

## Challenges of education in contemporaneity: thoughts of a researcher <sup>1</sup>

An interview with Bernard Charlot

Conducted by

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During an interview given to *Educação e Pesquisa* magazine in July 2009, Bernard Charlot, a French intellectual who has lived in Brazil since the early 2000s, reflects on his academic background, his intellectual itinerary and especially on some current education problems (from elementary school to higher education). Known for his important studies on the relationship people have with knowledge, Charlot shows in this text his great commitment to teaching practice and to research. Born in 1944 in Paris, Charlot graduated in philosophy and holds a Ph. D. in philosophy from the University of Paris 10. He has large teaching experience: he was a professor at the University of Tunis, in Tunisia and, back in France, at *Ecole Normale* (an institute that licenses teachers), in Le Mans, and at the University of Paris 8. In this institution, where he worked for 16 years, he conceived and founded ESCOL (Education, Socialization and Local Communities), a research team known worldwide, which focuses on investigating the relationships with school disciplines (especially aiming at clarifying how students from different social classes gain knowledge) and other crucial themes related to education, such as violence at school, territorialization of education policies, and globalization. In Brazil, Charlot worked as visiting professor at the Federal University of Mato Grosso and since 2006, as a visiting professor at the Federal University of Sergipe. He is currently working as an adjunct professor at the University of Oporto (Portugal). He has written several books, including *A mistificação pedagógica: realidades sociais e processos ideológicos na teoria da educação*. Rio de Janeiro: Zahar Editores, 1979; *Da relação com o saber: elementos para uma teoria*. Trad. Bruno Magne. Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2000; *Os jovens e o saber: perspectivas mundiais*. Trad. Fátima Murad. Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2001; *Relação com o saber, formação dos professores e globalização: questões para a educação hoje*. Porto Alegre: Artmed, 2005 and *Jovens de Sergipe. Como são eles, como vivem, o que pensam*. Aracaju: Governo de Sergipe, 2006.

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**Could you please tell us a little about your life, your childhood and your family roots?**

I was born on September 15, 1944, the first day of school in France, which I think is meaningful. My parents had three sons and a daughter. I am the second son. We used to live in Paris, my parents' hometown.

My father never finished elementary school. He was a blue-collar worker in several areas: house painter, paviour etc. He was imprisoned in Germany but managed to flee two years later. After the war, he joined the police force because they gave preference to prisoner-of-war escapees.

Sociologically speaking I come from a family that transitioned from the working class to the lower middle class. My mother was a good student and managed to improve the lives of all her children. Because she was a good student, she finished school early, at twelve, and, instead of getting a job in a factory, she got a job in an office. Life was not easy for her during the war with a newborn son. She had to raise her children and work. She led a tough life.

My mother played a key role in my education. I was the one most expected to succeed academically because I was considered the "intellectual of the family". But my elder brother went into business and now he is the wealthy one. The third son became a physiotherapist. And although my sister did not pursue further education or get rich, she has a comfortable life.

**Could you please tell us about your school memories (when you started school, the profile of the schools you attended and their teaching styles)?**

I attended preschool for a short time, but I do not know how old I was. I do not remember it much, so I guess I did not like it much. Later, I went to a school in a working class district in the east of Paris. I started first grade and, after two weeks, I was transferred to the second grade because my mother had already taught me to read and write. I am not sure whether this was good because, from then on, I was always the youngest in the class, which was not easy. At the time, the students were still ranked and given prizes. I was always the best or the second best student of the class, but I was not a typical nerd because I always had friends among the worst students of the class. I was a good student, but I was forgiven by my friends. I experienced the two worlds. I was a rather complicated student for the teachers: very often the best of the class, but also a member of a group that liked laughing and sometimes resisted schooling. Later on, this helped me understand things of these two worlds.

I went to a high school that was more technical / business-oriented, with modern teaching methods and no Latin or Greek. I very much liked not only French and History, but also Mathematics. When I became a high school junior, literature made me want to study philosophy. To do so, I would have to change schools, because philosophy was not taught in that school. My mother, who had always had ambitious dreams, went to see the principal of *Licée Henri IV*, one of the two best public schools in Paris. The principal specialized in Mathematics and, since I had good grades in Math, he allowed me to enter. In that new school, I took *Concours Général* during the senior year, which was a test for the best students of France, and I won the History Prize.

I wanted to be a political journalist. I could enter the Institute of Political Sciences without having to take an admission test, thanks to my scores at *baccalauréat*, the final exam given at the end of high school. But I would not be paid to study and I needed money, because I got married for the first time when I had barely turned 19. At that time, in the working-class world, people used to marry early. I led a working-class life and at the same time I had to study. I passed an exam and won a fellowship to study literature at Sorbonne and become a French teacher. This fellowship would allow me to support myself for two years. But I did not wish to become a French teacher. So I decided to study for the *École Normale Supérieure* admission exam because it did not require knowledge of Latin or Greek. I wanted to be a history teacher. My mother went to see the teacher of the last year of high school, who advised the class, and asked him what I needed to do to become a history teacher. He was a philosophy teacher and I was the best philosophy student in the class. He recommended that I become a philosophy teacher rather than a history teacher. In philosophy, there were exams of Latin and Greek, but he told me: “all you got to do is learn Latin and Greek”. And this is how I learned Latin at the age of 20 and Greek at the age of 21 at *École Normale Supérieure*. I then passed, somewhat by chance, the “Aggregation” exam that qualified me as a philosophy teacher. But, before working as a teacher, I would have to do the compulsory military service.

