

A. R. Berner, *No One Way to School. Pluralism and American Public Education*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York 2017, pp. 185

The latest book of Ashley Rogers Berner (Deputy Director of the Johns Hopkins University Institute for Education Policy and Assistant Professor in the School of Education at Johns Hopkins University, USA) is both an attack on the wrong turns towards uniformity in the American public education and a strong call for a change in the American framework for public education such that pluralism becomes the cultural norm.

The topic is very up-to-date in the USA, due to the recent political development followed by Donald Trump's election and Betsy DeVos's appointment as Secretary for Education, but also for a debate in the newspapers (e.g. Nicole Hannah-Jones, *Have We Lost Sight of the Promise of Public Schools?*, «The New York Times Magazine», 21 February 2017; K. Carey, *Dismal Voucher Results Surprise Researchers as DeVos Era Begins*, «The New York Times», 23 February 2017).

From the very first page of her work, Berner underlines the failure of the American educational system: «it is no secret that America education leaves many students behind intellectually, civically and morally. Educational leaders disagree about *why* this is so. I argue in this book that much of the fault lies with two wrong turns that should be reversed: first, the nineteenth-century political decision to favor a uniform structure over a plural one; second, the early twentieth-century abandonment of a traditional, academic curriculum. We have been paying for these mistakes ever since»

(p. 1). Focusing mostly on the first point, she shows a fact, simple and undeniable: «America's public schools are not "uniform" operationally: they vary in financial resources, teacher quality, neighborhood, student demographics, and even curricular emphases. They are, however, uniform conceptually. They were intended to provide a uniform experience» (p. 29). Nevertheless, according to Berner, «there is no clear advantage to a uniform system of education in its ability to prepare students academically and civically» (p. 93). On the contrary, she argues that the American education system was converted into a system characterized by uniformity and that is necessary to correct it by «implementing a well-designed plural system instead» (p. 140).

Questions like «who is in charge of education: the individual, the state or civil society? In what combination? Why?» (p. 30) or «Should the state manage education completely, or rather share this provision with the voluntary sector?» (p. 31) are the starting point and the supporting structure of her book.

Berner's attack against traditional American public schools acting «as bureaucratic agencies rather than as the organic communities that work well for so many students» (p. 93) seems very harsh to an Italian reader. Even by a quick glance, the American public education system appears to be more pluralistic than the Italian one: it is worth mentioning, for instance, the introduction – in some states – of vouchers in 1990, charter schools in

1992, tax credits in 1997 and of ESAs (Education savings accounts) in 2011. Furthermore, Berner is very careful in differentiating her position from certain approaches – that she judges negative or, at least, partial, ineffective and self-defeating – to the topic of educational pluralism and school choice: for example, she argues that «against the libertarian view, that choice alone is insufficient, and that without guardrails choice can undermine excellence and equity» (p. 92). Berner's view sets itself as an alternative that is neither libertarian nor state-focused and that draws upon the pluralistic, civil society model. In fact, when Milton Friedman first introduced the idea of school vouchers in 1955 (M. Friedman, *The Role of Government in Education*, in Robert A. Solo (Ed.), *Economics and the Public Interest*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, 1955, pp. 123-144), «he did not argue against state regulation or even, in certain circumstances, state provision of education» (p. 37).

No One Way to School calls for a change in the cultural paradigm of American public education, a goal perhaps more difficult and slow to achieve, but longer lasting because «change at the level of culture is different in kind than change at the level of politics or the law» (p. 135).

Finally, with this book Berner «attempts to draw a more inclusive argument that rests upon the foundational goals of the common schools, while affirming that they are better met by plural education, than by uniformity». (p. 141).

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