

# Formal Education as Economic and Social Value and as an Object of the Social Sciences



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By

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## PREFACE

At first sight, the main themes and issues featured in this book are easy to grasp, and for many, they may be self-evident. However, based on a contrary conviction, an attempt to explain some of these issues, their approach, and the target audience seem to be needed.

When exposing matters related to this theme, this conviction of potentially understanding difficulties and consequent misinterpretations even comes from previous experiences, some of which are linked to evaluations for publication in specialised journals. Therefore, these are difficulties in understanding what, after all, consists of the issue at hand, by specialists of the topics covered. In this kind of discussion, what can usually cause misunderstandings stem from the assumption that something related to the evaluation of “education” is on the agenda. Thus, it would be a question of confrontations between positions regarding “education” or the modalities and criteria for measuring their “importance” or “value.” Many other problems could be mentioned in the sense of potentially pushing positions towards different perspectives. However, rather than the list of possible questions that the topics may cause, the most important aspect is to point to what seems to be in its origins, from the perspective of this work.

In this regard, what must be highlighted is that the origins of the questions, for their approach, do not refer to “education” or something of sorts but to the perspectives of sociology itself. This may seem elementary and therefore contain something disappointing. At the risk of being even more disappointing, this work does not take formal education as its object

but only as an empirical reference. More specifically, the general assumption is that strengthening or deepening spheres of specific activities, such as formal education, among others that could be addressed constitutes an obstacle to professional practice in its apprehension by sociology.

If, on one hand, this may be elementary and even seem obvious, on the other hand, it contradicts almost all sociology or social sciences works generally dedicated to the theme of “education” or related to any other sphere of activities, such as political ones. However, the root of the problem is not in the number of professionals, but in what can be conceived as sociology or social sciences and its conditions of existence and limits.

Any bibliographic study pertinent to the themes covered by this book, be it “education” and statistical classifications, among others, can show an increasing number of dedicated authors. Conversely, the centrality of concerns and “practical” formulations can also be observed. As mentioned in this work, there is a clear trend towards what is defined as sociology—or at least, for the most part, constituting a kind of “social” or moral aid of applied economics. This applies both to the support of government policies and to activities for the representation of interests and subsidizing agendas for public or media discussion in general. Therefore, this work is at risk of having its diffusion driven by a misunderstanding; in other words, it can be taken as a kind of subsidy for the instrumentalization of positions towards issues such as the “value of education.”

Furthermore, it appears—or at least is expected—that the recent boom of sociology and social sciences can strengthen these segments with concepts and professional practice more directly centred on applied rationalism, which is free of “practical” concerns. Again, although it may seem elementary and even obvious, this predisposition is essential to grasp the main issues that this book intends to illustrate. In broader terms, it is a



matter of strictly distinguishing the empirical reference themes from the object of sociological research; oddly, this is as old as the very origins of the discipline. In the case at hand, in the present work, it is about taking means or resources of action and social hierarchy and legitimacy, including formal education, as an object of investigation.

However, beyond the oldness of the problem, there are also challenges related to specific conditions and limits of sociology existence that go beyond the present work. In any case, this type of problem serves as a basis for considering other complex issues for the discipline, among which its relations with applied rationalism.

The problematic relation with rationalism has different aspects, of which one of the most general involves sociology's *raison d'être*. This has implications for professional practices' motivations and the formulation of objects of study. Since it is neither compensated by the supernatural as the theology nor by "practical" or utilitarian applications, it is evident that sociology, in strictly rationalist terms, requires very specific conditions. Among these, besides autonomy in professional practice, it must have cultural bases that value knowledge without pretensions of utilitarian or "practical" applications. Moreover, regarding the formulation of study objects, one must consider that, since rationalism has no pretensions of utilitarian applications, contrary to what is generally supposed, there is no continuity between the so-called "applied social sciences" and sociology due to their different bases and logics of action or rationalities. Still on study object formulation, one of the widest problems arises from the requirement of axiological neutrality. Again, despite being one of the basic assumptions of the discipline since its origins, its observance in professional practices is sporadic. At all events, as far as this is taken seriously, it implies in the impossibility of taking the ends or meanings of social actions as an