**Could you tell us about your itineraries as an intellectual and political activist? You graduated in philosophy and your first research was related to the epistemology of sciences. You started to develop an interest in education topics when you were 25, thanks to a teacher training job that you had in Tunisia, right?**

When I was done with my studies, instead of going to the military quarters, I did the cultural cooperation program at the University of Tunis. I was nominated for the Department of Education Sciences, although I had never studied pedagogy. Like most philosophers, I despised pedagogy. I had to teach philosophy of education, psychology and other such subjects, even though I knew nothing about education. I started talking about Plato and after some weeks of Plato, a student questioned me about this content.

Many of the students were in their thirties and I was one of the youngest in the class. It was 1969, I was in my mid-twenties. I explained to them what I knew how to do: analyze concepts. They knew the reality of the Tunisian school and I knew that of the French school because I had been a student. We decided to study together, with a part focused on theory and another focused on real situations. I read the classical books – Freinet, Claparède, Dewey, Montessori, Makarenko etc – at night and on the weekend. They brought cases from school, such as: “I asked a student to fetch some chalk in the principal’s office. He stepped into the office and before he could say anything, he was slapped. What can we do?”

So we worked with books and reality. At that time, I started becoming aware of the enormous gap between them. Instead of staying only two years in Tunisia, I stayed four. That is how I did my training in Pedagogy. I made an effort to adapt to the country. My first son was born there and his middle name is Karim, an Arabic name. I studied Arabic for six hours a week for a year. Later, knowing how to read Arabic was also useful at the University of Paris 8, where many immigrants studied.

When I left Tunisia, I worked for an *École Normale* for 14 years, where I noticed the same problem I had noticed in Tunisia: the gap between reality and theory was enormous. I started to write *La Mystification Pédagogique*, not to say that pedagogy is a hoax but to say that there is a pedagogical discourse – no matter whether it is the traditional one or the so-called constructivist – which is deceiving because it does not address the real situation.

In my early thirties, along with my job as a professor, I worked for a left-wing weekly magazine as a volunteer journalist. I specialized in Education. At the time I received a proposal to work as a professional journalist – the job I had dreamed of as a teenager. But I decided to be a researcher for two reasons. First, I already had three children and working as a civil servant was safer than as a journalist. Second, as a journalist, I would ask questions to which, as a researcher, I had answers. And I realized that I would rather be an interviewee than an interviewer.

I joined the University of Paris 8 later on because I was researching educational policies among other things and I had a feeling that the time of the *Ecoles Normales* was about to end. In 1985 in France, I defended a thesis on the work that I had already published – 3 books and 42 articles – which amounted to more than 1,000 published pages. I intended to defend a regular doctoral thesis, but Gilles Ferry, my supervisor, suggested that I defended a *Thèse d'État* (which in Brazil would be a combination of Ph.D. and full professorship). At the very beginning of the school year, I had only two weeks to write a research note about everything that I had published. I wrote it at night and my wife had someone else type it. I did not even have time to proofread it. I was so naïve that I wrote 59 pages with single spacing between the lines, and normally people write with larger spacing to make the text look more serious and profound! Later on, with that thesis, I was hired as a full professor by Paris 8, at the very first time I applied, in 1987. That was very important to me because I did not have to suffer, wait and flatter the “great professors”. That way, even though I was at the top of the academic hierarchy, I was able to live outside the hierarchy and maintain my freedom of thought.

Power has never seduced me. I have already had power. At Paris 8, I ran the undergraduate and graduate programs. I was asked twice to run for rector, but I did not want to. I was the president of the Association of Education Researchers, the equivalent to ANPED in Brazil, for six years, that is, two mandates. But I have never accepted to be a member of the National University Council, which assesses co-workers' careers. I do not like to exert power, not only because power means responsibility but also because I feel a little ridiculous.

**Your interest in education was probably also related to the political context in France at that time in history. You started teaching one year after May 1968. What kind of young person were you? Were you involved in politics?**

I have always been a left-wing person, also because my parents were leftists although they have never been affiliated with a political party. In my youth, I always heard that I would get successful and would eventually forget my roots. This was a challenge to me.

Immediately after I finished the “Aggregation” test in 1968, I went to sleep because the test was very difficult. The following day, I heard about the outbreak of the revolution. Of course I took part in the events. I never erected barricades

because that is not my style, but I participated in the meetings, occupied Sorbonne, distributed folders in front of factories etc.

