

## FOR A NEW COMPARATIVE HISTORY OF EDUCATION

### Interview with Professor António Nóvoa

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Since May 2006 professor António Nóvoa has been dean of the University of Lisbon, and was re-elected in March 2009 after having promoted a complex process of reforms in the university by-laws. This outstanding administrative and pedagogical responsibility at the university is the result of and recognition for an effective and successful academic career in Portugal and abroad.

António Nóvoa emerged on the European and global scene in the 1980s among those studying the History of Education. In 1986 he defended his doctoral thesis on professionalization of teaching in Portugal between the reforms of Pombal and the 20th century, at the *Faculté de Psychologie et des Sciences de l'Éducation* of the Université de Genève. In the following year, this study was published in two volumes under the title *Le Temps des Professeurs: analyse socio-historique de la profession enseignante au Portugal*, by the Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica de Lisboa.

With the publication of his doctoral thesis, professor Nóvoa built a prestigious academic career at the Universidade de Lisboa, with expressive international activity in the field of Comparative History of Education. He is the author of articles in specialized journals, most of them in English and French, and a number of books, highlighted by “A difusão mundial da escola”, organized in partnership with Jürgen Schriewer and published by EDUCA in 2000, and “E vid ente mente: Histórias da Educação”, released in 2005 by ASA Editores, after organizing the publication of a Dicionário de Educadores Portugueses. As a

researcher, António Nóvoa taught at various European and American universities from 2000 to 2003 and was president of ISCHE – the International Standing Conference for the History of Education.

In recent years, professor Nóvoa has had an important role in Brazil through participation in conferences, book prefaces and partnerships with universities. Since his work has been very well received by Brazilian professors, he was chosen to be part of the new phase of **Revista Linhas**, through the publication of our regular interview with an educator who is highly regarded in Brazil or abroad.

The following interview is a portion of a longer one given by professor Nóvoa to researchers José Eduardo Franco and Henrique Manuel Pereira in August 2006. It was edited by professor Norberto Dallabrida and focuses on questions about new trends in the history of education and the current configuration of school culture.

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José Eduardo Franco – You are responsible for the internationalization of the History of Education that did not exist in the time of Ferreira Gomes, and an opening to other scientific fields such as Sociology and Psychology. What do you think was your contribution to the modernization of the History of Education and the separation from its positivist tradition? What is the specific mark that you have made on the History of Education, even at the international level?

António Nóvoa – My thesis is based on socio-historical approaches and what characterizes it is precisely this opening to a sociological and historic perspective. In Portugal, we were very locked into a history that now gives emphasis to more than it did in the past, because it is a very rigorous history from the perspective of documents, and some more recent historical approaches tend to be less rigorous from this perspective. The study of the document, of the text, etc.

José Eduardo Franco – Your history is not based on a theory constructed in a void, but seeks to reconcile the historic tradition with a conceptual innovation.

António Nóvoa – The study of sources is essential and much history was conducted without this study...I think that a balance must be maintained between a history that is dependent on documents, which is the case of positivist history. I often recall a statement by Joaquim Ferreira Gomes that is paradigmatic of a given concept. The statement was made when he published a series of reports and laws concerning the Escola Superior de Educação de Coimbra. In the preface, Gomes, a professor at Coimbra declared: here are the facts, this is the work of the historian, now a sociologist must come and analyze them, interpret them...But many of the things that Joaquim Ferreira Gomes did, and others as well, are still useful today, even if history must go far beyond this.

José Eduardo Franco – A fundamental mark of your investigation is its interdisciplinary nature.

António Nóvoa – In fact, this is my life... We are composed of the life that we construct, by the things that we do and read, and in this sense, my life is very open.

José Eduardo Franco – When you introduced this new perspective, was it criticized or well accepted? You created a school.

António Nóvoa – I never felt resistance or criticism. Probably because I entered at the right time, and since I was very busy, I could not pay attention to this criticism. When my thesis was published in Portugal, I felt that a few people who were already well “established” had a less favorable reaction, but nothing significant. I never felt that anyone tried to obstruct my career! Even now during my candidacy for dean, you cannot imagine how many people came to warn me of conspiracies against me, campaigns to denigrate my image. In reality, I did not attribute any importance to those who were frightened, nor did I notice these measures... if they really existed, they were not successful. Portugal is a country that unfortunately has lots of this feeding of more or less imaginary conspiracies.

José Eduardo Franco – Returning to the History of Education, what do you consider to be your contribution in this scientific domain?

