THE CIRCULATION OF EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL THEORIES AND PRACTICES: THE ALGERIAN EXPERIENCE

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Abstract - *This article sets out to explore the historical development of educational provision in modern Algeria. It argues that despite the country's formal political independence, and despite the authorities' attempts to celebrate national identity, Algeria is still characterised by the wholesale adoption of European educational theories, policies and practices, even though these fail to connect with indigenous realities and needs. The article considers the tensions between fundamentalism on the one hand, and westernisation on the other, claiming that both positions fail to respond to the question of Algerian identity and to the development of an effective educational system that reflects that identity.*

O n an historical plane, Algeria has for a long time been the land of invasions of several peoples and tribes, namely the Vandals (429-535), the Ottomans (1554-1830), the Spanish (1504-1792), and the French (1830-1962), but she has also been the crucible of several civilisations: berber, phoenician, carthaginian, roman, byzantine, arab-muslim, turkish, spanish and french. If, on the one hand, the Algerians' resistance at this level has been fierce and successful, on the other hand, it has been tougher, sometimes quasi insuperable, if not quixotic (others would say counter-productive), to fight against the incursion of more elusive, though less visible, and yet more invading opponents: i.e., ideas and theories, particularly on educational matters, which were or are still produced in foreign contexts and applied in Algeria.

After their political freedom, few developing countries achieved economic independence, and very few have been able to attain their total cultural freedom. Besides, the weight of the colonial heritage concerning the school system has been particularly heavy, and its consequences catastrophic. Thus:

> *...what the Europeans' departure is going to bring about is the sudden promotion of a certain number of civil servants on the spot, and a massive entry of those who have benefited from their schooling in French, as well as men - mainly 'political' cadres of the struggle (for independence) - who benefit from a loosening of the regulations concerning recruitment (Glasman & Kremer 1978:26).*

This is true of all sectors of the state, but education has been particularly hit. Therefore, when developing countries tried to improve their educational structures, they experienced multi-faceted problems which prevented education from playing its role in the overall development of the nation. This is no less the case of Algeria.

The aim of this paper is to study the circulation of certain European educational ideas or theories and their application in the school system whose major aim, whether in formal or informal education, is to prepare and help people to reach, through

training, a better standard of living, of literacy and health. The present debate centres on the assessment and quantification of the importance of the impact of these ideas on the system, and their role in the improvement of the educational structures, and the possible attribution of failure, admitted or not, in the implementation of the above-mentioned thoughts and practices.

Two broad periods can be identified in the history of educational ideas and thoughts in Algeria. They correspond roughly to the application, very often misapplication, of a major educational theory or practice (home-produced: rather rare; or imported or borrowed from foreign countries: very often the case, and the object of our concern in this paper). The two identified periods tie with the educational philosophies which pervaded the Algerian educational system for decades. In the first period (1962-1970), Algeria went through a mimicry phase, due more to objective factors than well-thought out decisions. Then, in the second period (1971-1995), she started to develop its own idiosyncratic vision of, and strategy in, education and pedagogy.

"The colonial hangover" (1962-1970): the impossible emancipation

The first period can be qualified as the era of *'impossible emancipation'* because of the rather restrictive political, social, economic and educational factors present shortly after Independence in 1962. Besides, any national culture retreats or even fades away when foreign cultures invade a given country with ease or with force, and where little resistance is developed against the intruder. This is certainly true of Algeria which failed to generate the conditions for success in general growth or those for a steady development. In addition, the skilled manpower and adequate financing necessary to allow the country to free itself from the long standing bonds with metropolitan France were scarce or absent. Once again, the limited means (human: lack of teachers; infrastructural: few schools, lycées or colleges, and only one university in Algiers; financial: Algeria was then an agricultural country; and organisational: lack of managers) and an absence of expertise in educational matters made the task of bringing about a 'true' Algerian educational system difficult, if not impossible to achieve.

