

THE RETURN OF THE “EDUCATIONAL CATASTROPHE”: INEQUALITIES, CRISES, AND THE FUTURE OF EUROPEAN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Georg Picht’s theory of the “educational catastrophe” (Bildungskatastrophe) and Ralf Dahrendorf’s related perspectives on social inequalities in education serve as key reference points for analyzing the realities of European education. This study explores the significance of these theories, focusing on their historical development and contemporary reception. Through a critical review of the literature, it highlights the ways in which the original insights of Picht and Dahrendorf continue to hold relevance, especially during periods of educational crises and restructuring. Although these theories appeared to lose their immediate influence during the era of European integration and educational reforms, the resurgence of inequalities demonstrates the enduring pertinence of their original diagnoses. Despite the European Union’s policies aiming to balance opportunities, social constraints continue to produce disparities in access to and quality of education.

Analyzing the chronological evolution of their theories reveals the cyclical nature of educational crises. Inequalities and inefficiencies in educational systems resurface in new forms, raising questions about the sustainability of contemporary European strategies. Re-examining the theories of Picht and Dahrendorf, not as outdated findings but as tools for understanding recurring problems, may help identify the factors that continue to threaten education in both Germany and a unified Europe.

Policies of evaluation and privatization have exacerbated disparities in educational access, hindering the formation of a truly equitable educational system. Although Europe has moved away from the extreme “catastrophic” educational practices of the past, the need for substantial reform remains pressing.

Creating an inclusive educational system that incorporates targeted social policies, funding for the most vulnerable groups, and reforms oriented toward equal opportunities is a critical prerequisite for securing a fairer and more effective educational future in Europe. Such an approach is essential to prevent a new “educational catastrophe” in Europe.

Keywords: Educational crisis, education restructuring, European education policy, Georg Picht and Ralf Dahrendorf theories, educational catastrophe

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the decades following the Second World War, Germany faced profound social and economic transformations. The destruction caused by the war had devastated the country's economy, while its political system had to be rebuilt on entirely new foundations. The establishment of the Federal Republic of Germany in 1949 marked the beginning of a period of reconstruction. The Marshall Plan provided the necessary financial support for rebuilding infrastructure and revitalizing industry. The rapid economic recovery that followed, known as the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic miracle), was based on a model of intensive industrialization and export promotion, transforming the German economy. Eichengreen (2008) emphasizes that Germany's growth was driven by the effective use of a disciplined and educated workforce, as well as by the stability offered by the social market economy.

The social structure of postwar Germany was shaped by two major factors: the need to integrate displaced populations and the challenge of addressing the inequalities exacerbated by the war. Within this context, the reconstruction of the country relied on a model of the welfare state, in which state intervention played a decisive role in shaping the labor market and social policies. The rise of the middle class was accompanied by the increasing role of education as a mechanism for social mobility. According to Kaelble (1985), education was closely linked to employment prospects; nevertheless, it continued to function as a mechanism for reproducing the existing social structure, as class divisions were preserved through early selection of students already at the level of compulsory education.

The structure of education in West Germany continued to reflect class differences. Educational conditions resulted in a demographic and cognitive gap, as the economy demanded more scientists and technicians than the educational system was capable of producing with the required level of training (Picht, 1964).

The prevailing educational structures of the period retained many features from the prewar era, particularly the division between general and vocational education. Secondary education was strictly separated into different types of schools, largely determining students' professional and social trajectories. The roots of this system can be traced back to the 19th century, as Green (1990) points out, when education functioned as a tool of social separation and the preservation of elite groups. Although postwar Germany undertook democratization of many institutions, education remained trapped in traditional models, offering limited potential to alleviate social inequalities through academic achievement.

Economic growth increased the demand for skilled labor, intensifying pressure for educational reform. However, the tripartite education system (Volksschule, Realschule, Gymnasium) continued to operate as a mechanism for the social reproduction of inequalities, as students' social origins largely determined their educational and professional prospects (Tenorth, 2010). Based on a model of early selection, this system channeled Gymnasium graduates into university studies, while Hauptschule and Realschule mainly led to vocational pathways. As noted by Erikson and Goldthorpe (1992), this system, despite its functional alignment with the labor market, simultaneously maintained class distinctions through the early educational tracking of students.

