

XAVIER BONAL

EMOTIONS AND RATIONALITY IN POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Q. Tell us a little about who you are, about some of the most significant milestones in your personal/professional life, and your most noteworthy achievements as an educator/scholar/citizen. Locate and position yourself within the socio-political and historical movements that define who and what you are, and where you 'stand'.

I am an academic working in social sciences with a clear objective of doing useful work with a view to improving social justice. That's what definitely gives more meaning to my professional life. I think that to do that today means unavoidably doing critical work. It means working mostly in a counterhegemonic form to produce 'different' evidence and to unmask taken-for-granted mainstream knowledge. I am a sociologist and a critical economist. Both disciplines have helped me to develop a 'suspicious' attitude towards that knowledge serving policies and practices. How so? It's difficult to identify a single reason. I grew up within a family that experienced political and cultural oppression under Francoism. My father was not a political activist in strict sense, but was an excellent professional working in the public health sector. He was visibly critical of the dictatorship. My parents and other relatives were concerned to teach us why Catalan language could not be 'seen' and heard in the street, on TV, or in most of institutions. They taught my brothers and sisters and myself the meaning of personal and collective freedom. When Franco died I was twelve years old, but my child-eyes had already seen radical demonstrations in the street and saw my aunt lying in bed full of bruises after being beaten up by the police. I was aware about the death penalty approved by Franco to assassinate the radical anarchist Salvador Puig Antich and could feel the atmosphere of an active civil society fighting for political change. My adolescence took place, therefore, in a moment of social and political change in Catalan society. Clandestine organisations were emerging, the Communist Party was legalised, the first general elections took place and I could see the pride of a generation being able to vote for the first time in its life. The attempted *coup d'état* of 1981 showed me how scared people were of the military forces, and how precious is political freedom when you start enjoying it.

Although the Spanish political transition is often presented as an exemplary one, because there was no bloodshed, I am not especially proud of it. Bringing change by forgetting the past is not only unfair but it is also an incomplete process. Wounds do not close easily, and we are still experiencing it today because not everything has been said. However, from a personal point of view, the arrival of democracy, the existence of political pluralism and the need to reconstruct a society gave me the context to engage in endless debates with my university colleagues, and to

observe social, political and cultural change in a society living in an accelerated way while feeling the fear to loose freedom again. As a result, I belong to the first generation of Spanish people that entered the university and the labour market in a normalised—though incomplete—democratic context. We were able to choose for the first time, we felt free to speak, and we started enjoying civil and political rights as something normal. My political consciousness those years extended also to those movements in Latin America fighting for socialism. The Sandinist revolution in Nicaragua was ‘the’ model in the early eighties, and in my socialist context was celebrated as the correct one compared to the Cuban Castroism. As any other middle class youngster I had of course my ‘Che’ poster in my room which added the necessary romantic dose to dream of socialist change and freedom. At that time I became aware that no matter what I would do with my professional life, I would try to work in Latin America and for Latin America. That’s something I can be proud of because I have been able to do it on many occasions.

After almost two decades of academic and political work in education I had the chance to engage in a different experience in public sector administration. In 2006 I became Deputy Ombudsman for Children’s Rights in Catalonia. I had the opportunity to intervene on human rights’ violations to children in my country, and to have a better projection of my work and ideas. For four years I was able to realise *in-situ* how social and political justice is often denied to the most disadvantaged. The experience was extremely useful to me. On the one hand, I had the chance to detect the magnitude and the forms in which children’s rights are violated and to have a ‘direct’ experience and knowledge of invisible and silent children. On the other hand, I could realise that theoretical knowledge and academic work is absolutely meaningful when working about ‘real problems of real people’.

Q. What have been some of the most formative moments in your own education? Here you can also tell readers about the individuals, movements, organisations, etc that were most influential in shaping your development as an educator/scholar/citizen.

My parents opted to enrol my brothers and sisters and myself into a private Catalan school. Public schools during Francoism were completely disregarded by the government. They were of very low quality and were absolutely doctrinaire in content and teaching methods. A number of private schools started teaching mostly in Catalan, although it was formally forbidden by law. So, to escape officialist education parents would opt for private education, which was extremely diverse both in its institutional forms and in its pedagogies. My school was a good one, clearly Catalanist in its spirit and quite innovative in terms of curriculum content and teaching methods. Nationalism, however, coexisted with some elitist flavour oriented to form the new leading class. After starting my secondary education I asked my parents to leave that school and to enrol in a public secondary school. I wanted another atmosphere and other types of people around me. When I was sixteen years old I attended a secondary school in Barcelona which was more

mixed in its social composition. The experience was a very positive one for me. Maybe the academic level of the school was a bit lower than the private one, but I learned much more about work discipline and about other life styles and cultures.