After independence, and despite an ultra-nationalist ideology, the educational authorities had to make do with a hybrid school system resulting, on the one hand, from the lukewarm reforms undertaken by the French during colonisation, and on the other, the embryonic educational framework consisting of hundreds of koranic schools and *medersa,* the equivalent of the European colleges providing religious teaching. With independence, Algeria inherited problems from colonial rule: a rigid school curriculum and a very selective system of examinations strewn with formal tests like obstacles throughout the school system: first, *La Sixième,* 6th year primary school; second, the B.E.P.C. *(Brevet d'Etudes du Premier Cycle)* fourth year secondary school; third, the *Probatoire,* or first part of the *Baccalauréat,* sixth year secondary school;

and finally, the *Baccalauréat* or its second part, seventh year secondary school. This obstacle race, of course, led to a very high school drop-out level.

From 1962, the Algerian government felt the need to develop an authentically Algerian system of education able to satisfy the country's plans for rapid economic growth, and also to face the ever-growing demand of the public for a substantial increase in education provision. To face this demand, but also to stop the human haemorrhage from the schools due to the departure of teachers of French stock, educational institutions called upon teachers from traditional structures, namely koranic schools and *medersa*. This had bad effects on the quality of teaching. Educational authorities had to reverse this decision (Grandguillaume 1983) in order to avoid the entrenchment of a very low level of educational provision. Since then, the school system has undergone a series of reforms to re-shape the educational structure, basing its philosophy on ideas originating mainly from Europe, either directly imported from European countries or through people who were completely behind these ideas because of their education or training.

The first period in the history of education in Algeria is characterised by the reproduction of European school models. Indeed the Algerian educational system remained, for a long time, a carbon copy of the French one. French policies of centralism, in synchrony with the *democratic centralism* of the Algerian regime, and secularism, since religious teaching was not as systematic as it is presently, were carried on without change, deviation or alteration. The educational authorities had, as a priority, to take over from the French manpower at all levels of the school system (as teachers, course designers, educational institution managers, inspectors, etc.). It is partly thanks to foreign expatriates' know-how that all sorts of problems were handled more or less adequately.

The application of such borrowed theories and practices has led *de facto* to a centralising and standardising monolithism which, in the long run, has discredited or rather ignored, the indigenous traditional values and attitudes to make room for modernism as determined by the *developed centre* (as opposed to *underdeveloped periphery* to which Algeria belonged). One must add that this educational monolithism was in harmony with political monolithism advocated during the 1960s and 1970s by the anti-imperialistic and socialist leaders who ruled the country. People endured the rigours of this new yoke. In some ways this was not new to them, but this time they bore this version of the burden with more understanding and even fatalism: a well-known attitude Algerians develop in the face of strong adversity or a catastrophe.

Amidst this profusion of thoughts and theories originating from Europe, Algerian educationists were more concerned, consciously or not, with the preservation of the school infrastructure, the provision of sufficient but not necessarily qualified manpower, and the development of a centralised administrative system, partly because of a need to maintain their own status and privileges, due to their lack of expertise and know-how, or because of an absence of intellectual courage to tackle real problems at the root of the ills.

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Besides, the Algerian educationists were then engaged in action as technocrats, busy with the technicalities of the school system. They did not take up the role of intellectuals and failed to generate theoretical debates in order to develop an indigenous philosophy of education to inform their policy-making. This failure can be partly attributed to the insufficency, quantitatively and qualitatively speaking, of Algerian cadres, but also to the tight control of the political authorities, (or rather the ruling party) over educational matter and change in the school system.

Despite its socialist regime, Algeriá turned quite often towards the developed centre for an expert's view or help to solve the numerous problems she experienced in all fields. However, maybe due to the Algerian regime, there was a certain western European reluctance to co-operate and help the country meet its economic, political, and educational needs. Consequently, the Algerian state looked eastward, towards the Eastern block and the Middle Eastern countries, and although without the proper financial or human resources, adopted a voluntarist policy to reduce, among other things, the level of illiteracy. Such was the priority of the first government, intent to meet the demands of the school system and the economy. However, there was an additional problem: a marked opposition between the productive sector and the system of education. Each of them seemed to be living in total isolation from the other. Thus:

