

Interview with Pr Bruno Poucet, Professor of sciences of education, University of Picardie Jules Verne, Amiens, France

Ismail Ferhat

email: ismail.ferhat@u-picardie.fr

Université de Picardie Jules Verne. France

1. Introduction¹

Born in 1952, Professor of sciences of education at the University of Picardie Jules Verne (Amiens, France), Bruno Poucet is a French renowned historian of education in France. He has conducted and realized various researches on education (and their interactions with politics) in contemporary France. He worked on the history of education policies of the French 'Fifth Republic' (founded in 1958 by Charles de Gaulle) at the national level and in the Picardie region - where he lives and works. He is interested in the history of secondary and higher education, private sector of education, school secularism (called in France «laïcité») and the teaching and curriculum of philosophy. Eclectic in his areas of interest, he has also been deeply committed in the functioning of the French education system. He has been a long-time teachers' union deputy leader at the CFDT (currently the major trade union in France). In 2011, he has created the CAREF research unit (Centre Aménois de Recherche en *Éducation* et en Formation, specialized in educational studies), at the University of Picardie Jules Verne.

He has kindly accepted to be interviewed by Ismail Ferhat, Associate professor at the University of Picardie Jules Verne (CAREF research Unit/Teachers training school of Amiens), for the review *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación*, in spite of the difficult sanitary situation in France, in April 2020.

¹ Translated by Ismail Ferhat and reviewed by Bruno Poucet in April the 30th, 2020.

2. The interview

Ismail Ferhat (I.F.): *Becoming a historian of education is not a path that could be predicted... How did you become interested in this subject?*

Bruno Poucet (B.P.): I was interested in school questions at first because, from 1976, I was a secondary school teacher. I asked myself a number of questions about how school was functioning, its organization, the students who frequented it, on their parents, on colleagues, and the administration which supervised this institution. Quite early in my professional experience, I also asked myself how to improve my teaching: training sessions helped me, I have tried new activities and evaluations with my pupils (favoring lecture, organizing debates, new type of evaluations, reorganization of the class council, cultural activities, trips abroad). Such experiences invited me to reflect more broadly on the nature and functioning of the school system.

It was, however, not only through practice that I was questioning how education works. The subject I taught also played a major role. I was a teacher of philosophy, and one of my first courses dealt with school system and the inequalities it engendered - we were in a time of harsh criticism of educational institutions by Pierre Bourdieu or by Ivan Illich, whose writings like *Deschooling society* had interested me a lot. But by reflecting on pedagogical practices, I was out of step with the inspection body which considered that «philosophy was in itself its own pedagogy». The students quickly made me realize that this was not really the case in classrooms. They pushed me to think, innovate, question the model received by my professors in high school and university. It should indeed be said that, at this time, professional training to become a secondary education teacher was almost non-existent². Unless you wanted to install yourself in a sort of professional routine, it was necessary to think, innovate, experiment new ways of teaching. The pupils are there who constantly invite you to wake up ... except if you let you to become embittered, offbeat.

I gradually become involved in the training of teachers of philosophy. I discovered on this occasion the work of Antoine Prost³. And that awakened in me a taste for research. I wanted to understand how this discipline I was teaching was historically constituted. I thus entered the history of education, because I did not want to do research in philosophy, contrary to my initial will. I also assumed local and national union responsibilities. Such an experience led me to understand the functioning of the educational machinery, by allowing me to have a look at the heart of educational policies. And that also allowed me to meet intellectuals such as Antoine Prost, André

² Note by Ismail Ferhat : until 1990, and the founding of IUFM (or University Institute for teachers training), secondary teachers were receiving a rather light initial training in regional pedagogical centres called CPR, and the national exams they have to pass were almost totally devoted to the scientific knowledge of their subject.

³ Note by Ismail Ferhat: Antoine Prost, born in 1933 and former professor of contemporary history at the University of Sorbonne, is widely considered in France as one of the most important historians alive in this country. He has mainly devoted his research on three fields: First World War studies, working class unions and parties, and history of education. He has been also active in debates on historical methodology, and in education policies- he was a senior advisor on education to the Prime minister between 1988 and 1990.

Robert, Jean-François Chanet or Emile Poulat, the last one who has prefaced my first book in 1998⁴.

I.F.: *You have a background in humanities. What has made you become interested in sciences of education?*

B.P.: I have actually a triple background. First, literature: I studied literature and I taught, as a teacher of philosophy, for several years with a great interest on literature. Secondly, philosophy: it was my main curriculum of studies, until a project of PhD I did not realize in epistemology and history of science. Third, history: that was the case when I began studies in the project of thesis. But the point that unites, in fact, the main part of my intellectual approach, is the history of literature, and of the philosophy that I taught in high school classes. We worked on famous literary and philosophical authors. It was necessary to show how their works were made up, how they had influenced the culture and how they questioned us today. On the top of that, how beyond the knowledge which one had to bring, they contributed to build our world? Philosophy in this sense was not just pure speculation, but also, according to the old Cartesian precepts, a reflection on practice. It is thus an immense cultural openness since it invites people to question themselves about everything and to cultivate themselves accordingly.

