

A "POST-EGALITARIAN" SOCIETY - FROM STATISTICAL TO LIBERAL JUSTICE¹

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Abstract: *The article provides a historical survey of the changes in the conception of educational equality and justice in Czech basic and secondary education. Three stages are identified: 1. unsuccessful administrative-political measures to improve equality of access for individuals of working class background; these ignored the requirements of individual cognitive work (1948 – the mid-1960's); 2. the era of strong valorisation of school education under the conditions of paucity of educational opportunities; the correlation between social differentiation and educational merit was weak (1960's – 1980's); 3. the last 15 years saw a growing tendency towards early selectivity and differentiation considered as "fair" by virtue of its reliance on supposedly socially and culturally neutral abilities and interests of the individual. The historical development in the area has resulted in a strongly individualistic conception of school success/failure.*

Key words: *Czech school, history of educational equality and justice, psychological assumptions*

Introduction

"The Czech educational system is characterized by significant educational inequalities" – such is the claim by sociologists (Matějů, Straková, 2005) on the first page of their report "Towards a Society of Knowledge".

What has happened, then, following forty years in which an "egalitarian" educational system was being constructed – a designation concerning which both communists and liberals are in rare accord (though, for precision's sake, they apply the terms "equal chances" and "unified school") ?

For the former, such a system represented an ideal arrangement to replace the "dual" system from between the two world wars (in the post-war decades, "unified school" became a symbol of a "new fair society"); for the latter, the term is a synonym of an injustice threatening the development of gifts and capacities which are necessarily individually specific and varied, thus resulting in a new order of unfair inequalities. Nevertheless, both camps agree that the educational system

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in place between 1950 and 1989 guaranteed a certain degree of equality.

This paper provides a short historical overview of trends in educational equality and justice in Czech basic and lower secondary schools. Given the limitations of the genre, (the paper is based on a selection of secondary materials) this article has chosen to propose one perspective from which to view the changes in the educational system in the Czech Republic: the perspective of justice. I will argue that the administrative and instrumental nature of communist policies in the 1950's strengthened the conviction that educational dispositions are determined biologically and are intraindividually invariable. In the subsequent periods of the development of the educational system in Czechoslovakia, the educational offer was differentiated in response to this fact. However, given the paucity of educational opportunities and the low correlation of social differentiation and educational achievements, it only paved the way for an individualist conception of education. This is the reason why liberal notions of just education in which the question of justice is divorced from the issue of equality found ready acceptance after 1989.

Equality of access to education as an administrative instrument in the construction of social justice

The ideology of the communist party which became a dominant force after the war sees education as its exclusive territory and as one of the privileged instruments in the erection of a new society devoid of injustice and crises, as these result from social inequalities inherent in the old social order. "Socialist" (Communist) society would be "fair by definition", for the party advocates – and partly ensures – access for all to the means of production, to healthcare, social security and, of course, open, free and general access to school education.

Since 1948, the new educational policy of the communist regime was carried out under the aegis of the principle of equality for all – widely shared at the end of the war – conceived *per negatio* as a reaction to the dual educational system.

What were therefore the reasons for the relatively easy acceptance of the "unified school" system as an emblematic expression of justice, an acceptance by far exceeding the ranks of ideologists of the single ruling party? It should be pointed out that the new conception of educational justice built upon the experience of differentiated educational science and practice from between the two world wars and was centered on the **criterion of equality of access**. In this sense, injustice was objected to by pointing at the percentage (exceptionally low in 1946) of children who received their education in branches of long secondary/high school education (and most of whom were of upper-class origin). Realities of this sort and the theoretical debates between advocates of the individual psychology of ability and gifts on the one hand, and of educational science calling for a shared educational basis (common core) on the other, were still in place after the war (1945-1948).

When the communists took power, the educational system was threefold. At

the age of eleven, after communal (primary) school, pupils coming from different social classes were channelled – either into “discount” education (an additional three years at their former communal school as a lay-by of a sort, accounting for 5.5% of the age group in 1946), or into municipal schools which did indeed allow certain pupils access to upper secondary schools and high schools (in 1946, the “municipals” comprised 83.5% of the age group), or, finally, into a “long” secondary/high school of seven (technical schools) or eight years (general). A majority of the pupils in the last group would gain access to university education or to relatively privileged jobs (at the end of the war, schools of this kind comprised 11% of the age group).