The strengthening of industry and the growing importance of technological education led to an expansion of vocational training programs. However, university education remained a privilege of socially advantaged groups. According to Ringer (1979), German higher education

continued to be marked by an inherent elitism that excluded the lower social strata, reinforcing the role of education as a mechanism for preserving social hierarchy rather than promoting upward mobility. Educational policies during the 1950s and 1960s focused on enhancing vocational education in line with industrial needs, while university studies remained accessible primarily to certain social groups.

The social inequalities linked to education made the 1960s a period of intense debate regarding the need for educational reforms. Goldthorpe (2010) observes that Germany followed a distinctive model of social policy in which education functioned more as a means of reproducing the existing social structure than as a mechanism for broader social mobility. The growing demand for skilled labor, social pressures for equal opportunities, and the need to adapt to changing economic conditions made the call for educational reform increasingly urgent.

The debate over the role of education in German society became closely tied to broader ideas of social justice and economic development. Markovits (1982) underscores that education was regarded both as a tool for strengthening economic growth and as a factor for maintaining social stability. The tension between these two goals shaped the framework of educational policy, largely preserving existing social inequalities. This contradiction would later become a central point in the discussion on educational reforms.

2.0 THE THEORY OF THE "EDUCATIONAL CATASTROPHE"

Georg Picht's theory of the "educational catastrophe" (Bildungskatastrophe) is not merely a documentation of the crisis in West German education during the 1960s; rather, it constitutes an analytical interpretive framework that functions as a research model with specific problems, causal relationships, and proposals. Picht's central thesis is based on the premise that education fails to meet the needs of an evolving society and economy, leading to intensified inequalities and social stagnation (Picht, 1964).

The educational crisis that Picht identifies manifests on three fundamental levels: cognitive, social, and institutional. On the cognitive level, the inadequacy of education in producing skilled human capital is evident in the system's failure to adapt to the demands of new technologies and scientific advancement. Picht argues that education operates on outdated premises, neglecting the rapid progress in the natural sciences and the need to modernize the curriculum (Becker & Mayer, 2008).

On the social level, inequality in access to education forms a core component of his theory. Social origin significantly determines students' educational trajectories, perpetuating a closed system of social class reproduction. Picht recognizes that the educational system does not permit upward mobility for the lower social strata, resulting in a static social model that hinders innovation and progress (Dahrendorf, 1957).

At the institutional level, Picht criticizes the structure and management of the education system, which he views as overly centralized and lacking flexibility. The tripartite educational system (Volksschule, Realschule, Gymnasium) does not allow for the revision of learning pathways, while the absence of comprehensive educational policies obstructs adaptation to new social and economic demands. Picht maintains that education should serve as a mechanism for dynamic

social development, rather than remain a tool that perpetuates existing inequalities (Tenorth, 2010).

Picht's concern also extends to the relationship between education and democracy. He contends that an educational system that fails to provide equal opportunities undermines citizens' capacity to participate in democratic processes. Education should not be limited to the transmission of technical knowledge but should cultivate critically thinking citizens, capable of actively contributing to the shaping of society (Dahrendorf, 1965).

Within the scope of these analyses, he proposes specific reforms, including increased educational spending, curricular restructuring, and the creation of new institutions that would enable greater participation from social groups traditionally excluded from higher education. His emphasis on educational reform as a prerequisite for social progress positions his theory as a research model that views education not as an isolated institution, but as a mechanism that shapes social and economic structures (Picht, 1963).

Picht's theory played a decisive role in the subsequent development of educational policy in Germany, exerting pressure for institutional interventions that would ensure the adaptation of the educational system to contemporary challenges. Although the reforms that followed varied in their implementation, the research framework he developed remains crucial for analyzing educational inequalities and the structural changes required in modern educational systems.

3.0 THE THEORIES OF RALF DAHRENDORF

Ralf Dahrendorf is among the most influential figures in twentieth-century sociology, with his scholarly contribution centered on the study of class conflict and the dynamics of social mobility. Dahrendorf's theoretical approach is closely connected to the thought of Georg Picht, particularly with regard to the role of education in the process of social reproduction and the restructuring of social structures (Dahrendorf, 1965). As early as the 1960s, Picht had already highlighted the weaknesses of the German educational system, which was unable to respond to the new social and economic demands of the postwar period.

