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Detlef K. Muller, Fritz Ringer and Brian Simon

Excerpt

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Introduction

FRITZ RINGER

In England, as in France and Germany during the later nineteenth century, educational institutions were transformed by interrelated structural changes that set the decisive patterns for subsequent developments in education right up to the present day. One way to describe the transformations of this critical period is to point out that they brought secondary and higher education into closer interaction with the occupational system of the high industrial era. Primarily involved on the side of the educational system were certain younger and less prestigious institutions and curricula that were considered 'modern', 'technical' or 'applied' and thus potentially fruitful contributors to economic and technological progress. Primarily affected on the side of the occupational system was a range of younger professions that had come to be more educated than their early industrial precursors and whose expertise was arguably more relevant to commerce and industry than that of the older liberal and learned professions. The *partial* and *sectoral convergence* between the educational and the occupational systems that began in this way during the late nineteenth century has continued, through recurrent crises, ever since.

Economic functionalists have understandably been tempted to interpret this phenomenon of convergence as an adjustment of the educational system to the technological requirements of high industrial and late industrial economies. After all, contemporary societies do indeed have to equip large numbers of people with competences that early industrial societies could neglect. Thus Robert Locke has plausibly argued that high rates of economic development in Germany toward the end of the nineteenth century were due in large measure to the quantity and quality of training offered at the German technical institutes, which were both larger and more practically oriented than the Ecole Polytechnique in Paris, and yet more scientific in

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their approach to knowledge than the French *écoles nationales d'arts et métiers*.¹ Moreover, there certainly were scientists, technical experts, business leaders and educational reformers during the later nineteenth century who actively urged the modernisation of educational institutions in the light of newly emerging technical and economic 'needs'. When such new educational options as the French *enseignement spécial* and the German *Realgymnasium* first became available, they attracted enrolments quickly enough to suggest a positive 'market' or 'demand' for such options among parents from certain social groups.

Nevertheless, the economic functionalist approach to educational change is seriously flawed in several respects. To begin with, no one has ever succeeded in specifying the functionalist case by demonstrating the usefulness of *particular* curricula for *particular* technical or business positions. Thus Locke merely asserts that the abstractly theoretical bent of the Ecole Polytechnique spoiled its graduates for practical technical work. But even if we accept this judgement as generally reasonable, we may find it harder to concede Locke's simultaneous claim that the *écoles nationales d'arts et métiers* offered *too little* in the way of systematic science and technology, a claim that conflicts with Rodney Day's persuasive evidence to the contrary.² While also giving little attention to the qualitative character and quantitative significance of practically oriented programmes in French science faculties and related institutions, Locke simply tells us that the German technical institutes, and they alone, offered the *right sort* of education in the *right quantity* for optimal economic growth. But how does he know that? Could he specify the 'needs' of industry with comparable exactitude even for today? Were there enough places in industry even for the engineers and technicians that France did produce? Might Germany not have drawn more economic benefit from its highly developed system of primary and post-primary schooling, or from a surviving apprenticeship system and an emerging vocational school programme, than from its universities and technical institutes? And are we not beginning to wonder nowadays whether general forms of higher education may be more useful, even from the viewpoint of economic productivity, than highly articulated systems of specific technical qualifications? To raise such issues is just to indicate that the economic functionalist account of educational change (and the educationalist account of economic growth) must be questioned in detail, even though it seems initially plausible when stated at a very high level of generality.

A further difficulty with the economic functionalist case is more immediately apparent in the historical sources themselves. We can read what was written during the public debates over the future of secondary education in England, France and Germany, for example, and we can certainly find a few single-minded spokesmen for scientific and technical education among the

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participants in those debates. Yet we cannot help but notice as well that most recommendations made in those discussions aimed not only at economic benefits, but also and even primarily at a certain structure of social roles and ranks, in which those with 'applied', or 'merely practical' or 'technical', schooling typically ranked very low indeed. Even when established business leaders pointed to the needs of the economy, they often in fact explicitly or implicitly directed their most 'practical' advice to students from the middle and lower levels of the social hierarchy, while associating themselves, or perhaps their sons, with the more 'elevated' objectives of the traditionally most prestigious institutions and curricula.