explanatory principle. On the other hand, it also implies taking these ends or meanings as integrating the object of study, which may contradict the legitimacy principles in vogue. This is linked to the general working assumption that strengthening spheres of specific activities, with their own principles and means of action and legitimacy, constitutes an obstacle to their sociological study. This is stronger when it comes to activities close to erudite culture since it involves categories that are better able to impose their own legitimacy principles. Strictly speaking, what, from the perspective of those investigated, constitutes a sense of social actions and respective beliefs and values, under a sociological approach, can become the means of social hierarchy and legitimacy. This is the case of formal education or its association with something like the “value of education,” which is already established as a public discussion. However, otherwise, its consideration as a means and principle of social hierarchy can only interest sociological analysis. Along the same lines, any other theme linked to “values” or civic morals in the broad sense could be considered.

In sociology, difficulties in adopting a rational perspective in the strict sense facilitate its use as instrumentalization of the most diverse “causes,” among which are its association with identity redefinition and reinforcement processes, in the representation and legitimacy of the most varied interests, and grounding of meaning or “rationalization” of social positions, among many others. One of the most general consequences of this is polysemy, which characterizes confrontations between different currents or perspectives within the discipline. Apart from references by some authors and theoretical positions, these confrontations usually manifest adherence to certain conceptions of society, to identity references, and civic morality principles in vogue—in short, something of an ontological order. As already mentioned, it happens that besides rationalism, which has nothing to offer

when it comes to searching for meanings or in utilitarian and “practical” terms, there is no middle ground. This also results in the impossibility of continuity between sociology and the so-called “applied social sciences.”

Although such an issue can also be considered elementary, for what is on the agenda, one should highlight the impossibility of taking problems such as the “value of education” seriously, unless from a “practical” point of view. The same occurs with the instrumentalization of labour market management and social integration policies, which are the basis of statistical classification schemes—the subject of the second part of this work. At this point, the hypothesis that current occupational classification schemes tend to reify the idea of the social division of labour, particularly for top social categories, is pursued. Although somewhat ironic, the underlying idea behind the critique of “practical” uses of sociology are that a greater degree of division and specification based on theoretical and epistemological foundations and on goals of their professional practice would be productive for this discipline. This would at least contribute to lessening the degree of ambivalence and misunderstandings.

If this makes any sense, it could reset some burning problems, among which the best connection between new resources provided by the current technological conditions and theoretical and epistemological formulations accumulated by the discipline. These new features provided by technology can have two sides: on the one hand, they favour some reification and conversion of new techniques for measuring empirical data into “methodology”; on the other hand, new technical conditions provide better conditions for access to empirical information and communication of research results, which even led to the writing of this book.

However, besides new technical conditions, very acute general problems remain independent thereof. One of the most intriguing is the lack

of any consensual definition of the discipline's object and its epistemological foundations. Everything indicates that this type of problem stems from the fact that the sources of most criticisms of the "education" approaches as the object of study in this work refer to formulations of the last century.

Conversely, by reading this book, one can see that substantial advances have occurred recently in the formulation of new perspectives, though evidently, it does not include this author, who is happy to point out some of the problems found. As for "solutions," it is not about a lack of competence as no study could be taken seriously based on rationalism and epistemological scepticism if any "solution" to "practical" problems was at stake.

# INTRODUCTION

The present book consists of a series of texts linked to the theme of conditions for valuing formal education. However, it is not focused on discussing or defending any “value” positively or negatively; here, formal education serves only as a theme or empirical reference for dealing with more general social science issues. As formal education it would be possible to include several other topics for this purpose.