> *the educational system produced degree-holders in the scientific and technical fields, less and less called upon by industry, and whose job, when they are recruited, has nearly nothing to do with the expressed needs. As for the productive sector, it met its own needs in technological competences in a quasi autonomous way, on the one hand by equipping itself with its proper structures of training, and on the other by drawing heavily and from the start on foreign technical aid (Djeflat 1993:43).*

In the first decade of its Independence, Algeria became the field for the experimentation of foreign theories brought by individuals (experts, teachers) or groups (companies, research units) from Europe, the USA, or the Middle East. Strangely enough, this burgeoning life of ideas prevented the educational authorities from freeing themselves from too narrow a cooperation with 'friendly' states. The ideas applied were not always for the good of the country nor of the people. Algeria badly needed hundreds of experts in education, industry and economy in general. Unfortunately, the expatriates were not always as expert as it was claimed, to say the least. Moreover, this cacophony of conflicting views did not help the authorities to find a happy medium between some extreme opinions. All this gave a heterogeneous and unorganised character to the whole educational system, which reinforced its lack of organisation and coherence.

Meanwhile, the solving of the economic (until the oil boom of the 1970s) and political problems (military coup in 1965) was the first item on the government's agenda. Education was not, practically speaking, a priority for politicians except in speeches and slogans. In the political sphere, the only concern was the number of millions of dinars to give to education, which meant little, when we know that over 70% of the

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budget was devoted to salaries.

Under such adverse conditions (intellectual, human, political, and financial), it was almost impossible for the educational system to come of age. It was rather too early to have some kind of tradition established, as it was also imaginary or illusory to see total change occur overnight. The agents of change (Algerian experts, teachers, etc) were at that time few, untrained, or ignored. On the other hand, one should not forget the force of inertia constituted by some groups or individuals who felt endangered by certain educational measures, and who were thus more interested in preserving or getting a status, a profit, or a privilege to the detriment of the school system or the nation. During this first decade of its rather short history, if one considers 1962 as the starting date of modern Algeria, decision-makers, more often than not, affected a simple transplantation of ideas. Besides, they had very little if any capacity to adapt these theories to the environment, let alone create or invent ideas suitable to the educational setting. The motto of educationists seemed to be: *'Adopt, do not adapt'.*

But this state of affairs could not go on forever. Deeper reforms were needed in order to change the whole face and structure of the school system. Besides, it was important to shed the vestiges of 132 years of colonialism and build a socialist society that would move vigorously to the twenty first century, and at the same time prepare the country to obtain the autonomy and emancipation which it had failed to achieve in the first years of its independence. This was a highly difficult, if not utopian goal. However, that did not mean that Algeria had to live in autarchy. Development does not mean 'reinventing the wheel', but going beyond all the advances achieved in science and technology, rather than being tied by them.

"The paradigm shift" (1971-1995): the era of inconsistencies

Once the economic (thanks to the oil boom of the 1970s) and political problems (disappearance of strong opposition and strengthening of one-party socialist system) were somehow handled, the government turned towards the educational structure to reform it. Reforms were more carefully planned and most of the time were based on imported theories. However, this period was characterised by a gap between wishful thinking of the authorities, and a reality rarely apprehended in its entirety. Real problems on the terrain were very often not well grasped, if not totally ignored. Therefore, any change was very remote from the problem area it was supposed to remedy, either because the objectives were not realistic or the means to attain these objectives absent or insufficient.

The intention of the political as well as the educational authorities was first to strengthen the socialist approach to education (provision of equal opportunity to all, free schooling, school for all, scholarships awarded to the majority of pupils, or nominal fees in all cases). One other way of bringing change to the philosophical aspect directing the school system was to adopt the Polytechnical Curriculum Theory (East German model) for the first nine years of schooling. Hence 1978 saw the setting

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up of the Foundation School based on the fundamental principles of socialist education, namely:

• Compulsory schooling up to the age of 16, in order to ensure literacy and faithfulness to the Constitution and the National Charter;

• Fusion between primary and middle schools to avoid the problem of drop-outs;

• Scientific and technological literacy, given that an important objective of education was to produce citizens capable of adapting themselves not only to socio-economic and cultural, but also to technical and technologic transformations taking place. Literacy electives were encouraged less and less;

• Tightening of the bond between schooling and work, since education needed to be conceived and planned as an integral part of the development of the country, and had therefore to be intimately linked to the planning of other sectors (such as agriculture and industry).