It is therefore appropriate, we would argue, to look at the educational transformations of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries primarily in terms of their *social effects*, rather than primarily in terms of their *economic causes*. The educational systems that emerged from the structural changes of that crucial period, it seems to us, ended by perpetuating and reinforcing the hierarchic organisation of their societies, and we really want to ask just how this came about.

There has been a tendency to assume that the enlargement of access to secondary schools and university-level institutions that began in the late nineteenth century was a kind of opening of the educational system to new sectors of the population, a 'democratisation', or an improvement in the access chances of the less advantaged social groups. But recent research has thrown considerable doubt on the hypothesis that increased enrolments resulted in a significantly more equal distribution of *relative* educational opportunities. More students from the lower middle and working classes did indeed reach the universities, but so did larger numbers of students from the propertied upper middle classes. The resulting *relative* gains achieved by the working classes long remained virtually insignificant, and even the advances made by the lower middle classes were neither great nor easy to assess in view of rapidly changing socio-occupational categories and of the growing complexity and *hierarchical* differentiation of educational institutions. In becoming more widely available, moreover, educational qualifications tended to lose some of their value in the 'job market'. The old assumption that educational expansion has meant 'democratisation' in the sense of increased individual *socio-occupational mobility* has thus lost most of its credibility. As a matter of fact, individual mobility may be highly overrated as a historical issue – and as a species of 'democracy' – in education as in other fields. In any case, one must begin to seek alternative conceptions of the significance of education for social stratification.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social reproduction struck several of us as potentially useful in this connection because it provides an alternative to economic functionalist views of education and because it focuses more on relatively stable class and status relationships

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than it does on individual mobility. Social reproduction as conceived by Bourdieu entails the re-creation of hierarchic social relationships over time, or from parental to filial generations.³ Bourdieu distinguishes between economic, social and cultural capital. Social capital consists of familial 'connections' and the like. Cultural capital in one of its forms is cultural 'background', a relationship to the dominant culture that is passed along by the family. If those who inherit this form of cultural capital enter the school system, they have a very high chance of obtaining valuable credentials, which in turn will give them access to favourable occupational and social positions. Thus educational credentials largely confirm and certify family background; but they also constitute a new and highly convertible form of cultural capital. In describing contemporary French society, Bourdieu has stressed the bimodal shape of the social hierarchy, the fact that the distribution curves for economic and cultural capital are typically somewhat separated, as if by an axis of symmetry. He has also called attention to the phenomenon of 'conversion' (*reconversion*), that is to changes in the reproductive strategies of dominant social groups that have affected the relationship of partial interconvertibility between economic and cultural capital in post-war France.

In a simple form of social reproduction, the distribution of the three types of capital within a parental generation would be reincarnated in an essentially similar distribution within the following generation. The children of the highly educated would end up with educational advantages comparable to those of their parents. But this is *not* to say that most university students would necessarily be the children of university graduates. After all, university-educated parents might also have been joined at the universities by less favoured social groups. Their success in passing on their cultural capital would have to be considered perfect if all their children reached universities, even if the children had to share this advantage as much as, but no more than, the parents shared it. Indeed, what is reproduced, according to Bourdieu, is always a set of *relative* advantages and disadvantages, positions in a set of class *relationships*, not absolute quantities of economic, social or cultural capital.

Nor is social reproduction typically as simple as the examples of the last two paragraphs. In a certain context, even the widening of access to advanced education might help to reproduce the prevailing class relationships by improving the legitimating capacity of the educational system. More routinely, absolute assets might be increased to maintain relative advantages, or exchanged for more promising relative advantages in another realm. Or as has already been suggested, there might be significant changes in the relationships among the several forms of capital, or in their interconvertibility. Thus important social groups might find it necessary or advantageous to rely more heavily than in the past on education as a means

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of maintaining their social positions. Something along those lines apparently happened in connection with the structural changes of our period. Increasingly articulated educational systems came to play more central roles in perpetuating social hierarchies, and it is this development we have tried to understand under the heading of education and social reproduction.

The main difficulty we have had with Bourdieu's model is that it is rather unhistorical. Despite the flexibility introduced by the idea of possible changes in the relationships among the several species of capital, Bourdieu's educational system seems timelessly and almost too perfectly to fulfil its reproductive function. But I suspect that the degree of separation or incongruity between the distributions of economic and cultural capital has varied historically and from country to country, that it was greater during the early nineteenth century than it is today, and that it has in fact been attenuated by the convergence between education and occupation since about 1870. In any case, all of us have been interested in dynamic processes of structural *change*, and we are convinced that these processes profoundly altered the role played by the educational system within the larger society. More specifically, we believe that modern educational systems as we know them only really emerged during our period, together with that capacity to define and perpetuate social distances that Bourdieu rightly ascribes to them.

