



Foreword

This book springs from the idea that the changes that affect educational systems are produced by two categories of actors: decision-makers on one hand, and students and their families on the other. Despite its simplicity, this idea is at one and the same time sound, innovatory, powerful and praiseworthy. Sound, because it is incontestable that the changes in question are due to the actors involved. Innovatory, because there has been a tendency within the sociology of education in recent decades to attribute the outcome of educational systems to conflicts between social wholes that are loosely defined but described as dominant and dominated. Powerful, because it makes it possible to explain a great quantity of factual data, and far better than any of the studies inspired by the thesis that the development of the educational system is the result of conflict between social groups. Praiseworthy, because all research that aims to explain macroscopic data on the basis of the individual behaviour that is undoubtedly its cause, must face up to the awkward problems posed by the identification of the mechanisms through which individual behaviour engenders collective phenomena. This difficult question is usually referred to as that of the transition from the micro to the macro level. Nathalie Bulle manages brilliantly to escape from this exercise by conceiving a simulation model which not only has real explanatory value, but can also inspire other research on different topics.

It is clear that within the French education system that is her subject, pupils and their parents seek to take best advantage of the choices offered to them by the educational system at any given moment. The choice of curricular streams involving study of Latin have long been dictated in the minds of students and their families not so much by the love of the language, of Roman history or of that of Caesar and Cicero, than by a concern to follow a course of study that was socially advantageous. This role has been played at other times by German, a language considered to be difficult, and mathematics, a discipline that has the reputation of being unrewarding. The choices made by political decision makers about the distinctions between the streams, syllabuses and timetables devoted to a given discipline constitute the multiple parameters that structure the range of options available to pupils and their families. As far as the policy-makers are concerned, they are responding to some degree to the effects that result from the individual choices of pupils and their families.

A recent example of this was apparent in 2006 when political decision-makers were confronted with a difficult problem. It had become evident that the scientific stream in the second cursus at the *lycée* (the final period of education leading to the *baccalauréat*) had become so attractive that it had led to a devaluation of the literary stream, and they wished to find a remedy for this situation. The difference in prestige between the two streams that had gradually emerged was in fact the result of an aggregation of choices made over time by pupils and their families, as the model developed by Nathalie Bulle has shown. Confronted with this situation, political decision-makers wished to relieve the scientific stream of the role it had acquired as most prestigious, and thought up the idea of getting rid of the courses in history and geography that came at the end of the second cursus. As Nathalie Bulle makes clear these decision-makers also had their own objectives, strategies, values and, more generally, their beliefs. The means to be used in the hope of attaining these objectives were put forward not merely by “experts” but also by interest groups who do not always lose sight of their own interests. In this case the interest groups were right to protest against the idea of giving future citizens the hope of an easy and rapid route into the job market, but at a high price, that of a narrowly scientific education. In other cases, these interest groups have played a more negative role.

I would like to extend Nathalie Bulle’s analysis of this point in a general fashion, rather than try to summarise a book whose argument

is clear. Experts in educational science are one of these interest groups, alongside in particular the teachers unions and the associations that represent the parents of school pupils. It was the experts in educational science who previously, for example, had convinced decision makers that the whole word method of learning to read was better than the traditional phonics method. They were the same people who had recommended a structuralist approach to grammar and who had imposed this or that programme within one discipline or another. There is nothing surprising about such a phenomenon and it happens in every country. But political decision-makers in France seem more ready to be influenced by these groups than in neighbouring democracies. However, because there are conflicts between the corporate and general interest over many subjects, there are undesirable consequences which result from such cases. But why do these groups have greater political influence than in neighbouring democracies, this difference explaining why France finds particular difficulties in reforming its educational system?

Roberto Michels, a student of Max Weber, coined the term *iron law of oligarchy* to describe the tendency for the governments of democratic nations to be influenced by the opinions of interest groups rather than public opinion itself. But he was not able to explain this phenomenon. It was the American economist and sociologist Mancur Olson who succeeded in identifying the basic mechanism that was responsible for this tendency towards oligarchy amongst democracies. He demonstrated that when a small *organised* (or “lobby”) group tries to impose its interests, its will or its ideas on a large but *unorganised* group, it has a good chance of succeeding because as the members of the large group are unorganised they are likely to adopt the *free-rider* strategy, that is to assume that *the others* will try to exercise the pressure needed to oppose the interests of the small organised group, with all of the costs that it involves. Every person thus hopes to benefit from the collective action that he wishes for, but without having to be responsible for its costs. But since everyone tends to use the same reasoning, the large unorganised group that forms the public does not in most cases take any action in the end to oppose the small organised group. This mechanism is an explanation of why many governments are so sensitive to the demands of interest groups, and so often impose on the public views that they do not share.

But what is most important to note here is that the mechanism in question acquires an excessive power in a centralised state where, as

in France, the executive enjoys dominant power. It is because within this type of configuration of political power, political decisions tend to take the form of a compromise between the executive and the interest groups or lobbies.

This mechanism explains many features of educational policy. It explains why France appears to be less capable than other democracies of renewing its educational system and why it has such a low ranking in international classifications of educational training. It explains why it was possible to impose the whole word method of learning to read on French schoolchildren, even when it could quickly be seen to be counterproductive. It explains why the role of assessment and ranking of pupils may have been strongly watered down, contrary to the expressed will of the political authorities, or why the setting up of occupational training designed to fulfil the needs of the firm has been neglected, that is one of the main causes of youth unemployment in France.

Not only does Nathalie Bulle's book demonstrate an original approach which can inspire research in the sociology of education and be a role-model through the pertinence and effectiveness of its methodology, it also opens up important questions in other domains such as comparative political sociology.

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