The introduction of Foundation School has diminished the number of years of compulsory education from ten (in the old French-type system) to nine. French as a medium of instruction has disappeared from the school curricula. It is now considered as the first foreign language, a slight privilege over the other foreign languages, namely Spanish, English, German and Russian. Besides, the pupils can be oriented either towards vocational training or towards the secondary school. Entrance to university is subject to the award of the *baccalauréat*. Another institution was recently created: the University of Further Training (*l'Université de la Formation Continue:* UFC), for those who leave school without the *bac.* While no one would dispute its contribution, there is one criticism that is often made: it is a 'shadow university' with nearly the same programmes as can be found at the traditional universities without, however, the necessary human resources.

The *Ecole Fondamentale et Polytechnique* was the result of the pressure for more and better education. It supposes the reconversion of the middle cycle and its combination with the primary cycle which precedes it. Its aim is to become progressively polytechnical, combine theory with practice, and bridge the gap between academic and practical studies. Foundation School came about to put the whole system back in its qualitative context with the hope that it would solve the problem of drop-outs, which has become somewhat catastrophic in proportion.

We have avoided speaking of higher education, because it is our feeling that only cosmetic changes were brought about by the 1971 Reform of Higher Education. Among such changes was the transformation of faculties into institutes. On the other hand, Foundation School was thought to revolutionise the system, and at the same time satisfy the demands of modernism, which meant that the Algerian system of education had to support an industrial revolution. This it did not always do and indeed a number of harmful and counter-productive decisions were taken. Thus, 1979 saw the end of the technical colleges *(Collèges d'Enseignement Technique: C.E.T)* in a period when industry needed large numbers of skilled and semi-skilled workers (Djeflat 1993).

This paradigm shift (i.e. from a highly selective school system to a school for all through a democratisation of education) could not be completely realised because the triptych of the government's educational policy was far from being achieved. This threefold policy included:

- The 'Arabisation' of all curricula and medium of instruction (most scientific subjects are still taught in French);
- 'Algerianisation' of the teaching staff (now standing at about 80%); and
- The democratisation of education.

Results were mainly achieved in the democratisation of education. There has been in fact a quantitative development of education to mitigate the limited and selective opportunities provided by colonial masters. The benefits include the replacement of an elitist system by a more balanced one with equal opportunities for all, and the reduction of social stratification (Miliani 1991). There has been a shift, therefore, in that education went from a phase where it was highly selective and competitive, to a stage where it became considered as an inalienable human right for the benefit of all. This swing of the pendulum was not supported by the pedagogical, didactic and human resources necessary to provide a quality education for all. Furthermore, a new phenomenon appeared with mass schooling: school drop-outs. These drop-outs and other young unemployed who developed a kind of anti-establishment attitude, became known as '*Hittiste*' (those who lean on walls).

The type of school advocated was therefore more concerned with political principles in line with the socialist regime than with other types of organisation or ways of functioning of the educational system. However, the role of education is now increasingly being seen as a promoter of growth and as an investment for the future.

Despite the everlasting slogans, the situation on the terrain was totally different. In reality, there was also a continuation of a French centralist orientation and of the dominance of degrees over expertise. Degrees were and are still valued more than the level of expertise of teachers. The other problem came from the fact that the educational authorities were, and are still, looking for the help of foreign training research units, i.e. *Bureaux d'etudes*, mostly French, American and British, in order to have access to technologies, an assumption which proved with time to be false. Most of the time these very companies of educational engineering were focusing their efforts on obtaining contracts which excluded the national expert from the control or mastery of the knowledge or know-how they sold. Indigenous experts were mostly concerned with administrative affairs.