I was a working class student that belonged to the left wing because of his/her roots, but I never joined a political party because I quickly realized that one has no freedom of thought in political parties. I would be expelled.

When I had to leave Tunisia, I had no university connections; I did not belong to any university group. I applied for a job at any university in black Africa and got one in Togo. But, without notice, it disappeared from the official lists. I had been a union member in Tunisia. I belonged to the Higher Education Union and once we occupied the Embassy of France there. And the French government obviously did not want to send to Africa such type of professor.

I went back to France and worked at an *École Normale*. There, I was a minority union activist who wanted to change all the practices, including those of the unions. I was into this kind of activism, always suspicious of political parties.

Afterwards, while working at the University of Paris 8, I was an alderman of Saint-Denis, the town in the suburbs of Paris where the university is located. Saint-Denis is one of the poorest cities in France, with a working-class past and it is said to be violent. It was there that I did most of my research on the relationship with knowledge. In France, aldermen are not remunerated, they do voluntary sociopolitical work. They are elected from a list, with a program; I ran for alderman in a list with a communist mayor, socialists, ecologists, and people without a party, like me.

I am one of the founders of the World Education Forum, which took place in Porto Alegre (Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil) and I am still a member of its International Committee. But although I do not participate much now because it has been institutionalized.

I think I am an intellectual in the French sense of the word: a researcher who participates in social debates and movements, but who is not bound by a political party.

**Your first book launched in Brazil (*A mistificação pedagógica*. Ed. Zahar, unavailable) in the eighties, had great repercussion. In this book you discuss the significant gap between teaching theory and practice, social reality. How can such distance be overcome?**

Let us talk about Brazil. Teachers develop practices that are essentially traditional because the school has been conceived to have traditional practices: fragmented time and space, ways of distributing students according to their age and, above all, individual assessment, which generates a hierarchy. But there is something specific about Brazilian teachers: they know that they must claim to be constructivists to avoid problems.

University professors, without taking into account the conditions under which elementary school teachers work, explain that teachers should be constructivists. And when teachers ask professors what they should do, Brazilian professors do the same thing their French peers do: they say they will not give recipes. They refuse to give recipes because they do not have them. If they did, they would give them. If they knew how to work, they would say it. I believe we have to find a way out of this impasse. Many Brazilian schools are in a material situation that was typical of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is totally unrealistic to talk to teachers about constructivism. We know that in many schools the main difficulty is teachers' absenteeism. In the Amazon,

rain is a problem; there are students who walk for two hours to get to school, and there is no teacher. I do not mean to criticize anyone, I know it is tough, tougher here than in France, but this is the reality. If we want to change Brazilian schools, we have to work on reality. Reality has to be the starting point.

**In one of your articles, you state that you prefer the “crisis” of a democratic school to the piece of an elitist school. Considering what you have just said and taking into account the several difficulties and multiple problems that schools face today, what do you suggest educators and researchers do to tackle them?**

Of course we cannot give recipes, that is, ways of doing things that always work, no matter what the context is. But we can and should offer work techniques. Otherwise, we explain an ideal pedagogy to regular teachers, who have regular students, work in conditions that are frequently uncommon and we blame the teachers, which makes them think that they are not capable, that they do not know how to face their difficulties.

We should work with “regular” teachers and, from this point of view, I distrust discourses on the ideal school. There are examples of schools, like *Escola da Ponte*, in Portugal, which are very impressive. Of course this school is very interesting, out of the norm, but that is exactly the problem: it is out of the norm. What percentage of the teachers who are very moved by this example would actually embark on such adventure? And what is the real function of such heroic examples? When we give them, we tell teachers that we can change Brazilian schools now. It is true, but to do so there must be heroes. In Brazil, there are around 1,800,000 teachers, not 1,800,000 heroes. They are workers who want to do a good job but we cannot expect them all to be saints, activists, heroes. We in Brazil – I say we because I live here now and I share your worries and joys – we should work more on the Brazilian school reality and not on what an ideal school should be like.

This distance between theory and reality is a nearly chronic problem in education – and not only in Brazil. But the specificity of Brazil is that it has to solve all the problems at once and quickly. France and other European countries had a century to constitute the first four grades of elementary school and 20 years to construct the other four grades. In Brazil, we have to solve everything at once: finish the elementary school, which has been statistically solved, but which still has problems; we have to solve the high school problem, which is currently the most severe. Because of the insufficient number of high schools, there is now a bottleneck between elementary school and university. Furthermore, it is necessary to organize universities for globalization. There are schools here from the 21<sup>st</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, sometimes in the same neighborhood! This means that the unrealistic discourse has more serious consequences in Brazil than in France, since the distance between reality and discourse in France is shorter than here. It is nobody’s fault. I do not like to point fingers, but we have to solve these problems.

