



PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS IN EDUCATION AS AN ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND CULTURAL PHENOMENON: EXPLORING GRAMSCIAN THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

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Abstract: This paper explores possibilities of using Gramsci's work for a broader understanding about public private partnerships in education (ePPPs). Over the last three decades, public private partnerships (PPPs) have received significant attention in several fields. Policymakers, politicians and economists usually refer to them as management tools of sectorial policies to improve the public sector outcomes. Some researchers have critically expanded the PPPs meaning by discussing about the roles, action and external influence of global market leaders and international organisms on national states and/or local governments. Nevertheless there is a risk of reducing the PPPs understanding merely to a political phenomenon – often at the governmental level. This paper aims at broadening the historical ePPPs meaning by exploring their mediations with economic, political and cultural spheres. In order to do that, the paper will present a theoretical study about ePPPs which is based in Gramsci's conceptual contribution. First, the strong linkage between economic, political and cultural dimensions in the Gramscian theoretical framework will be highlighted; second, the ePPPs historical meaning will be discussed considering its mediations with each of the spheres above mentioned. This paper argues that Gramsci's theoretical framework is useful for shedding light on the understanding of ePPPs, as well as that his ideas might improve social movements and organisations engaged with building a new social order. **Keywords:** public-private partnerships; education; economy, politics and culture; Gramsci

INTRODUCTION

This paper is based on a theoretical study which looks for pointing out some analytical categories considered fundamental to a critical approach to public private partnerships in education – hereafter ePPPs (Robertson and Verger 2012). In order to do that, this paper explores possibilities of using Gramsci's work for a broader understanding about public private partnerships in education. Special attention will be paid to the concept of hegemony, which in short means a range of historical movements strongly mediated by economic, political and cultural mechanisms whereby social groups seek to exercise their leadership over the others, by subordinating them to a particular conception of the world (Gramsci 1999).

Hence, this study aims to increase the ePPPs historical meaning by exploring the following assumption: ePPPs have been constituting the framework of the new political economy of education as one of its core



dimensions, by means of very economic, political and cultural arguments, processes and mechanisms – quite often associated among themselves – to reiterate the market as the mirror of efficiency and effectiveness for all spheres of life.

While a specific form of education policy management, ePPPs implies the direct action of social groups in a matter under which government liability is expected. However, because this political management is not self-explanatory, this article refers some aspects of ePPPs meaning through dialectical as well as organic mediations between them and economic, political and cultural spheres. In a Gramscian approach, organic means, on the one hand, to take account explanatory movements “relatively permanent” instead of occasional/accidental ones, and on the other, to avoid “a mechanical juxtaposition of single ‘units’ without any connection between them” (Gramsci 1999, p. 418-419). Theoretical references and some secondary data will support such methodological approach throughout the discussion on ePPPs.

The article is organized as follow. Firstly, some expectations, analysis and problems regarding ePPPs are exposed. Secondly the ePPPs historical meaning is discussed considering its mediations with economic, political and cultural dimensions. The paper concludes by summarising some contributions of Gramsci’s work to ePPPs’ understanding and – more than that – to a critical approach of the historical reality committed with a new social order.

ePPPs BETWEEN THEIR PROMISES, SUSPICIONS AND PROBLEMS

In simple terms, public-private partnerships (PPPs) mean a specific relationship between governments and private sector to provide a determined product or service. Policymakers, politicians, economists, and international organizations usually refer to them as a flexible, dynamic, and useful tool to achieve economic sustainability, good governance and social development (European Union 2005; United Nations 2008; World Bank 2015). In that relationship, the managerial superiority of the private sector over the public sector is taken for granted as well as it is assumed as a consensual idea which must be widely spread through society.



As a structured mechanism for governance, PPPs started in 1992 with the British private finance initiative (PFI) layout. Since then, PPPs have been increasing worldwide (Hall 2015; Klein 2015; Musson 2009). The World Bank (2015, p. vi) informs they are used by “more than 134 developing countries, contributing about 15–20 percent of total infrastructure investment”. PPPs have been carried out by governments in crucial public sectors such as education, health, renewable energy, water and waste, and more recently sanitation (Hall 2015; Mehrotra and Delamonica 2005).

In the education field, studies about ePPPs have proliferated. In Seddon, Billett and Clemans’ (2004, P. 128) words, such production has tended “to celebratory narrative and premature closure”. According to Robertson et al (2012), analyses on ePPPs have varied between high expectations and optimism, in one hand, and scepticism and suspicious, in the other hand. Gurn (2016, p. 11) classifies “these counter related stances on partnerships as either, corporate manna with the best of intentions, or self-interested profiteering and privatization of public education”.

