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## In the footsteps of the masters. Interview with the history of education

edited by Antonella Cagnolati and Jose Luis Hernandez Huerta, Rome, Tab edizioni, 2021, 448 pp., €35,15 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-9295-373-4

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## BOOK REVIEW

**In the footsteps of the masters. Interview with the history of education**, edited by Antonella Cagnolati and Jose Luis Hernandez Huerta, Rome, Tab edizioni, 2021, 448 pp., €35,15 (paperback), ISBN 978-88-9295-373-4

“Masters” play an important role in the life and identity of any community. Not only are they the most cited authors, but their research and personal habits influence the issues, values, and identity of a research community. They organise, manage, and sustain communities, often invisibly but always through their tangible presence. Their significance, therefore, transcends their own personal work and measurable scholarly impact.

This is no different for historians of education. In the life of a community that has become increasingly international in recent decades, masters are a clearly identifiable presence. This volume edited by Antonella Cagnolati and Jose Luis Hernandez Huerta, *In the Footsteps of the Masters. Interview with the History of Education*, consists of 21 interviews with many masters in the history of education: Rosa Bruno-Jofré, Giorgio Chiosso, José Luis Peset Reig and Elena Hernández Sandoica, Marc Depaepe, Antonio Viñao Frago, Iveta Kestere, Maria Helena Câmara Bastos, Carmen Betti, Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, Jesús Vargas, Joyce Goodman, Lucien Criblez, Maria del Mar del Pozo Andrés, Edwin Keiner, Craig Campbell and Kay Whitehead, Daniel Tröhler, Grigory Borisovič Kornetov, Roberto Sani, Fritz Osterwalder, Bruno Poucet and Consuelo Flecha García. Some of the interviews have previously appeared in various journals, but several were written or adapted specifically for the book. The list of names is truly international, representing Europe, South, Central and North America, as well as Australia.

The interviews tend to revolve around a few central topics: the interviewees’ education and professional training, their research careers, and their thoughts on the history of education. A particular strength of the book is that the literature discussed in the interviews is always footnoted. Some of the interviews are in English, others in Italian and Spanish. Therefore, reading the book will be a complete experience only for those who speak all three languages. Perhaps this one aspect can be mentioned as a challenge. Short summaries in the other two languages would have made the volume more accessible.

There are several ways of reading the book, all of which invite the reader on an interesting intellectual journey. The texts can be read as individual life stories. Reading their recollection of their personal and professional values and competences, their reflections on the role of the history of education, and their methodological and philosophical considerations can be useful for any reader, but especially for early career researchers.

It is very interesting to read about the different social and educational backgrounds of the interviewees and their different life paths. Of course, many of them have a background in history or education, but others have come to educational history research from the natural sciences or the arts. Many have also worked at some level of the school system before entering academia. This diversity of background and experience has certainly contributed to the thematic and methodological enrichment of educational history writing in recent decades.

However, as the history of education as an academic field has become more professionalised and institutionalised, the training of the next generation has also become more standardised. As Lucien Criblez points out, long and winding research careers are increasingly rare. “A ‘standard career’ is now streamlined, rapid and governed by a few

standard criteria (publications in prestigious journals; presentations at international conferences; raising of third-party funding; periods spent abroad, preferably in English-speaking countries), even if certain tendencies towards a reversal of this are now also evident” (p. 256).

It is also interesting to note the features that permeate the texts, reflecting the changes in the history of education over the past fifty years. It is not possible to give a full account of these in a book review, but it may be of interest to highlight some of these features.

One of the most important changes in educational history research has been the widening of the range of sources and methodological approaches used. Several interviewees point out, in relation to their own research, that they have sought to include sources that have not previously been studied or published. They continue to stress the importance of archival sources, but they have begun to use new ones such as visual sources, letters and correspondence, small pedagogical treatises, periodicals and magazines for schools and teachers, school manuals and textbooks, youth literature, etc.