**You have been one of the first authors in the education field to draw attention to the relationship that subjects, particularly the poorest students, establish with knowledge, with what is taught at school. Do you think this theme still needs to be better understood? What new questions does this theme bring about?**

I will try to answer in the simplest way possible. One only learns if one studies, if one has an intellectual activity. But I only make an intellectual effort if the activity makes sense to me and offers me some kind of pleasure. Therefore, the activity itself, its sense, and the pleasure derived from it are central. Attending school, studying (or refusing to study), learning and understanding, both in school and out of school: what sense do young people make of this, particularly those in the working class? In other words, what is the relationship of the students with school and knowledge?

This approach, this way of questioning, implies a rupture with many previous questions and that is what matters above all. But we have to be careful: a relationship with knowledge is not an answer. It is a way of questioning. In France, I heard teachers say “he fails because he does not have a relationship with knowledge”. That is a mistake: everyone has a relationship with knowledge, even when one does not like to study. When someone is said not to have a relationship with knowledge, the analysis in terms of cultural deficiencies is reintroduced, which is an ideological catastrophe. The notion of the relationship with knowledge allows us to keep the idea of cultural deficiencies away. The problem is not about saying whether the relationship of the student with knowledge is “good” or not, but to understand the contradictions that the student faces at school. Out of school s/he experiences ways of learning that are very different from the ones required for good academic achievement. We must try to understand those contradictions. That is why I strongly insist on the heterogeneity of the ways of learning. There are things that can only be learned at school and, therefore, one cannot underestimate this institution. But important things are also learned out of school.

Today, I base this idea of the heterogeneity of the ways of learning on an anthropologic analysis. Human beings are born incomplete, as authors as different as Kant, Marx, Vygotsky or Lacan explain. But they are born in a human world which provides them with a heritage. By acquiring this heritage, through education, the offspring of men become human. In other words, what characterizes human beings is not within each individual. As Marx wrote on his VIth Thesis about Feuerbach, the essence of human beings is a set of social relationships. If we expand this idea, we can consider that the essence of human beings is everything that the human species has created throughout history. Therefore, education is a humanization, socialization and subjectivation process. In psychology, this leads to a cultural-historical perspective. In sociology, this leads to a reassessment of the subject issue, which sociology has left aside to constitute itself. In education research, we should consider the student a human being, who is social and singular in an inseparable manner – and perhaps this is the specificity of the discipline Education.

**You criticize sociology’s tendency not to consider the singular and point out psychology’s reductionism of not considering the collective, the plural, the social. For you, the issue of the subject is particularly important. Is that the reason for your dialogue with the works of Lacan and, more recently, with those of Vygotsky?**

I started studying psychoanalysis in the 1960s, a lot earlier than Vygotsky, an author that was not known in France until the 1980s. And I found the cultural-historical psychology perspective in Brazil.

I immediately agreed with Vygotsky, one of the few thinkers in education who is a real Marxist. I am interested in the cultural-historical perspective and, for me, it is nearly evident that human beings construct themselves by integrating a part of what has been created by the human species. In a way, that is the very definition of the cultural-historical perspective. But I also need psychoanalysis, which Vygotsky refused to integrate into his perspective, due to the Marxism of the time. Actually, what I write presupposes the notion of desire: since human beings are born incomplete, they spend their lives looking for something that would fulfill them. This is what Lacan calls "*objet petit a*" or "object little-a," an unattainable object of desire since nothing can complete a human being, be it love, money or power. Human beings are and remain unavoidably incomplete, always looking for something that can never fulfill them. Furthermore, because they are born incomplete, human beings immediately establish relationships with other human beings. As Descartes used to say, we are *levés à bras*, that is, we are carried in our parents' arms. Once born, babies do not change nature. In the classic Marxist perspective, it is the human species that changes nature. What do little babies have to do? Seduce their parents to get what they want, to meet their needs. What discipline helps me understand problems regarding desire and relationships? Psychoanalysis, although I know I am not a specialist in the area.

Therefore, I need Vygotsky and Lacan. I need Vygotsky to understand that the human psyche has been constructed throughout history and to comprehend what the relationship between the history of the human species and that of the subject is. I also need him to understand that subjects are not a set of biological drives who are subsequently socialized: they are social beings from the very beginning. But I need psychoanalysis, especially Lacan, to understand the roots of the desire to learn and to have knowledge. By the way, Lacan was the first to use the expression "relationship with knowledge". To learn, I need to be engaged in an intellectual activity. What is the driving force of this engagement? A desire. But how can we desire a mathematics theorem or a chemistry formula? This is a very concrete question: learning is *interesting* when intellectual content meets a deep desire. Vygotsky perceives this problem when he distinguishes between cultural-historical meaning and personal sense, and tries to articulate them. Such distinction was discussed by Leontiev.

Finally, I cannot forget that subjects must sustain their biological bodies, support themselves, work, and that thereby they get involved in relationships of domination and exploitation. Psychoanalysis knows that the subject is desire, but it also knows that the subject is structured by norms, which has led psychoanalysis to the notion of superego. But the sociology of psychoanalysis is as brief as sociologists' psychology. The notion of superego, of social norms, was not worked on by psychoanalysis, as if such notion were clear.