The experiences lived in the early eighties were very important to form my political consciousness. I started my BA in Economics, and later on, in Sociology, and was very lucky to be taught by good professors. One of them, Joan Estruch, influenced me very much in my understanding of Sociology as a science to uncover the social construction of reality and to question the taken-for-granted assumptions of mainstream knowledge. Another one, Professor Miren Etxezarreta, opened my eyes towards a critical political economy of development. And a third one, Marina Subirats, taught me excellent courses in social structure and in sociology of education.

Those years were crucial to understand my intellectual motivation in critical social sciences. I was extremely lucky to join a small group of students that opted to do sociology as a specialisation within public sector economy. Faculties of Sociology were forbidden under Francoism and only a few professionals in Catalonia had studied this discipline abroad. The French influence, and specially the work of Bourdieu, was visible in their work and their forms of thinking.

I learned also a lot from my studies abroad. I was able to spend almost one academic year at Stanford University, in California. I attended courses run by key scholars like Martin Carnoy, Larry Cuban, Francisco Ramirez and Henry Levin, with whom I was able to learn about the experience of the Accelerated Schools Project. At the same time, I was impressed by a very interesting international community of students that were at the Center of Educational Research at Stanford (CERAS). I learned from them and from the experiences of their countries, in the context of a programme of international education. Later on, my professional career allowed me to meet amazing scholars. I have been lucky not just to collaborate with people who I admire, but to gain very special friends. Here I want to mention Stephen Stoer, a terrific intellectual who we sadly lost recently, as well as Roger Dale, Susan Robertson and Ronald Sultana. I have very simply learned a lot from all of them.

Finally, there is something that might surprise even those who know me, but which I identify crucial in my life. I studied and played music in a music school. This school was absolutely anti-academic in teaching methods. No exams and no academic memorization at all. What we learned there was learning and enjoying music by playing and loving music. I have always seen an interaction between art sensitivity and political sensitivity. Art, in any form, educates some emotions that give the sensitive part to political consciousness. By this interaction one is able not only to understand oppression or discrimination, but also to better empathise with those experiencing it. Social injustice becomes not only rationally deplorable, but emotionally incorporated in the consciousness.

Q. What are some of the key educational 'problematics' that currently preoccupy you? How are these linked to the broader preoccupations you may have

about society? What is your response to these problematics and preoccupations, as a scholar and as a citizen?

Current global transformations are having an enormous impact on social and educational local contexts. These are challenges for both policy makers and academics, who I think should focus their research on these current transformations as a question of social responsibility. In education these changes affect many dimensions, like the dynamics of social exclusion and social cohesion linked to educational processes, the devaluation of educational credentials and their effects in the labour market, changes in educational governance or migration processes and school experience, just to mention a few. I am especially interested in the effects of these changes on people, and especially on the most disadvantaged groups. One of the main issues I am concerned with relates to the processes of school segregation and their impact on educational inequalities. My country for instance, has experience an amazing change in the social composition of public schooling for the last ten years. Migrant students count for 16% of student population. The challenge has been enormous in terms of providing them with the necessary school places and educational services. However, the Department of Education has done nothing in terms of combating educational risk among public and private schools. Most migrant students are enrolled in public schools, and some of them became real ghetto institutions during the last decade. School segregation has critical consequences in terms of both educational opportunities and social cohesion. The extreme concentration of migrant students provokes the abandonment of autoctonous populations of those schools with more concentration of migrant students, opting sometimes for private schools to avoid 'otherness'. Segregated schools present higher rates of failure and lower quality of schooling, which is unfair in terms of educational and social chances. But school segregation is also a sign of the social and political incapacity for living together, as Alain Touraine has noted (Touraine, 1997). I think western societies face today this enormous challenge, and schooling should be treated as the legitimate and privileged institution to construct the type of society we want to live in. I denounced this situation when I was at the Ombudsman office, and I have published about it. But the politics of non-decision making dominates the scene. A culture of school choice and the perception of educational risk are powerful reasons for preventing any intervention on that matter, with just a few exceptions.

At the international level, I am also very concerned about the schooling experience of poor children in developing countries. During the last decades enrolment has increased significantly, but educational results remain very low in poor communities. The global agenda for education is turning strongly towards the issue of learning, and not only enrollment. Why is it so difficult for a poor child to learn at school? I have recently worked with the concept of educability, strictly understood as the social conditions that prevent a child to have a positive experience in the school. With other colleagues I have carried out research in Brazilian *favelas* and have published a book titled *Ser Pobre en la Escuela (Being Poor at School)*, which builds on ethnographic work with poor children and their school expectations (Bonal *et al.*, 2010). The message of the book is that we have

first to know what poverty does to education to make education a powerful tool for changing the lives of the poor and planning the necessary interventions. This is a central preoccupation of my current work.