We can also mention the expansion of the methodological repertoire, the increase in interdisciplinarity, the role of reflexivity and sensitivity to theories, or the growth of intellectual trends that influence the history of educational writing. Heinz-Elmar Tenorth, for example, does not see these effects as unproblematic: “[History of education] has also taken part in all turning points – critical, theoretical, linguistic, visual, praxeological, spatial, material (etc.) – of the international debate in the historiographical, social scientific and social philosophical disciplines, sometimes at the cost of having difficulties in identifying its disciplinary identity and its significance in the educational context” (p. 206).

Giorgio Chiosso aptly sums up the developments when he says that in the last three or four decades there has been a significant change in the nature of historical-pedagogical research compared to previous years. This renewal is evident both in the subjects studied, with fewer studies focusing solely on the history of ideas and a greater emphasis on research aimed at reconstructing well-contextualised educational experiences, integrating theoretical reflection, and in the adoption of more sophisticated methodological practices, including extensive use of archival documentation. The result of these developments is that historical-pedagogical studies have matured and are now widely used by scholars from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, such as social historians, scholars of the development of educational disciplines, linguists, anthropologists, and others (p. 68).

As resources and methods expand, the issue of digitisation is inevitable and is therefore addressed in this volume. In his interview, Lucien Criblez summarises the dilemmas well. “(. . .) concrete historical work, such as in an archive, has hardly changed, but access and processing possibilities have changed fundamentally. At the same time, however, expectations regarding the transparent handling of sources and contextualisation have grown. This, together with a much greater awareness of methodology, has led to an overall improvement in the quality of research carried out by young scholars” (p. 262).

Recent decades have been marked not only by a proliferation of methods, sources, and theoretical approaches to the history of education, but also by the internationalisation of the discipline. The various aspects of this process are explored in depth in the interviews. On the one hand, international organisations (e.g. ISCHE, EERA) and journals (especially *Paedagogica Historica*) are recurring features of the interviews. The field is increasingly characterised by research carried out in international cooperation. This has changed not only the nature of research but also its direction. Recently, there has been a growing emphasis on the study of global and transnational processes in the history of education. As Marc Depaepe points out, internationalisation and methodological enrichment are inextricably linked to the future of educational history: “The future

lies in collaboration across national, historical and cultural borders, as well as across the often spurious boundaries of professional fields” (p. 100).

However, there is a tension, as Frist Osterwalder puts it, that “historical educational research is very much shaped by national and cultural boundaries” (p. 407). The problem of internationalisation and nationally focused research is perhaps most poignantly articulated by Iveta Kestere. She argues that after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Latvian historians of education naturally turned to research into the national past. The international community, however, did not receive national research with unanimous enthusiasm: “The world community of historians received the ‘new’ Europeans’ renewed sense of national identity and their enthusiastic presentations with reserve and suspicion. In the modern era of globalisation and internationalisation, a national, localised history of education without reference to the global context arouses little interest” (p. 130).

Yet, many of the subjects of educational history research, most notably school systems, have developed within a national framework. Although nations have never existed in isolation, they have been the most important framework for the history of educational systems and pedagogical thinking about education over the last two centuries or more, and therefore the research on them cannot be neglected. However, a number of interviews suggest that a balance must be struck between the two foci.

Although the research on history of education seems to be more successful than ever before – mainly because of the processes described above – its academic position is in decline. In many places, it has lost, or is losing, its traditional place in teacher education. “There is indeed a certain systematic disinterest on the part of historical educational research in the expectations of the educational professions”, notes Heinz-Elmar Tenorth (p. 207). The experience is therefore similar worldwide, but most of those interviewed are cautiously optimistic about the future. The future of the discipline in higher education may lie in the very characteristics that make it less fashionable now. Although at this time other research paradigms dominate educational research, education, teaching and schooling are phenomena whose contemporary functioning cannot be understood without knowledge of the historical context and the “longue durée”.

Another intriguing aspect of the interviews is the reflections on the status of history of education in times of political change. The twentieth century witnessed a number of significant historical turning points, from which the history of education was not exempt. The lives of many of the interviewees were marked by changes in political regimes, particularly by the transition from dictatorships to democratic systems.

This is perhaps most evident in the case of two researchers from the former Soviet regions. The academic careers of both Grigory Borisovič Kornetov and Iveta Kestere began in the Soviet Union, but really took off after the fall of the communist regime.