By highlighting the role of ePPP in the global education policy, Ball and Youdell (2008), Education International (2009), Robertson et al (2012) and Robertson and Verger (2012) stress plenty of motivations, mechanisms, and outcomes, among other arguments, whereby education as a public good has been displaced from the social concerns to the market interests.

At the national level, ePPP experiences have been questioned by researchers from different countries like Brazil (Peroni 2013), India (De Angelis 2014; Srivastava 2014) and Uganda (Brans 2011), just to mention a few examples from low-income countries, in which national projects of education policy have been vigorously influenced by ePPP promotion (Verger 2012). However, issues around ePPPs are not a privilege of countries divided between the poor and the poorest of the poor. Countries like the United States and the United Kingdom have also accumulated problems concerning ePPPs experiences (Browning 2000; Education International 2009; Hall 2015).

From within their own promises and problems, ePPP remain quickly moving forward in such way which seems to be a daunting task to quantify them both in their scope and breadth. However, it is clear that PPPs are “shifting the



structures through which educational life chances are organized and governed” (Robertson et al 2012, p. 14). What has been described so far strongly indicates that ePPP’s meaning is much more complex than its definition in simple terms. Thus, what are ePPPs indeed?

ON ECONOMIC MEANINGS OF ePPP

The starting point here is the acknowledgement that any form of ePPPs “broadly share a common foundation in a set of programmatic ideas that represent a continuation rather than a moderation, of economic liberalism” (Robertson and Verger 2012, p. 27). Such continuation, however, assumes a specific configuration in the current historical moment of capitalist development, in order to enhance the conditions of production for the market seeking higher profit rates (Slater and Tonkiss 2001).

In this regard, it is worth revisiting Gramsci’s analysis on Taylorism-Fordism which he interpreted as an economic, political and cultural hegemonic response to the capitalist crisis during First World War (Gramsci 1999 – especially in “Americanism and Fordism”, also known as *Quaderni* 22). Although the current capitalist crisis as well as its responses in progress are quite distinct from the ones that happened one century ago, at least two remarks based on Gramsci’s thoughts on hegemony process might be highlighted. First, “the world of economic production” (Gramsci 1999, p. 134) is not reduced in itself since it is organically linked to superstructural elements. Nevertheless – and this leads to the second comment – the hegemony spread into social life as a whole is strongly bound up with structural forces. Thus, “for though hegemony is ethical-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity” (Gramsci, 1999, p. 373).

These statements may be useful to understand some nexus between the idea of “partnership” and the world of production, and, in doing so, to articulate them with ePPPs.

The ultimate capital partner is the capital in itself



Slater and Tonkiss (2001, p. 91), discussing on issues arisen from the individual's meaning within capitalist society, argue that "economic order, including market order, is *a/ways* embedded in such a thing as 'society'". Thus, the entrepreneurship ideology – which represents the newest liberalist individualism's version so nestled in the current economic discourses – has been confronted by "the rise of a finance-led accumulation that reflected the interests of financial rather than industrial capital" (Jessop 2010a, p. 352). Thus, over the past 30 years, production and labour process started to be affected by a set of changes – financial, managerial, technological, organizational and so on – which has been called in many different ways such as flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1990), capital globalization (Chesnais, 1996), or global capital system (Mészáros, 2002). Regardless of the title, these critical approaches of changes in capitalist society agree that since 1980's there is an ongoing renewed ruling class' societal project as bold as resolute, which has not only sought to fix or prevent social crisis, but in some way to profit from them (Harvey 1990, Chesnais 1996, Mészáros 2002). The "marketization of public services" (Huws 2012, p. 73) has been an integral part of that societal project.

Under a huge competitive economic atmosphere, different forms of corporative interaction have taken place in the market, either through enterprise grouping (Grabowiecki 2006; Waddock 1988) or by means of outsourcing services and/or production sectors (Antunes 2015; Gounet 1999; Huws 1999, 2012). It might occur through networks of corporative partners, which join each other in articulated arrangements such as joint ventures, enterprise clustering or Keiretsu groups, as such corporative governance is called in Japan, very often by mixing companies from different countries and economic sectors, and even being supported by national governments and/or trading blocs (European Commission 2013; Gollain et al 2002; Grabowiecki 2006; Kogut 1988). Particularly for large capital companies, these attempts to enhance productivity gains are driven by interests to taking advantage of the fluid, risky and promising financial market (Antunes 2015; Chesnais 1996; Harvey 1990). Such strong business trend – if not a rule – somehow explains why companies have



turned into financial assets, regardless of the field of expertise they belong (Chesnais 1996). In this broad corporative governance, shaped in a global oligopoly industry, industrial capital and financial capital remain inextricable linked (Chesnais 1996; Huws 1999). It blows away the “myth of weightless economy” (Huws 1999), at the same time that it underlines how much productive capital persists on backing conditions of fictitious capital reproduction (Chesnais 1998). Education is not a remote island in such economic domain.

