

# Jarosław Charchuła

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## School without functions

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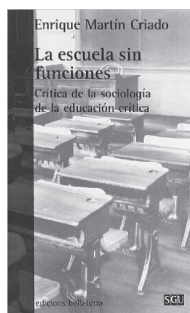
Jarosław Charchuła SJ  
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Poland

## School Without Functions

Enrique Martín Criado, *La escuela sin funciones. Crítica de la sociología de la educación crítica*, Bellaterra Publishing House, Barcelona 2010, pp. 384

Issues related to the education system, as an element of a broader social context, are a significant subject of research for representatives of various scientific disciplines, including educational sociologists. Professor Enrique Martín Criado has been tackling these issues in his works for many years, taking into account, above all, the socio-cultural context of Europe and Spanish-speaking countries outside Europe. His last work, published in 2010 by the Bellaterra Publishing House in Barcelona, is entitled *School without Functions: A Critique of the Sociology of the Reviewed Education* (originally in Spanish: *La escuela sin funciones. Crítica de la sociología de la educación crítica*). It presents his proposal of an alternative methodological model of analysis and study of the educational system, opposed to the sociological theories that described this topic before—namely functionalism and critical sociology of education. This new perspective would enable the analysis of the school system and its main problems.

Criado divides his work into three parts. The first is a perfect didactic guide, presenting a detailed review of the most important elements that sociology has brought to the topic of education, combining them with the pedagogical and functional hypothesis. In the second part, the author presents and analyses the most important theoretical elements of the aforementioned hypothesis and contrasts them with the ideas of sociologists, such as Max Weber



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and Norbert Elias, whose visions of society Criado then uses in his proposal of methodological analysis of the school system. Finally, in the third part, the author presents an alternative analytical model. The author begins with the term of “field”, constituting the foundation of his model concerning the school system, as well as other social areas, and which forms an independent set, broadly integrated, unstable and subjected to continuous change processes. Criado performs a detailed historical review, which helps the reader understand the source of the school field and the process that shaped this field. At the end, he analyses the most important aspects forming this field and the debate elements that generate conflict and tension inside the field.

In his book, Criado, among other things, reviews the excessive amount of functions which are expected of schools: training of staff, promotion of culture, creativity and civic democracy. In the opinion of the author, there are people who set these positive functions against negative functions, such as hiding social reproduction by transmuting social inequalities into inequalities due to merits, thus contributing to legitimation of social inequalities; the fact that school is tasked with classification of workforce in order to legitimate inequalities arising on the labour market; indoctrination of the society in a manner preventing the questioning of an unjust social order, etc.

However, particular teachers in the same school—according to the author—may have different opinions on what education is and how to teach, not to mention different opinions on tensions between school and family or between these two institutions and the group of friends of a younger or older child, or the models derived from the means of communication. No wonder that the distance between moral standards is so enormous that, for teenagers, school education applies to the school life and often has no practical application in real life.

The analysis of the education system presented by Criado is based on an assumption that it is a complex tangle created as a consequence of the crossing of strategies of particular participants of this system, referred to as actors. This tangle is divided into fields and actors placing “bets” on those fields. Fields are a term coined by Pierre Bourdieu, explaining the system of relations of the force arising around social disputes regarding legitimation in a given field of social life. In the case of the education system, the field’s energy is legitimation

of the definition of good education. In order to understand a field, we need to form relations between particular actors gathered around this “energy”. One of the tensions in the education field—as noticed by Criado—can be found in the following quotation: “The existing practice is perplexing; no one knows on what principle we should proceed—should the useful in life, or should virtue, or should the higher knowledge, be the aim of our training; all three opinions have been entertained.” (Aristotle, *Politics*, Book VIII, Part 2). As we can see, the current educational crisis concerns the same problem that was already noticed 2500 years ago: whether the goal of education is to teach values, transfer knowledge or prepare to enter the labour market.

During his deliberations, Criado outlines the main theories forming the basis for the development of educational sociology with regard to pedagogical and functional hypotheses. It is a very accessible guide to particular epistemological trends that theoretically, from the point of view of sociology, have supported the development of the school system. It mainly indicates the existence of two—at first glance opposing—positions that are nonetheless based on the same foundation: the functional nature of the school system as a mean to socialise individuals in order to justify and replicate the set order. On the one hand, we come across theoreticians propagating the classic functional theory, relying on the consensual vision and preaching that school has some functions which guarantee social consistency and social division of labour. On the other hand, the authors of the so called critical sociology, from the point of view of conflict and dominance, claim that school is an element maintaining the established order, which is characterised by social inequality, where the dominant classes maintain their status and the workers’ class is socialised in order to accept this situation as a normal state.

