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Introduction to special issue on: Schools put to the test

Schools put to the test

When schools and their stakeholders come face to face with politics (1930s–2020s)

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How do schools deal with the state, and more generally with politics? The relationship between the educational establishment and political power may be obvious to social scientists, but what does it mean for those who imagine, invest in, work in, and manage schools on a daily basis? By considering the educational establishment as part of “the staple diet of politics”¹ (Buton et al. 2016), this special issue aims to understand how the state fits into the expectations of school stakeholders and audiences in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and ultimately how the school system becomes an “arena of social relations” that influence public action (Aymes, Gourisse, and Massicard 2015, 2).

These questions, which grew out of a multidisciplinary seminar held by the Institut de recherches et d'études sur les mondes arabes et musulmans (IREMAM) (Institute of Research

¹ Translator's note: Our translation from the French. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

and Study on the Arab and Islamic Worlds) on “Educational policies, teaching practices, and social interactions in the Muslim societies of Europe and the Arab world” in the modern era,² chime with the desire to contribute to the recent revival of the history of education in this area by introducing lines of inquiry and approaches developed by the sociology of education. Marginal in comparison with the progress made by the discipline in France since the 1970s (Prost 1968; Chartier, Compère, and Julia 1976; Parias 1981; Caspard 2000), the history of education in Arab and Muslim countries, which was summarized by Chantal Verdeil for the Middle East (2017), nevertheless went through the same stages: after the waning of the initial interest shown by mostly Anglo-American historians in the construction of nation-states, there was a lull of a dozen or so years before a more dynamic phase led to the diversification of research topics in the 1990s. States loom large in this historiography, which emphasizes the political aims and challenges of the education sector in the context of nation-building and later of neoliberal critiques. For the most part studies have focused on institutional histories or the major nationalist figures of the modern school system. If, as Verdeil argues, students have for too long remained the “poor relations” of these developments, the questions of teaching content and stakeholders, which she also raised, have since found some responses. To mention only French and francophone scientific output, there is real editorial momentum. A study on history teaching in colonial Sudan (Seri-Hersch 2018) laid the groundwork for investigations of teaching content. Stakeholders have also been the subject of several recent publications: one looking at private educational initiatives in the Arabian Peninsula from the 1940s to the 1960s (Honvault and Al-Rashoud 2019), and two at colonial Algeria, one focusing on the “new Islamic education” introduced by Muslim reformers (Courreya 2020) and the other studying the school system during the Algerian War of Independence through the prism of children and their families (Hadj-Ahmed 2022). Finally, a forthcoming special report will look at the “lived experience of stakeholders” in educational organizations through ethnographic studies, historical accounts, and sociological analyses based on interviews with teachers and/or parents (Pellegrini 2023, forthcoming). These studies of school stakeholders in the Arab world are contributing to a revival of the field of education studies at a time when new research on students is being conducted in France and Europe (Condette and Castagnet-Lars 2018, 2019).

The attention paid to this recent revival of research on schools in this cultural area has improved the dialogue between history, sociology, and political science within the seminar team, which focuses on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The approaches developed since the 2000s in the sociology of education, which has moved away from the study of specifically school-based mechanisms and activities, have been particularly popular. They have made it possible to take advantage of the “political problematization” of schools (Sawicki 2012) and studies of how teachers, parents, or students perceive and relate to schools by seeking to understand what they reveal about wider relations to public institutions, or to “their national socialization” (Barrault-Stella et al. 2020, citing Millet and Thin 2005, Mengneau 2016, and Farges and Tenret 2020).

This special report illustrates these relationships by looking simultaneously at school stakeholders and the political problematizations of the school system: seen as a “site of knowledge” in Christian Jacob’s sense (2014), in other words as a “site” traversed by

² See <https://qalam.hypotheses.org/>.

numerous interactions, particularly between its users (teachers, students, parents) and institutional stakeholders, the school is also a site of social construction of the political realm, or even in certain cases co-construction of the state and definition of national policies. The articles in this special report thus treat the “school,” understood in the broad sense as an educational institution up to secondary level, as a window onto how the people who attend and run schools relate to politics and the state.