Corporative interactions and ePPPs

In the education field, a corporative interaction – as in any other economic sector – may be realised in different ways by means of chains of influences, interests and markets (Ball 2008, 2009; Komljenovic and Robertson 2016; Robertson and Komljenovic 2016). However, there are two education market features, not always encountered within other business categories, which deserve to be noted.

First, corporative interaction in education gathers diversified kinds of profit and non-profit partners. On the one hand there are partners closely engaged in educational activities, such as international organisations, chains of educational institutions, charities, foundations, non-governmental organization and so on. On the other hand, there are varied actors, not originally/or directly involved in the education field. Among them are economic sectors – from financial institutions to cosmetic industry – as well as influential business people, representatives of the renewed philanthropic capitalist spirit (Ball 2008; Morvaridi 2012; Robertson and Verger 2012). What should be underlined here is that government, through varied levels of participation, is a privileged partner in such arrangements. As Ball and Youdell (2008, p. 32) point out, “partnerships take the form of joint ventures and profit sharing without wresting ‘ownership’ entirely from public sector hands”.

Education business diversity is linked to the second education market feature, which is concerned with major and promising profits in the sector, most likely with low financial risks. Even though profitable private participation in the education field is not a novelty, it has substantially changed at a national,



international and transnational level, especially after the World Trade Organization's launch, in 1995, when knowledge, investments and services became goods as marketable as any others (Siqueira 2005; Robertson and Verger 2012). Since then, sectors such as health, environment, culture, water supply, education and so on – which used to be predominantly provided by governments (Siqueira 2005) – have been subjected to rules of the General Agreement on Trade Services (GATS). The political and cultural changes resulting from this commodification of education as well as its current economic outcomes – in millions, billions and trillions, in any thinkable currency – have been widely discussed by several studies (Ball 2008, 2009; Ball and Youdell 2008; Komljenovic and Robertson 2016; Robertson 2012; Robertson and Komljenovic 2016; Robertson and Verger 2012; Verger 2012; Verger 2014). However, some data may provide additional elements to understanding how profitable education market has been so far.

ePPPs and the capitalist accumulation process

In 2013, Strauss' (2013) article in *The Washington Post* announced: “Good news for those who see school reform as a way to make big bucks: [...] the global education market is now worth \$4.4 trillion — that's TRILLION — and is set to grow a lot over the next five years”. The financial market plays a huge role in this business opportunity.

Table 1 portrays a brief list of some education companies which have been investing in the biggest stock markets of the world, namely New York Stock Exchange (NYSE) and National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations (Nasdaq)¹.

¹ Education, educational and learning were key words used in the search engine available in the stock market's websites.

*Table 1 Market education investors – NYSE and Nasdaq, August 2016*

Investor	Service	Country of origin	Stock exchange
American Public Education Inc	Post-secondary education – Distance education	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Apollo Education Group Inc	Post-secondary and high education – Educational programs and services	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Barnes & Noble Education Inc	Publishing for college and university	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Bridgepoint Education Inc	Post-secondary education	United States	NYSE
Bright Horizons Family Solutions	From nursery to elementary schools – Educational services – Advisory	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Cambium Learning Group Inc	Educational services and technologic materials	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Capella Education Co	Post-secondary and higher education – Distance education	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Career Education Corp	Higher education – Distance education	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
DeVry Education Group Inc	Education services – Post-secondary education	United States	NYSE
Education Realty Trust Inc	Housing communities from universities	United States	NYSE
Educational Development Corp	Publishing of educational children's book	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
ITT Educational Services Inc	Post-secondary and higher education	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Laureate Education, Inc	Higher education	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Lincoln Educational Services Corp	School – Post-secondary education	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Strayer Education Inc	Post-secondary and higher education	United States	NYSE and Nasdaq
Hailiang Education Group Inc	School – K-12 schools	China	NYSE and Nasdaq
New Oriental Education & Technology Group Inc	School – From kindergarten to high school	China	NYSE and Nasdaq
Nord Anglia Education Inc	School – From kindergarten to secondary school	China	NYSE
Pearson PLC	Educational services and publishing	United Kingdom	NYSE and Nasdaq

Source: Author's survey based on latest available data from NYSE and Nasdaq websites in August 2016.