That is why most of us were fascinated by the work of Detlef Müller, and particularly by his emphasis upon processes of change *within* the educational system, and upon the impact of educational qualifications upon the socio-occupational hierarchy. According to Müller, the Prussian *Gymnasium* of the early nineteenth century enrolled a good many students who did *not* prepare for university entry, but left school after a few years to pursue a variety of non-graduate occupational paths. The *Gymnasium* thus functioned almost as a common school, with a socially diverse pattern of recruitment that was closely linked and effectively sustained by an equally diverse 'output' of academically oriented graduates *and* non-academically oriented early leavers. In its social effects this pattern was at least potentially 'democratic', to the extent that students entering the *Gymnasium* from relatively humble backgrounds might be encouraged by academic success and by the prompting of teachers to alter their perspectives from those of early leavers to those of graduates and university entrants. The more this happened, however, the greater the academically and socially conservative pressures became to transform the *Gymnasium* into a purely university-preparatory institution and in effect to channel potential early leavers away from the *Gymnasium* into the *Realschulen*, *Realgymnasien* and *Oberrealschulen* of the later nineteenth century. While these less fully accredited institutions ultimately managed to send many of their graduates to the universities as well, they long in effect prevented their pupils from compet-

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ing effectively for access to the universities and to the academic professions. The overall process, according to Müller, was thus one of exclusion, not one of expansion and democratisation.

With this in mind Müller developed the concept of systematisation, which really launched the whole discussion that produced this book. An initially diverse collection of vaguely defined schools, Müller argues, was gradually transformed into a highly structured *system* of precisely delimited and functionally interrelated educational institutions in Prussia, and possibly elsewhere, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In a sense the Prussian educational system became *more systematic*: the boundaries between different types of secondary institutions were more sharply drawn; curricula and graduate qualifications were meticulously specified; and the functional relationships among the different parts of the total system were fully articulated. Partly, the process was one of bureaucratic rationalisation. Government officials extracted fixed and explicit rules from previously implicit patterns of practice; in pursuit of a rational division of labour, they fully specified institutional roles. At the same time, the system thus created was a socially hierarchical one, and the whole process of systematisation was also a conflict-ridden exercise in social demarcation. Powerful interest groups intervened in decisive ways at a time of socially conservative reaction to the great depression of the late nineteenth century. What emerged from the systematisation of Prussian secondary schooling between 1870 and 1920, according to Müller, was therefore a rigorously stratified or 'class' system of education that has since been extended and modified but by no means replaced.

It is worth noting that the process of systematisation proceeded from the top of the academic hierarchy downwards. Thus in Prussia, beginning in the early nineteenth century, Latin schools that met certain standards were officially designated *Gymnasien*, while the remaining schools fell into a residual category of institutions that were both incompletely accredited and incompletely defined. From 1860 on, the later so-called *Realgymnasien* began to take shape, while the even less favoured *Oberrealschulen* did not emerge until 1878. At each step of the process new academic and social territories were thus in effect charted or colonised. More recently organised programmes were initially defined primarily by the boundary that separated them from the older and more established institutions. But as even remoter lands were opened up, further academic and social distinctions were discovered or invented. The decades around 1900 witnessed a critical stage in this downward advance of systematisation, in England and France as well as in Germany, as an essentially binary pattern of elite and popular schooling was superseded by an essentially triadic structure of elite secondary, non-elite secondary, and higher primary education.

Of course educational systems have always been to some degree system-

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atic, in the sense that their parts have been interrelated and interactive. Yet in Europe during our period the major systems certainly became more systematic than ever before. They seemed to evolve *as if* all particular institutions and arrangements were being adjusted to a unified overall plan. As complete hierarchies of school types were elaborated, the rank order of qualifications they offered came to define a corresponding hierarchy of occupations. This was particularly clear in late nineteenth-century Prussia, where educational qualifications were used to set civil service ranks, which in turn structured the wider occupational system. Certainly in France, and probably elsewhere as well, educational qualifications had a similarly defining impact upon the structure of occupations, so that the sectoral convergence between the educational and occupational systems during these crucial decades was a *genuinely interactive one*. With little exaggeration, one can speak of an 'educationalisation of the occupational system', not an industrialisation of education or a functional adjustment of the educational system to the economy. And this adds force to the concept of the relative autonomy of the educational system within the larger society.