To do so, the coordinators of this special report have chosen to investigate “moments” where these relations are revealed. The historical example studied by Jean-François Condette, who analyzed French schools during times of war from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, demonstrates the importance of the ideological motivations—patriotic and nationalist, but also, and most particularly, humanist—of school stakeholders, who even in times of violence endow the school as an institution, “at the level of its basic units, rather than its central structure,” with a remarkable capacity for resistance and adaptation, and even a degree of autonomy (2014, 25–26). The heuristic qualities of periods of crisis, rupture, war, or simply conflict with political and administrative authorities are ideal for casting new light on the relationship between school and state in the societies under discussion here: first because of what such periods produce in terms of sources for research and opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue, and second because they lead to a redefinition of the social world around and within the school, and so to potential adjustments and transformations of school dynamics.

The five articles in this special report cover the Maghreb and the Middle East in varied political contexts: the creation of an independent, modern state in the Yemen of Imam Yahya Muhammad Hamid ed-Din in the early 1930s; the colonial situation in Algeria between the end of the Second World War and the Algerian War of Independence; the distant, barely discernible state in Lebanon during its civil war (1975–1985) and during the unprecedented economic crisis of the 2020s; and the autonomous government of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq during the 2010s. All these contexts involve those in power grappling with armed conflicts and/or economic upheaval (Lebanon), defending their borders or their authority (Algeria, Yemen), or dealing with unprecedented movements of people (Kurdistan Region). These unusual circumstances invite exploration of how the state is understood in schools when these institutions, normally a sanctuary of ordinariness, are shaken by events or by doubts about the nature and ambitions of the government that create an atmosphere of uncertainty, or in contrast open up new possibilities. These instable contexts, as in so many other parts of the world, create or test schools but mostly do not fundamentally disrupt them: the school persists, resists, despite “the restriction of the space of habits” (Mariot 2021), and its various stakeholders—teachers, parents, directors—fight to make sure it exists, functions, and transcends temporary turmoil.

Seen by teachers and many parents as a means of ensuring children’s professional and economic future, schools often echo students’ expectations and are sometimes the site of their protests. Beyond their desire to attend school, their reaction to what they may perceive as a crisis of the state and the educational establishment reveals their capacity to use school as a vector of expression, negotiation, or confrontation, as a source of ideas for defining the future and social identity of their communities or of the nation. The articles in this special report

thus follow in the footsteps of the historian Edward Palmer Thompson (2015) and the field of subaltern studies in that they emphasize the agency or empowerment of “small” stakeholders, in this case schoolchildren. Likewise, they draw on the most recent developments in the sociology of education, which use the intertwining of social relations within schools to consider how schools become a source of ideas for public action (Barrault-Stella et al. 2020). In return, the diversity of expectations expressed through schools vis-à-vis the state is a valuable opportunity for the state to assert its authority, but also a considerable challenge. It is in attempting to respond to these expectations that political power, and with it the state, chooses what to include or exclude, and so defines itself.

Outside colonial Algeria, where the educational system established by the French government is still in place, education in the modern Arab states discussed here developed to a considerable extent around schools that fell, to varying degrees, outside of government control: for example in the French schools in Lebanon, the Kurdish community schools in Syria and Iraq, and an initially private school in Yemen. The fact that these schools were to a certain extent independent of the state facilitates research and access to sources, which is generally still quite difficult as far as the archives of education ministries or central governments in Arab countries are concerned. Far fewer obstacles were encountered in the case of one of the two Lebanese schools discussed here, where access to documents was facilitated by the researcher’s personal relationship with the school’s directors. In Yemen, the correspondence between a former teacher-director of the school and the authorities were found in the director’s archives, preserved in Aix-en-Provence, while field surveys could be conducted in Lebanon and the Kurdistan Region without the need for approval from any kind of central authority.