The author’s criticism of critical educational sociology indicates that it is not far from the idea of the school system’s functionalities, but makes them its own, although it interprets them in a characteristic manner. From there, the author forms the foundations of an alternative for this model. He analyses the main assumptions of the pedagogical and functional hypothesis in detail and decides that it contains discrepancies and theoretical defects. Many issues remain unsolved and many questions unanswered, especially those

concerning the source of the social order (the functionalists assume them as the starting point), the needs satisfied through the institution's functions, and who benefits from these functions, etc. It is an extensive set of issues showing contradictions, which the functionalists strengthen theoretically using "rhetorical tricks".

Criado uses the notions coined by Weber and Elias to explain his idea of the general social reality, in particular the situation of the school system. Both authors rely on functional logic, but still avoid indeterminism. They reject the notion of the society as an integrated and coherent whole to focus on analysis of relations and social dynamics on the given fields (unstable and variable network of interdependencies between institutions, sectors or positions, which maintain both integrative, as well as conflict relations).

The author devotes the last part of his work to the notion of the "school field". Relying on the research of Bourdieu, who builds the theoretical foundations of the idea of a "field" in Weber's terms, he defines the "school field" as a specific area of social space, autonomous but interdependent from other fields forming the society. This sphere gains numerous actors and groups, with relations of constant conflict and tension between them, caused by diversity of relevant motives and interests. Therefore, the notion of "field" is a very important tool for studying the society, which not only refers to the function performed by a set of institutions, organisations or individuals in a given social scope, but also pushes us to analyse the relationship between them. Criado defines these relations as "dynamic" and it is a fundamental notion allowing us to understand the configuration of fields. These dynamic relations are understood as processes resulting from the network of relations between particular actors, generating regularities.

One of the fundamental elements of the author's analysis is the use of the socio-historical method to understand the process for creating the school field and determining the main processes of autonomisation, followed by the dynamic processes that configured the current school system. The author suggests various historical events, which impacted the shape of education, by presenting a significant and rich analysis allowing us to understand the current system. From this point onwards, relying on the notion of field and as a result of the presentation of the history allowing us to understand the process of

the formation and configuration of the school system in the West, especially in Europe, the author analyses the fundamental aspects forming the current school field, its advantages and disadvantages, emphasising the great importance of the role of a sociologist in development of the school system.

The school field is an ill-adjusted system in constant motion. The high number of groups present in the field and the accumulation of functions assigned to the field increases the number of factors creating tension and conflicts, thus contributing to the continuous changes. One of the main sources of conflict is the discrepancy between education as a liberating good, when motivation to study reaches further than just obtaining a diploma, and the logic of credentialism, which changes the education system into a medium to obtain diplomas and titles. The teaching model is based on control, orderliness and the classification of students by means of examination. Generally, students are hardly motivated, and their answer to the educational requirements is more effective for this model based on control. In most cases, students are interested only in obtaining a diploma and overcoming barriers hindering access thereto. Teachers should adapt to the students in order to achieve their maximum efficiency. The belief that the school system is a means of liberation, where school is presented as a space governed by the logic of education and values (to some extent marginalising the logic of credentialism and daily limitations), creates a large discrepancy between legislation regulating the school system, and the own logic and structure of the system, as well as between the objectives set out and those effectively achieved.

Educational reforms—as noticed by the author—often use an idealistic approach, detached from practical constraints of a classroom and the logic of credentialism, forming the structure of the daily life of school centres, and furthermore indicates very ambitious goals and set out high requirements for teachers. This results in effects that are highly detached from the assumptions. The school system is not a universal solution to all problems. Its goals should be adjusted to match the reality: the principles of education, the logic of credentialism, the bureaucratic organisation of employees, etc. For the education system, teaching how to write and read is already a difficult task, and still this system is appointed additional goals related



to moralising individuals, equalising opportunities, and even pointing the way to achieve economic equality between social classes.

This book allows us to approach the analysis of the school system from the sociological point of view. The independence and autonomy of the content of all three parts of the book allows experts in the subject to proceed directly to the innovative proposal of the author. Other readers can benefit from the significant theoretical aid that facilitates reading of the whole book. We are facing a text critical towards the sociological basics of the analysis of the education system, towards the sociologists' criticism of these basics, and towards the current configuration of the system in the West. However, the most important thing is that the author does not stop there; he goes beyond and defines an alternative methodological model, which allows for analysing a subject that is so important for the society—namely the education of future generations.

#### ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE:

Dr Jarosław Charchuła SJ  
Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Poland  
[jaroslaw.charchula@ignatianum.edu.pl](mailto:jaroslaw.charchula@ignatianum.edu.pl)