António Nóvoa – The idea of the Comparative History of Education is a renovation to which I made a significant contribution in Portugal and even on an international level. For example, I am now writing a history about the Comparative History of Education for a large international encyclopedia. I received an invitation to do so from the editors, due to an article I wrote that was published in a British journal. They said that my article offered a great methodological renewal for comparative history in the field of Education.

José Eduardo Franco – What are the particularities of this proposal for methodological renewal?

António Nóvoa – For a long time History was closeted in an excessively chronological and very positivist concept of time. The same can be said in relation to Comparative Education, which for a long time was locked in a very rigid concept of space, or that is, Comparative Education consisted in a comparison between countries defined by national geographies. The innovation that I brought was precisely to break with the concepts of time and of space. In the case of History, to break with the chronological concept of time, and in the case of comparative Education, to break with the geographic concept of space.

José Eduardo Franco – What is the new concept that emerged?

António Nóvoa – They are concepts that I am still searching for in order to establish a suitable formulation and definition. It is easier to define new conceptual routes in relation to the spatial factor, because comparative education is something that, when one adopts principles, for example that of globalization or principles of comparison between global space or of comparison between the local and the global, the focus is no longer national. The national border is a possible criteria, but it is no longer the dominant criteria. We can have concepts of space that can range from the small community space to the large global space. All of these spaces are possible spaces of comparison. I think that one of the most interesting spaces from a comparative perspective today is the space of the large regions of the world. For example, the Portuguese-speaking countries, the Commonwealth space. They are spaces that are interesting for comparative effects that do not coincide with national spaces. In the History of Education, the space of southern Europe is important due to the influence of the Jesuits, from Catholic Europe. In sum, the comparison that I advocate is a type that breaks

with concepts that are too geographic and limited, above all with what was positivist Comparative Education. This was based on methodologies guided by pointed questions aimed at knowing, for example, “what can Portugal learn from Spanish educational reform?”

José Eduardo Franco – What questions are asked today?

António Nóvoa – The questions raised today concerning this comparison, which are of particular interest to me from a historical perspective, concern issues of intelligibility and meaning. That is, how can we give meaning to a set of things, what are the meanings that we can find. In southern Europe, the sense of the school is different from that which we find in northern Europe or Japan. Therefore, there are different meanings, intelligibilities, readings. It does not involve learning the lessons that the other countries can give us as was done earlier in Comparative Education.

José Eduardo Franco – So it involves understanding the differences and not considering each region as the ideal model.

António Nóvoa – It is something in between; in other words, there are two possible traditions of Comparative Education. One is older, and based on the lessons that some countries can give to others, and another comes from authors who defend the global system, and consider that it is all the same throughout the world. I think that there is an intermediate level of comparison that recognizes that there are large debates found throughout the world and that are identical, but that have various specificities and localizations in different regions of the world. These localizations – and this is the innovative point – comes less from national geographies and more from a set of cultural and historic meanings of various regions.

José Eduardo Franco – But this process still includes, in this phase, a very strong level of subjectivity. Rigorous methodological criteria should be established, and in this sense, there is still a long way to go to reach a more rigorous delimitation process.

António Nóvoa – Of course. I just did a study, which will be published one day, about the history of schools, which consists of a comparison between France, Spain and Portugal – it should also include Italy – using this set of countries not as autonomous countries, but as a

region that shares a set of common histories and orientations, which gives a different meaning to comparison than that of traditional comparison. This work was part of my second doctoral study that I conducted at the Sorbonne about the comparative History of Education.

José Eduardo Franco – What was the specific theme that you studied in your second doctorate?

António Nóvoa – It consisted in a comparison between Portugal, Spain and France, in which I worked with broad international statistics over the 19th and 20th centuries and other elements.

José Eduardo Franco – About the history of education?

António Nóvoa – It was more than a history of education, it was a history of culture.

José Eduardo Franco – Your ability to adapt the history of education to these times of globalization is noteworthy. In addition, you are one of the Portuguese scholars who were capable of exporting work from this country to an international level, as a specialist recognized in Europe, the United States, Brazil, which is not common in the Liberal Arts in Portugal. Your articles are published more abroad than here. Do you have a strategy to publish more abroad than in Portugal?

António Nóvoa – It was not a strategy. For example, in the hard sciences this has been a common practice for 30 years, or that is, there is no physicist, chemist or mathematician who publishes in Portuguese journals or who publishes books in Portugal, they publish in international journals; actually, the career of a university professor is built this way, while in the humanities they publish more in Portugal. From a certain time, what I felt inquisitively was that if I wrote about the methodology of the Comparative History of Education, for example, who would be interested in publishing this in Portugal?

José Eduardo Franco – You have published mostly in English and French.

António Nóvoa – Yes, although I have published in other languages.