These numbers reveal sufficiently the extreme **selectivity** of the Czechoslovak educational system in terms of two factors highlighted by its critics: the selection took place too early and within a framework which made future re-orientation impossible. Injustice was therefore perceived in the far too unequal access to an extensive period of quality education and this perception was intensified by the premature nature of decisions concerning orientation and the impossibility of their later revision.

However, the fiercest debate concerned the **consequences** of the inequalities in question. Advocates of the selective system accused their adversaries of seeking to undermine the **quality** of education, citing **psychological arguments** to argue their case (the absorption capacity of the then educational branches allegedly reflecting a naturally unequal distribution of gifts and abilities in pupils). The critics of early selectiveness and advocates of the ‘unified school’ denounced segregation within the system and the attendant lack of social justice, since in 1948 “long” secondary/high schools were attended almost exclusively by young people of well-to-do background (both in cultural and educational terms) while, as a matter of fact, pupils from communal and municipal schools could hardly gain access to higher levels of education. First and foremost, these critics stressed the aspect of social cohesion. One may thus see how arguments in favour of justice in educational matters polarized the debate: with on the one hand those who stressed the perspective of the specificity of the individual, his particular gifts and who understood learning primarily as requiring predispositions conceived as “natural” (their concept of justice including **quality in education**); on the other hand those who put emphasis on the social and moral function of school education. The social function refers to the consequences of school education as productive of the necessary social cohesion which results from the participation of all in an identical type of educational process. The argument supporting the moral function of school education rests on the refusal to accept *a priori* differences posited by different educational programmes (in this concept of justice, the **quantity** and **universality** of approach are put to the forefront).

The educational policy of the communist party was therefore to merge several branches and introduce the ‘unified school’ system with the objective of providing the **same** quality of education for **everyone**. The social function of school prevailed over the quality of education itself – at least during the first decade after 1948. The

original project of building up differentiated education within the institutions of 'unified school' was abandoned. In the course of the following years, research and theoretical debate between those backing the "macroscopic" perspective (focused on conditions "external" to the activity of learning that need to be brought about) and psychologists and educationists who were trying to optimize the potential for learning in each pupil, gradually waned.

The only easily noticeable symptom of social change was targeted – a change in statistics concerning entrance into secondary and tertiary education (the latter essentially comprising universities and higher technical institutions). Inevitably, measures representing merely illusory shortcuts to reach the desired end were introduced. To illustrate the case, I will mention two of these. The first persisted till the end of the 1970's: *compensatory bonuses* in the entrance exam for young people of working-class and, to a lesser extent, peasant background. The planned effect (rapid change in terms of entrance statistics) was not achieved, as many young people thus assisted did not succeed and left their institutions, especially at university level. This led to another measure: the introduction of courses and of special schools targeting working-class children to prepare them for studies. These "*working class prep schools*"; as they were known, were supposed to prepare young apprentices for their A-levels in the course of a single year, thereby opening up to them direct access to university (relieving them of the obligation to pass through selective entrance exams).

Several conclusions can be drawn concerning this approach which I shall call that of "**statistical justice**":

- Elementary education saw improvements and a solid common educational culture was granted to all, but the system remained relatively closed at higher levels.

- The macro-structural political act of instituting educational justice by this means fell into the trap of "shortcuts". In leaving aside the necessary cognitive work by the individual, its preliminary requirements and the conditions for its implementation, the result was not only the failure of a certain notion of justice (to wit, the notion of the injustice of inequalities), but also the introduction of policies which led to the failure of the compensatory measures which were supposed to favour working-class children. They also reinforced interpretations of educational failure which may be described as "biological" (relying on the notion of innate intelligence as expressed in the Czech idiom for those having a talent as "having the right cells"). As a result, equality policies were seen not only as ideological, but as psychologically inadequate as well.

- As these measures rarely reached the level of the individual, new injustices emerged. Large numbers of young people in the 1950's attained their A-levels or university studies at the cost of personal sacrifices (lower-class children at the cost of extreme mobilization in preparatory classes, a mobilization too often bound to fail; children from formerly "privileged" classes for their part were forced to "become" workers first in order to be able to benefit from bonuses or had to

progress by means of alternative educational branches or branches parallel to their employment, etc.) Many children of intellectual background, of peasants or "hostile social elements" never had the opportunity of benefiting from equality of access and from justice in the domain of education. A "disappointed generation" was born. (Šanderová, 1990).