These data indicate, among other possible inferences, that these education companies – involved in varied activities and representatives from the biggest economies of the world – have acted both as specialised firms and financial assets, following the business trend indicated by Chesnais (1996). Considering the global scope of the education services sector (Robertson and Verger 2012), it is very likely that Manhattan is not the only place to investors like those ones listed above. Furthermore, this list might grow and diversify more and more, considering how articulated and connected the market education has been in joining public and private partners in the global education industry around the world. This situation may indicate that the education sector has organically entered the “bizarre” monetary capital universe, in Marx’s (1988, p. 38) words.

Although it is not easy to accurately track down the path of public funds involved in this sort of education financialisation, it also seems difficult to refuse clear indications that public funds in education “have become a site of accumulation that is crucial for the continuing expansion of international capital” (Huws 2012, p. 65). In this respect, it is worth quoting Dexter Whitefield²’s reply when he was asked in a BBC programme³ about the most profitable areas in PFI in the UK:

PFI in health, [...] there’s been an average profit on the equity sales to date of 66.7%. Transport, education are slightly below the average, but if you take education [building new schools], which is about 34%... [...]. I think it’s a wealth machine, it’s a way of actually not necessarily printing money, but it’s virtually that, given the scale of these profits.

However, it is important to bear in mind that, the labour power – in any economic sector – remains the raw material which makes that “wealth machine” running. It must be noted that money-making without the mediation of production process is still a “vertigo” in the capitalist mode of production (Marx 1988, p. 43). As a social relation, the capital is embedded in different,

² Dexter Whitefield is a European Services Strategy Unit’s director. For further information see <http://www.european-services-strategy.org.uk/>.

³ BBC Radio4, File on 4 programme, episode “PFI profits” broadcasted 14th June 2011, reported by Gerry Northam, produced by Rob Cave and edited by David Ross. Download MP3 available at [<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b0111vf2f>].



simultaneous and juxtaposed processes, including the role of labour power within them (Marx 1988, p. 82), even in times when dominant beliefs have denied any role of workforce in the source of value of the commodities (Huws 1999). Most likely, the increase of ePPPs worldwide has improved some production chains like building construction, textbooks, and technological devices, and so on. Based on Molnar and Reaves's (2002) estimation, Gurn (2016, p. 8) informs that "corporate-sponsored educational materials grew by approximately 1,875%" from 1990's to 2000's. Thus Huws' (1999, p. 36) argument that "in at least some parts of the service sector, the trend is one of materialisation, rather than dematerialisation" makes much sense indeed.

At this point, it is worth going back to Gramsci's thoughts on hegemony and its mediations with the productive world. In that context, Gramsci held the view that hegemony was "born in the factory" (Gramsci, 1999, p. 571). After nearly a century, the economy financialisation suggests a similar movement, this time cutting across – nevertheless, without excluding – the manufacturing arena: it means that, in the case of ePPPs, at the current time, hegemony seems to be born in the market as a whole, from which it has spread itself into varied dimensions of social life with the ineluctable State activity.

ON POLITICAL MEANINGS OF ePPP

As part of that global project, ePPPs have contributed to the process of capital accumulation overall as well as to the enhancement of private sector – its interests and worldview – into specific national contexts. In the latter case, through ePPPs "the private sector is now deeply embedded in the heart of the state's education service at all levels, from policy and research work to delivering learning in classrooms" (Robertson and Verger 2012, p. 37). In fact, studies on ePPP experiences at the national (Brans 2011; De Angelis 2014; Peroni 2013; Srivastava 2014) and broader levels (Ball and Youdell 2008; Robertson et al 2012; Verger 2012) have indicated varied political strategies – from both the public and the private sectors – to introduce/develop/enhance ePPPs as a governance tool.



ePPPs and their political achievements

Whether due to government's weakness in education provision or even to their agreement with market orientation, uncountable amounts of public funds are sustaining the conduct of the private sector in the education field through several types of relationship between public and private partners, from formal contract to informal arrangements. Examples of that might include private management and public funding, direct or indirect services provision (professional, support, and operational services), subsidies to or sponsorship of students, voucher schemes, tax incentives, provision of lands, cash transfer programmes, infrastructure and service contracting, and financial assistance (Patrinos 2006; Moumné and Saudemont 2015).

The set of theoretical references on ePPPs indicated in this article so far allows inferring that the allocation of public funds has joined all sort of private institutions (profit, not-for-profit, low cost, community, NGOs, philanthropic foundations/donors, and so on), in varied arrangements (from private owners to joint ventures), regardless their ideological orientation (secular or religious). Under the "perfect umbrella" of ePPPs (Robertson and Verger 2012, p. 30), Catholics, Jewish, Hindus, Muslims, on the one hand, and developed/developing/underdeveloped countries, on the other hand, have paradoxically maintained themselves in peace regarding ePPPs matter, despite the severe religious and political conflicts over the world in the last decades.

