

Education in the ‘Postnational Constellation’: the weakening of democratic, expertocratic and ethico-professional legitimation and control.*

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Abstract

The article discusses current transformations in the education systems worldwide. Focusing on the European Union (EU) and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as policy actors, it argues that these transformations imply a triple economization of education policy which can be observed at all levels of the education sector. The increasing importance of these organizations in educational issues marks a transition to a “postnational constellation” also in the education field insofar as the national educational sovereignty is being at least readjusted.

The economization of education policy is however not restricted to bringing education closer to the needs of the economy and to turning its services into tradable goods. Rather, it also impinges on the operative level of education. A logic of production is being implemented in the self-description of the institutions of the education system, which are no longer bureaucratically administered establishments, but are rather conceived of as managerially conducted production business in which entrepreneurial action is needed. This new governance raises the problem of democratic legitimation of political decisions which ideally combines three elements: democratic, expertocratic, and ethico-professional. The article discusses the consequences of a shift in the balance of the three components with reference to Germany.

Keywords: Economization of education – EU – OECD – International Education Policy – Germany – Postnational constellation.

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During the 1612 Reichstag of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation in Frankfurt am Main the humanist Wolfgang Ratke (Ratichius) presented a memorial with his “new teaching method” that promised to guarantee unity and peace in an Empire threatened by disintegration and war. At that time, in the eve of the Thirty Years’ War, this was more than a boastful promise. The didacticus Ratke, with his Lutheran belief in the power of school teaching, proved to be way ahead of the imaginative power of his contemporaries. He anticipated the modern concept of public education as part of the government of the whole population at a time when its material implementation was even beyond the imagination of his contemporaries.

Although back then his proposal could only meet with incomprehension by the powerful, the event marks the beginning of a process of functional differentiation of politics and pedagogy: The art of governing and the art of educating are thought as complementary to each other since then.

The idea of a pedagogical steering of the population could only establish itself during the second half of the 18th century, then under the sign of the European Enlightenment and the Humanism.

The publicly controlled education of the whole population should make the different groups a ‘nation’, help the human species develop and improve, and qualify the individual in such a way that s/he can be of use to the different functional systems of the society. An all encompassing education system, that goes well beyond the school, became a feature of national sovereignty of European states during the 20th century, and served as model for state building worldwide.

When in the year 2000 the European Council in its Lisbon Declaration called “Lifelong Learning” a means for Europe to become “the most competitive region in the world” within a few years, it acted in exact the same logic of pedagogical steering of societal processes that the Reichstag did not yet want to concur four centuries before. In parallel to this, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) set the stage when it resumed its strategy of international comparisons (large-scale assessments) of national education systems – which became well known in Germany by the acronym PISA-2000. The PISA program aims at improving the quality of results of educational processes in schools in order to raise the employability of the graduates.

The agenda of Lisbon and PISA-strategy follow the same common vision that public education can be used as useful steering instrument for socially desirable developments. Today, it is not the matter of a premature promise of an overly confident pedagogue, but there is a strong belief in the social-technical feasibility of societal-political goals – which seems to be securely established in public discourses – that can be prescribed by the political system and executed by the education system. The most comprehensive education of the whole population has become a political option that is regularly called upon when social problems are in the lookout for solutions.

1.

Lisbon and PISA possibly mark important turning points in the history of the global education discourse. The EU Declarations and the comparative studies of the OECD that are associated with these city names seem to relativize the importance of the nation state; influential actors in education policy entered the stage in the guise of transnational organizations. Education increasingly became an international political issue.

Supplementary to the competences of the member states, the EU Commission reclaims for itself own jurisdiction in education policy. The same is true of the OECD and one could also name other organizations such as the World Bank (WB), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). The increasing importance of these organizations in educational issues, both in and in other educational institutions, mark the transition to a “postnational constellation” also in the education field insofar as the national educational sovereignty – over which nation states had to date kept a jealous watch – is being at least readjusted. New is that transnational organizations raise a claim to influence, at least indirectly, the performance of the institutions of the national education systems of their members through targeting and agreements on objectives – from Kindergarten to the university.

The internationalization of the education discourse of the past twenty years is empirically linked to a triple economization of education policy: In all international documents education is being: 1) thought in surprisingly one-dimensional terms as a

form of the exploitation of the population and subjected primarily to economic objectives; 2) at the same time it is treated as if it was an economic good that can be produced as well as; 3) marketed like any other commodity of the production sector. This narrow connection must not surprise. The concerned organizations are, with the exception of the UNESCO, international and transnational organizations whose objectives are to promote the economic systems and their performances. They are qua their statutes guardians of the free market, *i. e.* committed to the idea that the distribution of goods and services is best regulated via pricing mechanism.