**How do you see, in the Marxist line of thought, the relationship between the subject and society, the subject and social institutions? We do not mean institutions in the normative sense, but in the sense of all the relationships that define a pattern to be reproduced and institutionalized. This relationship is, of course, contradictory. But in what terms do you think this contradiction should be discussed?**



I do not know whether I am capable of answering this question. I will do what people usually do when they do not know the answer: answer another question. I would like to say two things, one from the sociological viewpoint and another from the psychoanalytical perspective.

Nowadays, the issue of the subject is important for sociology. It is a political matter. First of all, it is very interesting to analyze current society as a subject's source of suffering and abandonment. Individuals have never been as free as they are today and concurrently so abandoned. That applies to the young too: our society likes youth, but it does not like the young; it values everything that is new, but it does not make room for the young.

Bourdieu himself came across the issue of the suffering subject: before publishing *La misère du monde*, he wrote *La souffrance*, an article on the same topic. But a sociologist could not talk about subjects so Bourdieu proposed a sociological explanation of the phenomenon: when there is a gap between *habitus*, that is, the socially structured mental dispositions on the one hand, and the functioning conditions of this *habitus* on the other hand, the subject suffers. From my point of view, this explanation is interesting but it is not sufficient. I find it difficult to talk about the subject without taking into account what psychology, especially psychoanalysis, teach us.

Secondly, and in a more general way, sociology must take into account the contemporary phenomenon that I call "individuation of life and relationships". Individuation, which is a social and psychological process, and individualism, which is an ethical and political categorization, should not be confused. For example, in France, the great social movement of the 1980s was against racism and was led by an organization called *Touche pas à mon pote* (Don't hurt my friend). It is not individualism, since it is about refusing racism, but this refusal is thought in the logic of individuation: the concept of "racism" is too general to mobilize people, particularly the young, but referencing what non-whites suffer does mobilize them. How can we think about a society in which the individual has become a central reference and in which the subject suffers?

The second thing that I wish to say regards the matters of contemporary psychoanalysis. I have written extensively on the need of considering the subject. But I have recently found out, while reading things about Lacan, that the concept of subject is not clear at all. What is a subject? Who and what is that who says "I"? This is the issue that permeates Lacan's work. Lacan has often cited what Rimbaud, a great French poet, said: "*Je est un autre*" (I is someone else). If I is someone else, I need to understand his/her relationships with others and, in a broader way, with the society and the culture in which s/he lives, to understand what it means to be a subject. And then I run into Vygotsky again.

**You are a very experienced researcher. In addition to conducting research in France, you have coordinated studies in Tunisia, the Czech Republic, and Brazil. In 1987, you founded the ESCOL team (Éducation, Socialisation et Collectivités Locales), based on a research program on the relationship with knowledge. Taking into account your large experience as a researcher and as a mentor of new researchers, what advice would you give to young researchers in the education field?**

I set up a research team called ESCOL. I arrived at the university in 1987, at the time of the priority education zones. I was working for Paris 8, in a very poor town and I wanted to work on those zones. The basic idea was to work on the inside and outside of the school, education, socialization, and collectivity, which in Brazil would be called community.

At the beginning, it was not easy because I wanted to work on the difficulties of the weakest students in a fragile place. The French equivalent to the Secretary of Education, who in France exercises authority over universities and was right-wing, told the Rector of Paris 8 to tell me that that was not a good idea. I asked for a prohibition in writing, because in France a civil servant does not have to follow a verbal command. He did not comply because he knew his text would end up being published by the national press. So I decided to carry on. Sometimes, research is also a political confrontation with authorities. Later, I also had problems with the Minister of Education, who was a socialist, concerning another study. If you want a peaceful life and official honors, give up being a researcher, or only pretend to be doing research! This is the first thing that I would say, and actually do say, to young researchers.

The second thing is: “dare create”, listen to the arguments and guidance of your supervisor, but do not follow his/her *commands*. In your work, you can even criticize what your supervisor has written – which has already happened with my doctoral students. In the intellectual world, there can be coaches, like in soccer, there can be more experienced colleagues, but there cannot be bosses. Also, do not rely on methodology books too much: those who research do not have time to write methodology books, and vice-versa. For example, these books use too many pages to classify interviews into unstructured, semi-structured, and structured, but researchers always use semi-structured interviews. The so-called structured interviews are questionnaires administered orally; they are not interviews. And the unstructured interviews are nothing but chit-chat.