The paradoxical effect of policies promoting equality of access, which were dominated by contingent partisan political interests, was that education, diplomas and the opportunity to study became a highly desired and rare commodity. Secondary education was a long way from having become a mass phenomenon between 1948 and 1989. If the number of school-leavers completing secondary education and passing the 'maturita' examination was at 11% for the age group in 1946, it rose only to 39% in 1989. University and higher education was of a very low percentage for the age group (10-11% in 1989; besides, even today this percentage is one of the lowest for OECD countries.)

Valorization of the school in a de-stratified system of "historical inversion"

The first erosion of the unified and standardized system came in the 1960's with the introduction of specialized classes and specialized elementary schools (in arts, sports, languages, mathematics). During the period of political thaw, M. Cipro (1966) challenged the uniform method of teaching "*without considering the heterogeneity of pupils, ... without respecting specific talents...*". Understandably, the change in educational policy was not provoked by arguments based on the right to choose or those stressing competition. Rather, two other reasons were cited: economic weaknesses demanded a better educated working force ("to cultivate talents" became the slogan of the 1960's) to boost the competitiveness of the country in the efforts of each of two political systems to emulate the other, and the "scientific" argument about individual capacities and gifts which exist somewhat independently of society and which the school should help to flourish.

This argument was considered as ideology-neutral. At the end of the 1960's, the trend was confirmed in the introduction of three types of secondary (upper secondary) institutions, including a four-year general "college". From the perspective of equality of treatment, however, the system as a whole still remained **highly standardized** (both in the positive and negative sense): same per capita funding, same manuals, same number of pupils per class, same quality criteria for teachers, heterogeneous classes in terms of pupils' social origin (specialized classes being the only exception), etc.

The perspective in which equality of access and equality of treatment are wed reveals that the Czech educational system at the end of the given period, i.e. in the late 1980's, offered a controversial and ambiguous picture.

On one hand, attendance at nursery schools rose successfully to 98% of children of the age group. The state could thus ensure pre-school education which "prepares

for future success at school of all children". Elementary school was reduced to 8 years, but compulsory education was extended to 10 years. It was characterized by minimum differentiation in terms of content, manuals, teaching methods, with only one selective element – specialized classes from 8 years of age on in certain elementary schools (following an entrance exam, they enrolled 5% of the school population in 1989). In this sense, basic equality (access to common culture) was assured.

Nevertheless, access to secondary institutions (for that matter never very diversified), was relatively difficult (their capacity varied between 34% and 40% of the age group throughout the 1980's). Because of shortage in staff and of a reduced capacity of institutions persisting even in the 1980's, a large number of families – members of the above-mentioned "disappointed generation" become parents – had a hard time reproducing their level of education with their children. Educational justice based on the reduction of disparities stirred a feeling of profound injustice. We have already mentioned that access to superior education remained the most limited (between 10-12% of the age group as opposed to the slow, but unceasing increase in the number of secondary school leavers who passed the 'maturita' examination – up to 39% of the age group in 1989).

The chances of educational continuity therefore remained fragile: good results at lower secondary school were a long way from guaranteeing access to upper secondary/high school; the same went for a good result at 'maturita' and entrance to university. The passage to superior levels of education depended almost entirely on the results of entrance exams taking place on one day (or over several days). This situation bred tensions while the diploma remained of rare value.

However, the phenomenon that did most harm to the feeling of educational justice as a source of social justice was the almost inversely proportional relation between the level of education or qualification received and wage level. This "historical inversion" reflects the fact that the connection between education and living standards (or social success) remained relatively weak. (Večerník, 1990; Matějů, 1990).

All the more that with uncertain political, social and economic fortunes, which do not always make it possible to accumulate and transmit economic and financial capital, education and educational culture remain the only value which seems inalienable.

One must add to this the fact that in the 1980's, the diploma (as an exchange value) became an important instrumental value: because of the degradation of the economy and of working conditions for less qualified jobs (though better paid), it served to avoid hard, dirty or risky work. Social success was therefore indirectly, or even paradoxically, dependent on success in education.

For these reasons, the quality of family background, parental support and parental choices (although limited by the reduced offer of the institutions) proved to be the decisive factor for success in education at the end of the 1980's.