The situations previously remarked indicate how organically ePPPs are politically linked to the current global societal project driven by "the profit-oriented, market-mediated logic of capital accumulation" (Jessop 2010b, p. 177). It becomes even more clear if ones consider that "Every relationship of 'hegemony' is necessarily an educational relationship and occurs not only within a nation, between the various forces of which the nation is composed, but in the international and world-wide field, between complexes of national and continental civilisations" (Gramsci, 1999, p. 666).

The sectors of the ruling classes, as well as their supporters from subordinated groups which have underpinned that hegemonic project, may include in their list of neoliberal achievements – to use Harvey's (2005) words –



some significant outcomes supplied by public-private partnerships. Overall, it is possible to mention, as Harvey (2005 p. 76-77) stresses, the thriving governmental reliance on PPPs in such a way that “Businesses and corporations not only collaborate intimately with state actors but even acquire a strong role in writing legislation, determining public policies, and setting regulatory frameworks (which are mainly advantageous to themselves)”. As regards ePPPs, specifically, their political performance is clearly summarised by Verger and Robertson (2012 p. 117): “The fact that the norms and rules of free trade are more deeply penetrating the education sector means that education itself is increasingly anchored in, and therefore imbricated with, market politics, including their regulatory frameworks and procedures”.

Assuming the globalisation process “as a particular project that acts as a mechanism of change at a ‘global’ level” (Robertson and Dale 2015, p. 9), the role of PPPs within it seems to be clear-cut. However, it is by no means a right straight journey into the totalising market heaven. Structural and superstructural components are “complex, contradictory and discordant” ensembles (Gramsci 1999, p. 192) whereby the open-ended historical process keeps going, not without setbacks even for the hegemonic groups.

Contradictions in the global level

Despite the strengthening of the private sector over the last decades, whereby that sector reached the status of privileged partner of governments around the world, the global crisis of finance-led accumulation (Jessop 2010b, p. 177) has worsened. In addition, there has also been an uneven and disparate geographical development unlike an economic, political and cultural fluidity, as supposed by an ideological sense of globalisation process (Harvey, 2005). The World Bank’s “ambitious goal” defined in the early 1990’s to contain the poverty growth in Africa and reduce the number of poor elsewhere by 400 million by the end of the 20th century (World Bank 1990, p. 6) was frustrated. Two decades later, the picture may likely be worse than before as three aspects suggest: a) in Africa, the slower poverty reduction has contrasted with the rapid population growth; b) the global poverty may include 700 million people; and last but not



least, c) the rising inequality has exacerbated even within high-income countries (World Bank 2015b). Thus, the more the partnership takes root into social relations, the more the hegemonic project exposes its fractures. In short, the current capitalist crisis has not yet found an organic solution (Gramsci 1999).

Contradictions in the national level

Varied measures throughout the process of globalisation of the neoliberal proposals have been implemented by transnational and national agents to achieve a broad social consensus regarding a successful match between a development model based on competitiveness and the reduction of the “political economy of poverty” (World Bank 1990, p. 52). Global commitments as well as structural adjustment programmes – mainly whereby bilateral (trade and financial) agreements (Harvey 2005; Jessop 2010b; Mészáros, 2002) – might be included among the steps towards that end. Indeed, due to the role of social policies for both the global purpose overall and the consensus to support such project, it is noteworthy the weight of the Education for All movement (EFA) in that. According to Unesco (2000, p. 18), EFA policies should be “promoted within a sustainable and well-integrated sector framework clearly linked to poverty elimination and development strategies”.

The first global EFA conference, which took place in Jomtien, Thailand, in 1990, was mainly sponsored by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and The World Bank, amongst other co/associate sponsors and organizers⁴. It would not be exaggerated to say that the first EFA conference had represented the starting point of partnerships in education at the global level considering the inescapably

⁴ Co-Sponsors: Asian Development Bank Denmark Finland Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), Japan Norway Sweden United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Associate Sponsors: Australia, Canadian, International Development Agency (CIDA), Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Italy, Switzerland, Bernard van Leer Foundation, World Health Organization (WHO). Joint organizer: Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). Among the EFA participants, member states (delegates and observers), intergovernmental organisations and NGOs (from unions to companies) were included (Unesco 1990).



EFA social influence on national policies, rather than the weight of its sponsors, organizers, and participants. In any case, Dale's (2000; 2005) definition of a "globally structured agenda for education" (GSAE) encourages to assume that EFA has acted at the supranational level of governance, if not shaping, hardly suggesting rules for national/subnational scales of governance within 164 countries, that is, about four fifths of the world⁵. This gives an idea not only of the power of influence of the education market model, but also the scope of the ePPPs industry (Robertson and Verger 2012).