A distinction among research theme, object of study, and problems and difficulties in grasping their meanings is fundamental in this work. One of the general hypotheses pursued is that the greater social division of labour and the increasing relative autonomy of different spheres of activities or social universes may increase difficulties in distinguishing between empirical themes and objects of study. For Hammersley (2014), in addition to the absence of objects of investigation independent of cultural codes supporting them as problems of knowledge, the limits of possibilities for the existence of social sciences are determined by their lack of autonomy, of which an extreme example is the so-called political science. It does not seem accidental that the “speciality” of social sciences dedicated to studying activities or the political landscape stands out as it is a sphere of activities associated with something considered to be socially critical. Such an enhanced recognition of the social importance of a given sphere of activities may increase due to the strengthening of the specific interests and resources involved and their principles of legitimacy, and even with the support provided by the instrumentalization of “specialities” of social sciences.

Therefore, besides the so-called political science, several other “specialities” focused on other themes or spheres of activities can be structured and serve as instrumentalization for its principles of legitimacy. Formal education can be a case in point in this regard.

As is well known, the social division of labour and rise in specific principles of legitimacy with their own means and logics of action have been approached by social sciences since their very beginning, with proposals with roots in Weber (1984) and more recently in Bourdieu (1979; 1989), among many others. However, what should be highlighted for what is at stake in this book is a general hypothesis according to which universes or spheres of social activities are not only the means of action and representation of interests with their own principles of legitimacy. These spheres of activities and principles of legitimacy, which Bourdieu (1989, 375–376) defines as “fields,” can be directly linked to more general trends towards new versions of the spirit of capitalism and values that legitimise certain beliefs and government policies. Among these values and beliefs, those associated with formal education and its support for government policies and large international bureaucracies may be central.

For what is addressed in this book, it is worth mentioning that, as these principles of legitimacy are imposed on social sciences, whether about formal education or any other sphere of activities, there are no conditions for the formulation of any object of study strictly sociological. Under these conditions, the theodicies themselves (Weber 1984, 454–475) or the *illusio* (Bourdieu 1980, 111–112) that legitimise the sphere of activities—in this case, formal education as a “value,” whether economic, social, or moral—serve as assumptions or unthinkable for the social sciences. Therefore, the “questions” that could be asked as an object of knowledge are already inscribed as “value” or “cause.” The theoretical and epistemological

foundations of social sciences lose their sense since their *raison d'être* is based on the possibility of reinforcing a certain position on the agenda regarding this “value.” The texts presented here show several exemplary cases of this, starting with the fact that almost all the theoretical and epistemological battles involved have the “value” of education as their central issue. As these generally involve authors somehow linked to formal education, it is clear that their stances are directly oriented in favour of the defence of its “value” either as an economic “return” or as a social “value.” In these showdowns, for example, the elementary fact that one of the aspects of the theoretical positions is the so-called theory of human capital does not even come into play; therefore, an eventual return from investments in formal education only makes sense in the conception of human nature and “rationality” of investments, which is proper to it. On the other hand, opposing theoretical and epistemological stances, such as those of credentialism or of Bourdieu, tend to be taken as an instrument of moral denunciation as they can point towards the dependence of the “value” of education in the face of the respective social conditions.

In addition, there is the trend that makes it difficult to distinguish between themes and object of study, which consists of confusion between rationalism and rationality with utilitarianism. Modalities of the absorption of human capital theory assumptions are a good indicator of this. To the extent that this occurs, it obviously does not make sense to formulate an object of study strictly as a problem of knowledge, without any “practical” or axiological claims. The distinction between “practical” and theoretical logics (Bourdieu 1980, 135–165) also loses sense and has implications for grasping the logic of action. Such dependence and subordination of social sciences in the face of “practical reasons,” which is present in their uses in

efforts to interpret formal education, can also make it difficult to read interpretations without pretensions of any “practical utility.”

Thus, the texts presented in this work may be used for misunderstandings or taken through inverted signs. The first text, for instance, shows an effort to examine the evolution of the economic value of formal education according to some indicators of social position. Therefore, it is not on the agenda whether the “value” of education as “investment” or in moral terms is positive or negative. The same is true of the second text, whose concern is to confront the economic value of the amount of education with the social position indicators available in census sources and their limits. Finally, in the last text, along with this problem of the limits of the indicators available in the sources of statistical material, especially because of classification schemes for occupations, other related problems are addressed. Particularly, it is about the uses of the social division of labour for the formulation of these classification schemes by the great international bureaucracies (International Labour Organization—ILO) and their association with meritocratic ideologies—in this case, socially dominant categories such as managers.