> *The intervention of the research unit means the coherent use of methods and techniques of capitalistic management: experts, profitability, computer, everything there is to impose the image of a superior rationality, and therefore not questionable (Glasman & Kremer 1978:127).*

The result of this profusion of ideas and theories was an incoherent set of structures and practices. This was partly due to the antagonistic nature of the theories or experiences applied, for there was not only diffusion of a knowledge and/or know-

how, but also the laying of an ideological superstructure upon a culture alien to it. This melting-pot of ideas gave birth to educational institutions (Foundation School, *Lycée, Collège,* University, University centres...) that are placed side by side without being integrated into a whole. This atomistic vision of school could not logically lead to a well integrated educational system.

Furthermore, there was then a blatant contradiction between the so-called anti-imperialistic position of the country, as expressed in official speeches, and the use of capitalist methods of management recommended by these research units. The latter's educational theories and proposals were supposed to be adapted to the 'national realities' of the country. However, content-wise the system was similar to that of many European nations, while the local teaching methodologies left a lot to be desired. In fact, what is still advocated is a quantitive approach to the development of education despite supposedly future-bound policies whose intent is focused more on quality. This concern for quality exists, but reality in the field is wrongly apprehended. To the real problems diagnosed (problem of drop-outs, medium of instruction, large class size, lack of qualified or well-trained teachers, foreign language learning...) in all educational areas, the authorities respond by launching sporadic, unsystematic and incongruous actions. Changes are always conceived in a limited and localised stage of the system, never as part of a whole where transformation at a level may have impacts on others. Besides, decisions for change seem to come out of the blue. The idea of long-term planning, of thinking in terms of decades, is something that decision-makers do not seem to be capable of.

Perspectives: between social fracture and economic crisis

Several individuals' personal and/or political ambitions have driven the country to its present social predicament. Even schooling has contributed greatly to the present social and cultural plight as Carlier (1995:406) notes, the *"Foundation School has provided the managerial staff, the troops and lexis, if not the syntax of neo-fundamentalism".*

The disappearance of social values has led the country to a fracture among members of the population which used to be united against one common enemy, colonialism. Since then it has lost faith in the future and in itself, and has also lost its sense of direction. The problems are all the more insuperable now that the country is suffering economically from the dictat of the International Monetry Fund: the influence of the world economy is being felt more and more, as Algeria progressively adopts a market economy.

This tragedy has many faces: economic, because Algeria relies too much on trade with Europe; social, since over one million Algerian emigrants live in France; political, given the strong links with the European Community and the USA; and technical/technological, due to the reliance on European know-how and expertise. All these facts will always facilitate the circulation of foreign ideas, notwithstanding the

speeches of educational/political authorities who increasingly advocate an open resistance to change initiated *extra muros* to make room for intramural initiatives. By way of reply to change generated from European thoughts, there is still a strong move to return to 'primeval roots', a favourite slogan of the conservatives. Among these are the *Salafists* who since the 1970s have advocated a puritan reformism towards 'authenticity', a concept rarely explained or defined In fact, a clarification of these roots is neither needed nor desired, because this would mean tackling very controversial aspects, where very opposed views are expressed. Foremost among these would be the discourse on national identity, the writing of the history of Algeria, and so on.

Today the government has decided, once again, to develop the ethos of a national system of education. It has thus decreed in April 1995 that a Higher Council for Education be created in order to structure the educational system in a more efficient way. The objective of the council is to link the work of the ministries of Education, of Higher Education and of Employment. Will this be another hope nipped in the bud? My feeling is that this top-down approach to solving problems is not the way to face the numerous demands of the school system. For over thirty years, education has tried many theories, most of them of European origin, but what seems to be essential is not only which educational theory to implement, but also whether the approach advocated is a systemic one or not. Most of the time, failure seems to be due to a micro-analysis of problems, forgetting their relationships with and in the whole.