However, the national governments' pledge either to assume the EFA education notions or adopt the framework for action from the movement has not been enough to achieve the targets defined in 1990, including "strengthening partnerships"⁶ (Unesco 1990). Due to this fact, the principles as well as the EFA goals which were defined in Jomtien had to be postponed twice: first, during the World Education Forum in Dakar in 2000, and after that, in a second forum in Incheon in 2015. Notwithstanding the achievements in expanding access to education since the EFA movement was launched, the schooling process has reproduced inequality, exclusion and marginalisation, apart from risible learning outcomes, as the last EFA declarations suggest (Unesco 2000, 2015). By trying to overcome this picture by 2030, both the establishment of an "international evaluative corporativism"⁷ (Afonso 2013) and the strengthening of the partnership idea as "the heart" of the EFA (Unesco 1990, p. 7) have become the most emphasised aspects of the global structured agenda for education.

Since the local governments are the main targets of education reforms, the global proposals are deeply conditioned by the "territoriality of jurisdiction" of the national states (Harvey 2005, p. 180).

⁵ 195 countries in the world (August 2016), according to The World Factbook from the Central Intelligence Agency, United States Government. Available at [<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2051.html#xx>].

⁶ The EFA's purpose is organised in five aspects: 1) Universalizing access and promoting equity; 2) Focusing on learning; 3) Broadening the means and scope of basic education; 4) Enhancing the environment for learning; 5) Strengthening partnerships (Unesco 1990).

⁷ For the purpose of monitoring and evaluation of education systems, the OCDE, the Unesco, and the World Bank launched, respectively, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), in 2000, the EFA Global Education Monitoring Report (GEM), in 2002, and the Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER), in 2011. Such "international evaluative corporativism" has spread around the world, by multiplying national evaluating systems from developed to peripheral countries (Afonso 2013, p. 275). For further information see [<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/>], [<http://en.unesco.org/gem-report/about>] and [<http://saber.worldbank.org/index.cfm>].



The incorporation of ePPPs as element of national policies is subjected to the fact that the nation state has to handle with “a continuous process of formation and superseding of unstable equilibria (on the juridical plane) between the interests of the fundamental group and those of the subordinate groups” (Gramsci 1999, p. 406). However, the struggles between either social classes or their fractions have been interpreted by the agents of the global education project as a problem of “governance” – as Unesco (2009, p. 25) claims, “Governance reform is a prominent part of the EFA agenda”. Although the governance concept implies an expansion of the role of varied institutions in regulating social and economic life (Slater and Tonkiss 2001, p. 143), the governments are still predominantly seen by those agents as the main responsible for the expected changes (Unesco 2009; United Nations 2008; World Bank 2009).

The contradiction between the need “to take into account the wishes of the stakeholders (local citizens, NGOs, employees/trade unions, civil society, media, etc.) in PPPs” (United Nations 2008, p. 15)” and the spotlight of government leadership reflects somehow the structural limits of the ruling class to understand the role of the class struggle within the hegemony process. Thus, the reduction of internal balance of power in a “viewpoint of political technique” (Gramsci 1999, p. 168) is not enough to overcome social disputes within national states.

The Gramscian “general notion of state” is enlightening in this matter since the power of the political society – which is in short an ensemble of institutions and mechanisms to assure governmental intervention – can only be understood by the balance of power within the civil society (Gramsci 1999). Therefore, “State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win the active consent of those over whom it rules” (Gramsci, 1999, p. 504). Hence, the greater or lesser degree of ePPP incorporation into the education systems in the national level will depend on the nature and circumstances of the adhesion or resistance both the dominant and the subaltern groups of civil society. Furthermore, the struggles between these



groups either to establish or refuse their corresponding conceptions of the world and practical stances (Gramsci 1999) play a crucial role in that conjuncture.

As the World Bank (1990, p. 52) advocates, successful “policies to benefit the poor” are “often built on objectives and strategies that are shared to some degree by the poor and at least some groups among the nonpoor”. It might imply both the diffusion and the changing of “ways of thinking through actions and reactions” (Gramsci 1999, p. 727) which may stimulate – individually or collectively – a kind of “vital action, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order” (Gramsci 1999, p. 629). In Gramscian terms, it is called culture.

ON CULTURAL MEANINGS OF ePPP

The World Bank’s account quoted above can be interpreted as a way of ruling class’ acknowledgement of the need to involve “elements of the hegemonic group or of the other subaltern groups which undergo such hegemony” (Gramsci 1999, p. 203)” in the current dominant political strategy. Such involvement, as the World Bank describes, should seek the subaltern groups’ agreement with ideas and practices – the objectives and strategies – defined by the dominant groups, which means to submit the needs of the former under the interests of the latter.