These favorable conditions enhance the heuristic qualities of the moments of disturbance selected to analyze the relationships between school and state: because they put the ordinary school environment to the test and because they encourage stakeholders in educational establishments to express themselves, they tend to generate valuable research materials. If, as historians know well, conflict produces papers, in this case it helps to reveal and amplify the voices of normally inaudible day-to-day stakeholders such as families, teachers, school directors, and even students themselves, as well as shedding light on their suddenly disrupted everyday existence and the changes it may undergo. These aspects of the educational world in history, discussed here by Juliette Honvault (Yemen), Christine Mussard (Algeria), and Sami Ouchane (Lebanon in the 1970s and 1980s) can also be brought into dialogue with research on more recent periods thanks to the sociological and ethnographic approaches of Akhésa Moumami (contemporary Lebanon) and Boris James (Kurdistan). The Arab and Muslim landscapes revealed by these articles vary widely in time and location and fit into very different contexts of contemporary history. At the school level, however, the articles use archives, interviews, or observation to capture the “black box” of the classroom (Caspard 1990) or the school, the intimacy of the staff room, and local debates.

Juliette Honvault looks at an educational initiative in the early 1930s in Yemen, then under the Zaydi Imamate after the Ottoman withdrawal. The history of the Dhubhan school, founded by Ahmad Nu’man, a young sheikh, sheds light on educational issues in rural and mountainous Yemen near the border with the British Aden Protectorate, and the conditions

that pushed its founder into reformist activism and ultimately into political life. The weakness of the public services paved the way for local initiatives and opened up an unprecedented school sphere occupied by “border crossers,” often single individuals attracted by Aden and its opportunities. Influenced by the Arab and Muslim reformist ideas of the “modern” Orient and by new Arab teaching methods, they introduced some of their students to political awareness of the state, and even to its necessity, before being brutally confronted by power. Going beyond the linear and justificatory nature of autobiographical narrative to analyze archival documents from the Ahmad Nu'man collection, Honvault was able to put the ideological aspects of this confrontation into perspective. She highlights the importance of power struggles within the Imamite state, which, helped by the strict, hierarchical power structure, jeopardized this rural school and its teachers' modern educational practices, leading to its closure after four years of operation. In the specific context of a brief period of political openness, the Dhubahn school seems to have been a hub of exchange and engagement, revealing the vitality of rural populations affected by school shortages who tried, in a novel reversal of perspectives, to participate in the construction of the Imamite state.

Christine Mussard focuses on the educational demands of Algerian families in French Algeria after the Second World War. In Blida, subprefecture of the department of Alger, these families used various means to express their desire for their children to attend the city's public primary schools, a few years after the 1944 decree that made schooling obligatory for all children without exception. Associations of men, women, and parents contacted the prefectural authorities to request a place for their children or denounce the shortage of places. The diversity of their approaches reveals their relationships to the schooling they demanded and to the representatives of the colonial state to whom they addressed their demands. Social status, interpersonal relationships, networks of solidarity, and political commitments were all mobilized to achieve their objectives, revealing the different forms of engagement of these local residents of varied economic and cultural capital. These practices, which intensified around the start of the school year, challenged a highly contested colonial state on the eve of the war of independence. This micro-historical approach to a phenomenon already identified by the social sciences in its general outline reveals the agency of parents outside and within the school who called on the authorities to claim their due.