My own contributions to our discussion have focused on the concept of 'segmentation' and on the idea of the 'generalist shift'. The term 'segmentation' is essentially descriptive. It refers to the division of educational systems into parallel segments or 'tracks', which differ both in their curricula and in the social origins of their pupils. Statistical measures of segmentation report the degree to which particular secondary programmes or schools, for example, deviate from the norm for the secondary system as a whole in their students' social origins. Curricular differentiation alone does not constitute segmentation; clear social differences must be involved as well. What matters is the *conjunction* between social and curricular differences, for such a conjunction will invest curricular differences with socially hierarchical meanings, which in turn will define the social status of graduates. It is only through the wedding of traditional cultural models to social distinctions that educational systems have come to play so powerful a role in social reproduction.

What I call the 'generalist shift' is the observable tendency of newly established 'practical' or 'applied' educational programmes and institutions to take on a more generalist and academic character, largely in response to the socio-cultural aspirations of teachers and parents.⁴ The idea of the generalist shift has seemed to me particularly suited to the history of French 'special' and 'modern' secondary schooling from the 1860s to the turn of the century, but it may also help to account for the process of systematisation as a whole.

Simplifying a little, one can picture the European educational systems of the mid-nineteenth century as defining an academic and social scale. Primary schools for the lower classes made up the lower end of this scale. At

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the upper end highly accredited secondary schools trained their graduates for the universities and for the traditionally learned professions, while also schooling non-graduate pupils for other middle-class occupations. Driven along partly by enrolment pressure and competition for credentials, the process of systematisation was a filling-in of the intervening positions along this academic and social scale. Whether already in existence or newly created, intermediate institutions tended to move upwards, imitating and approaching the traditionally prestigious secondary schools. The latter, meantime, defined and asserted their distinctiveness with increasing vigour, as did less favoured institutions with respect to rivals even lower on the scale.

The result was that lines in the middle ranges of the scale were sharply debated and ever more precisely drawn. Forms of segmentation had existed earlier; but they now became more significant for certain sectors of the occupational system, as well as more finely articulated, and much more systematic in character. Indeed, the public discussions between educational reformers and social conservatives in France and elsewhere during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries become much more comprehensible if one reads them as conflicts over the precise social meanings and statuses to be assigned to older and younger programmes conceived of as more or less *generally* educative, as against those conceived of as partly or wholly 'applied' or vocational in character.

Hilary Steedman has suggested the concept of 'defining institutions' in place of the 'generalist shift'. Her point is that certain distinctive characteristics of the most prestigious school types were non-curricular, at least in England. Since the generalist shift, by my own account, is essentially an imitation of the dominant institutions, one need not prejudge whether the aspect imitated was curricular or not. In addition to curriculum, the ethos and organisation of defining institutions were in fact emulated, at least in England.

These certainly are cogent arguments. On the other hand, curricular differences seem particularly capable of investing social distances with cultural meanings, thus legitimating and perpetuating them. Indeed, as I have suggested elsewhere, the English system of the twentieth century may have been unusually flexible precisely because social differences between schools had not been thoroughly linked to curricular ones.⁵ More generally, too, it is hard to imagine a non-curricular difference that would acquire the symbolic force of the distinction between, on the one hand, pure or theoretical and, on the other, practical or applied knowledge, or between 'disinterested' and utilitarian learning.

Of course curricular divergences did not acquire such meanings by force of logic, just as the classical curriculum was not inherently or necessarily less modern than the modern one. Bourdieu has rightly described the contents of a dominant culture as arbitrary, in the sense that they are neither logically

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nor biologically necessary. And yet there is nothing truly accidental about such linkages as that between Latin and an inherited past, Latin and disinterested culture, or Latin and social distinction. These associations had *historical* origins, and they proved extraordinarily forceful and enduring. That is why they continue to require our special attention.