This concern suggests that the effective combination of the economic development and the political control of the poverty in socially acceptable terms demands some level of social consensus, by means of strategies of persuasion and consent, preferably, rather than force and coercion. A well-known Gramsci’s (1999, p. 529) formulation on the historical approach of the ruling class is helpful here: “The bourgeois class poses itself as an organism in continuous movement, capable of absorbing the entire society, assimilating it to its own cultural and economic level. The entire function of the State has been transformed; the State has become an “educator”, etc”. It means that the economy, politics and culture are inextricably tied in with the hegemony moment, from its construction to its exercise (Gramsci 1999). Thus, ePPPs



might be included as part of the necessary “cultural⁸ front [...] alongside the merely economic and political ones” (Gramsci 1999, p. 194) which are all related to the “globally structured agenda for education” (Dale 2000; 2005).

By recovering briefly the argumentation made in the previous parts of this article, it is worth underlining some cultural mediation between ePPPs and the economic and political “fronts”.

ePPPs and a new economic culture of the global neoliberal project

In its neoliberal shape, especially in a context of economic financialisation, the state continues “promoting the old forms of parasitic accumulation of savings and tending to create closed social formations” as indicated by Gramsci (1999, p. 583) in his analysis of the relationship between state and world of production.

Under the Welfare State regulation, such promoting, as Oliveira (1998) argues, placed the public funds as an ex-ante of the accumulation process – a legacy incorporated into the neoliberal logic even after the dismantling of public services. Therefore, the advent of PPPs has innovated the role historically played by the capitalist state faced with the process of capital accumulation for at least two reasons.

First, the trend of budget constraint – often followed by spending cuts – does not necessarily mean reduction of governmental resources in the absolute level. Furthermore, the EFA’s guidance for the countries to devote around 6 per cent of GNP in education (Unesco, 2000) might increase public investment in the education sector instead. In any case, the public funding for education, either by its increment or reallocation, should focus on the poorest along with maximising efficiency and accountability (Unesco 1990, 2000, 2015). Therefore, ePPPs proposal matches very well with such guidelines, principally from the

⁸ Raney (2006, p. 4) explains that Gramsci refers to culture generally and specifically: “That is, for Gramsci, culture describes how people function (organize), imprint (document) and interact (socialize). Hence, culture is not static, but varies according to how it is used; that is, culture is non-referential (it cannot be held to one thing) and therefore changeable”. In fact, there is a huge reference to the culture in Gramsci’s work, either as a noun or an adjective. Hence, the concept of culture is always related to other notions such as economy, politics, hegemony, history, philosophy, education, and so on. The subtitles in this part of the article are inspired by that Gramscian cultural approach.



private sector point of view because, in financial terms, its contribution “to the social sector is small in relative terms, and there is little evidence that this will change in the future” (Draxler 2008, p. 52). However, there is huge evidence that public funding for education has financed private business in an unprecedented way through ePPPs.

Second, companies and owners from the education sector, such as the listed in Table 1 in this article, are new financial investors. From then on, these “new rentiers” – for using Gramsci’s (1999, p. 583) words – share with traditional investors space within the sphere of speculative capital. The stockholders of the education industry are then entered into the financial elites, thanks to the production and socialisation of the knowledge, both of them linked in different ways to the ePPPs. The introduction of a new model of education provision through the relationship between public and private agents might be one signal, among others, the change in certain culture of “the economic programme of the State itself – in other words the distribution of the national income” (Gramsci 1999, p. 371). This context may indicate how deeply the naturalisation of education as a commodity has joined the market culture. A similar outcome has characterised the political sphere.

ePPPs and a new political culture of the global neoliberal project

The division of tasks referring to formal education between political society and civil society could represent a higher level of social organisation and cohesion. Though this statement may be simple or even naïve, it tells about what ePPPs are not supposed to be. In the ePPPs case, there are at least two reductions.

The first of them refers to the political subjects legitimised as “the partners”. On the one hand, executive power is seen as the main economic and political agent from the political society. On the other hand, all civil society – as well as its complexity and contradictions – tends to be reduced to the entrepreneurial sector, with very few exceptions. The second reduction lies in the political condition to materialise the partnership: the political society as a whole – executive, legislative, judiciary and all other official structures – has to



be exclusively submitted to the interests, needs and values of one group from the civil society. While these reductions certainly do not assure themselves the hegemony of a ruling class' fraction over the entire society, they provide privileged circumstances for converting the market culture into "ethical content of the State" (Gramsci 1999, p. 448). Therefore, ePPPs have contributed both for "the extension of profit-oriented, market-mediated accumulation into spaces where it was previously absent" (Jessop 2010b, p. 176) and "to introduce a global value chain into parts of the economy that historically didn't have them" (Huws and Lewis 2011, p. 2).