Kornetov’s career is tied to ex-Soviet Russia and Kestere’s to Latvia. But their experiences were similar in many ways. Kornetov highlights that the Marxist-Leninist dialectical-materialist methodology has been replaced, a radical rewriting of many events and processes of the pedagogical past has taken place, and the historical research has focused on topics that were previously either prohibited or did not arouse interest.

Kestere emphasises the changed role of historiography and history of education: “Then the Soviet Union collapsed. Latvia became an independent country in 1991. Lives of Soviet people were turned upside-down, including their professional careers. The society was open for new beginnings. Ideas for reforms, including the educational one, came from two sources: firstly, historical experience that positioned education as a national value, protector of culture, and creator of the national identity, and, secondly, Western experience, resulting in importing new ideas from abroad” (p. 123).

But the book contains recollections not only about the Soviet dictatorship and its collapse. The careers of Spanish colleagues are set against the backdrop of the operation and fall of the Franco dictatorship and the transition to democracy. The fall of authoritarian regimes and military juntas in South America also created a context in which the history of education had to redefine its role.

Although it cannot be considered a political transition in the traditional sense of the word, 1968 has also become synonymous with significant change. Student movements in the West and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in the East symbolised a challenge to the existing order. Although not all of them were active at the time, 1968 had a significant impact on the lives of the masters featured in this volume. Jesús Vargas, for example, had a long and winding road from being a leader of student movements in Mexico to becoming a respected scholar. Even if 1968 did not have a direct impact on everyone's life, the new approaches that emerged in the intellectual buzz of those years have enriched the history of education in many ways. In her interview, Carmen Betti highlights the strengthening of the critical spirit, the new opportunities for women, and the impact this has had on historiography.

Edwin Keiner also emphasises the impact of the intellectual effervescence that began at that time: "In the context of the post-1968 movement, I became acquainted with a variety of left-wing currents, movements and groups, a stark contrast to my conservative socialisation, which made me question many earlier values and ideas and led me to develop my own reflexive position" (p. 291).

This last statement leads to an issue that may be of particular interest to readers from the post-Soviet region. Both interviewees from the former Soviet Union point to the burdening effect of Marxism, which they assert has been misinterpreted as a strict doctrine in the Eastern Bloc. Grigory Borisovič Kornetov stresses that only Marxist history was considered scientific, and the rest of historical science was interpreted as pre-Marxist or non-Marxist, understood mainly as alien, anti-Marxist, hostile, false and deceptive (p. 347). He also points out that in the Soviet Union, pedagogy was solely and exclusively Marxist, based on a single Marxist-Leninist dialectical-materialist methodology. It was proclaimed and regarded as the only scientific and most advanced in the whole world (p. 350).

Iveta Kestere also speaks of the simplistic interpretation of the Marxist research methodology and its lasting impact. "It is widely believed that Soviet historical research (including the history of education) was based on Marxist methodology. (...) In reality, in the Soviet Union, Marxism had been reduced to (...) a simplistic and ideologised formula for explaining the world. (...) A number of historians did not really know or understand Marxism, and others, not acknowledging the political dictate of research, went into intellectual self-isolation, limiting their output to chronological descriptions of history" (pp. 123–124). Some of the effects of these phenomena are still being felt today, thirty years after the fall of the Eastern Bloc.

At the same time, in other parts of the world, different interpretations of Marxism and different leftist theorists have had a fertilising effect on the history of education. Rosa Bruno-Jofré, for example, emphasises in the interview the role of Marxist movements in South America. But many of the Western European colleagues also mention the influence of Marx and Marxist scholars. Although the influence of the various interpretations of Marxism on the history of educational writing is well known and written about, this once fertile influence seems to have been somewhat forgotten. One of the virtues of this book is that it draws attention to this multifaceted relationship through personal life stories.

However, the possible aspects briefly highlighted above represent only a few of the diverse and complex readings found in the book. As such, the volume will surely be of use not only to contemporary readers but also to those interested in the historiography of educational research in the future.

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