Overall, the main stances in the current bibliography regarding these theoretical confrontations about the “value” of education are on the one hand credentialism (Collins 1979; Brown 2001) and the works by Bourdieu (1984; 1989), and on the other hand, appropriations of the so-called human capital theory. Although its origins are formulated by neoclassical economists, sociologists take the works by Coleman (1988) as representative for such appropriations. Although, at first glance, stances related to the effects of schooling are confronted because of the social conditions of its implementation, or else as something intrinsic from a supposed acquired competence and increased work productivity, these are



aspects based on different conceptions that encompass the very notion of “reality,” society, and social sciences. With specific regard to credentialism and Bourdieu’s formulations, despite their divergences, their roots and basic assumptions are in Weber’s propositions (Bourdieu 1989, 537–538). Therefore, the “reality” in social sciences points to what constitutes a “limited fragment” (Weber 1983, 206) rather than some given “reality.” Thus, this epistemological scepticism does not presuppose unveiling some “reality” but a partial approach to something allowed by a certain culturally delimited analytical scheme. Moreover, on the agenda is the assumption of axiological neutrality as a *sine qua non*-condition for professional practice in sociology and hence a methodological requirement to exclude the values or purposes of social actions (Weber 1983, 119–178; Bourdieu 1982, 13–15), besides a set of principles that may seem banal at first sight but whose application has faced problems and obstacles. One of those seemingly banal principles consists of the concept of “domination” as a general foundation for sociological analysis to the detriment of that of “power,” which is “amorphous” (Weber 1984, 43). It turns out that none of the social sciences, if taken seriously, could presuppose any “non-domination” or something similar, which is very common in other theoretical perspectives. In such a perspective of “domination” and legitimacy of concepts structured on multidimensional bases as a general principle, every social structure is based on the means and principles of domination (in a sociological and non-moral sense).

In terms of the effects of schooling and professional specialisation, this perspective does not presuppose any “equality” or “democracy” effect on emerging modes of domination. In analytical terms, it implies, in particular, enabling the “levelling” of the social structure through schooling degree and modern division of labour, in confrontation with the formation

of new hierarchies and groupings, which have a basis and principles that are found in the base of status groups, i.e., honour and recognition for lifestyle (Weber 1984, 111–113; 706–752).

However, when confronting multiple interpretations of the “value” of formal education, be it credentialism, the work of Bourdieu or any other theories, much more than “education” is in question. As already mentioned, this is the very conception of “reality,” society, and the reason for the social sciences—something opposite to the foundations of theoretical and epistemological stances that consider the “value” of formal education as something intrinsic. In this sense, a certain conception of “reality” and its approach by social sciences are based not only on epistemological scepticism but also on axiological neutrality. It should be noted, however, that this is not a naïve definition of scepticism in the sense of a “pessimistic” stance—not least because there is no value judgement between pessimism and optimism on the agenda.

Something similar happens with the principle of axiological neutrality since it is not just some elementary legally based idea of avoiding inclusion in the analysis of immediate or individual ends of social practices. It is a question of excluding judgement of the very principles that support legitimacy and classification schemes, which in Bourdieu’s language—referred to as “fields” or spheres of specific activities and institutions—constitutes the *illusio* (Bourdieu 1980, 111–112), or what Weber (1984, 454–475) defines as “theodicy.” One of its more general implications is that, even when it comes to analyses of concrete situations, such as the conditions of economic valuation of education or beliefs that underlie the “value” attributed to education, something substantive is not on the agenda as the “thing” education or schooling degree valuation, but its effectiveness as means of explaining the social structure and logic of action on the agenda.