The emphasis placed on the new cultural meanings of both economic and political realms due to the changes arisen from ePPPs experiences leads to the main outcome of this process as a whole. It is related to the notion of education as an ensemble, "as a unity of multiple determinations [...] whose shifting authoritative, allocative, ideational and feeling structures, properties and practices, emerge from and frame global economic, political and cultural processes" (Robertson and Dale 2015, p. 150). In these terms, ePPPs might be understood – and explained – as constituent and constitutive of the new political economy of education. "New" in the sense that the market has been promoted as the main reference to organize, document, and socialise a specific dominant education project by means of actions and beliefs, intentions and achievements, intellectual force and moral basis. Therefore, ePPPs – from their planning to their results – have acted as a distinctive structural component of the capitalist attempt to overcome its ongoing crisis. In some countries like Chile and the United Kingdom, just to mention two different neoliberal settings, it is unlikely to understand their education systems apart from ePPPs. The critical studies on ePPPs referenced in this article suggest that is a worldwide trend.

Through ePPPs, projects by social groups – regardless whether public or private – may have been articulated, disarticulated and rearticulated, shaping other projects, resulting from a consensual arrangement, heavily based on market rules. Through ePPPs, people from varied spaces, directly or indirectly related to the partnerships themselves, from global meetings to schools and their classrooms, have been educated. Inspired by a broad education meaning in Gramsci's work (Gramsci 1999), ePPPs can be identified as part of a



hegemonic political economic strategy and its correspondent cultural movement; thus, ePPPs have mobilised a special sort of social activity in which the market – its principles, mechanisms, targets, and practices – has been educating the society at large: psycho-physically, intellectually and morally.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed at broadening the historical ePPPs meaning by exploring their mediations with economic, political and cultural spheres based on Gramsci's work contribution, notably by means of the concept of hegemony, the dialectal relationship between structure and superstructure, as well as the organic linkage of economic, political and cultural realms.

Since the first World Bank report, the theme of poverty has been incorporated in most analysis and proposals led by the ruling classes. In 1978, the economic growth was announced as the pathway towards the reduction of poverty (World Bank 1978). In 2015, poverty became associated with a personal deficit of aspiration and decision-making needs (World Bank 2015b). Through all this time, huge economic and political reforms were made around the world, including in the education sector. However, the concentration of wealth and the widespread poverty, on the one hand, and the offshore tax regimes and the growing menace of terrorism, on the other hand, indicate that social problems have indeed been increasing. Therefore, it could be said that the political economy of poverty reduction – as announced by the World Bank – “has been failing as a response to the [current] “crisis of impoverishment” (Gramsci 1999, p. 409). Under the umbrella of the neoliberal social program, the education sector has been called to hardly contribute with the changes expected by dominant economic and political agents in different levels: global, transnational, regional, national and local. In this article, ePPPs' meaning – as part of a hegemonic historical construction – was sought through their mediations with economic, political and cultural contents and practices.

Throughout the discussion, some mediations were underlined which can be briefly stated as follows: a) economically, ePPPs have been linked to the production and reproduction of capital in different ways, since such kind of



partnership has worked as instruments and mechanisms for transferring of public fund to the private sector; b) politically, ePPPs have both constituted a global education project and contributed to the social consent to its improvement, despite deep contradictions between political targets and achievements, and c) culturally, ePPPs have been structured and have structured new meanings and means of relationship between economy, politics and education, in such a way that the society as a whole has been educated by the market.

In light of the nature and specificities of ePPP – from their appeals to their outcomes – it might be a misrepresentation if one addressed them simply as a new education panacea, a rhetoric euphemism (Ball 2009) or a new buzzword (Srivastava 2014). It is expected that the argumentation developed in this paper has unveiled economic, political and cultural mediations to define ePPPs as structural and structuring component of the new political economy of education.

Two open issues may deserve to be pointed out. Firstly, it would be important improve the knowledge about movements of resistance against the marketisation of education process, as some studies have done (Education International 2009; Hall 2015; Verger and Novelli 2012), to contribute with a counterproposal social force which is able to question the hegemonic consent about ePPPs. Secondly, the focus on ePPPs cases could explore power relations which play a role in the relationship between the “partners” in order to identify, for instance, who decides, where the crucial decisions are made, who takes control over arrangements made. These open issues may be indications of further studies on ePPPs.

Finally, this paper expects having showed how Gramsci’s theoretical framework is thought provoking for shedding light on the understanding of ePPPs, as well as that his ideas might improve social movements and organisations engaged with building a new social order.

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