Let us summarize: educational justice relied on principles of equal treatment for all at the level of basic culture (lower secondary school) and on equality of result of

the prevalent majority of children (virtually no unschooled children, no illiterates, a limited number of functional illiterates, etc.). Élités from specialized schools and upper secondary schools (winners of a number of international competitions, especially in the domain of science and maths) justified the system and the conviction that success or failure depend on largely innate individual capacities.

Nevertheless, in listing the effects of forty years of policies aiming at educational justice, we should not forget the paucity of diplomas (the number of candidates exceeding the capacity of highly desired institutions); the necessity of involving the family in order to pursue a successful educational career and the reinforcement of the individualist conception of success or failure at school.

Educational justice was no longer understood as centering on the issue of equality (of access) but was defined in terms of the development of everybody's potential. However, at the end of the 1980's, the problem of equality of access returned, this time at higher levels of the system. Furthermore, it combined with a feeling of loss of social value of diplomas which used to represent a social insertion ticket within informal exchange networks. This state of affairs did not make it possible to assert the "principle of difference" as opening the upward path by means of education and establishing social differences according to educational merit.

The liberal era: The divorce between justice and equality

The year 1989 saw a major reversal and the new political class soon sought to project the principles which were introduced in the administration of (once more capitalist) society into the domain of education. It can be said that the representatives of the "new" model of society acted by **negating** the previous educational model, in an attempt to revive the *status quo ante*, by **prolonging** and emphasizing certain features and **strategies** employed by parents in the 1980's, and by an assiduous **application of market principles** and of the market economy.

The feeling of a crisis in schools and of injustice in education found expression in three ways. It was worded in terms of *lack of quality* of education resulting from unification. The "all together" strategy was seen negatively as a brake on the development of talented children by their mediocre peers. In the eyes of critics, this lack of quality was manifest in the absence of diversity of institutions, and, consequently, in the absence of opportunity for individual choice in the market of school education which was thus falling short of the new liberated economic order.

The second reproach was expressed in terms of *the excessive orientation of communist schools towards factual knowledge* at the expense of the formative function of the school, thereby ignoring the progress of pupils' personality and of their creativity. These two objectives of school education were perceived as mutually exclusive (and even outstanding results of Czech pupils in international assessment surveys at the beginning of the 1990's were interpreted negatively as confirming the use of excessive drill and practice methods).

The third critique criticised authoritarianism: *the school was represented as an institution which was authoritarian and violent towards pupils and their families.*

What was accentuated was the *absence of "humanist" principles* at school (it was deemed undemocratic, leaving little or no autonomy to the pupil, etc.)

The stage looked opened for a new form of justice based on the principle "let everybody make a free choice of his destiny". It expressed itself by a *retreat of the state* (deregulation and autonomy of institutions and of actors), by the *introduction of competition and of diversity* at any cost, and by the *official endorsement of the individual model of success* (if the state should intervene, it is through assisting institutions in charge of the gifted as well as of the handicapped).

The retreat of the state was reflected in the contents of education. Institutions gained greater autonomy: since 1990, they could decide on 30% of the syllabi and since 2005, they have been obliged to formulate school programmes (under the designation of "framework programmes") in all subjects. The passage from curriculum defined by the state towards "framework objectives" defined in terms of psychological competences was grounded in law in 2005.

Besides, this retreat was reflected in the criteria for the profile and quality of teachers; today, there are no obligatory profiles or standards of teacher qualification at national level (they depend on individual universities – whose programmes, though accredited, are always institution-specific.)

The rapid differentiation (stratification) of society, where the newly rich who arose out of privatization prove the lack of relevance of school education for success (and where only 29% of the population in 2001 had a salary above the national mean and where the so-called middle class was very weak and always menaced by pauperization), was reflected in reforms which differentiated the structure of the educational system. The unified lower secondary school, synonym of "discount" education, gave way to new secondary/high schools of 8, 7, 6, 5 and 4 years, as well as to curious institutions such as the "martial arts college" or the "college in family education". Choice became possible, yet towards the end of the 1990's, the effects of the principle of enlarged range on offer were clear – there was a large number who felt deceived.