Therefore, addressing the value of a schooling degree as dependent on the social conditions behind it is not equivalent to some derivation of value analysis from it; however, since Weber's (1984) formulations, what is in question is the understanding of the conditions affecting social structuring and respective logics of action.

Such an analytical perspective has yet another more general implication that seems difficult to grasp and apply. "Power" in Weber (1984, 43) consists of an "amorphous" concept while forms of domination are taken as constitutive of social structure and its multidimensionality. It turns out that conditions of existence and the professional use of an approach based on methodological scepticism, axiological neutrality and domination as basic concepts require a degree of autonomy that rarely has conditions of existence. In this sense, sociology, which requires a greater degree of autonomy, could be able to constitute a kind of explanation and analysis of a set of principles and criteria for social hierarchy. However, this would rarely make it sustainable since it would require the exclusion of any value, including those that justify beliefs in formal education. To this end, the conditions of the legitimacy of the *raison d'être* and the professional practice of sociology in a strict sense are based on an apparent paradox because they are dependent on quite specific cultural circumstances that enable rationalism to exist and be understood as a value, regardless of moral or "practical" interests and the values with which it can be associated. This makes the widespread legitimacy of social sciences inversely proportional to the degree of strictly professional requirement, which can also occur in other areas of knowledge—though often less directly and decisively. These other areas have well-known and notorious difficulties in breaking resistance regarding the "disenchantment of the world" or the acceptance of explanatory principles contradicting prevailing beliefs, as in the case of the

debate between evolutionism or heliocentrism with the so-called creationism. However, with regard to sociology, this type of obstacle adds to the approach of the means of action and legitimation and, therefore, of the social hierarchies and their justifications, which, evidently, does not have any “practical” interest. As already mentioned, for Hammersley (2014), one of the main barriers to the existence of social sciences stems from the absence of any object of study regardless of its cultural formulation. However, besides this, cultural conditions and their associations with rationalism come into play for enabling the existence of an object of study as a matter of knowledge. Among the implications of this, the most elementary consists in the lack of some sort of continuity between the so-called “applied” social sciences and the others as they are constituted by different bases and logics.

Conversely, for the strand based on the intrinsic value of schooling resulting from labour productivity, which has the human capital theory as its main formulation, certain conceptions of the “reality”, of society and human nature are at stake, although it may seem that these are conceptual differences, as already mentioned. Such distinct roots of this aspect should be highlighted because the cosmovision force based on these assumptions and on neoclassical economics and the interpretation of schooling or school degree as a sort of “capital”—in the sense of investment result with economic and “social” or cultural effects—ends up spreading common sense in school and in the agendas of media prophecies. This has ended up reaching even social science professionals with ambivalent or contradictory stances, with critical attitudes towards the foundations of neoclassical economics and economic liberalism but adhering to definitions of schooling and their effects according to the categorizations of human capital theory.

To make this conception of society and the social philosophy underlying human capital theory explicit, the fundamentals of neoclassical economic theory do not have to be considered. This is because, unlike what Polanyi (1980) proposed about the objectification of market as a structuring principle of society in the early days of capitalism as a condition for the emergence of economic science, the theory of human capital deems as most important (at least in immediate terms) the assumption of the relations between the capitalist market and what is generally called “social.” These relations, which are the basis of original formulations by economists (Becker, Mincer), are related to different types of capital (physical, human, social) and serve as an inspiring basis for later formulations by sociologists aligned with such perspectives. It is not, therefore, merely a matter of advancing economics towards the other social sciences, as often highlighted; it is a conception of human nature based on a determined philosophy and civic morality, underlying the conditions of existence and effectiveness of all capital types. The very definition by one of the main original formulators, Coleman (1988), makes the dependence between social capital and its moral bases very clear—not only on the so-called human capital but on all other types of capital. In other words, the moral bases of *homo economicus* are taken as an assumption of the effectiveness of all types of capital (for more details, see Coradini 2017). This same interpretation scheme can be found in a group of authors dedicated to substantiating the so-called “social capitalism” or something similar through notions such as “social capital,” which has no proximity to Bourdieu’s definition, although nominally identical (1980b). This is, for example, the case of Putnam (1992; 2000) and the so-called “social resource theory” or “neo-capitalism” (Lin, Cook, and Burt 2008), among others. In that sense, besides morality as a source of profit and, simultaneously, “human achievement”—that is, *homo*