José Eduardo Franco – Why has your thesis not been published in Portuguese?

António Nóvoa – When I published the thesis, in 1987, I was exhausted, because I had corrected the proofs three times, and it was nearly a thousand pages long. There were a number of people who asked me for a Portuguese translation, one of them was my colleague Rui Grácio, to whom I even made a commitment to do so. However, when I simply realized that I would have to convert all of the sources, I did not have the courage. In addition, when I read my dissertation again, I thought it was not well written, and for this reason I would have to rewrite it, which would involve conducting a new thesis about the same subject. So I thought it would be better to spend the hours that I would have to spend on this arduous task doing a new book. But it is curious that much of the international penetration that I have achieved was due to the fact that my thesis had been published in French. Proof of this is that until today, when I meet professors who I do not know, they recognize me as being the author of the two volumes about teachers. I believe that I would not have been able to achieve so much abroad if the thesis had not been published in French.

José Eduardo Franco – Did you ever try to publish it in English?

António Nóvoa – I published one chapter.

José Eduardo Franco – Turning to your trajectory with a more direct question: what is your educational utopia? Do you have an educational utopia after so much research and reflection? A utopia for our country or for the era of globalization?

António Nóvoa – No, I don't have one. I am not one for utopian thoughts. It is known that utopias in the field of education have always had poor results.

José Eduardo Franco – But do you have a perspective, a vision, or are you not concerned with this. Considering the present, the future of education?

António Nóvoa – My utopia, at this time, for education and for schools in Portugal is nearly a type of anti-utopia.

José Eduardo Franco – Can you explain?

António Nóvoa – Schools sought to do too much during the 20th century. They took on too many functions, created too many expectations, took on the role of a type of savior of the world, of humanity, the nation and the economy, and as being the route to progress and development. Their role became inflated with utopias and missions. I think that it is now necessary for someone to come along to speak against this and say: “for the school, what is for the school; for society, what is for society”! I defend a more modest role for schools. I do not want the school as a metaphor of the temple of knowledge that shines light on society. I want the image of the school in a more modest place, more reserved, at the same time more capable, more qualified, more dedicated and responsible.

Therefore, I think that we should do away with the idea that all of the problems of society can be resolved in the school. The school does not resolve any social problem, society has to resolve social problems. It is not up to the school to assume the role of regenerator of society or of humanity.

José Eduardo Franco – In this sense, can it be said that the crisis that is felt today in the school, in education, is due to this excess of utopia?

António Nóvoa – This and other things, I think it is principally due to this.

José Eduardo Franco – You thus clearly defend an anti-utopia?

António Nóvoa – If we had a school that worked well with that which is its principal responsibility...

José Eduardo Franco – What is this essential responsibility?

António Nóvoa – The school culture. I think that people do not like school culture very much.

José Eduardo Franco – What is a school culture?



António Nóvoa – School culture is composed of two or three central elements, the first of which is a culture of knowledge, of appropriation of knowledge, centered on learning – and not on teaching – and the way that given knowledge is appropriated by a certain person and contributes to his or her development.

Therefore, these three elements – knowledge, learning and the appropriation of knowledge – appear to be very obvious but are not. The Portuguese school never emphasized school culture and as absurd as it may appear, was a school without a culture of work, of discipline.

José Eduardo Franco – But wasn't it this way during Salazar's New State?

António Nóvoa – Completely. More than at any other time! I remember, in fact, a text – a manifesto – from the parents of children who attended the lyceums in 1932-33, against an attempt to introduce more demanding examinations. Justifying the reason for their protest against this measure, they presented the following profile of their children [don't forget that we are speaking of the elite of the elites, because who was it that attended the lyceum in 1932?]: “We are against this examination system because it is against the characteristics of Portuguese youth. Our children are capable of intense, brief mental efforts, they rebel against slow efforts, tenacity, persistence and continuity. They are spirits of great vivacity, inclined to rapid, fulgurant synthesis, but incapable of patient, meticulous and profound analysis. They are minds with great elasticity but that are not firm. They are intelligences open to all curiosities but only attracted to enthusiasm for the new and unprecedented. They are wills that are easily dominated and made inert by the monotony of mental occupations.”

This psychological portrait is contrary to that of the school culture, which involves persistence, work, continuity, knowledge. But it also involves these qualities: creativity and imagination. This text is a portrait of our school. It is the portrait made by the right-wing, but then came the portrait made by the left after April 25, defending the importance of environmental education.

José Eduardo Franco – You mean the one that, in the Reform of Minister of Education Roberto Carneiro, was part of the so-called “School Area” and more recently also called “Area of Project”, in which the students develop a sort of para-curricular activities.

