Educational Racism, Classism and Social Protectionism

Rodolfo Valentino

The two subsequent contributions in this volume of our journal concern German and Spanish texts of the same article translated by the author himself, who works for the European Institute for Migration and Social Inclusion (IEM) and Independent European Sociological Research Institute (EUROSOR).

Free access to education and equal opportunities only exist on paper. Numerous studies demonstrate this. The educational personnel of the schools recognise their “peers” and favour them, consciously or unconsciously. The “others” have it two or three times more difficult.

Introduction

The right to education is a human right according to article 26 of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of December 10, 1948 and a cultural human right according to Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The social reality, however, is different. Many sociologists have been pointing out for decades that supposedly “free” access to education, equal opportunities and school rights are being obstructed and even reversed by subtle “socially discriminatory” strategies. For the American
economist Chuck Barone, the reason is obvious: classism. He distinguishes 3 levels of classism:

(1) At the macro level, one social class oppresses the other through a particular political-economic system, where certain occupational groups earn less than others, for example social occupations versus economic occupations, have less social prestige, or are excluded from employment or the working market. For him, capitalism is inherently classist, or to put it another way, “anticlassism is necessarily anticapitalist at this level”.

(2) At the meso level, the “upper class” oppresses those of a “lower class” as a group by generating negative prejudices against them. The “accomplices” are the media. His concept of anti-classism is also based on this level on the demand for a different media culture.

(3) At the micro level, “lower class” individuals are oppressed as individual subjects by “upper class” individuals through individual attitudes, identities and interactions. “In the US there has been anti-class training analogous to anti-racist training for a number of years” to overcome classist or social-racist individual attitudes.

The Social Habitus

But how do members of a supposed same “class”, a similar “social environment” or a common “style of life” smell or identify? The German sociologist Norbert Elias and his French colleague Pierre Bourdieu would answer simply: with the habitus (social).

Elias defines the “social habitus” as common habits of thinking, feeling
and acting that are inherent to the members of a figuration (a network of dependencies based on thought and assumed belonging and solidarity) and therefore have a “structure of similar social personality”. Bourdieu goes into more “plastic” details and defines the “habitus” as the complete package of a person: his general appearance, his lifestyle, his language (linguistic code), his clothing and his tastes.

This is how it happens that the majority of “teaching staff” in Europe who come from the academic middle class recognise and favour consciously or unconsciously their “peers” and their “descendants” by the linguistic code, educational qualifications, clothing, etc., despite the increasing pluralisation of lifestyles and social media.

Especially in countries where “teachers” imagine that they do not have to educate students (for example in Germany), class and thus also habitus is considered an immutable “social defect” and activates consciously or unconsciously “social-racist” and classist strategies of “social protectionism” to preserve the supposed “class” or “social group” of their own. Consequently, children and youth from low-income and educationally disadvantaged homes have it two to three times more difficult due to their habitus and social racism. Even if their performance is equally good, they have to convince teachers more than those from the “advantaged classes”.

A social dilemma is further intensified by the fact that missteps or deviant behaviours quickly become a social stigma from which one can practically no longer free oneself. Especially in Northern European countries, a “southern” appearance (dark hair, dark eyes, dark skin colour) can speed up the process of “school” stigmatisation and become a “discrimination intensifier”.

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Conclusion: perspective—compensatory education

One possible solution could come from a country with a strong record of discrimination based on race, colour, national or social origin. This is the US “compensatory education”, which was discussed in Western Europe as early as the 1980s. Its goal is to improve the school performance of children and youth from socially disadvantaged families, classes, and neighbourhoods (ghettos), in order to reduce educational disadvantages and create equal opportunities. Social problems such as crime, drug use, alcoholism, unemployment, dependence on the social system, parenthood at a minor age, etc. must be addressed proactively without becoming a “social stigma”.

The expectation that educational expansion can achieve a far-reaching equalisation of educational opportunity has remained an illusion in many European countries such as Germany. Even if the access door to a good school education has been widened, the influence of the social origin in the form of habitus, lifestyle, language (linguistic code), clothing, behaviour etc. but also the migratory origin, continue to be the most important factors in preventing “upward” social mobility.

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Bibliography—A selection


NB: do you have any comments on Valentino's article? Please send these to info@ethnogeopolitics.org or through the contactform at www.ethnogeopolitics.org.