

Richard MÜNCH, *Governing the School under Three Decades of Neoliberal Reform. From Educocracy to the Education-Industrial Complex*

Nathalie Bulle

---



**Édition électronique**

URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/ress/7201>

DOI : 10.4000/ress.7201

ISBN : 1663-4446

ISSN : 1663-4446

**Éditeur**

Librairie Droz

**Édition imprimée**

Date de publication : 21 mai 2021

Pagination : 248-252

ISSN : 0048-8046

**Référence électronique**

Nathalie Bulle, « Richard MÜNCH, *Governing the School under Three Decades of Neoliberal Reform. From Educocracy to the Education-Industrial Complex* », *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* [En ligne], 59-1 | 2021, mis en ligne le 21 mai 2021, consulté le 25 mai 2021. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/ress/7201> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/ress.7201>

---

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 25 mai 2021.

© Librairie Droz

---

# Richard MÜNCH, *Governing the School under Three Decades of Neoliberal Reform. From Educocracy to the Education-Industrial Complex*

Nathalie Bulle

---

## RÉFÉRENCE

Richard MÜNCH, 2020, *Governing the School under Three Decades of Neoliberal Reform. From Educocracy to the Education-Industrial Complex*, New York, Routledge, 252 p.

- 1 With this book, Richard Münch makes an important contribution to the sociology of education, questioning the forces that dominate contemporary educational development in the context of international globalization. These forces result from the diffusion to the educational sphere of neoliberal principles that dominate the regulation of the economic sphere (as expresses in the title of the introductory chapter “The economic governance of the school”). The illegitimate and harmful nature of this diffusion, with regard to the fundamental missions of the school, is demonstrated on the basis of a preliminary reflection on the conditions of the autonomy of education systems (in chap. 2 “From the pedagogical establishment to the education-industrial complex”). The pedagogical issue of education systems’ relative autonomy represents the crucial insight of Münch’s analysis, and is the guiding thread of his book. It translates into the educative sphere the anti-utilitarian philosophy that dominates his work and supports the modern demand for secular morality. With regard to schools, this demand concerns the autonomy ideal of the democratic individual, endowed with “independence, creativity and the power of judgment” (p.244), which requires an education “as comprehensive and profound as possible” and “a completely ideology-free educational reform that serves solely the objective of improving education” (p.35).

- 2 On this basis, Münch offers an analysis of contemporary pedagogical developments in the United States, justified by the pioneering role of the Anglo-Saxon countries in general, and the United States in particular, in the contemporaneous transformation of schooling. The methodological approach adopted is resolutely part of a voluntarist theory of social action, supported and developed by the author in his various works, with particular reference to the figure of Talcott Parsons. Münch is also, it seems to us, part of a more direct Weberian filiation, since his analysis is based on a well-understood methodological individualism. The main systems of action are studied, the dynamics of which are explained by the new situations created and the purposes they inspire to the actors of these systems, especially those who hold a power of influence or a power of action. The evolutions brought to light represent the unintended consequences of these actions, perverse effects both figuratively and literally, which endanger the school's profound ideals, if we consider how much "the theoretical model of the self-governance of schools through market competition leads to a completely different reality in practice, in which the school does not govern itself but becomes the plaything of a network of actors, each of whom pursues their very own interests" (p.5). The reference here to the actors' own interests does not represent a general interpretive stance but refers to the instrumental forms of rationality that dominate the models of economic action infused into the educative field.
- 3 What are the action systems concerned and their actors? Very generally, in the state and federal administrations, these are involved in the "school choice" agenda and programs, especially under the No Child Left Behind Act (to which chap. 3 is devoted: "No child left behind? Corporate education reform in the United States") Other major institutional actors are represented by foundations, and international consortiums such as the OECD Directorate of Education, consulting firms such as McKinsey and think tanks such as the Hoover Institution. In addition, among main economic actors, textbook and testing industries are principally in play, with a globally operating oligopoly involving Pearson Education, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt and McGraw Hill Education (this new educational directorate is studied in chap. 4 "The U.S. education-industrial complex") Münch bases his analysis of the conditions for the autonomy of education systems on the work of Niklas Luhmann (2002, *Das Erziehungssystem der Gesellschaft*, Suhrkamp), whose name is attached to a system theory of society, and that of Niklas Luhmann and Eberhard Schorr (1988, *Reflexionsprobleme im Erziehungssystem*, Suhrkamp). These works refer to the development of Prussian education at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which was marked by the emergence of the tension between the neo-humanist ideal of education as an end in itself and the realistic ideal of a useful education, which grew with the gain in power of the commercial and industrial bourgeoisie.
- 4 The interest of the reference to the work of Luhmann and Schorr is notably justified by their introduction of an interesting auxiliary construct, the "pedagogical establishment". This construct comprises "pedagogical experts who are active in the training of teachers, in educational research, in the administration of education on all levels from local communities up to the federal bureaucracy, in political parties, in churches and in professional associations or trade unions" (p.10). The pedagogical establishment is supposed to guarantee the autonomy of the education system by keeping the state supervision of school education under pedagogical control. In this aim, this group of pedagogical actors needs support from four additional pillars of the

educational system's autonomy: "pedagogy as reflection theory of education" (which ensures the interface between the internal consistency of the pedagogical system and external interests and expectations), "teaching as a profession" (which requires the autonomy of the teaching practice), requirements of the "school as an organization" (involving self-referential operation of decisions) and "instruction as an interaction system" (involving the social embedding of learning and personality formation).

