions are themselves capable of learning. The question is posed even more strongly by the riots – whether in Paris in 2005, or in London now. In 2005, French activists had their doubts: so worn down was the school that its capacity to connect creatively with the turbulent protests of the *banlieues* was limited (Drevon, 2005; Dugas, 2005). The same could be said of England’s riots, which spoke of huge dissatisfactions and unendurable conditions, which have yet to be addressed, either socially or in educational terms. The educational order established by a Sarkozy, a Berlusconi, a Cameron is plainly inadequate to the scale of the problems that the protests of the youthful and precarious have identified. The issue for those who work in education is whether they can find the space, resources and energy to respond. An educational and social programme awaits development; a political challenge needs making; a new classroom practice is a necessity.

Note

- [1] Though the material presented here is largely new, the arguments that underpin it have been developed over a number of years, in, for instance, a book of which I was co-author, *Schooling in Western Europe: the new order and its adversaries*. (Italian and Spanish editions were published in 2009 and a revised French version in 2011); see also my article in 'Patterns of Conflict in Education: France, Italy England' in A. Green (Ed.) *Blair's Educational Legacy*.

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