The object of Dahrendorf's critique was the structural asymmetry of the educational system, which, according to his analysis, contributed to the reproduction of social hierarchies through the mechanisms of school organization. Dahrendorf (1965) went beyond the mere recognition of this reproduction, arguing that the German educational system, rather than promoting social mobility as was often assumed, functioned as a mechanism for preserving existing social inequalities. In his analysis, he emphasized the deep connection between class structure and education, highlighting how the inequalities inherent in the educational system reinforced distinctions and divergences in social mobility.

A central concept in Dahrendorf's work is the theory of "life chances" (Lebenschancen), according to which education is not merely a means of social advancement but simultaneously a mechanism for reproducing class structures. While for some social groups the educational system may expand possibilities for advancement, for others it maintains predetermined paths constrained by the very structures of the system (Dahrendorf, 1979). His analysis makes it clear that education is not a neutral mechanism of social ascent but rather a tool for the reproduction of power and inequality.

The concept of power positions, as developed by Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), is fully integrated into Dahrendorf's approach, reinforcing the link between educational policy and the perpetuation of social and class-based inequalities. Through its institutional mechanisms, the educational system reproduces existing power structures and reinforces inequality between different social classes, which has immediate and lasting effects on the potential for social mobility and the formation of social justice.

Although Dahrendorf's work is influenced by the Marxist tradition, it significantly diverges from it by developing a theoretical framework focused on interest conflicts and the functioning of institutions. While class conflicts remain a central theme in his work, Dahrendorf goes beyond the unidimensional economic definition of social contradictions proposed by Marxism, combining it with the theory of social differentiation. In his analysis, the influence of Max Weber's theory of social action is evident, as Dahrendorf attempts to link the concept of social mobility with class conflicts, placing them within the broader context of social institutions.

In his work *Bildung ist Bürgerrecht* (1965), Dahrendorf aims to present education not only as a fundamental right of citizens but also as a primary means of social mobility. He opposes the view that regards education primarily as a mechanism for reproducing social inequalities, as described by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron (1990). While he acknowledges that the educational system can reinforce existing social hierarchies, he also sees its potential to act as a catalyst for social advancement.

Observing the postwar reconstruction of the German economy, Dahrendorf stresses the importance of the educational system in adapting to technological developments and new economic requirements. He focuses on the role of institutions and education as a means of shaping the field of possibilities for social advancement. In this regard, his theory converges with Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital, according to which access to education and social mobility are determined by an individual's cultural heritage. Individuals with higher cultural capital possess more opportunities for educational and professional advancement, which leads to the reproduction of social inequalities.

His theory is also directly linked to Durkheim's analyses of the role of education in maintaining social cohesion, though it significantly diverges from the functionalist approach of Parsons. While Durkheim viewed education as a central factor in integrating individuals into society, Dahrendorf focused on the conflicts arising from unequal opportunities for access to knowledge, questioning the perception of education as a mechanism of social integration, as supported by Parsons (1951). For Parsons, the school functions as a space for sorting and selecting individuals based on their functional abilities and skills, and social mobility is viewed through the lens of meritocracy (Dahrendorf, 1979; Parsons, 1959). In contrast, Dahrendorf challenges the value of meritocracy, arguing that access to education depends on already established class positions, thereby exposing the structural inequalities that constrain the potential for social advancement.

Dahrendorf's critique of the traditional structure of the educational system underscores the significance of the social and class-based dimensions of education, examining how it reproduces existing social hierarchies. His thought partially converges with the ideas of Paulo Freire, who also criticized the transmission of knowledge as a passive process that reinforces existing power relations. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire regards education as a

tool for liberation, through which individuals are called to recognize their oppressive reality and engage in actions aimed at its transformation. Freire's concept of "humanization" emphasizes the need for an educational process that does not reproduce knowledge as a static and passive process, but rather as a dynamic tool for social change and for dismantling power structures that perpetuate social inequalities.