Let me repeat at this point that my concept of segmentation is primarily descriptive, and that it does not in itself offer a theory of educational change. It does focus attention, however, upon the way in which curricular and cultural alternatives acquire socially hierarchical meanings, and here it is firmly linked to a historical theory, or a theory of tradition. The wedding of curricular patterns to social meanings takes place in an essentially historical process, for the curriculum offered by the traditional forms of elite education is unconsciously supposed to confer qualities upon the student that enrich him personally – and thus indirectly elevate him socially as well. But the qualities involved are clearly products of historical traditions; most typically, they are idealisations of qualities ascribed to the social and cultural elites of former days: the English gentleman, the *honnête homme*, the Humboldtian idealist of *Bildung*. Thus historical traditions confer meanings upon curricular contents, meanings that become important symbolic assets – and defining elements in the hierarchy of education.

My enthusiasm for the sociology of Max Weber, as a matter of fact, is largely due to the place of history in his analysis.⁶ Crucial to this aspect of his theory is his distinction of status position from class position, and his definition of status in terms of life-style and social honour. History was brought into his explanatory models because he recognised that status conventions were bound to change more slowly than the realities of class. The past is therefore always present in the symbolic contents of favoured life-styles; the signs of educational distinction are historical compromises in an almost Freudian sense, and the whole status system need never be fully congruent with the hierarchy of wealth and economic power. The rank order of educational institutions and curricula translates a pre-existent social hierarchy into the language of academic prestige, whether in the idiom of cultivation or in that of merit. Once established and vested with a certain autonomy, the educational hierarchy then acts back upon the social hierarchy, primarily to legitimate and reinforce it, but also to supplement and complicate it by the reintroduction of partly incongruent status traditions. The potential tensions and conflicts between the class and status orders, I would argue, became particularly sharp and visible during the crisis of the late nineteenth century precisely because the earlier separateness of the educational hierarchy was being eroded by the increased interaction between education and occupation.

Bourdieu has by no means neglected these relationships. Usually leaving social capital out of account, he has distinguished cultural from economic

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capital, much as Weber distinguished status from class. Moreover, he has given more searching attention to the symbolic contents of educational traditions, and to social categories and meanings more generally, than any other social theorist since Weber. His account of cultural reproduction derives much of its force from his awareness that hierarchic social relationships are not only expressed but also sustained by such categories and meanings, and that educational systems contribute significantly to their perpetuation. His conception of social reproduction is thus linked to a theory of legitimation – of ideology as symbolic domination, rather than as mere reflex and epiphenomenon.

These dimensions of Bourdieu's work are indispensable for the social historian of education and of knowledge. On the other hand, Bourdieu's 'cultural capital' is not explicitly and fully enough linked to the past; its distribution seems as immediately variable as the distribution of economic capital. Here again, Bourdieu might give more attention to genuine change over time, to historical contingency and variability, and thereby also to the social and ideological incongruities induced by the presence of the past. In other respects Bourdieu has developed aspects of Weber's theories well beyond their original formulations. With respect to status, tradition and history, however, it is Weber's approach that still appears more fruitful.

Despite a certain convergence of viewpoints, as the attentive reader will discover in the chapters that follow, the contributors to this volume continue to disagree about several issues, at least in emphasis. Thus Müller interprets the evolution of Prussian secondary schooling over the course of the nineteenth century primarily as a process of *exclusion*, and his analysis is based on rigorous research at the local and regional level. My own summary sketch of Prussian secondary enrolments in Chapter 2 is intended to challenge Müller's interpretation, or at least to qualify it; but I focus on *net* and *long-term* quantitative changes *in all of Prussia*. Of course, one has to expect a divergence between local, short-term processes on the one hand, and their aggregate effects on the other. My suggestion is only that the exclusionary dynamic must *somewhere* and *sometime* have been accompanied by a countervailing process of expansion. In Prussia as in France, I would argue, there certainly *was* a dynamic of exclusion along the lines charted by Müller; but there was also a process of expansion in the non-elite or 'modern' sector. Over the long run and in the aggregate, these two *countervailing* dynamics produced the net effect of quantitative stability in the traditional secondary sector, along with moderate expansion in the newer and less highly accredited programmes, especially at the non-graduate level. What we may really need, therefore, is a set of explanatory models that will account for the simultaneous presence of *exclusion and expansion*, and for the *interactive* relationship between them.

A further difference between Müller and myself appears to be largely a