

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT'S CRITICISM IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

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Rezumat: Îmi propun să analizez liniile directoare ale criticii pe care Michael Oakeshott o întreprinde sociologiei educației: în primul rând, este vorba de o disoluție a educației în favoarea socializării. Apoi, în strînsă legătură cu aceasta, învățămîntul vocațional, inițial doar o alternativă educațională pentru cei săraci, ia amploare. Se mai consideră în mod eronat că educația, forța de muncă și piața locurilor de muncă, cît și productivitatea economică ar avea legătură. Îndepărtîndu-ne de asemenea idei, am putea opta pentru un învățămînt academic liberal, care să nu pună accent pe scopuri extrinseci, nici pe cariera viitoare a studentului și nici pe necesitățile societății în materie de forță de muncă. Cu atît mai mult cu cît, faptul că un învățămînt nu e direcționat înspre producerea unor performeri valoroși ai funcțiilor sociale, nu înseamnă că acesta va produce persoane fără valoare pentru societate.

Cuvinte cheie: educație, sociologia educației, socializare, învățămînt vocațional, forță de muncă

Abstract: In the following paper I intend to analyse the leading points of the criticism of the sociology of education I detected in Michael Oakeshott. First, education is substituted by socialization. Then, in connection to this, vocational education, only an alternative to education at first, created for the poor, becomes more and more important. There are also several myths that link education to employment and economic development. Leaving such ideas aside, we can choose a liberal academic education, that doesn't underlie extrinsic purposes such as the student's future career or his fulfilling the needs of his current society. The more so as the fact that education is not strictly orientated towards producing valuable performers of the social functions, doesn't mean that educational engagement is designed to produce socially valueless persons.

Key words: education, sociology of education, socialization, vocational education, employment

Résumé: J'ai l'intention d'analyser les points principaux de la critique de la sociologie de l'éducation, je détectés dans Michael Oakeshott. Premièrement, l'éducation est remplacée par la socialisation. Puis, dans le cadre de cette éducation, formation professionnelle, seule alternative à l'enseignement au premier abord, créé pour les pauvres, devient de plus en plus important. Il y a aussi plusieurs mythes qui pointent éducation à l'emploi et le développement économique. Laissant de côté ces idées, nous pouvons choisir une éducation libérale académique, qui ne sous-tendent fins extrinsèques comme carrière future de l'étudiant ou son répondant aux besoins de sa société actuelle. D'autant plus que le fait que l'éducation n'est pas strictement orientée vers la production d'artisans de valeur des fonctions sociales, ne signifie pas que l'engagement éducatif est conçu pour produire des personnes socialement aucune valeur.

Mots-clés: éducation, la sociologie de l'éducation, socialisation, formation professionnelle, employ

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1. The Concept of Education

Michael Oakeshott developed an original theory of education, stating that education is a *transaction between the generations*; by this transaction between human beings, newcomers are initiated into an *inheritance of human achievement* of understanding and belief. Such a human inheritance is composed not of things, but of meanings, not of physical objects but of human activities, practices, customs, beliefs, modes of understanding, aspirations, sentiments, opinions, images, namely of *states of mind*. It is a world of understandings and for newcomers an initiation into this world is an engagement into learning to understand. By this, they aspire to human condition and humanity, as long as they begin to reflect themselves into the mirror of the inheritance of human understanding².

According to his view on education, Michael Oakeshott upholds several thesis: Education means escaping from all practical considerabilities of our lives. As education provides us with an escape from the constant pressures of the practical world, school (in its most paradigmatic manifestation – university) can be seen as a place apart, a remarkable place, and an interval. Therefore, education shouldn't have any extrinsic purposes (making a career, being socially successful, getting a well paid job) and no immediate practical utility.

The idea of school means to Michael Oakeshott *detachment form the immediate*. The immediate local world that we socially inhabit, and all the current practical concerns implied by this world, need to be put into brackets when we discuss the idea of school. Oakeshott insists on the Greek origin of the word "school", i. e. *scholé*, meaning *leisure*. School can be most adequately associated with *play* rather than with work. Work refers to using the world and its means for our own benefit of satisfying our wants. But our wants keep changing and reshaping and our efforts to satisfying them keep growing, so that we enter a tempo characterized not only by a certain inconsistency, but by anxiety and frustration.