Dahrendorf argued that educational policy cannot be neutral, as it reflects existing social contradictions. He stressed that educational institutions are shaped by conflicting interests, and that access to knowledge constitutes a contested field for different social groups (Dahrendorf, 1988). His analysis aligns closely with the views of Henry Giroux, who emphasized education as a space of ideological struggle and the reproduction of hegemony (Giroux, 1983; Giroux, 2001). However, Giroux, beyond recognizing the oppressive dimensions of education, also acknowledged its potential to function as a tool of liberation. He further extended this concern within the context of contemporary educational systems, highlighting how education becomes a mechanism of social control. Adopting a more radical approach, he developed the theory of "critical pedagogy," proposing the need for an educational system that serves as a means of resistance against hegemonic power structures (Giroux, 2005).

Dahrendorf's contribution is not limited to a theoretical diagnosis of education's problems; he also proposed institutional interventions aimed at enhancing social mobility. He highlighted the need to restructure the educational system in order to balance social inequalities. His emphasis on the democratic dimension of education resonates with Picht's concerns about the educational crisis. However, Dahrendorf focused not only on the risk of lagging behind in knowledge, but also on the role of class conflicts in shaping learning opportunities (Dahrendorf, 1997).

Dahrendorf's thinking remains particularly relevant within the contemporary educational landscape, in which education continues to function as a mechanism for differentiating social classes. The recognition of educational inequality as a central social issue remains a fundamental element in the discourse on shaping educational policies aimed at reducing exclusion and enhancing citizens' access to knowledge. His relationship to Freire and Giroux is primarily found in the critical reflection on education as a mechanism that can function both as a means of oppression and as a means of liberation. Although Dahrendorf did not adopt strictly radical frameworks, he acknowledged the role of social conflict in reshaping social structures and supported the need for institutional reforms that would ensure greater social mobility.

The connection between Dahrendorf and Durkheim lies in the study of education as an institution that shapes socialization. However, while Durkheim (1922) perceived education as a mechanism that ensures societal cohesion through the integration of individuals into the collective consciousness, Dahrendorf's perspective significantly diverged, as he focused on the conflictual dynamics within the educational system. For Dahrendorf, social cohesion is maintained through the imposition of class interests, rather than through natural integration, as Durkheim proposed.

The synthesis of all these theoretical perspectives enhances our understanding of education not only as a mechanism of social mobility but also as a tool for the maintenance or disruption of social inequalities. In the German educational system, these theoretical approaches are

examined within a dynamic social and economic environment, in which tensions between institutionalized meritocracy and structural inequalities remain a central issue for analyzing educational policy (Gillborn, 2008).

The theoretical rupture introduced by Dahrendorf recognizes education not only as a mechanism for reproducing inequalities, but also as a field of dynamic social change. His connection with Picht emerges from their shared observation that postwar Germany possessed an educational system inadequate for the needs of an industrialized society. Contrary to more conservative interpretations of educational policy, Dahrendorf emphasized that achieving social mobility requires radical reforms that ensure broader access to education and challenge the structures that perpetuate class-based inequalities (Dahrendorf, 1979).

4.0 THE RELEVANCE OF THEIR CRITICAL THEORIES TO EUROPEAN EDUCATIONAL POLICY

The theories of Picht and Dahrendorf, along with those of other theorists such as Bourdieu, Giroux, and Freire, continue to serve as valuable tools for analyzing and understanding contemporary educational systems in Europe, despite the socio-economic transformations of recent decades. The tension between theory and reality highlights education as a dynamic field where the reproduction of social inequalities, described by these theorists, coexists with efforts aimed at dismantling them. Contemporary educational policy in many European countries remains bound to a system that, while aiming to promote knowledge and mobility, often reinforces class divisions and limits opportunities for less privileged social groups. Nevertheless, the theories of Picht and Dahrendorf, in combination with the critical analyses of Bourdieu and Freire, offer a robust theoretical foundation for shaping reform proposals that seek to expand access to education and reduce social inequalities.