*economicus* and utilitarianism based on a certain moral and conceived as the equivalent of rationality—once the “social” character of capitalism is emphasised, even notions previously attributed by social sciences to certain social structures of archaic societies or periphery of capitalism are included. A good example in this regard is represented by the new appropriations and definitions such as that of “mediation,” which it becomes used for description and interpretation of the latest capitalism—the so-called “neo-capitalism” (see, for instance, Burt 2008).

In the case of theoretical and epistemological bases of human capital theory, although directly associated and derived from neoclassical economics and utilitarianism, there is a conception that intends to integrate a set of dimensions of social structure in the *homo economicus*. Thus, on the one hand, unlike the approaches that presuppose the multidimensionality of social structure, the economic dimension, which is based on the capitalist market, constitutes the basis of this structure. By contrast, this capitalist market economic structure integrates other dimensions such as the cognitive one, which is constituted by human capital, and the “social,” which is based on social capital and its foundation in a pluralistic civic morality. Both the cognitive and “social” dimensions act on service and instrument for enhancing the economic dimension (for more details see Coleman 1988, among others). However, it is worth noting that the dimension represented or constituted by human capital is reduced to its cognitive aspect, while the social one has a certain sense of civic morality due to the pluralism of central capitalist societies, and more specifically engagement in civic or “community” organisations and activities (Coleman 1988; Putnam 1992). With the legitimacy and naturalisation of not only the capitalist market as principle and means of social hierarchy, in the sense proposed by Polanyi (1980) but also of ideologies based on school meritocracy, the return of investments in

education obviously takes a central place in the agenda. At the same time, however, a school title is not merely an economic “return” or, in a broader sense, a “social” or moral value, but it is a principle and criterion for social hierarchy or its legitimacy foundation through the representation of organised interests. In such circumstances, axiological neutrality, which is highly regarded in Weber’s sociological approaches—or in any other intended as such—does not apply. Education as a “value” and its respective “returns,” either economic or “cultural” and moral, are already at the basis of the “reality” to be analysed and do not enter the formulation of the object of study. After incorporating this perspective and its spread and use by government policies and interest representation agendas as well as different social prophetism types, a widespread common sense with circular rhetoric is constituted, which tends to include social sciences.

In short, the effects of education as something intrinsic caused by an increase in labour productivity due to acquired competence, only make sense when considering these and other conditions that are at the origin of this approach. Unlike almost all considerations on confronting the effects of schooling as something intrinsic or arising from social conditions while being acquired and the uses of educational attainment, this is not a simple divergence in interpretation or conceptual definition; indeed, different objects of analysis are at stake, and their results only make sense on issues under investigation and their theoretical and epistemological foundations.

Therefore, a priori denial of any returns on investment in education would be meaningless either in economic terms or more generally. At least at first, with investments, it can be assumed that results also occur. The key question, however, is not located at this point but in the meanings of what can be considered an “investment” in education and in the conditions and logics of action involved. Unlike the theory of human capital or any

economic approach, when taking a discipline such as sociology, which presupposes the multidimensionality of social structure, the problem is not located in search of evidence of “return” but of existing conditions and meanings as means of action and hierarchisation and legitimization of spheres of activity, such as those associated with formal education or any other.