I will tell you how I created that research instrument, widely used today, which I called in French *bilan de savoir*, an expression which has been translated in Brazil as “balanço de saber”, “escrita de saber”, “inventário de saber”<sup>2</sup>. The Secretary I told you about did not issue a prohibition, but told the principals of high schools to deny me access to the classes. The principal of the local high school was polite, offered me coffee, but used several excuses to never let me enter the classrooms. That lasted 8 months. At the end, the teachers themselves became interested in my research and asked to meet me. They said they would work with me and asked what we would do in the following meeting. I had not thought about that and did not actually know... If I had followed the methodological rule, I would have said that we were going to work on our own relationship with knowledge. But I knew that if I did that, they would not show up for the third meeting. So I improvised: “We are at the end of the school year. Let’s make a knowledge inventory with the students who are graduating from high school.” They asked me what that was. I did not know it either. My idea was to make an inventory. I explained to them what a health inventory was, what a car inventory was, and asked them to explain the same thing to their students. They came back with very interesting texts. In the following year, with Élisabeth Bautier and Jean-Yves Rochex, who had joined me, we structured the wording of the

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<sup>2</sup> Those three terms could be translated into English as knowledge audit, knowledge writing, knowledge inventory.

inventory question: “Since I was born, I have learned many things at home, at school, in the streets and elsewhere. What is important about all this? And now what do I expect?” I had just created a research instrument.

I tell my students that they can create research tools, that life is more than just questionnaires and interviews. I say: “You have all the rights, as long as you follow two rules: a) you should have a relevant methodology to answer your central questions and; b) you should work rigorously. Bearing that in mind, you do not have to ask for your supervisor’s authorization, although you may ask for advice. Stop asking whether you may or may not do something. Ask yourself: does this manner of data collection allow me to answer the central question rigorously? If it does, go ahead.” I think that in Brazil students are overly dependent on the supervisor. How can a too obedient student become a “master”?

The third thing that I would say, and actually always say, is the following: the specific job of a humanities researcher is to identify and think about contradictions. It is not to say that the people are right – by the way, the people do not care about the legitimacy researchers believe they confer them. Shortly after I realized this, I got rid of the official Marxist speech and started developing a Marxist *thought*, when I wrote, together with a colleague, a book on the history of the formation of blue-collar workers in France from 1789 to 1984. I discovered that there is no business elite. Rather, there are at least three types of businessmen – the big businessman, the middle businessman, and the shop owner – and that the three of them do not always share the same interests. I also discovered that, at the beginning, the revolutionary unionism was sexist and sometimes racist. I found contradictions, my pre-organized world collapsed and I was able to start thinking.

I explain this to Brazilian students. Many times they intend to do some research, but they already have a political answer, which prevents them from researching. They engage in field work with many certainties and few doubts. I explain that the difference between activism and research, also when one is an activist, is the issue of contradiction. Activists, at least the traditional ones, cannot take the opinion of their opponents into account; they cannot try to understand the viewpoint from which their opponents may be right because that will prevent their activism. On the contrary, the job of researchers is to bring contradictions to light, including the ones that exist in their field. And that is how they can help people and contribute to the progress of social movements.

Darwin always carried a little notebook to write down the essential objections to his theory, because he would not forget the favorable arguments, but he would forget the objections. This is research. Furthermore, research is a pleasant activity when one has a question that has not been answered, when there is a little suspense, when one finds contradictions. That is what I call live research, research that gives you pleasure. Research without ignorance is not research, research without effort does not exist, and research without pleasure is not worth it.

The first question I ask those who ask me for supervision is: “What do you want to know that nobody, including me, knows?” That question is the first step in the adventure that constitutes research.

**In the Brazilian context, you are one of the authors that can move through both the academic world and everyday school world with a lot of competence. Although you are an intellectual, you are heard and respected by professionals that work in public education. How do you explain this?**

First of all, my relationship-with-knowledge issue is in the crossroads of the subject, social inequality and knowledge issues. It is the same issue teachers face in the classroom. Secondly, I talk about situations and practices that the teacher knows, even when I theorize. Teachers do not refuse theory when it is about situations, problems, practices; they reject theory that has no identifiable object, theories in which authors only talk with other theory authors. Thirdly, after having defended the teachers as a union leader and having criticized them as a journalist, I ended up understanding which attitude I find fair. I know it is difficult to be a teacher, especially in the contemporary society, and I sympathize with teachers. I also know that current school practices are not satisfactory. But I have put away any discourse about “the blame”, since now I understand the contradictions that teachers have to face daily at work and I explain these contradictions to the teachers. And I always try to offer “concrete” hints, such as say what I would try to do if I were in their shoes. Teachers understand that. Besides, I do not “lecture”; I explain things, which is something quite different. I use many examples, I cite students and teachers, I do not use complicated words and, when I cannot avoid using them, I explain their meaning. I am not a “doctor” talking to teachers, blaming them, humiliating them. I am, at least I try to be, a research colleague sharing research results and conceptual tools and practices to make teachers stronger, prouder of their jobs, happier and to have them do the same thing to their students.

**In contemporary Brazil, we can say that education is still one of the most serious social problems. As for successive policies, there is bad use of the budget allocated to this sector, poor teacher training, propaedeutic and heavy curricula, and varied difficulties in everyday school life. There is also a great distrust of politicians in general. Because you have lived in Brazil for some time, you must be well aware of these problems. Our question is: what is your opinion on this state of affairs and what is the role of the researcher?**

I am a foreigner and as such I cannot and do not want to interfere in Brazilian politics, but of course you are right when you say what you have just said. However, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, in spite of everything, Brazil has advanced, including in education. In this area, Brazil progresses slowly but surely. Concerning the role of the researcher, I think I have already answered that question when I talked about working on contradictions.

