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Approach: Paths to a Critical Self-Reflexive History of Education

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Introduction to the Thematic Section

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The title of this special thematic section of *Encounters* is “Conceptions and Practices of Education in a ‘*longue durée*’ Approach: Paths to a Critical Self-Reflexive History of Education.” It follows an international colloquium on the same theme that was held at the University of St. Michael's College (USMC) in Toronto from 16-18 February 2023, which brought together more than twenty scholars from five continents on this important topic. The event was made possible through a Connection Grant by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the collaborative partnership between the Theory and History of Education International Research Group at Queen's University; the Institute for Research on the Second Vatican Council in Canada at USMC; the Civic Culture and Educational Policies Research Team from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid; members of the History of Education Research Group (NIEPHE) and the Thematic Project Education in Borders of the University of São Paulo; and the Cátedra Alfredo Bosi, the Institute for Advanced Studies of the University of São Paulo (IEA/USP) University of Sao Paulo, Brazil. The six articles that follow represent the breadth and diversity of the topics discussed.

In the first article, Judith Harford traces the development of university education for women in Ireland in the 19th and early 20th centuries. She outlines three successive stages in the challenges that women faced during this time. In the first stage they were accommodated within the existing male-dominated norms of society. The result was the emergence of separate women's colleges in the country, which meant the creation of a two-tiered system where “women were subordinate and managed”. The second stage was marked by the search for equal treatment

over special treatment. This eventually led to the 1908 Irish Universities Act and to the creation of new coeducational universities in the country. The third stage, Harford calls “access without equality”. While women had access to higher education like men, restrictions on them remained. Dominant patriarchal power structures continued, “predicated on a... strong desire to safeguard the status quo in the face of a fundamental social and cultural shift in the quality and scope of women’s education.”

The second article also deals with power structures and higher education, albeit within the context of Roman Catholic residential seminaries. In it, Michael Attridge traces the development of seminaries from their antecedents in the middle ages, through the Council of Trent up to the Second Vatican Council, finishing with a focus on Anglophone Ontario. He shows how control over the formation of young men over the centuries has moved from decentralization in the dioceses under the direction of the local bishop to centralization during the period of ultramontanist in the 19th to the mid-20th century and finally towards decentralization again at the time of Vatican II in the 1960s. Despite this, the educational system has consistently remained closed where accountability was within the dominant, hierarchical power structures of the church. In earlier times and especially after Trent, this created strong forms of clericalism which resulted in a “clerical culture” and allowed for the possibility of abuse. While Vatican II made some important strides towards reform, much more work needs to be done.

In the third article, Naomar Almeida-Filho draws attention to “coloniality” and higher education in Brazil. Following Peruvian thinker Anibal Quijano, Almeida-Filho uses the term “coloniality” to mean the “matrix of power and patterns of action resulting from colonization and colonialism.” From there he describes the three interrelated notions of coloniality of power, of knowledge and of being. The more recent movement to decolonize the university has been linked to the second of these, the coloniality of knowledge “where one type of knowledge appears as valid, authentic and relevant, while others are expropriated, devalued and silenced, to the point of being considered as invalid and irrational knowledge.” Almeida-Filho sees two different views on the role of the university regarding coloniality. The first views it as a central perpetrator of the problem. The other views it as the place to overcome it. After a brief overview of the history of higher educational reforms in the Western university, Almeida-Filho turns to higher education in Brazil and to three contemporary index-cases that he surmises may help to overcome coloniality in the university: the denial of the Georges Cabanis reforms; the myth of the 19th century German Humboldtian university; and the failure of the Flexnerian reforms.

In the fourth article, Cristián Cox and Macarena Sanchez Bachmann describe the impact that the military dictatorship in Chile from 1973-1990 had on public policies related to teacher education and the complexities that followed. In the post-independence period in the 19th century, the education of teachers in the country was two-fold with primary educators being trained in normal schools and secondary educators trained in universities. However, with the military dictatorship, this ended in 1974 when the former were closed, and all training was transferred to the latter.

Further reforms to the university teacher education programs were initiated in the 1980s and in the decades that followed. Nevertheless, as the authors note in the conclusion, there remain dysfunctionalities in the system that present as deficiencies or gaps and impact teaching performance in the school system.

The next article shifts the reader from state-sponsored educational institutions to independent, alternative organizations and free schools. Author Peter Glinos traces the origins of the Alternative Education Resources Organization (AERO) from its roots in the 1960s and 1970s to its formation in the late 1980s. From 1989 to 2003, AERO created an international network that raised funds for alternative schools, advocated against policies that standardized education and supported reforms to increase school choice. Significantly, Glinos offers a detailed description of the origins of AERO in Canada when Jerry Mintz started a school for the Keewaywin. It was the beginning of AERO, and Indigenous within Canada played a key role in shaping the network. From there, the organization partnered with alternative schools in Toronto, Hamilton, Vancouver and beyond. In later years it worked with the governments of Russia, Israel and Japan, and helped facilitate the rise of the International Democratic Education Conference. As Glinos notes in his conclusion, Canadians and Indigenous people in Canada “had a significant impact on the Alternative Education Resource Organization’s formation and praxis.”

Finally, in the last article, Veronica Dunne departs from the theme of formal education to encourage urgent attention to global climate change. As she writes “the power we need to address climate change is not education, activism or financing... but a major shift in consciousness, related to a new understanding of our place in the universe.” Inspired by Rosa Bruno-Jofre’s 2020 book about the history of her religious congregation, Dunne weaves together what she calls a tapestry of stories and highlights the commitment of the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions since 2008 to address the ecological crisis. These efforts include spiritual practices, collective study, and shared liturgy. Practically speaking since 2008, the community in Canada has offered financial support to ecological efforts, through initiatives involving tree-planting, water and biodiversity advocacy and drawing on the indigenous knowledge of local people. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, Dunne reaffirms that what is needed is “a still deeper shift in consciousness commensurate with the new context and challenges” in which people find themselves. What is needed is for people to think of themselves as cosmological beings.

Although seemingly disparate and disconnected the articles share many things in common. In complementary ways, they expose the complex, intertwined relationship of power and education in different contexts over time, whether through social constraints, ecclesial influence, the force of coloniality, government interference or grassroots movements. Dunne’s article offers a hopeful view on the positive effect an organization might have in teaching the public through the power of action. Together they represent a variety of paths to a critical self-reflexive history of education. It is my hope that they are the catalyst to further reflection and discussion.