The unidimensional approach of economics and, in the case of the theory of human capital, neoclassical economics, is directly faced not only with a multidimensional social structure but with relations between resources or means of action socially objectified and categorised as such with those of an implicit and tacit nature, whose legitimization is indirect. As will be better detailed later, this structure consists of one of the main axes of division and opposition in the social sciences. Specifically, regarding the opposition between approaches that presuppose an intrinsic value of schooling and those centred on social conditions of training and uses of educational attainment, one of the most general questions that arise is about the meaning of the notion of “market” for school titles, as well as work, with its own conditions and characteristics. Even without addressing the controversies that pervade the very discipline of economics in its divisions on the economic market definition and its autonomy or dependence on social and institutional conditions, the concept of “market” for schooling or educational attainment is not yet defined and can be analytical or simply a metaphor. Furthermore, as defined by Bourdieu (1980, 226–228), a school title can constitute a “measure of rank or order” that does not depend on the brevity of its biological carrier. However, this objectification as an independent title result from definitions and rules that are never completely concluded. In other words, the non-objectified dimensions and personally interdependent relations and actions of representation and defence of



interests and their legitimation are not eliminated with objectification, which acquires a character of depersonalisation or “reification.”

Something similar occurs in the labour market and more specifically in its relations with educational attainment, as already highlighted by Bourdieu and Boltanski (1975). However, it is not just about the specificity that the “merchandise” in the labour market is not separable from its bearer, as emphasised by Goldthorpe (2014). Such emphases on market specificities and labour agreements were already part of the old scheme proposed by Erickson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero (1979). Most recently, it has been taken up by Goldthorpe for quite specific reasons as it is an effort to establish an interpretation scheme for schooling valuation based on proposals by economists, who are supporters of the theory of “screening through education.” Most importantly, this author is one of the main advocates of schooling as a means of social mobility and advancement, that is, formal education as a social and moral “value” in clear and direct opposition to credentialism and Bourdieu’s approach, in a strictly doctrinal stance based on certain moral values. In his own words, credentialism and Bourdieu’s proposals associate education with “group or class interests, rather than organisational or societal interests” (Goldthorpe 2014, 272–273).

Conversely, despite the opposite theoretical and epistemological roots and bases between human capital theory and the intrinsic value of schooling, as opposed to approaches centred on the social conditions of formation and the achievement of educational attainment, there is a trend to try to merge and circumvent the exclusionary character of these approaches. Regarding the theory of human capital, a widespread diffusion and appropriation process has tended to its simplest version, assuming the “value of education” as something naturalised. However, as already

mentioned, this work does not aim at assuming value or “return” on investment in education as something exclusionary, having social conditions of formation and uses of educational attainment and their relations with social structure as the object. Bearing in mind that under certain conditions schooling may include an “investment” character, as already mentioned, it is assumed that some “return” may occur. Then, the problem becomes the relations between these investments and their return with their conditions of existence and the respective social positions and logics involved, which encompass different meanings of schooling itself. In other words, it is not a question of denying potential investments in education but of qualifying and integrating them into another object of investigation, which is external to the concerns of the neoclassical economy—the one with the structure and different social logics and meanings according to the respective positions, means of action, and principles of legitimation on the agenda. Regarding Bourdieu’s proposals, the dependence between “technical” and “social” competence has always been emphasised (Bourdieu 1984; 1989), even leading to its classification as “technicality” by Collins (1979). More recently, in the balance of advances in credentialism by Brown (2001), the specific meaning of school credentials according to social position has been highlighted, and for some segments, certain types of “return” are included. However, this is not a “return” in the sense of business rationality or financial investments.

One of the general characteristics of studies on formal education effects based on the theory of human capital is the widespread use of mathematical modelling, with measurement techniques focused particularly on regression tests and the inclusion of a few general indicators. Besides, these indicators may imply a high degree of reverse effect or of circular causation (Baudelot et al. 2004, 15–26). What may seem like some

preference for measurement techniques, generally referred to in this environment and in most social sciences as "methodology", encompasses much more than "technical" or methodological issue. A certain conception of the "reality" and, by extension, the social objectification of what is under investigation is at stake as a return from investments in "education." Since these are studies based on a certain approach to neoclassical economics and therefore have a one-dimensional perspective restricted to the economic rationality of utility investments, it is evident that this "reality" comes into the agenda as an object of investigation.

