

Sayad Abdelmalek (2014) – L'école et Les Enfants de L'Immigration. Paris: Seuil, 238 pp.

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Book Review

A review of a work published a decade ago may seem anachronistic or unnecessary. Yet, this is not the case with *L'école et les enfants de l'immigration* (2014). This collection of unpublished essays by Abdelmalek Sayad, edited by Benoît Falaize and Smaïn Laacher, explores the intricate relationship between migration and education, addressing issues that remain highly pertinent today. Drawing on the sociopolitical context of his time, the author offers incisive reflections on the politicization of culture, the symbolic construction of distinctions between *nationals* and *non-nationals*, the reproduction of social inequalities, and the temporal dimensions of migration. The analytical depth with which Sayad addresses these issues makes the volume still relevant today, as many of these questions remain open in our societies.

As outlined by the editors in the opening pages, the volume compiles papers drawn from Sayad's archives at the *Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration* (CNHI). These papers span from 1977 “when French schools saw the arrival of a new public produced by family reunifications” to 1997 “when the issue of their school failure became pregnant in the public debate” (p. 11). The volume opens with *Un parcours scolaire* (1990), the only essay presented out of chronological order. In this piece, Sayad retraces his personal trajectory as a student and teacher in Algeria, situating it within the country's historical events and social structures, constructing a proper socio-analysis (Sayad, 1999a). The following essay, *La scolarisation des enfants immigrés dans l'école française* (1977), is a substantial work in which Sayad critiques the processes of social reproduction perpetuated by the French educational system. These processes, he argues, marginalize both working-class and foreign-born students “Since educational structures are at the very least inadequate for the intellectual and social development of French and foreign children who do not, from the outset, respond to the social and cultural conditions postulated for success at school, these children are declared ‘unsuitable’, or ‘idiots’ in relation to school” (p. 44).

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Drawing on themes from *La reproduction* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970), Sayad examines the social mobility expectations cultivated by the children of migration, which are soon thwarted due to their class and migratory status. They come to understand their school failure as indicative of the social subordination that awaits them (p. 62). The next essay, *Pourquoi des cours en langues nationales pour les jeunes immigrés?* (1979), presents an interview in which Sayad addresses one of the central themes of the volume: his critique of teaching “languages of origin” (ELCO) to the children of migrants in French schools. He identifies several key issues: the relationship between legitimate and “foreign” languages, which mirrors the unequal relationship between cultures and social groups, and the discourse surrounding cultural “roots” as a form of exclusion from the national community. “Discovering or rediscovering today the existence of ‘languages of origin’ means putting the emphasis once again on the necessarily temporary dimension of immigration” (p. 78).

The next three essays are linked to Sayad’s involvement in the “Berque Commission,” a ministerial consultative body that worked on the issue of school-immigrant relations between 1984 and 1985. In the first essay, Sayad highlights how the Ministry’s intentions mask a series of contradictions and power dynamics, primarily the perpetuation of the image of “extraneousness” in relation to the children of migrants. One of the most contradictory issues is the teaching of languages of origin. This practice fetishizes and objectifies languages and cultures, and by arranging them hierarchically – since it is within the *French* school system that *other* languages are taught – it reinforces symbolic distinctions between the *French* and the *others*. He describes how intercultural pedagogy, ostensibly distancing itself from assimilationist approaches, often perpetuates segmentation and marginalization: “It has generated, in schools, a ‘teaching-ghetto’ (immigrant languages for students who are children of immigrants) for a ‘ghetto public’” (p. 111). In the second essay of this triad, Sayad examines the dynamics of invisibilisation of social differences within the school system, dynamics that are further intensified by the effort of “cultivating the cultural ‘specificities’” (p. 130) of migrants’ children. Finally, the last essay related to the “Berque Commission” presents Sayad’s reflections on the work of the commission itself. The author begins by considering how the school – particularly its culturalist attitudes – can foster illusions of cultural continuity despite migration: “The immigrant’s illusion of loyalty to himself (despite his immigration) is combined with this other illusion, of the society of immigration, that this ‘loyalty’ can be safeguarded and even perpetuated from one generation to the next, thanks in particular to the school” (p. 141). Thus, the children of migrants are expected to maintain a “continuity” (Sayad, 1994) with the previous generation, reinforcing national divisions between migrants and natives. However, as Sayad notes, it is also within the school that this illusion

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of temporariness can be shattered, as the objective reality of migrants' perpetual presence becomes evident. The school thus emerges as an ambivalent institution, capable of both dissipating the uncertainties of migration and frustrating the desires of migrants' children to "realise themselves totally and authentically, to exist fully" (p. 159). In these essays, Sayad addresses several central themes of his work, such as migrants' political mutism, naturalisation, and the illusions of migration, analysing how the educational institution can be both an actor of social reproduction and a potential transformative agent.