To summarize, let's put it simply: I was a total stranger to the sciences of education. As a teacher, I had no training in the subject: the first degree in this field, at the University of Picardy, was created well after the start of my professional practice, in 1990. When I began to search a field a research, I looked where it seemed to me that it was possible to work on education. So it was the sciences of education, with the intention of choosing more specifically history of education. My professor in Amiens, Claude Carpentier, specialized in historical sociology and open-minded to international studies, recommended to me to pursue my training with Claude Lelièvre, professor of educational sciences and education historian at the University Paris-V (now Paris-Descartes). We had the same background: he was initially professor of philosophy; then he had become an education historian. I was taking the same path.

I.F.: *Why and how did you choose your subject for your PhD?*

B.P.: Things happened quite simply: as soon as my undergraduate studies in sciences of education, I wanted to continue, from a more theoretical point of view, what I did while I was training colleagues. Where does teaching of philosophy come from, how was it formed, how was it transformed? How could it evolve? What types of pedagogical exercise could be offered to students? I proposed to Claude Lelièvre to work under his supervision on this question for my DEA paper (I already had a DEA in philosophy)⁵. He accepted. I thus discovered the world of archives and

⁴ Note by Ismail Ferhat: André Robert, born in 1951, was professor of sciences of education in France. His main field of study are teacher unionism and history of education. Jean-François Chanet, born in 1962, is professor of contemporary history (specialized in French political and education history) and is currently a high civil servant in charge of a school regional district («Recteur» in French). Emile Poulat (1920-2014) was a sociologist and historian, who was specialized in the study of Catholicism and secularism («laïcité» in French).

⁵ Note by Ismail Ferhat: DEA was the former denomination for «Master degree» in France until 2004. It was a research-oriented degree, close to the Anglo-Saxon Mphil, while the DESS (also a

research methods in history. I also had to - it was an obligation for students at this time – to follow seminars and lessons outside my field of study, in order to discover other areas of research. I therefore chose a seminary on the history of intellectuals (with Jacques Julliard and Christophe Prochasson at the EHESS)⁶. I also chose a course on the history of museums in education (with Jacqueline Eidelman and Michel Van Praet, respectively researcher at CNRS and professor at the Museum of Natural History)⁷. So it was primarily general history, not just history of school curricula. Nevertheless, this is in this direction that I went between 1992 and 1996 to write my doctoral thesis. By exploring archives, by crossing handwritten, printed and oral sources, I quickly understood that it the teaching of philosophy a construction of the school itself as shown by André Chervel⁸. It was not only an issue of didactic, an adaptation of academic knowledge to classrooms. Two elements appeared to me: the history of this discipline was not independent from education policies, it cannot ignore what is called in France «the school question», i.e. the historically complex relations between the public and the private sectors of education. The originality of my thesis was to avoid a purely pedagogical approach to reintegrate the teaching of philosophy into a socio-political framework. So I tried to show that the history of education and political matters are deeply intertwined. It was important to study this interaction in order to understand successes and failures of the school system.

I.F.: *What made you switch to a university career?*

B.P.: It could be seen as «a return of the repressed». In 1976, I wanted to go to Germany for six months to learn German – whereas I was working on Ludwig Feuerbach. I gave up in the face of difficulties – I was not coming from the elitist «Grandes écoles» that offered better chances to obtain such international exchanges, and there was an extremely limited number of positions available in philosophy research. Most of people who have obtained a PhD I knew at this time were teaching in high schools. So, I had to be realistic. I taught in high school, but I never really gave up the idea to do research in social sciences. When the situation was better 15 years later, I decided to resume a university course, while continuing to teach. There was no PhD funding, and by consequence there was no choice: teaching and following postgraduate studies were to be done at the same time. I was far from being alone in this case: most of the members of Claude Lelièvre's research

«Master degree» now and closer to the Anglo-Saxon Msc) was more professional and was therefore not intended to be followed by a PhD. In France, all masters are now accepted to candidate to a PhD program.

⁶ Note by Ismail Ferhat: EHESS (or Schools for advanced studies in social sciences) is a prestigious interdisciplinary university in social sciences, founded in Paris in 1975 from a previous institution. Both its students and teachers enjoy a high freedom in terms of choice of subject and methodology. Jacques Julliard (born in 1933, now retired) and Christophe Prochasson (born in 1959) are both members of this institution, and specialized in the intellectual history of the French contemporary working class movement.

⁷ Note by Ismail Ferhat: CNRS is the major state research organism in France, covering all the scientific fields. Its academic members, whose status differ from university positions, are allowed to make full-time research (although some of them also choose in addition to teach).