"Diversity" as in itself a guarantee of quality and as a factor in competition bore its first rather bitter fruit. First, results of TIMSS and PISA enquiries reveal that the quality of the Czech average revolves around the levels of the early 1990's or has dropped slightly (depending on disciplinary field). Yet, it can be said that inequalities between Czech educational institutions have grown strikingly and that the results of lower secondary school pupils after the departure of the "gifted" and of those attending "long" secondary/high schools (colleges) have declined, as did their chances of succeeding at the entrance exams to university. (This is partly the result of a considerable drop in the number of classical general secondary/high schools and an increase in the number of specific secondary/high schools "reflecting the interests and talents of the pupils"). In addition, the "effect of the family" variable plays a more important role in the Czech Republic than in a majority of OECD countries.

Individual success was understood as interwoven with the logic of entrepreneurial spirit, associated with specific character traits such as self-denial,

ability to make sacrifices or a strong will, and, last but not least, with talent. It was overrated by the media and decision-makers, and almost appeared to be incompatible with the emphasis on necessary intellectual work at school. Research by didacticians (Slavík, 2005) speaks of "the myth of creative genius" put forward by decision-makers, educational activists and even certain teachers at the beginning of this decade. Respect for rigorous work vanished from social and even educational discourse. This is why the connection between specific intellectual efforts, the, quality of the school, school results and success in life (in society) was further extenuated.

We are therefore witnessing a parallel increase in the importance of parental choice, in their ability to interpret the situation and make decisions, and, on the other hand, in the uncertain character and unintelligibility of the system. The chances that a child of a worker will gain access to university are three times lower today than for a worker's child in France or another OECD country.

Increased selectivity in the past fifteen years, a more varied range of options offered within the system accentuating the necessity to make choices and not merely to follow a logic of prescribed education, a slow tendency towards de-segregation (schools for the disabled, impaired, gifted, special schools, etc.) – all these did facilitate and spur tendencies which already existed in outline towards the end of the 1980's. Individual qualities and family support provide the key to school success.

Nevertheless, the new form of justice seems to be facing a certain degree of resistance – resistance from teachers and two thirds of parents who demand of the state that it not retreat and refuse to take responsibilities that they believe are not theirs (choosing the best teachers and institutions and participating in the construction of curricula and of education). In recent public opinion surveys, around 65 % of those interviewed expressed their conviction that all children should receive education together for as long as possible – while backing the possibility of choice within a school.

Contemporary societies differ, it would seem, in the degree of and motives for resistance to the principle of personal merit as dominant principle. Nevertheless, after the experience with a proactive egalitarian justice, it is more difficult to challenge the scientific-psychological argument of "natural" inequality. That is, the argument which obscures the "cultural" nature of the psychological processes and functions and which tends to distort the problem of educational justice by offering erroneous ways out.

Conclusion

Statistical justice founded on the principles of equality of access and, subsequently, on that of equal chances which was implemented administratively and proactively in a context marked by deficiencies and by an insufficient availability (both in range and number) of school careers has had the counter effect of contributing to

an easier acceptance of inequalities as “fair”, since these inequalities are thought of as freely chosen and depending solely on the capacities of the individual and the attention given him by his family.

If, furthermore, the connection between education and post-school life is obscured or undermined, policies promoting justice based on equality of treatment are considered as ideologically-motivated and as a waste of efforts.

It seems that in the era of globalized liberal market capitalism, where states are increasingly losing influence and where flexibility and the ability to adapt are reduced to personality traits, in a society which denounces redistribution efforts as unjust – with the exception of certain visible individual handicaps – and following an experience remembered as egalitarian, the new form of justice rests on a shared definition of the social bond which serves to establish which inequalities are just and which are not.

Justice and equality are drawn apart. There is a tendency to dissociate the two indivisible elements which, according to Aristotle, define justice – legality and equality (general law valid for all and the same rights for everyone under that law). In the liberal mindset, the two have nothing in common, at least in the matter of school education. On the contrary, “laws” instituting redistributive justice (to compensate those for whom fortune has reserved less and to restore equality in this respect) are seen as contrary to equality and individual merit. They are found to be in conflict with distributive justice (to each according to his merit). Let us note that this logic can only be adhered to if we understand the individual, his merits and the psychological prerequisites of his actions in a culture-free manner (the term culture being used in the sense of historical-cultural psychology here).

Liberalism triumphs with its conception of justice as a sum of individual deserved destinies. Yet, it seems to me that without a historical-cultural analysis of the genesis and development of psychological functions and of the social bond, it will be difficult to come up with strong arguments to help justice and equality to become reconciled.

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