Q. What are your reflections about the major forces that are shaping educational practice in your country/region? What are the dynamics and interests that underpin these forces, and what kinds of challenges do they represent for the articulation of an education project in your country/region?

I think my country is a good example of how globalisation impinges on educational policies and processes in what I called in the very first issue of the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* a ‘semi-peripheral’ type of schooling (Bonal & Rambla, 1996). The underdevelopment of education for a long time meant that the democratization process of education arrived very late. Mass schooling in countries like Spain or Portugal had to take place in a period of economic weakness—what Stephen Stoer (1986) referred to as the simultaneous process of consolidation and the crisis of mass schooling. That had consequences at many levels: raising educational expectations at the university level without having properly developed secondary education, underdevelopment of vocational education that was considered a completely marginal option, lack of sufficient school places and the role of the market to compensate for this shortage, or a tremendous generational gap in educational attainment. As a result we have suffered from these difficulties for the last thirty years or so. Now, in the middle of this global crisis, we are witnessing a phenomenon whereby the most educated generation of our history is experiencing enormous problems for social and labour inclusion. The level of unemployment of graduate young people is the highest in Europe, and more than 40% of graduates have jobs for which they are overqualified. We are witnessing what Bourdieu called a ‘deceived generation’ (Bourdieu, 1979), and this is having consequences on young people’s motivation and social attitudes. People accumulate educational credentials, but cannot find exchange value for them. And many times what they see is older people with lesser education blocking their road. We have one of the highest rates of youngsters not in employment, education or training, and this of course will have consequences on social cohesion but also on economic efficiency. Economic crisis, on the other hand, has raised demand for vocational education, which is scarce. Just to mention Catalonia, two thousand students have been kept out because of the lack of supply. Here again we can see the consequences of our recent past of educational underdevelopment.

Another great problem is that of those youngsters who drop out without having completed postsecondary education (and sometimes without having completed compulsory schooling). The Spanish rate for this figure is closed to 30%, far from the expected benchmark established in the 2000 Lisbon Agenda, which is 10%. Reasons have to be found in a dynamic and precarious labour market, which easily absorbs unqualified young workers (in the tourism sector, for instance), but also in an educational system which is unable to motivate and retain youths within the system. Educational reforms are failing to address the need of these youngsters.

Most of them are incapable of defining a life project and to find somebody to trust, or to trust in them and give them a chance. This is an enormous challenge for the years to come, and something needs to be done, not least because the number is bound to rise, given that students coming from a migrant background are more likely to fail at school.

Q. Which authors/texts would you single out as being of utmost importance if one wishes to understand educational dynamics in your country/region? How do you use these authors/texts in your own work? Feel free to cite an extended passage, and to comment on it in ways that add further insights into your own thinking.

Personally, I have to confess a moderate disappointment with the current production of educational research in my country. There are different reasons for that. One is that Faculties of Education are, in my view, too pedagogically focused and allocate only a minor space to social sciences in their programmes. Of course I have nothing against pedagogy but I think we need more critical research of educational processes from a social science perspective. I think we are witnessing nowadays the limits of curriculum and pedagogic reforms to bring substantial changes in education, and teachers need more social understanding of educational processes. On the other hand, I think we are witnessing new forms of intellectual colonialism through new systems of research evaluation in the social sciences—mainly by implementing the ‘publish or perish’ systems of promotion in academic careers and by valuing publications in ISI Thompson journals. The problem is that this is affecting both the selection of objects of study and the theoretical frameworks to interpret our social reality. Thus, we observe many scholars using sound western intellectuals to interpret a social reality that needs specific theoretical production and ideas to be grasped. Projects like the *Mediterranean Journal of Educational Studies* are important because other voices can be heard that might provide a better understanding of Mediterranean societies.

I have found a lot of inspiration in some Portuguese colleagues. The work of Boaventura de Sousa Santos (Santos, 1992, 1995) has given them inspiring ideas for theoretical production. Here I want to mention again some of the works by Stephen Stoer, framed by the theoretical ideas of Santos. Santos’ interpretation of ‘semiperiphery’, or recent works on globalisation and democracy, have been important in my work. I have found these theories very suggestive to understand educational policies and processes in Spain, and to understand how the logic of policy transfer and policy borrowing operate in semiperipheral countries. The metaphor of *image of the centre* is a very appropriate one to understand how the Spanish State operates and legitimates its decisions.