In the following essay, *L'école à l'épreuve de l'immigration*, Sayad once again addresses the relationship between school and culture, defining "an 'intercultural' school or a 'multicultural' pedagogy as one that in reality does not succeed in rising above a few commonplaces and caricatural folkloristic references to the culture of 'the other'" (p. 170). This is a particularly negative outcome if we consider the school's potential to foster equal and ongoing participation of migrants' children in society: "To school, and school well, is necessarily to make a bet on the future; not an abstract future, detached from any circumstantial declination, but a future well determined socially, culturally, territorially" (p. 171). With this in mind, Sayad proposes that the theme of migration be incorporated into teaching programs, especially from a historical perspective, in order to overcome the ethnocentric biases of French education and provide migrants' children with the tools to understand their present.

In the 1988 interview *Les enfants de la 'seconde génération' à l'Université*, Sayad comes back to the concept of educational failure, noting that when it concerns the children of migrants – often seen as a homogeneous, working-class group, destined for a predetermined educational and social path – it becomes normalised and does not prompt a questioning of the educational system that constructs and perpetuates this failure. This is followed by *Des finalités et des illusions de l'école* (1989), in which Sayad questions the stereotypes that define the school and its mission of social integration. Finally, the author returns to the theme of social inequalities that, more than any abstract discourse on culture or religion, impact the trajectories of students participating in a school system that supports social reproduction. *Illettrisme et pensée d'école* (1996) closes the volume. In this essay, Sayad addresses the social construction of the phenomenon of *illettrisme* or return illiteracy. It is interesting to note Sayad's use of the concept of "school thought" in this essay, which he defines as "the same thing" as "State thought" (p. 221). Sayad argues that our mental *habitus* is profoundly shaped by the representations provided by the school system (and through it, the State in general), to the point of influencing the meanings and symbolic orders that structure society and its hierarchies.

The volume *L'école et les enfants de l'immigration* stands as a key text in Sayad's scholarly production and is in profound dialogue with the rest of the author's

work, which – over the same twenty years of research – moves from an interest in migratory *ages* (1977) and migrant *culture* (1979) to that of *State thought* (1999b). The volume not only accompanies Sayad's intellectual trajectory but also reflects the transformations in France during his time, in which growing interest and concern for the fate of new generations coincided with the politicisation of migration. Few criticisms can be made of this work. Among them is the partial repetition of ideas and reasoning, a – though limited – disconnection between some essays, and, in some passages, a degree of particularism in the discussion. These issues, though inevitable in a work of this kind, remain secondary thanks to the depth and insight of the Algerian author's analysis. Indeed, the ten essays in this volume testify to Sayad's ability to elevate sociological analysis beyond the representations of common sense, revealing the underlying power relations of the social structure. A clear example of this is his sharp critique of the teaching of "languages of origin." Supported by the society of immigration as an act of recognition for "other" cultures, and by the society of emigration as a means of ensuring "cultural continuity" with the children of migrants, the teaching of "languages of origin" in French schools reproduces a symbolic hierarchy between legitimate and illegitimate cultures (both essentialized and objectified), as well as an unequal social hierarchy that divides *nationals* from those who – though French on paper – are nonetheless considered *non-nationals* and, as such, are socialised into subordinate roles. Finally, the volume carries a political urgency that sometimes leads Sayad to adopt positions that are difficult to implement in practice. This is the case with his proposal – against a hypocritical and superficial "interculturality" – to reaffirm a univocal and homogenising school mandate. These positions inevitably recall Durkheim (1922), from whom Sayad, however, largely distances himself by critically examining the political projects of the State that reproduce unequal hierarchies and social exploitation.

Ultimately, *L'école et les enfants de l'immigration* is a complex and profound work, as complex and profound as Sayad's thought and his analysis of the migration phenomenon. This work provides a framework for developing broad reflections on the construction of social hierarchies, the meaning of schooling and its relationship to migration, the practical (and often implicit) realisation of political visions, the relationship between migration's generations, and the connection between the colonial past and the migratory present – all of which Sayad explores through the lens of domination, particularly symbolic domination (De Montlibert, 2014). In this regard, *L'école et les enfants de l'immigration* is a valuable work for the understanding of various contemporary phenomena, particularly within European societies, where young generations with migration backgrounds are object of discourses and practices concerning their contested participation in societal structures and hierarchies. Hence, ten

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years after its release and almost fifty years after the writing of the first essay, this work continues to raise important questions and offer key insights into the lives and conditions of the children of migration. It is hoped that this volume, like many others in Sayad's oeuvre, will be translated and distributed beyond the French-speaking world.

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