Distinctively from work, play is an activity that is not inclined towards satisfying our wants, and an attitude that does not address the world in terms of *using it, of getting something out of it, or making something out of it*³. And the satisfactions that it offers are well guarded against frustrations. Play is neither work, nor rest but rather leisure activity, and refers to the activities of understanding and explaining the world and the activity of poetic imagination⁴. Such activities are considered free or liberal, as they are liberated from the anxieties and incessantness of the satisfaction of wants. Also they are enjoyed for their own sake and not because of instrumental reasons, i.e. their utility.

² Oakeshott, 1989, p. 66.

³ Oakeshott, 2004, p. 303.

⁴ Oakeshott, 2004, p. 305.

Consequently, there are two meanings of education. The former is an instrumental meaning of education: an initiation *in 'useful knowledge', knowledge which enables us to use nature to satisfy our wants*. The latter regards education as an initiation into *the great explanatory adventures of mankind*, namely philosophy, science, history, and poetry. Starting from this second meaning of education, Oakeshott forges the concept of liberal education, originating in the Roman expression *liberalia studia*, meaning “studies liberated from the concerns of practical doing, studies concerned with all the activities, which belong to ‘play’ rather than ‘work’”⁵.

2. Education vs. Socialization

Any attempt to deny any of the thesis stated above is an attempt to abolish the ideal concept of school and to turn it into something else. Michael Oakeshott decides that he should defend the idea of school, as a *serious and orderly initiation into an intellectual, imaginative, moral and emotional inheritance*, at all costs.

Modern school and its new techniques (mechanical devices and audio-visual apparatus), Oakeshott considers, come as an assault upon education, conducted against the idea of school as a place apart, designed for newcomers to become initiated into the inheritance of the human spiritual world. It abolishes ‘school’ by corrupting and supressing it⁶.

In Oakeshott’s opinion, the promoter of the project of abolishing the idea of school was Francis Bacon with his trademark “Things, not words”, meaning that education is not a transaction between human beings, by which the newcomer is initiated into an inheritance of human understandings, but the educated gets objective knowledge about the world of things (Comenius, Hartlib, Milton share this view)⁷.

Another attempt to suppress ‘school’ turns it from a place apart into a “community center”, “a combination of a local parliament, a people’s court, a village hall, an information center, a clinic, a social guidance organization, a sports club, an amusement park, a polytechnic and a ‘cultural center’”⁸. In a school shaped as such the student prepares to face the concrete practical problems of the social local world that he inhabits as future adult. In such a community center, teachers function as “trained social workers”. Instead of initiating the student into the human world, an initiation by which one truly becomes a human being, the teacher becomes some sort of a “social engineer”, thinking how to efficiently obtain the type of man that society most needs.

Thus school becomes orientated towards manufacturing the workers that society lacks, by developing skills, and initiating the youth into the activities and endeavours of their current local world. The postulants to adult life are no longer

⁵ Oakeshott, 2004, p. 314.

⁶ Oakeshott, 1989, pp. 71-72.

⁷ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 76.

⁸ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 76.

postulants to humanity, to human world, but one learns to "enact himself in terms of an assigned or a self-chosen role in an association of *fonctionnaires*"⁹.

Oakeshott names this phenomenon "the substitution of socialization for education"¹⁰. The thesis on education that states that it shouldn't have any extrinsic purposes is attacked and consequently, the idea of school is destroyed. The integration of the newcomer into the current local society by developing and acquiring skills becomes the external purpose of school. Instead of learning to become human, one learns how to become functional in a social system.

The sociology of education can be defined on the one hand as the scientific study of the educational practices of various societies, and, on the other hand, it signifies the sociology of the educational systems. In its first definition above, the sociology of education opposes the sociological education, as the latter puts the sociological concepts into educational practice¹¹.

By the sociology of education, Michael Oakeshott understands the history and presentation of educational systems, some „conceptual nonsense and historical rubbish"¹², as it was invented in order to justify the destroying of the educational engagement in its true sense. Modern sociology of education talks of a system of education that runs in the sense of producing efficient performers of social functions. That's why Oakeshott feels obliged to undertake a criticism in the sociology of education.

3. Three Important Distinctions Revisited

As we enter a university, we become part of a community of scholars, professors, researchers, or students. We come across different theories, doctrines, ideologies, and we acquire different skills (as part of a *vocational education*). We also accommodate with the manner of thinking that generated the current 'literature' (as part of a truly academic or *university education*).

On the one hand, students get *instructed* (teaching seen as an activity of communicating *information* - the explicit component of knowledge that can be itemized, and that can be found in manuals, dictionaries, textbooks, encyclopedias) and, on the other hand, they are the subjects of *imparting* (teaching seen as an activity of communicating *judgement* - the implicit component of knowledge, the specific ingredient that cannot be caught in propositions, that cannot be resolved to information or itemized, and that cannot appear as a rule).