I will take the opportunity to add one more idea: contrary to popular belief, the young are still politicized. They are not affiliated with a party, of course, but they are politicized, they participate in social movements. We have to understand that the way activism is manifested has changed. Large party or union movements no longer exist. There are movements promoted by women, ecologists, movements linked to several events (such as “caras pintadas”<sup>3</sup>). In Brazil, when I researched the young in Sergipe, church movements had the greatest number of participants, more because of social actions than faith. The young still raise issues of inequality, discrimination, racism, starvation in the world, but they belong to a generation that wants to see the

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<sup>3</sup> A youth movement that demonstrated in favor of the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello in the early 1990s.

result of their acts. They are characterized by life individuation and the distrust of politicians. In my research, the four institutions the young trust the least are the government, state and municipal legislative bodies, political parties, and the Congress. The business elite and the army come next. The institutions the young trust the most are the family, the teacher, the physician, and human rights defenders. The young have political interests and issues, but they show deep contempt and great distrust of everything related to institutionalized politics.

**In Brazil and in several parts of the world, higher education and graduate studies programs are undergoing great transformations. You worked for almost two decades as a professor at the University of Paris 8 and here in Brazil you have been working as a professor and researcher in higher education. Today you are 65 years old, which means you have already come a long way as an intellectual, as a thinker. What are your thoughts on the contemporary academic world (characterized by competitiveness, rush, pressures of every order, such as the need to publish a lot, to obtain funding etc.)? Is there a great difference between now and past times?**

This kind of pressure also exists in France, but I think it is worse in Brazil. I must admit that sometimes I get perplexed when I see researcher productivity assessment rules. My research on the young in Sergipe, conducted at the request of UNESCO in Brasilia and of the government of Sergipe, generated a 700-page report, based on 3052 administered questionnaires and focus groups, but it is worthless according to CAPES because it was published without a social security number. On the Lattes platform, research reports have to be listed under “other productions” because there is no place to register them, even though research reports are the foundation of the researcher’s work. We must teach the young to make research reports and publish articles based on them. The problem is that master students have to publish articles before defending their dissertation, since having published articles is one of CAPES’ criteria for the assessment of institutions that offer graduate education. Also, according to the current evaluation rules, books are not worth more than articles, which is absurd in human sciences. Researchers should be evaluated, but I find some of the current evaluation criteria strange.

In 1994, Andrew Wiles demonstrated a theorem enounced by Fermat in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, which many great mathematicians had been unable to demonstrate. Before that, Wiles was considered lost by researchers: he did not publish anything, he did not attend colloquia. He only devoted himself to trying to demonstrate the theorem. I do not know whether he published his demonstration with a social security number... Today, his name belongs to the history of mathematics. The pressure we are working under does not allow us to let important ideas mature. We have to rush from one theme to another according to publishing opportunities. What is left of those publications? Very few things. Some colleagues depend on their students to survive academically. In an international colloquium organized by our Education and Contemporaneity Group (EDUCON), a professor submitted thirteen texts, supposedly written with co-authors, who were her students. That makes no sense. I have always refused to sign a text with my graduate students and I still do. They get hurt. I tell them that I have not contributed to the text and they argue against it saying that I have helped them. But helping them is my job and the text is theirs.

**In one of your latest books published in Brazil (*Relação com o saber, formação dos professores e globalização: questões para a educação hoje*<sup>4</sup>, Artmed, 2005) you state that books are written not only for readers but also and most of all for authors. A book is a source of fulfillment and pleasure for its author. We would like you to tell us about your relationship with the world of books, with reading and writing.**

I do not reread what I publish, which sometimes results in curious conversations with people who know more than I do about what I have written. Once, a Brazilian student who was participating in my seminar at Paris 8 said something that I realized was from *La mystification pédagogique*. I said that I did not agree with it and she replied that I had written it. I then told her that she did not have to go around repeating some of the silly things that I had written. [laughter] She was hurt, but six months later, when she said goodbye, she thanked me and said that that had been the most important thing she had learned.

Sometimes I read a little extract of what I have published because I need to, but I will not repeat the same thing all my life. We do not know what we want to write until we finish writing a book. But we should not rewrite the book because it would be endless. We must continue our itinerary and write another book. That is why I said that one writes first for oneself.

I have very little time to read other authors' books. Because I thought that I was going to retire, I brought many books from France that I would like to read. But I have not read them yet and have not retired either. Besides, when it is a book on education, I say to myself: "Not today. I'm tired." There is this joke I like. The Pope enters a hotel room and sees a crucifix. He calls a hotel employee and says: "Take it away. It reminds me of the office". Because I talk about education all the time, I prefer to read novels. I have started reading Brazilian and Portuguese literature, which is very pleasant. I have studied English, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, but this is the first time in my life that I have mastered a second language. So I enjoy reading novels in Portuguese and sometimes in Spanish.