The governments of the member states of the EU and the OECD were joined – at least until mid-2008 – in their paradigmatic belief in the harmonizing power of market and competition, which could balance out individual pursuit of advantages and general social wealth. The paradoxal steering principle of the *laissez-faire* – discovered by moral philosophers in the 18th century, pointedly described by Adam Smith as the ‘invisible hand’ and radicalized by Milton Friedman in the 20th century – has condensed into a program in the Neo-liberalism. It could dominate the public discourse worldwide during the past thirty years and define the boundaries of what can be said and thought. The visible effect of its application is the politically intended deregulation and active globalization of the international financial, commodity, service and, finally, labor markets adopted by virtually all governments after 1989.

The field of economics of education found a plausible mental correlation of education and economy using the terminology of education markets, investment in human capital, and the exploitation of educational reserves that lie idle in the population as resources.

The new transnational education policy is neo-liberal insofar as it, in its essence, aims at a shift of strategy, *i. e.* it turns from “market correcting” to “market preparing” strategies. Long since is the catalogue of social services, which were so far not in the focus of commercial interest, being radically reduced. The prospect of real markets is now open also to services in the education sector. Since 1995 internationally tradable services are being listed in the extensive catalogues of the GATS agreement; these lie primarily – both in and beyond the regulated realm of general education – in the field of

pre-school childcare, in adult and professional education as well as in the higher education sector.

2.

The economization of education policy is however not restricted to bringing education closer to the needs of the economy and to turning its services into tradable goods. It also impinges on the operative level of education. With the technique of “open coordination” – which is used by the EU towards its members – as well as with the indicators-based “New Management” (New Governance) – with which the OECD aims at improving the performance of educational institutions – are steering instruments entering the education sector that are patterned on the methods of quality management in enterprises.

The introduction of these new steering techniques in the education sector adopts a way of thinking much familiar to business administration: the logic of production. It is implemented into the self-description of the institutions of the education system, which are no longer bureaucratically administered establishments, but are rather conceived of as managerially conducted production business in which entrepreneurial action is needed.

This vision is produced by an internationally networked “epistemic community” of (educational) experts, who as it were – are they to be accepted in this community – have to share a range of beliefs paradigmatically. Together with journalist and operative foundations they attune politics and public opinion to their view of education institutions and the problems to be tackled therein. In order to push the new market-oriented regime through, politicians, trade associations, consulting firms and education researchers coalesce in an “advocacy coalition” of neo-liberal education policy in which the ideological premises (the belief system) and the political interests cluster selectively around particular lines of educational research.

Economics of Education and Econometrics experience a noteworthy renaissance. Convicted of existence of ubiquitous quasi-natural laws, management consultants dare to not convert not only economic, but also diverse social functions – also education –

into a input-output scheme and translate them into targets to be achieved through technical and organizational means.

The knowledge needed by the managers is to be supplied by school-effectiveness and empirical educational researchers. Just like econometrics, these lines of research operate with process-product-model that attempts to establish correlations between pedagogical interventions and its effects. Even though this model has long been dismissed within the educational sciences and had to be supplanted by a provision-usage model – which is also drawn from the economic field – much research is being commissioned – mainly from cognitive psychologists – with finding quasi-natural, law-like regularities of teaching-learning processes. Like economists these researchers also work with ahistorical, context-free models constructed upon correlation of a few variables and try to provide robust solution knowledge for the new education management – be it for the Kindergarten, school or for adult education.

All in all, a means-ends rationality takes hold which is visible in the general principles of what might be the definition of education by the EU and the OECD: the most efficient and effective production of economically useful competencies in the graduates, which are oriented towards the ideal of the homo economicus. This has been most clearly conceptualized in the program for Lifelong Learning which emphasizes the need for continuous investment in the (own) human capital.

3.

It is debatable whether the phenomenon of transnationalization of politics is to be interpreted as loss of sovereignty of the nation state, which could be equated to a power reduction “against its own will”. On the one hand, it is true that the instruments of the new ‘expertocratic’ steering – which make use of inter- and intra-national comparisons, rely on scientific evidence and their resulting inherent necessities – can only take hold in the international relations if, and then only if, they meet with domestic political interest. The member states and their functional elites have to involve themselves in a transnational regime in a particular issue area out of their own considerations. The different implementation of the Lisbon and PISA processes in the member states

provide us with vivid examples of the diverse interplays of national and transnational levels.