Furthermore, I see a major point of contention which will block the implementation of European ideas in the Algerian school system: the notion of progress and growth the educational system should aim at. There is now a marked difference between those who favour the western view of development, and those who hold strong religious opinions. If the latter's vision had been subterranean but always present, even before independence and especially during the last ten years, it has now emerged as a major force to be reckoned with. The problem now is that the ideas and positions held by these opposite standpoints are at both ends of the theoretical and practical spectrum. What is unfortunate is that extremism characterises both positions and a happy medium seems very unlikely to be found. In any of the considered cases, when there is a possible change, there is no ecological consideration for the system of education. On the other hand, it is also my belief that education will always suffer from a primary monolithism of the decision-makers which is the expression of the fear of the alien, the other, except if the other is of arab or muslim origin. This tendency towards sameness sends back to us the everlasting problem of our national identity, a problem not yet solved. Very few governing authorities, political, cultural or educational, have dared tackle the thorny problem of Algerian identity. Many subterfuges have been used, but the problem remains untouched. Talking about this, Grandguillaume (1983:155) posits that

> ...*it is necessary (for the Algerians) to forge a myth of origin, a discourse on the origins which is also... a discourse on identity... the heroic struggle (against*
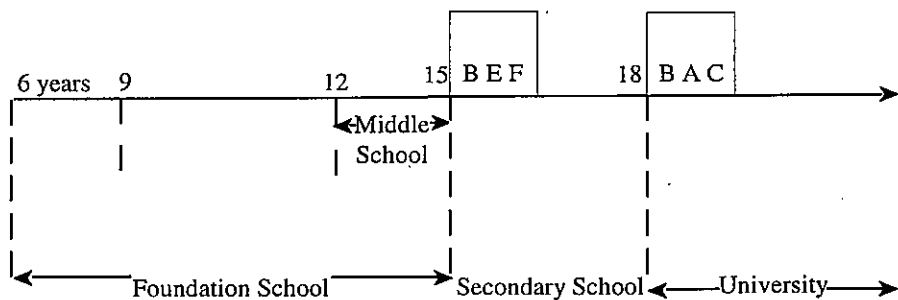
6 years 9   12   15 | B E F   18 | B A C

←Middle→ School

Foundation School ——→ Secondary School ←——University——→

Table 1. The Algerian School System

(BEF: *Brevet d'Enseignement Fondamental*).
(BAC: *Baccalauréat*).

age / Level	2-5	6-9	9-12	12-15	16-18	19-25	Educational Institution
Pre-school	not Systematic						Kindergarten
Foundation School		compulsory & free					1st Cycle (Basic stage)
			compulsory & free				2nd Cycle (Awakening stage)
				compulsory & free			3rd Cycle (training stage)
Secondary School					free		*Lycées* & *collèges*
Higher Education						free	Universities & *Grandes Ecoles*

Table 2. The Stages of the school system

France) can create this myth... the nation must be symbolised, it cannot be this way permanently by negation only, by opposition to the other, by the sole discourse on war.

The pluralism (or rather richness) of the country (linguistic, regional, ethnic, and intellectual) is thus ignored, denied or fought against, first by the ruling class, and then by several cultural and educational bodies, and this in favour of some supposedly unifying notions like *qawmiyya:* supra-nationality, one great arab nation, instead of the more limiting and yet identifiable *wataniyya:* nationhood (Laheraf 1988), or entities (Pan-Africanism, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Islamism...) which thus far have been ephemeral myths:

Arab nationalism and socialism on one side and islamism on the other have in Algeria taken on forms more uncompromising, ostentatious and authoritative than anywhere else, in a kind of caricatured excess imposed by an image of the self by constantly calling upon the past (Carlier 1995:408).

This monolithic approach to development is not the only problem experienced by the school. On the other side of the spectrum, the circulation of foreign ideas will always be detrimental to the Algerian system of education if endogenous and exogenous factors are not looked at carefully and changes brought about progressively. The need or obligation to graft foreign theories onto the system will always pose a problem because these are imposed on an alien set without a consideration for the whole, putting into question the ecological validity of these theories. The following points show the complexity of the intellectual debate the circulation of European theories can generate:

- Does not mimicry of educational thoughts, whatever their origin, harm social behaviours and cultural habits specific to countries of the periphery?

- Does Occidentalism (following western ideas) mean modernism/ development as defined by the countries recipient of the mentioned theories and ideas?

- Does not Occidentalism, which pretends to tend towards univeralism, mean uniformalism in its negative sense? Does not sameness then mean the end of progress, development and possibly creativity?

But this is another debate. And the Algerian educational system is not yet there.

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