⁹ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 79.

¹⁰ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 79.

¹¹ Hatos, 2006, p. 25.

¹² Oakeshott, 1989, p. 93.

Correspondingly, learning means on the one hand the activity of acquiring information, and on the other hand, the activity of coming to possess judgement¹³. Students are not a depository of the pieces of information that each discipline in their curriculum presents in front of them, but they first of all must learn how to think and, consequently, they should be taught how to think - and this is what imparting judgement means.

In a university education, knowledge is not passively acquired as pieces of information contained within the 'texts' of the day, and students are not expected to just inactively accept what they get, but to explore the manner of thinking that generated the respective 'literature'. 'Texts' are studied not for their own sake, but as means to decipher the mode of thinking that underlie them¹⁴.

Therefore, it is never about teaching the student how to think in general, but about teaching him how to think artistically, historically, scientifically, or philosophically. We study, for example, particular branches of science, some authors and philosophical theories, so that we arrive at the distinct manners of thinking that they represent. These manners of thinking are also representative for the specific and distinctiveness of a certain university from the others (it confers its traditional character).

4. Vocational Education

Oakeshott distinguishes three types of education: school education, vocational education and academic education (university education). While school education and vocational education are centered on texts (literature), university education favours the languages (manners of thinking) to the detriment of literature (what has been said from time to time in a language).

By school education one is initiated into the diverse texts of humanity, and one acquires basic abilities that entitle one to enjoy and make use of the intellectual capital of one's civilization. But school education means, in Oakeshottian terms, *learning how to speak before one has anything important to say*, and one learns not because one becomes Socratically conscious of one's ignorance (*I know that I don't know anything*), but without any previous acknowledgement or recognition of one's ignorance, because one is told to learn and forced upon learning, without even having to understand the content of what one learns¹⁵.

Distinctly from school education, vocational education means being initiated into a certain literature, essential or significant for developing certain skills or enabling one to enter a certain practice of the contemporary world. One comes to possess certain

¹³ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 57.

¹⁴ Oakeshott, 1967, pp. 312-313.

¹⁵ Oakeshott, 1967, pp. 305-306.

knowledge and a set of determined acquirements that one will also learn how to use in order to adjust a proper place in society for oneself.

Vocational education also distinguishes itself from university education. The main function of university education consists in initiating students into one of the specific languages of the different modes of thoughts by exploring the corresponding literature. Certain texts are studied not following practical external purposes such as developing a certain career or getting a certain place in society, but only because they are paradigmatical for a certain language (mode of thought).

Vocational education was initially elaborated as an alternative to education: a project of schooling the poor and equipping them with adequate skills so that they become productive and contribute efficiently to the current enterprises of their society. With the emergence of industrial society, vocational education extended, and it came to include all social classes¹⁶. As a common thread, vocational education is governed by social and not educational considerations: the goals of education follow the needs of the nation, and the special skills and techniques that are being taught respect the same desideratum.

5. The Functions of the School and the Curriculum

There are several different aims, purposes, or functions of the school: 1. Equipping the young with certain skills of literacy and numeracy, enabling them to contribute to society and to the well-being of the nation; 2. Providing personal fulfillment; 3. Cultivating the moral character of the young and providing them with a nurturing environment¹⁷. The substitution of socialization for education neglects intrinsic purposes such as 2 or 3, favouring extrinsic purposes such as 1.

Socialization corresponds to the conservative function of the school, namely the transmitting of the current culture. There is also an ideological component of socialization. Vocational education at all its stages (primary – learning literacy and numeracy, second – acquiring scientific knowledge, and third – technical college or polytechnic, in which special skills are learned) grew more and more government controlled. In Oakeshott's view, governments were the main agents of the enterprise of substituting socialization for education. Moreover, they contributed to the abolition of the idea of school by the policy of social integration by which they decided that there should be no differences between schools in terms of curriculum as they lead to social dividing.

Socialization as a reducing of truly academic education to vocational education entails certain curricular issues. The abolishing of school, the confusion between university and technical college or between *lycée* and *école communale*¹⁸ has to do

¹⁶ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 82.

¹⁷ Williams, 2007, p. 53.

¹⁸ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 87.

with a curriculum that doesn't reflect the interests of the students, but which is necessary in order to produce proper citizens.

Michael Oakeshott discusses two disciplines of the curriculum that contribute to the self-corruption of the educational engagement: science and languages.