The decision to make use of steering mechanisms from the economic field in the realm of public services is nationally well motivated, especially because they have shown to ensure a more rational consumption of resources along calculations of costs-benefits. The single welfare states made this decision in the course of the policy of reducing the ratio of government expenditure to the GNP and in the context of the ideology of the 'slim state'. After postal, transport, water, energy, health and social services it is now the turn of the cost-intensive education sector to be steered via the pricing mechanism, thus improving the efficiency of the deployed resources, opening up new financing sources through users fees and donations that can compensate for the programmatically run short tax revenues.

The accrual of competencies of transnational organizations, on the one side, correspond to the willingness of national governments on the other to make use of available expertise for domestic political purposes – which tellingly is provided by commissioned 'consortia' of internationally active testing services firms and research institutes. Research findings in the social sciences are characterized by a usual ambiguity, and it is for this very reason that the empirical evidence provided by these educational researchers may serve all decision-makers, who avail themselves selectively on them and draw conclusions convenient to their political interests. In the political sciences the concept of the "New Reason of State" describes a consistent inclination of national governments to build up domestic political pressure with the help of international organizations in order to overcome resistances to their reform projects. Examples are the shortening of the duration of the school years (from 13 to 12 years), the introduction of standardized (comparative) exams, pre-school education and all-day-schools.

Although transnational actors have to respect the autonomy of national governments, indeed they remain dependent on their cooperation efforts, the method of multilevel governance may be able to grant them leverage. Multilevel governance is the method used by transnational organizations to exert influence on national governments; it can, according to the circumstance, create turbulence in the national systems and so

indirectly influence traditions of education policy and common ways of thinking. However, neither the transnational nor the national level can be assured of maintaining control over the political-administrative Dynamics they trigger off.

4.

This new governance raises the problem of democratic legitimation of political decisions. Methods of indirect steering through indicators, comparative data (benchmarks, rankings) or agreements of targets tend to suspend the complex procedures that are usually provided for in democratic polities.

In modern constitutional states every serious intervention in the life of groups or individuals requires ideally a combination of three elements: democratic, expertocratic, and ethico-professional legitimation. From a normative position, different interests have to be deliberatively weighed against each other on the basis of adequate knowledge from a purposive-rational, but also from a value-rational viewpoint. State politics have, in this model, the moderating task of bringing about binding decisions and of enforcing them until further notice. The justification of the social order in important spheres of life has to be negotiated in sight of public contest of political parties, associations, science, administration, and the professions. Also – and especially – decisions in the realm of public education must be justified in conformity with generally recognized principles of a just political order – more than ever because education affects the opportunities of participation of the individual in the social life.

While the experts of the OECD, the EU Commission, and national boards such as the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder in the Federal Republic of Germany (KMK) euphemistically equate the new governance to a de-ideologization of education policy, other more critical observers, on the contrary, see these new steering techniques as a symptom of the weakening of democratic elements of decision-making. Some authors speak of a de-politicization and de-democratization of the education sector. “Markets”, warned Jürgen Habermas generally, “which cannot be democratized like state administrations, are increasingly assuming steering functions in spheres of life that were, thus far, arranged normatively, that is,

either politically or along pre-political forms of communication. [...] Also the realm that is subjected to public legitimation is shrinking”. At the moment, it seems to apply also to the internationalized education sector that “a coordination of action through values, norms and consensus-oriented (verständigungsorientiert) language usage” is being displaced in favor of a technocratic business as well as a straightforward market rationality, whose effects can be assessed and evaluated in hindsight.

The EU and the OECD – whose executive organs are not democratically elected – do not have any other normative frame of orientation at their disposal than their lowest common denominator, *i. e.* their commitment to free markets and the ideal of economically defined effectivity and efficiency. Heretofore at least, the mechanism of democratic decision-making and legitimation of decisions is mostly absent in the EU and the OECD. This fact supplies experts, who base their legitimation on scientific knowledge (evidence), increasingly with influence. As long as the internationalization of politics is tantamount to its ‘expertocratization’ and the latter in turn sets the regime of output-steering as the standard of national politics, a “cold” dismantling of forms of democratic control and legitimation will take place, also in the education sector. Whether this loss is paired with a corresponding gain in rationality – which would then have to be measured in terms of gains of system performance – has still to be demonstrated by evaluations of the adopted strategy.