Beyond the problems concerning theoretical and epistemological foundations and the very conception of social sciences, in association with moral grounds or legitimation principles of equivalence conventions (Desrosières 2005, 14–16), methodological issues also enter the agenda. As these are equivalence conventions, they do not constitute any given "reality" as such but principles, interests and actions or practices that define, apprehend and organise certain interpretations of it. This process of constituting a "reality" is based on organised interests and principles equivalent to codes of interpretation, which Jobert and Muller (1987, 53–71) defined as "referentials." Besides not being a given "reality" as such, but rather processes of definition and organisation of interests and interpretation according to certain codes, it is important to highlight that it is not reduced to "individual" actions but processes that exist only through collective actions and organisations.

This clashes with perspectives based on the human capital theory, which, as a derivation of the neoclassical economy and directly linked to the so-called rational choice, uses the individual in its utilitarian rationality as the main unit of analysis. It is not a matter of resuming old generic oppositions between "holism" and "individualism" but of taking the

problem of equivalence conventions (Desrosières 2001, 117–120) in its relations with legitimisation foundations of collective actions for definition and organisation of interests and civic morals, whose logics for action are completely different from those of economic agents operating in the capitalist market. In concrete terms and with very direct practical implications, these equivalence conventions are present in a set of classification schemes and categories based on the sources of empirical material. As highlighted by Desrosières (2001, 17–23; 2005, 20–23), the empirical categories explored by social sciences may have their origin in history or traditions and be formed by statisticians, and both modalities generally interact with each other. What is important to note, however, is that these classification schemes and categories are already a result of “construction of reality” processes through the formulation and imposition of classification and interpretation schemes conditioned by certain interests and codes of interpretation.

Regarding formal education, its growing importance in the elaboration of classification schemes should be highlighted, particularly through degrees of schooling. These school-based classifications and hierarchisation schemes, which are even at the basis of Weber’s (1984) formulations regarding their effects on social structure, tend to increase their relations and effects on principles of social hierarchisation and on the labour market. An indication of this may be the classification schemes of official statistics themselves, which have recently tended towards homogenization and internationalisation and have been associated with school meritocracy or school degree valuation as a classification principle. However, more than formulating general occupational classification schemes with an emphasis on educational attainment as a principle of classification, the transmuting school classifications into social hierarchisation is even more evident in the

institutionalisation and operationalisation processes of each country (e.g., Brazil), as indicated in an exemplary case below (see also Coradini 2013). In this process, interest categories must be represented for establishment and confrontations between interests and respective occupational “prerogatives”; yet, besides these concrete processes, the definition of “education” as a principle of social classification and hierarchisation and its supposed economic or moral “value” as something given are strengthened.

In short, regarding human capital-based approach, although its jargon tends to spread and be adopted even by critics of neoclassical economics and its foundations, it is a specific perspective derived from a current in the discipline of economics. Therefore, it consists of a specific conception of “reality” and of society, which is based on the utilitarian rationality of the economic market and extended to other dimensions by concepts such as human capital and social capital (Coleman 1988). For what is at stake here, there would be no point in denying the validity of this approach, with its specific “reality” focus, mathematical modelling-based methodology and object or research problem restricted to education return of investment (Baudelot et al. 2004). However, it should be emphasised that this work does not have an approach based on “education” as an object but rather a problem with a specific outline and therefore with results derived from this standpoint.

In any case, everything indicates that one of the main reasons for the spread of concerns over “education” in terms of “return” stems from its “valuation”—whether as an economic, cultural or moral “return.” Moreover, studies on the positive effects of “investments” on education in terms of “return” present serious methodological problems arising from circular causation. This results in the attribution of higher amounts of income to education, among other indicators considered to be positive,

which may also be associated with other interdependent conditions (Baudelot et al. 2004). For social sciences, whose premise is axiological neutrality, the main issues are still the effects of education or educational attainment on social structure. Given the methodological problems and to avoid being restricted to a particular social structure dimension, coupled with the limited empirical material and respective classification schemes available, the main analytical problem becomes the differentiation of the value of education or school title and the social conditions that are at its origin, which includes the mythologies that arise from them.