So you do not feel like a stranger in the tropics anymore?

No, I am no longer a stranger in the tropics... I do not read books on education regularly. I read them when I have to discuss a particular theme. Then I dive into the books with true pleasure because it is not a professional obligation. I need to understand something, so I need the books. I read them knowing what I am looking for. Reading then is like living, it is not an obligation. This practice is coherent with my epistemological references, especially with my favorite reference, Bachelard, who wrote "*Toute connaissance est réponse à une question*" (Knowledge is always an answer to a question).

**Could you please name some contemporary thinker who is important to you because s/he proposes an interesting, stimulating approach?**

It is not an easy question... If I did have to choose, I would say Michel de Certeau. He is a great author who wrote fundamental things on the invention of

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<sup>4</sup> Relationship with knowledge, teacher education and globalization: issues of education today.

everyday life, the arts of making, the difference between the strategies of the middle class, which dominates time and resources, and the tactics of the working classes, which make a bricolage according to timely opportunities. This author is crucial to help one overcome the pestering notion of “cultural deficiency.” There are important authors that I have not studied much, such as Wittgenstein and Habermas; I did not need them to help me think about what I tried to think about, but I know enough to realize their importance. And there are authors with whom I think [sic] and authors with whom I disagree. Bourdieu, a great thinker who allowed us to understand that the enemy is inside our heads, detaining us at the very moment we believe to be choosing with total freedom; Foucault, who disclosed the micro-powers that shape everyday life; Lacan, whom I have already talked about; the sociologists Goffman and Becker, who brought to light that deviation, transgression, and stigma are relationships, rather than characteristics of an act or subject; Snyders, who insisted his entire life on the importance of the knowledge matter. In the epistemology area, Bachelard and his intellectual heir, Canguilhem, who supervised my first study, which in a way means that I am kind of Bachelard’s grandson... And the founding parents. Marx, especially Marx the philosopher of the 1844 Manuscripts. And the French Marxist Lucien Sève, who introduced the individual issues into the Marxist debate. The great Marxist persecuted by the official Marxism – Vygotsky – and his heir, Leontiev. And Freud of course. A lot of people come to mind to answer the question “name some contemporary thinker...” But I am not a one-line-of-thought man, just like Michel de Certeau was not either.

### **Could you tell us about your current research and your plans for the future?**

I am trying to survive, jumping from one theme to another: I am now a true Brazilian professor [laughter]. I keep an eye on the issue of globalization and have published texts on it, for both political and scientific reasons. But in my current field research we investigate the relationships with school disciplines, both words in the plural. There is a basic question: for a child, what is the sense of learning, both inside and outside school? That is the question of the relationship with knowledge, in the singular. But philosophy, history, mathematics, physics, English, physical education etc. are very different school subjects and each of them has its own internal normativity. For example, in mathematics a symbol cannot have two meanings. And this is not an unbearable standardization enforced by the bourgeoisie but a norm without which there cannot be any mathematical activity. Poetry, on the contrary, is characterized by ambiguity. I would like to understand the relationships of students with those different fields of knowledge or culture.

We have been developing field research on that theme at the Federal University of Sergipe, in the EDUCON group, founded and led by my wife, Veleida Anahí da Silva. We have set up a research team on the relationships with school disciplines, with 12 subgroups, more than 70 researchers (12 Ph Doctors in several subjects, graduate students, undergraduate students and elementary school teachers). It is a calm investigation, conducted with no rush, which began nearly two years ago and that will probably take other two years. As far as I know, this theme has not been researched in a systematic, interdisciplinary way, which is how we are conducting our study. A new question deserves time. Besides, this group is a great place to train the young to do research. As for “concrete” training: we have constructed a questionnaire together, I have taught them what longitudinal analysis

is, how to categorize etc. I show and do things with them. I have even taught how to use Excel to those who wanted to learn it, to spare them from wasting hours calculating percentages. Research is, above all, a learning experience, a handcraft. It is not a class on historicism, phenomenology, Marxism and structuralism. It is useful to know what they are, but learning them is not the same as getting research training.

We have collected more than 3,000 questionnaires with open questions over the past one and a half years. We have received no funding, which means that I have time to do research instead of wasting time writing reports for CNPq [laughter]. We have also not attracted the fellowship hunters: in this research, one cannot get anything but education and pleasure. I do not mean to insult anybody, I know from experience that it is not easy to be a professor in Brazil, but a fundamental problem in the Brazilian education research is that it is often done by fellowship recipients that have no education or training to do so, with supervisors that have no time to take care of them. Later, the professor kind of fixes the text, but with little direct contact with the data, not diving into the details, those details that are often sources of new ideas. "What code should I apply to this answer: this one or that one?" This is what I call working "in the basement of research" and I think that the supervisor of a large research group like ours should participate, in one way or another, in those micro-decisions which are apparently just technical, but which are in fact essential for data collection and analysis.

As for my plans for the future, they are simple: to continue living, researching, and publishing.