Theoretical approaches to education continue to reveal the deep-rooted inequalities embedded in European educational systems, despite significant social and economic changes in recent years. Picht's theory (1964) remains central in the field of education, as it emphasizes the strong connection between educational crises and the social inequalities that affect European education systems. Picht underscores the importance of democratic access to knowledge, stressing the need for an education that considers social differentiation and aims to bridge the gap between different social groups. Despite reforms and policies promoting educational equality, modern Europe still faces systemic inequalities, with education struggling to provide equal opportunities for all students. The implementation of meritocracy, as envisioned by Picht, fails to equalize learning opportunities, particularly in regions with pronounced economic disparities. Specifically, the reliance of many educational systems on private funding, along with limited educational resources in less developed countries, results in persistent exclusion from access to education (Meyer, 2019). The failure to realize Picht's ideals exposes the incapacity of current educational policy to secure democratic access to knowledge, ultimately reinforcing social inequalities despite reformist efforts.

Dahrendorf's analysis (1988), which explores the relationship between education and class conflict, remains highly relevant, as social inequalities continue to affect and be reproduced through educational processes. Despite the implementation of policies such as free and compulsory education, actual reductions in inequality remain limited. The quality of education is not uniform across Europe, as students' socio-economic status continues to decisively

influence their educational and professional prospects (Bourdieu, 1998). While educational disparities have been somewhat reduced, socially excluded groups still face significant barriers to education, illustrating the system's inability to fully combat social differentiation (Western, Bloome, Sosnaud, & Tach, 2012). The application of meritocracy fails to ensure equal learning opportunities for all social groups, while the educational system remains trapped in a cyclical process of inequality reproduction, despite policies aimed at equalizing opportunities. The persistence of structural inequalities, despite the development of theories meant to reduce them, underscores the inadequacy of educational policies and the system's inability to reverse the social and economic conditions that continue to limit the effectiveness of education as a mechanism for genuine social mobility (Gillborn, 2008).

Freire's theory (1970), which conceptualizes education as a tool for social change and liberation, remains especially significant in the context of current educational policy. Freire emphasized the importance of a pedagogy that promotes critical thinking and participation, aiming to foster the student's active engagement in the educational process. Despite ongoing social and political challenges, Freire's principles, advocating for participatory and socially aware education, have significantly influenced recent educational reforms in Europe. In practice, the strengthening of the learner's role and the acceptance of diversity have become central pillars of contemporary educational policies.

Nonetheless, education remains confined by various limitations. According to Giroux (1983), dominant policies, often focused on economic and political goals, reproduce social inequalities and restrict education's potential to act as a catalyst for social change. For Giroux, it is not enough for education to merely echo the call for participation and critical thinking; it must aim at the substantial transformation of institutions and policies that hinder the true educational and social inclusion of students. Despite positive developments, the educational system still faces challenges that limit the full implementation of these principles. Social inequalities and exclusions persist, creating barriers to genuine access to education for all learners.

Modern education in Europe, despite significant strides toward enhancing opportunities for socially disadvantaged groups, continues to reflect and reproduce social inequalities that cannot be addressed solely through educational policy. The promotion of meritocracy and competitive educational practices, while seemingly supportive of equal opportunities, often results in the perpetuation of class distinctions and the reproduction of social hierarchies. In reality, theorists such as Dahrendorf and Picht highlight that education functions not only as a vehicle for social mobility but also as a mechanism for maintaining existing social differences. The persistent emphasis on meritocracy often overlooks structural inequalities and the deep interconnection between education and the socio-economic conditions that determine access to quality knowledge (Gillborn, 2008).

Especially in Southern European countries such as Greece and Italy, inequalities in access to quality education, exacerbated by social prejudices and resource shortages, remain largely unresolved. Economic and social disparities, coupled with increasing emphasis on assessments and dependence on private funding, widen the gap in educational quality, making social divisions even more pronounced (Horn, 2009).

The conservative shift in education, marked by an excessive focus on evaluation, examinations, and privatization, intensifies the contradictions identified by theorists such as Dahrendorf and

Picht. These scholars warned that education, despite being recognized as a means of social advancement, is not immune to the structural inequalities that pervade it. Educational policies, despite their reformist aims, often embody the contradiction of reproducing the existing social structure, thereby reinforcing disparities and limiting the real prospects for social mobility. The dynamics that emerge underscore the persistence of social exclusions affecting the most vulnerable groups, despite aspirations for education as a public good and a vehicle for progress (Mokyr, 2002).