In Spain, the work of Carlos Larena in sociology of education has proved to be very valuable (Larena, 1986). He developed the ‘Spanish version’ of theories of reproduction, and brought the works of Bourdieu into the Spanish academic debate in education. At the level of research, some institutions and scholars are doing interesting studies in education. In Catalonia it is important to mention the work of the Jaume Bofill Foundation, which specialises in social sciences, and which has

become a real ‘think tank’ in education in recent years. I have collaborated with them many times and I have directed occasionally the annual ‘State of the Art of Education’ in our country. There are other research groups that develop interesting works on issues like education and the labour market and education and migration. From a theoretical perspective, however, we lack our ‘Santos’, a more independent figure to produce context-based theories meaningful to understand social change in our societies. Of course one can mention the work of Manuel Castells as one of the most significant Spanish scholars in social sciences, especially after publishing his trilogy about the information age (Castells, 1999). But his valuable work belongs to the global space, and his theoretical production was mostly developed in the US.

Q. Which recent developments/innovations in the education sector in your country fill you with hope in terms of furthering the agenda of democracy, and of equity? Which recent developments do you feel most critical of, and why?

There are a number of isolated experiences that are really valuable in terms of bringing change to the educational space. The *Learning Communities* project developed by my colleague Ramon Flecha is a good example of radical democratic innovation in educational institutions attempting to change the educational experiences of the most disadvantaged (Flecha, 1998). There are also a number of individual projects that are developing socially transformative practices in education. Usually these experiences have the presence of actors outside of the education system. That is, non-institutionalised people who bring fresh ideas and a different know-how to education. There are nice projects in arts, like music, painting or dance. There are also interesting collaborations between schools and communities that work together with ‘at-risk’ children or teenagers who have embarked on failing academic trajectories (Subirats *et al.*, 2003).

At the institutional level, there are also some interesting experiences that have been important in terms of educational integration. Here it’s important to mention the *aulas de acogida* (‘host classrooms’) for migrant students. These are classrooms within the school for migrant students with difficulties in learning the language. Students share the regular class with other pupils and attend the *aula de acogida* some hours each day. But other educational devices have just followed the logic of keeping problematic children aside. Some programmes which are referred to as ‘curricular diversification’ are just devices for excluding children from disturbing the regular class. Recently, the Department of Education approved what is euphemistically called ‘Educational Welcoming Spaces’ (EBE, in Spanish). This programme is directed at migrant children who have difficulties with Spanish and Catalan language. They spend around two months in these classrooms before entering the regular school. In practice they have become a segregated space for facilitating the task of some teachers who are reluctant to work with these children. At the same time, this is a very contradictory practice with that of the ‘host classrooms’, because the latter were expressly designed to do the same job but *inside* the school.

In summary, institutional compensatory policies have been of very low intensity and have shown a low level of success. I think a different culture of compensation

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is needed, focused on the need of failing children and teenagers at school and capable to construct professional and life projects for social groups that are at risk of being excluded.

Q. What comments would you care to make about the impact of globalisation and/or regionalisation (e.g. Europeanisation) on educational development in your country/region?

As I argued before, I think that it is a central responsibility of social science academics to understand and analyse the impact of globalisation processes in our countries and regions. As Roger Dale states, it is a necessary step for our understanding of policy mechanisms of influence and a methodological challenge for comparative education (Dale, 1999). I can identify several dimensions of the impact of globalisation processes in educational development in my country. Following Dale, I observe direct and indirect effects of these processes. Direct effects are visible in forms of educational governance, like clear tendencies toward public-private partnerships or changes in school management that are lowering the decision-making capacity of teachers. Tendencies towards finance-driven and competitive-driven reforms are also observable in external service provision for schools. Furthermore, as in many other countries, PISA results are becoming a central issue in educational evaluation, saturating public debates about educational quality and influencing programmes to achieve better scores in the next PISA round. The Bologna process is also having a distinct impact in higher education, mainly in terms of governance and in the new forms of postgraduate education.

But there are also indirect effects, which are possibly the most important ones to understand the impact of globalisation and Europeanisation on education. I have already talked about the challenge of migration movements, which have clearly changed school demography and the profile of school users in our system. Consequences are important on school segregation, but also in the field of school curriculum and pedagogies. Changes in the labour market are also challenging education in many dimensions. The content of vocational education is under constant review and critique with a view to 'serving' the needs of entrepreneurs, for instance. At the same time, labour market reforms do not stimulate on-the-job training because young people usually have temporary and precarious contracts that do not ensure secure job tenure. But the clearest effect is visible in the devaluation of educational credentials. I mentioned the overqualification problem and the high rate of unemployment of graduates in Spain. A new phenomenon that can now be observed in Spain is graduate brain drain. Graduates cannot fulfil their expectations to find a proper job in times of crisis and thus opt to leave to northern European countries or to the US.

I think that the current crisis is affecting welfare state services profoundly, and we are witnessing new forms of the retreat of the State in education, especially the area of educational planning and in terms of facilitating market presence in educational provision. Unfortunately I detect a low capacity to resist these changes, and for that reason I think it is important that we investigate and denounce the effects of these tendencies as critical analysts of education.

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