- 5 At the roots of the educational systems' autonomy, we thus need autonomous pedagogical actors with relative intellectual, political, organizational freedom and power and also, with regard to the specific educative mission of the school, true relational and instructional practices. Therefore, pedagogy—in a broad sense, involving a reflective conception of educational ends, knowledge and methods—needs to be endorsed as a fundamental value by a body of dedicated social actors as well as the maintenance of social processes ensuring their relative professional autonomy.
- 6 These conditions are fundamentally threatened by today's implementation in schools of various neo-liberal processes of governance and control. In short, all of the dynamics in play involving actors within the educative and political systems, international consortiums and private firms investing in the educational field, tend to develop on the basis of steering "from above", by the control of pupils' performance, and "from below", by the artificial creation of a schooling market based on free school choice. However, just as the effects of education cannot truly be measured in a standardized way and reduced to basic functional cognitive skills, neither can education be evaluated by the public as a consumer good. The perverse logic of the new systems of action is to put the "weight of proof" on teachers, with the reductive pedagogical objectives implied by indicators, tests and textbooks developed by the new educative market. These objectives are no longer the fruits of free reflection by a relatively autonomous pedagogical establishment, but those of the instrumentally-oriented, short-sighted and pedagogically naïve choices of various actors in international consortiums and private firms. This dynamic underlies the expansion of an "education-industrial complex" driven by a logic of private profit.
- 7 The neo-liberal philosophy dominating schools is especially enhanced by a network of organizations in which a leading role is played by the OECD Directorate of Education and the PISA consortium. The survey, it should be noted, uses public opinion to force governments to follow the guidelines recommended by OECD technocrats, and supported by a questionable and reductive assessment process. In this regard, as Münch remarks, the value of PISA for assessing a country's artistic, scientific, technological and economic competitiveness may be called into question. Even if these changes of the education governance have been implemented before the launch of PISA (in 2000) in several countries that have favored a neoliberal reform agenda since the 1980s, the role of PISA in the massive spreading of a reductionist understanding of the role of education should not be underestimated.
- 8 The new systems of action at stake undermine the pillars of education systems' autonomy. The pedagogical establishment "has largely been squeezed out of the key positions of power" while teachers are losing proper professional expertise, since they "have no longer to think for themselves", and lessons are driven by textbooks and teaching materials with a view to preparation for tests (p.29, 34). The schools as organizations are no longer proper education actors. Rather, it is a network of highly influential actors at the top who design education as a "product" which is imposed on

school administrators, teachers and students. Moreover, the interaction practices in teaching are emptied of their meaning so that “there can be no learning and no personality development in the broader sense” (p.125).

- 9 The unfortunate irony of these developments is that they have been implemented not only with a view to influencing pedagogical quality, but above all, through it, the capacity of schools to reduce educational inequalities (their observable outcomes are described in chap. 5 “Much reform, little achievement”). In this respect, Münch recalls one of the teachings of the sociology of education that the effects of the new educational policies do not betray: “test scores are largely explained by the class structure at school and student level” (p.188). The responsibility attributed to teachers in fact distracts policies from real factors of improvement such as lower inequality in household income and social assistance or special learning programs. Families are in an unequal position with regard to the free choice of schools, which has additional inequality effects.
- 10 These transformations in American education prefigure developments in education systems around the world, not because they are inevitable, but because the model is copied, especially since some of the driving factors are globalized, such as the international league tables of school education (hence the caveat summarized in the title of the conclusive chapter “School and teaching in the trap of neoliberal accountability”). Given the novelty of such factors, Münch takes the precaution of questioning the intertemporal validity of the forces underlying the autonomy of education systems in Luhmann and Schorr’s analysis of school education.
- 11 On this subject, I would add to Münch’s analysis a deep and relatively new force which affects teachers’ loss of autonomy and may be a factor of division of the pedagogical establishment, that is, the general separation of pedagogical problematics from the issues of teaching specific subjects and their programs. This separation is intrinsic to a survey such as PISA, which is based on the principle of assessing competencies independently of knowledge and programs, a principle adopted to facilitate international comparisons. If Luhmann and Schorr had extended their analysis to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they may have observed the arbitrary separation of the mental world of education experts from that of academic scholars due to philosophical and institutional biases (especially the rapid development of educational sciences independent of any expertise in the teaching disciplines) with forms of opportunist linkages between these new education experts and political actors, the outcome still being a loss of teachers’ autonomy in terms of professional expertise—that is, a reduction of their rights and subjective capacities to think about their activity. Consequently, it is important also to be careful with the second pillar of autonomy, that is, teaching as a profession, which reveals itself to be a conceptual trap as soon as it structurally favors teachers’ educators professional and ideological biases. Interestingly enough, it is noted that it emerged as a result of the introduction of compulsory education, which is a sign of its socio-political fragility.
- 12 The ultimate teaching of the book refers to the key role of the teacher, both for the autonomy of the pedagogical establishment and for the thinking and mastery of pedagogical practices: if teaching, Münch writes, “can neither be rationalized with technology nor be controlled from the outside but remains largely dependent on the skilled synthesis of pedagogical, subject-didactic and subject-specific knowledge as well

as teaching experience, then the teaching profession has to invest greatest attention in recruiting suitable staff” (p.18).

- 13 A final thought may open the reflection towards the very interests of major social actors involved in our societies, which are developing with no independent pedagogical system. We know well that the creation of gregarious attitudes among segments of the population reduced to their consumer dimension may be a commercial advantage within market economies. And, for their part, governments in democratic societies are in an unstable position, revised with each mandate. We may observe that, as pedagogical actors, they are not truly investing in the power of thought of the “masses” as the survival of democracy requires.

---

## AUTEURS

**NATHALIE BULLE**

Paris, CNRS – GEMASS