Education in Europe, despite increasing efforts to promote social mobility, continues to be largely shaped by the structural inequalities that define it. The promotion of competition and meritocratic criteria in the educational process, despite good intentions to equalize opportunities, often reproduces class-based differences and restricts meaningful access to quality education. Freire's pedagogy, with its emphasis on participation, critical thinking, and social change, remains especially important; however, its implementation encounters the limits imposed by social and economic realities, as the inequalities shaping the educational process cannot be fully eradicated through policies that continue to rely on outdated models of evaluation and modernization.

5.0 CRITICAL REVIEW - CONCLUSIONS

Georg Picht's theory of the "educational catastrophe" and Ralf Dahrendorf's perspectives on social inequalities and the role of education remain profoundly relevant for analyzing modern educational realities in Europe. Although their ideas may have faded from public discourse during the period of European integration and educational reform, the persistent presence of social inequalities affirms the enduring value of their theoretical insights. The same educational challenges they identified have resurfaced in new forms, highlighting the urgent need to revisit their ideas through a critical lens.

Picht's notion of "educational catastrophe" and Dahrendorf's sociological analyses concerning the educational system's failure to ensure genuine social mobility and equality remain particularly timely, as they expose the structural weaknesses of Europe's educational systems. Despite significant educational reforms and the promotion of equal opportunity spearheaded by the European Union, the current situation demonstrates that the practical implementation of such reforms often clashes with social and economic realities, ultimately preserving existing inequalities (Becker & Mayer, 2008).

Modern Europe, and particularly Germany, has made progress in improving educational practices, avoiding some of the more extreme "catastrophic" methods of the past. Nevertheless, structural inequalities continue to persist, limiting access to quality education and social mobility for certain segments of the population. Policies centered on evaluation, competition, and privatization, despite their intentions to modernize the educational system, often exacerbate inequalities and hinder the possibility of meaningful social change (Tenorth, 2010).

The principal lesson to be drawn for education in Germany and the broader European context from the theories of Picht and Dahrendorf is that, despite progress and reform, educational policy must systematically address the dismantling of class and social divisions. Education cannot be regarded simply as a tool for social mobility if the deeper social factors that reproduce inequality are not adequately taken into account. The true challenge lies in preventing a new

“educational catastrophe” through substantive and structural reforms that go beyond superficial improvements and aim at radically transforming the social structures that shape education.

Europe has the capacity to overcome the challenges inherited from the past, but to do so, it must first recognize and confront the deep social and political contradictions that continue to shape its educational systems. The issues at stake are not merely structural or economic but are intimately tied to the values and models embedded within educational policy and practice. Education cannot be considered in isolation from its social context, as educational inequalities are often tightly linked to broader social disparities whether class-based, racial, or cultural.

Acknowledging these contradictions calls for a modernization of the educational system that focuses on promoting equality, social justice, and participatory education. The critical question is whether Europe can avert a new educational crisis. The answer depends on the willingness of member states to acknowledge the inherent contradictions in their educational policies. What is required is not merely a superficial improvement in access to education, but a fundamental reformation of the social and economic parameters that determine the quality of that education. Combating existing inequalities means Europe must develop strategies that ensure meaningful social mobility and foster the inclusion of all social groups, regardless of their initial conditions. The European Union must go beyond superficial reforms and undertake a substantive revision of its educational policies in order to promote convergence and social integration (Meyer, 2019).

The need for revising the educational system is not only about preventing an “educational catastrophe” but also about creating a learning environment that responds to the needs of contemporary society. Europe must manage the complexity of its cultural, economic, and social diversity, integrating difference as a foundational element of its educational policies. In doing so, educational policy will not only offer learning opportunities but will also contribute to shaping a way of life that strengthens communal consciousness, solidarity, and cooperation.

If Europe fails to recognize and address these contradictions, it will remain trapped in a vicious cycle of recurring social inequalities, thereby limiting true social mobility and prosperity for all its citizens. Avoiding an educational catastrophe in Europe does not rely solely on the implementation of reforms or the creation of new policies, but on the deeper understanding and effective confrontation of the social inequalities that affect education. In recent years, the EU’s educational policies have made significant progress in expanding access to education, but without ongoing reflection and adaptation to the needs of vulnerable social groups, there is a risk that educational policy will fail to ensure social justice and equal opportunity.

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