⁸ Note by Ismail Ferhat: André Chervel (born in 1931), is a former academic in literature and education studies, specialized in the issue of French language and literature teaching.

seminar were not young students, but teachers who were in their thirties or more. They were, however, benefiting from new possibilities after their PhD: there has been an unprecedented wave of creation of academic positions in sciences of education, due to the creation of the IUFM by the law of education in 1989, and the general increase of courses and departments related this scientific field. After obtaining my PhD in 1996, I applied for an academic position at the university of Picardie- in which I had started my studies in the seventies. It was a post of associate professor at the department of social sciences at the University of Picardie, and I was recruited. In fact, we were a total of three persons to be recruited this year in this university as academics in sciences of education: the department was quickly growing. I found some of my former professors whom I had followed teaching seven years earlier. Five years later, I obtained my HDR⁹. I had the choice between positions in Amiens or Lille. I finally chose to stay in Amiens, at the IUFM, before returning four years later to the department of human and social sciences where today I am finishing my academic career after twenty-four years of higher education teaching, administrative positions and various institutional activities.

I.F.: *Can you present your research topics today?*

B.P.: Today, of course, I continue to work on education policies. The archives are being more widely open than at the beginning of my thesis, so I can continue, sometimes with yourself, the exploration of governmental choices in education. A conference in 2018 that I co-chaired with our young colleague Julien Cahon will be published in a few months. Its title sums up my current intentions rather well: 'Reforming the education system'¹⁰. I have always thought that sciences of education could not be limited to a theoretical discourse. They have to contribute to bringing elements of understanding of the organization of the education system to its actors. I never refused to be interviewed by media when I was asked. It has always seemed to me to be part of the intellectual work I do. On the same subject, I have been asked to write a book on the history of essay in philosophy. I would like to continue exploring what governance of educational policies is: how it got organized, etc. Finally, I hope to have the necessary resources to write a summary on private school sector in France in the last two centuries.

I.F.: *In your opinion, why sciences of education should integrate a historical perspective? What benefits could it be expected for the education system?*

B.P.: I belong to this school of sciences of education which considers that they are a multidisciplinary discipline, or more exactly a mix of several disciplines whose object is education - in all its diversity. I am not defending a kind of educational mechanical approach who pretend to say how to teach, what practices should be used with absolute certainty. In my opinion, it would not be very realistic with the multiple interactions happening between students, parents and teachers. In short, there is not an undisputed truth on educational matters which could emerge from a

⁹ Note by Ismail Ferhat: in France, the HDR is a post-PhD diploma, whose obtaining is mandatory to become a PhD supervisor or to apply as a Professor of university. However, some departments (economics, law, politics or medical studies) have also a specific exam («Agrégation du supérieur») which allows to become directly Professor, even without an HDR.

¹⁰ Note by Ismail Ferhat: Julien Cahon (born in 1983) is an Associate professor in sciences of education at the University of Picardie Jules Verne, specialized in history of education.

specific discipline. Some insights can be brought, a lot of «craft» or «dot-it-yourself» in the sense of Claude Lévi-Strauss, of what are doing the actors of the education system. A sense of modesty is necessary when it is remembered that we work with human beings.

In this sense, history of education can be useful by putting in perspective, by helping to understand in a broader context, but also by highlighting that, sometimes, solutions to educational problems that have been found in the past are no longer suitable. By taking a factual look to history, this approach invites us to avoid nostalgia for an outdated past. Educational practices are not unchanging. They are invitation to invention. One word, basically: to understand in order to avoid passionate reactions on present issues. History of education is also about understanding, not supporting a cause- whatever it is. Educational militancy is the role of specialist associations or teachers' unions, not of a scientist. You also have to permanently question your work. Let's recall what Georges Dumézil said¹¹. One day my historical work will shift from one library shelf to another: it will become a novel and no longer a work of science. Because history of education is, like all history, a story and not a research report.

I.F.: *Finally, in your opinion, what are the rising stakes and subjects in the history of education?*

B.P.: When I started working, we were only beginning to come out from of a period in which history of education was essentially institutional and masculine, often ignoring the role and place of women, teaching subjects or private sector schools. Today, this is no longer the case to some extents. History of education has also taken a greater interest from «below» - for example history of pupils, less-known educational institutions like municipal colleges for adults, vanished diplomas such as the elementary certificate. It must help to understand the evolution of pedagogical practices, not to fall for the latest educational fashions such as neuroscience or new educational technologies. Without ignoring them, they cannot pretend to say everything about education.

History of interactions between school system and politics is a field that should be more meticulously investigated- in the CAREF research unit, we have started to open new perspectives, by studying the articulation of political and educational positions. This is for example what you have done through the two works you have coordinated in 2019, *Left-wing politics and education*, and *Scarves of discord*¹². We should also pursue the history of teacher unionism, in order to better understand the role of intermediary bodies in education.

¹¹ Note by Ismail Ferhat: Georges Dumézil (1989-1986) was a French philologist and anthropologist, specialized in the study of Indo-European languages and cultures.

¹² Note by Ismail Ferhat : *Scarves of discord* is a collective book on the first crisis on Islamic veils in state schools in France, which occurred in 1989 in the city of Creil, located in the region of Picardie.