António Nóvoa – Yes, the School Area. I know that it is important, but where is this knowledge? School culture is knowledge? Where is the knowledge, all of the work to acquire knowledge?

It is like the issue of mathematics! Children don't like mathematics. I always give my own example: I hated U.S. baseball and football, because I did not know the rules. When I got to America I thought that stuff was stupid until they taught me the rules. Now I love them!

José Eduardo Franco – But do you play?

António Nóvoa – I don't play, but I watch them on television, especially U.S. football. Its like chess: can you like chess without knowing the rules? And playing the piano, can you enjoy it without practicing for hours and hours? The same is true with mathematics. The first problem of the school culture in Portugal is the lack of emphasis on knowledge. The elites didn't send children to school to attain knowledge, they send them to earn a diploma.

José Eduardo Franco – They did not have the taste for knowledge?

António Nóvoa – Knowledge is the first point. The second is learning. The school was always marked by the idea of teaching and transmission and not by the idea of learning. This is serious because the great tradition of the school in the 19th century was that of study. Classes were a reasonably marginal element. The 19th century school did not have many classes, what it had was a large place for study. The great transformation of the school at the end of the 19th century was the increase in curriculums that would transform it into a combination of classes. This combination reached such a proportion that the tradition of study was lost.

José Eduardo Franco – There's no time.

António Nóvoa – Yes, there is no time. It is necessary to go back to the tradition of study which is what is closest to school learning. The principal objective of the school is not what the teacher teaches, but what the student learns. The teacher-poet Sebastião da Gama said: "I gave a very beautiful class". What use is a very beautiful class if it did not add anything to the student's knowledge? The student must learn. John Wright said that many

people gave their opinions about knowledge and teaching. He said that he would also like to be a doctor because a doctor gives anesthesia to a patient and then operates, while a teacher cannot work with a student under anesthesia. A teacher depends on collaboration with students. It is not possible to engrave learning without collaboration from students. This is the second point, that of learning.

The third point is the contribution that learning has for the development and growth of the individual. But I only refer to this point after the elements of knowledge and learning, which I believe are those that truly contribute to our development.

José Eduardo Franco – Heuristically?

António Nóvoa – Heuristically. Much pedagogic theory speaks only of this third point without mentioning the others, considering that the contribution to the development of children takes place through games, playful activities. That's not how it is. When it is said that the school must contribute to the development of the student it is through the appropriation of knowledge and learning.

When I mention a school culture I refer to these three matrices and in my view, the school often tends to undertake projects disconnected from this concept, particularly social projects. This situation is flagrant in Brazil, where the principal mission of many schools is to provide meals and a safe place for students.

José Eduardo Franco – And the rest is extra.

António Nóvoa – Exactly. Look, I know that there are schools in which this objective is probably very good, but my utopian project, as you had asked, is not this school. My project is that of conceiving a small school in which children have four or five hours of classes per day. For me a full time school is absurd! Nevertheless, I understand that it is necessary, because parents work all day and do not have a place to leave their children. I do not ignore reality, but my utopia is a school where children stay four or five hours, and later there are other hours with the family or for conducting other activities, sports, art. It is not one location that absorbs all of this. It is not a school in which the child enters at eight in the morning and leaves at eight at night and in which their entire life is confined to this space.

The idea that I have is that in this *expansive* school as I call it, there is tremendous confusion about the limits of its responsibilities and those of society. There is great confusion about the role of the cultural, scientific and healthcare institutions. For example, it seems obvious to us that, if there is a health problem such as avian flu, prevention should be handled in the schools. There is even a law for this. But I question why it should be at school and not in healthcare centers? Why not reconceptualize the healthcare centers?

José Eduardo – Because of a question of space?

António Nóvoa – Well, it is easier because all the children are there. The same is true, periodically, with the issues of fires and highway accidents: it is also the school that handles prevention. I know that it is easier, but is it legitimate to ask all of this of the school? At heart, schools like to have all these responsibilities because the educator is a generous person, the teacher likes to resolve social problems because the school imagines itself to be a place where society would finally find its progress. We have reached the beginning of the 21st century and we realize that the school has not brought progress or development, that it is not able to resolve all of the problems. This situation must be terminated.

José Eduardo Franco – Do you propose an end to the myth of the school? We must begin again?

António Nóvoa – It is necessary to begin again. It is for this reason that my discourse about the school today is anti-utopian.

José Eduardo Franco – It's a bit radical...

António Nóvoa – It is to say: “Let's do well what we have to do and require society to resolve social problems outside of the school. Don't put this inside the school”.