On the one hand, science could have entered the curriculum in a good way as part of the human inheritance that the student should enter. But, on the other hand, science as a mode of thought and as a language was not the issue here. Science couldn't be detached from immediate vocational and practical considerations. What actually entered the curriculum was practical science in the form of useful information about the world, and the primary interest was to shape those abilities that would help the student become a useful craftsman or a skillful worker.

In the case of the study of languages, they could also enter the curriculum as paradigmatic for a certain European culture and a language. But the study of the languages as a social means so that it should serve as a local or commercial instrument obviously subordinated educational considerabilities to practical ones. Once again the social usurps the place of the educational.

In both cases, education is subsumed to economic purposes. What was designed as an alternative to education becomes the most important ring of education. Education becomes a social investment that follows the current needs of a society in terms of employment and productivity. And the system of education is built in such a way that it optimally serve the local society and produce the "most economically the most adequate performers" of the social functions identified by the educational reform¹⁹.

6. Education and Employment

Why do people go to University? It is a fact that they go there out of practical rather than idealistic reasons. Let's face it. Nowadays no one chooses academic education so that one should take a deep breath of the fresh elevated air of the modes of thought. Neither is university a place apart to keep us away from everything that is mundane and offer the undergraduate three years of promising *unrehearsed intellectual adventure*.

In fact, economic, social, in short practical reasons help us decide that we need to go to university. People go to university because they want a good job, a well-paid job, they want a good position in society, and they want to be respected and looked high at.

Kevin Williams thinks that the main reasons why people decide to go to university have to do with employment possibilities²⁰. In subsidiary, there are reasons related to the increasing of income, and getting more prestige.

¹⁹ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 92.

²⁰ Williams, 2007, p. 106.

The relation between education, economy, and employment is a very misleading one. People may tend to adopt two myths: first, the idea that a technical vocational curriculum leads to economic development. Kevin Williams shows that this idea cannot be sustained: employment opportunities are related to the state of the economy rather than to particularities of the educational system²¹. If the economy is productive there will be enough jobs independently of the character of the curriculum and educational system.

Second, there is the idea that vocational education opens doors for employment opportunities. This cannot be accepted either. Employment opportunities seem to be related to socio-political considerations rather than to technical qualifications²².

Vocational education is neither relevant to employment nor to the world of work in general because people learn more about their actual jobs on practicing their job than they could ever learn in any vocational course of study: many vocational skills are acquired on the job rather than in schools²³. And schools would never be able to teach skills to a degree of specialization which could be relevant to workplace.

I am returning to Oakeshott's example of the study of languages as useful for the current needs of society and therefore undertaken because of practical considerations. There is this myth circulating in our Romanian society as well that one will get a better job if one knows one or more foreign languages, starting with English. It is true that many job announcements require that the candidate should speak some foreign language: if one is to work on a German business firm, one should speak German, if one were to become an operator in a call center with Italy, one should speak Italian and so on. Knowing a foreign language is sometimes, often enough, a necessary condition for getting a certain job, but is it also a sufficient condition in order to get and maintain that job, or in order to be successful on the job?

7. Brief Concluding on the Vocational – Academic Separation in Education

If we promote liberal education and cultivate our spirit and our moral character for its own sake, there is more probable that we will also be successful later on than if we center our efforts on shaping ourselves for a society that may change its needs and aims. Why don't we admit it? When you try so hard to please someone, you will inevitably fail, but if you try to do your best out of yourself because of yourself, you may find yourself to ingratiate oneself to that very person.

It is precisely what our attitude should be towards society when starting our education. Michael Oakeshott could be more right than we may have ever thought him to be when he considered education in terms of *learning how to do something out of*

²¹ Williams, 2007, p. 108.

²² Williams, 2007, p. 109.

²³ Williams, 2007, p. 111.

ourselves. By education we recognize ourselves in the mirror of the human inheritance, and we become human beings.

By education we gather information and acquire new abilities, we discover ourselves and we cultivate our vocations, aptitudes and talents, and we follow our interests. But we don't necessarily and premeditatedly turn future career success into a direct aim.

However, as Oakeshott himself pointed out, the fact that education is not strictly orientated towards producing valuable performers of the social functions, doesn't mean that educational engagement is designed to produce socially valueless persons²⁴.

Acknowledgements: This paper is part of a research financed by The Operational Sectorial Programme for The Development of Human Resources through the Project "Developing the Innovation Capacity and Improving the Impact of Research through Post-doctoral Programmes" POSDRU/89/1.5/S/49944.

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²⁴ Oakeshott, 1989, p. 79.