5.

The introduction of the new governance impairs not only the democratic element in decision-making processes. Also the second component – the emphasized expertocratic element itself – which should base on the most realistic description of reality is considerably constrained in its reach by the new steering practices. Under the conditions of market-simulated contract research and the permanent need to acquire so called third-party research funding, educational researchers – want they be able to research at all – have had no alternative than to comply with the demands of politicians for causal or rule-like knowledge.

In order to raise the responsiveness of the researchers to external requirements, the political establishment has begun to consequently transfer educational research from universities to newly founded 'service institutes' and to rearrange the university based educational sciences. Not only in these new 'service institutes', but also in universities research questions no longer follow from the logic of the academic discipline. The context of discovery is being prescribed externally by the so called programmatic funding. The desired paradigmatic orientation is fiercely implemented via research funding and faculty appointment policies. The educational administration suspends the academic competition for the best knowledge among paradigms and lines of research and creates itself the educational research that it needs.

Finally, also the third component, the ethico-professional element of the legitimation of educational practices, is being impaired by the new steering regime. When educational institutions are conceived of as business undertakings, a shift in the guiding principles on the operative level of education has to be effected. The model of the professional (teacher, social worker) is being supplanted by the (classroom) manager, who – in terms of causal action – has at their command techniques for accomplishing the objectives of their contractors or for fulfilling the expectations of the market. The resulting reduction of the competence for autonomous decision-making tends to suspend the specific mechanism of value-oriented self-restraint of purposive-rational professional action along ethical viewpoints.

A specific characteristic of professional action in the particular form of professionalism is its "moral potency: the 'orientation towards the collective' of the professions". Professional action differs "from the strategic behavior of the >self-oriented< business man and from the interests of the market-conformal manager". Professional action is led by "higher-level forms of universal solidarity". The specific accomplishment of developed professionalism, which is required in all professions in which the functions are fulfilled in interaction with and in place of the clients, is threatened to be repressed by the new steering techniques and the shift to the model of the manager, not only in the educational system. A lack of empathy is the price to be paid.

6.

The new techniques of context steering, of quality management, and of performance control were introduced in reaction to the non-governability (“reform blockade”) of complex functional societal systems. From the perspective of the reformers some massive initial success has been recorded. The new governance led to heavy turbulences in the education system, from Kindergarten to higher education, and provoked reactions to the externally set demands. This initial success must of course not delude the educational establishment that strong governance also includes strong mis-governance. What produces many effects can also produce many side-effects.

One obvious consequence of the new governance in the education sector is the tendency towards a reduction democratic and ethico-professional control and legitimation of the educational processes that now are conceived of as production processes. If one adds that the results of the empirical education research are inconclusive, little robust, and methodologically not suitable as bases of political decisions, it is to be anticipated that deceptions are to follow suit and soon a reform of the reform is to be initiated.

It is long known that under the conditions of functional differentiation, economy is best run by economists, science by the scientists/scholars, and education by specialized educators. Politicians should not forget – even when they are under public pressure – that they can neither manage banks themselves, produce cars, do research nor educate children. Their task entails creating optimal general conditions for the specialized organizations and professions, where social functions – e. g. education – can be best fulfilled.

If in an internationalized education policy – for comprehensible reasons – the expertocratic element is overemphasized, where objectives are determined via comparisons and then presented as factual constraints to which there are no alternatives, the other two elements – democracy and profession – will immediately be missed. The much debated discomfort with an increasingly economically (market-simulated) organized world – which now can be observed in a triple economization of

education on all levels – fosters the impetus to counter, politically and morally, a social reality that is perceived as irrational or unjust and undesired.

The hope to be able to control and govern complex (international) systems democratically and based on values may well be a yet uncovered illusion or a still unredeemed, utopist excess of a traditional political semantics. This hope, however, marks the aspiration – which cannot be relinquished in the postnational constellation – to remain acting politically and pedagogically, *i. e.* to pursue a social order in a norm-oriented way and with which most people can agree. This aspiration remains important as long as we do not wish to surrender to the fate of social evolution and its allocation of gains and losses – even when one remains aware of the limits of the influence of politics and pedagogy on individual functional systems of society.

In the tradition of the nation state, it was the task of public education systems to enable prospective citizens to demand conscious political participation. This goal of power of judgment of the citizen is the benchmark for the OECD and for the European Union if they want to pass from a mere economic to a political community and overcome the crises of the market economy as education policy actors.

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