Sami Ouchane's article deals with the relationships between the educational authorities and school stakeholders in a school in West Beirut, the Lycée Abdel Kader (LAK), during the Lebanese civil war (1975–1990). The school, which was founded in 1901 by the Mission laïque française (MLF) (French lay [or secular] mission), was sold in 1985 to the Rafik Hariri foundation, a public organization created during the war. The school community, already affected by a decade of violence and its economic repercussions, was thrown into disarray by the sale. The sharing of authority between the lycée's new Lebanese owner and the French institutions responsible for maintaining its francophone status (MLF and the Ministry of Foreign Relations) disrupted the routine management of the school and its classes. The school became an arena for staff mobilization and parental intervention, with all stakeholders anxious to protect their personal interests by means of practices by turns antagonistic and clientelistic toward the new management, which was free to act as it wished thanks to the gradual withdrawal of the French authorities. This moment of rupture in the long history of the French lycée makes the school into a window onto Franco-Lebanese relations, with the

relative position of each authority serving as a barometer for the evolution of the interstate power relationship. The diverse school stakeholders, far from remaining passive in the face of the numerous upheavals caused by this change of authority amid the already difficult context of civil war, employed defensive strategies that reveal their agency when under pressure, but also the great extent to which the school was affected by the many crises surrounding and impacting it.

Akhésa Moumami, meanwhile, looks at contemporary Lebanon, in the throes of an unprecedented economic and financial crisis since 2020. Testifying to the difficulties experienced by the vast majority of Lebanese people, the teachers at the Franco-Lebanese lycée Habbouche-Nabatieh express their sense of insecurity around both their personal lives and professional practices, which have been transformed by their loss of purchasing power and the COVID-19 pandemic. As teachers and mothers, they describe the resulting disruption in their homes and classrooms, denouncing the lack of response from either the MLF, and by extension the French state, as well as the current regime in Lebanon. In this well-regarded school in southern Lebanon, staff have had to adapt in order to be able to continue teaching and encourage student engagement. Nevertheless, the deterioration of salary conditions, perceived by the teachers as demonstrating indifference on the part of the French authorities, is a frequent topic in the staff room, which has become a space where teachers can express their discontent and their political hopes. This sense of turmoil has not, however, led to effective contestation, reflecting a reluctance to engage in conflict that is linked to the teachers' attachment to the school values. These values, which are shaped by the teaching of French curricula in a secular framework, transcend disagreements between the teachers and the management. The teachers' ambivalent position within schools seems to reveal the impact of manifold crises on personal engagement, with individuals caught between the effects of the disruption to the daily life whose narrative they share, and their professional mission.

Finally, Boris James studies the schooling of Kurdish and Syrian refugees in the autonomous Kurdistan Region in Iraq since 2012. Organized in camps, the schools' students come from families who experienced the Syrian Baathist school system, where the denial of Kurdish reality in both learning materials and teaching practices constructed school imaginaries characterized by rejection and dissent. Despite its practical difficulties, school in the refugee camps of the Kurdistan Region thus opens up new hope for the recognition of Kurdish identity. Nevertheless, it is quickly becoming a site of disturbance, with constant changes to teaching practices that hamper students' progress. After a period of hybridity, when Kurdish content was taught in the Arabic language to ensure the validity of school diplomas, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) recently abolished Arabic courses and imposed Sorani, which is spoken by a majority of Iraqi Kurds but not widely spoken among those from Syria. After the repression of Kurdish identity they experienced in Baathist Syria, this new choice to homogenize both the material taught and the language of teaching demonstrates the impossibility of the KRG recognizing these refugees' Syrianness. In this nested series of crises, school does not just echo the difficulty of constructing a Kurdish reality. The political forces that influence it also turn it into a site of disjunction and invisibilization, offering only a few narrow paths toward the recognition of diversity.

Ultimately, what these various case studies show is the extent to which educational establishments are permeated by politics, and the extent to which teachers, parents, and students are exposed to the presence or absence of the state. Rendered invisible by the routine of day-to-day life, these stakeholders make their voices heard, occupy space, express their hopes, and demand their rights in these contexts of rupture or political change, while the state itself must reconsider its role and its aims. Schools afford a valuable vantage point for examining the interactions between political authorities, their administrations, and their subjects in the modern era. Analysis of schools reveals how compliance with power is forged, challenged, or dismantled at the local or family level.

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