

Giovanni Abbiati

Carl L. Bankston III and Stephen Caldas, "Controls and Choices - The Educational Marketplace and the Failure of School Desegregation". Lanham: Rowman Littlefield, 2015, 144 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/88205)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 2, maggio-agosto 2017

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

L'articolo è messo a disposizione dell'utente in licenza per uso esclusivamente privato e personale, senza scopo di lucro e senza fini direttamente o indirettamente commerciali. Salvo quanto espressamente previsto dalla licenza d'uso Rivisteweb, è fatto divieto di riprodurre, trasmettere, distribuire o altrimenti utilizzare l'articolo, per qualsiasi scopo o fine. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Book review

Carl L. Bankston III and Stephen Caldas, “Controls and Choices – The Educational Marketplace and the Failure of School Desegregation”. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015, 144 pp.

doi: 10.2383/88205

This book deals with the hotly debated issue of school desegregation and school choice in the United States. Starting from the 1970s, after the *Green v New Kent County School Board Case*, the Department of Justice and many judiciaries took an active role in shaping public schools' ethnic composition with the goal of contrasting the intolerable levels of ethnic segregation in the school system. In court-mandated desegregated districts students started to be assigned to school on the basis of their ethnic background, as to avoid high concentrations of white or, on the contrary, minority students. In order to maintain the attractiveness of public schools, many desegregated districts offered free busing and public schools were heavily financed. In the early 2000s, though, public schools in the US appear to be more segregated than ever. Civil right activists often attribute this phenomenon to a lack of will from those who had to enforce these policies, such as governmental and judicial authorities. The authors, instead, tackle the issue from a different perspective: court-mandated desegregation, they argue, failed because it was simply doomed to do it. And this happened because of its very nature, in spite (or, paradoxically, as a consequence) of all the efforts put into it by public authorities.

In this book, the authors develop more in depth from a theoretical and an empirical point of view their findings on desegregation policies already published in *A Troubled Dream: The Promise and Failure of School Desegregation in Louisiana* [2002] and in *Forced to Fail: The Paradox of School Desegregation* [2007]. In a nutshell, the main argument of the book is that school desegregation is an example of self-defeating policy, because their proponents do not recognize the main traits of the “educational marketplace.” Court-mandated desegregation is a “*monopolistic effort at redistributing opportunities*” [p. ix], neglecting on the one hand that education is not a monopoly and on the other that education is a market of exclusivity. As a consequence, these policies failed because white affluent families, i.e. those with the largest available resources and possibilities to choose, decided to opt out from the system, either by fleeing desegregated school districts or by choosing private education. White-flight took place even when desegregation was accompanied by massive financial school support: what makes education valuable, as the authors explain throughout the book, is the school's clientele rather than its monetary resources.

As concerns its structure, the book is divided into five chapters. The first two chapters set the theoretical framework in light of which the authors analyse school desegregation. The third chapter shows, thorough the analysis of eleven district cases, examples of desegregation failures. The fourth chapter looks at the partial “successes” of desegregation, by analysing four case-studies. The last chapter discusses the rise of the school choice movement as a response of court-mandated desegregation policies.

More in detail, the first chapter discusses the ideological basis of the desegregation movement. In particular, the chapter examines the relationship between the goal of

equality of opportunity and the other purposes of education (training for jobs, socializing, creating an informed citizenry). The authors claim that the usual metaphor of education as a “game” in which individual players *should* start with the same amount of chips does not fit with the way education actually works in a competitive world where titles and schooling constitute valuable assets. The authors propose to analyse educational options in economic terms, treating the school as a sort of luxury good: its value does not only depend on its intrinsic qualities, but, rather, on the other consumers, i.e. the other students enrolled. The more privileged the families attending a school are, the higher its value. The main implication of this view is that educational experiences are commodities difficult to redistribute, “*because a degree of exclusivity is part of the value of those experiences*” [p. 6].

Chapter two analyses the political economy of schooling. Schooling is conceived as a competitive marketplace: therefore, the dilemmas of resources redistribution through the system can be studied in the same way as the redistribution of commodities in controlled markets. The authors observe that education is not a State monopoly: private education, home-schooling and change of district are feasible opt-out strategies for the families with more resources. These are also those who have more to lose in case of a redistribution. Then, the authors show the ways in which social and ethnic composition of schools is related to the academic environment and how this affect the educational value of a school.

The third and the fourth chapters represent the empirical part of the book. Each case-study is followed historically with a great effort of data collection, including interviews collected by newspapers, figures on students’ composition of schools and districts and documents from courts and administrative sources. The analysis of these cases shows that, unavoidably, desegregation is accompanied by the loss of prestige of formerly white-majority public schools and, consequently, by white flight. Paradoxically, hence, desegregation policies contributed to the sharpening of segregation, especially in large urban districts. The authors notice, in chapter four, how the conceptual framework they developed can be applied also in case of the districts considered as “successes” by the desegregation movement. These cases have been characterized by higher constraints for the families, and a massive white flight did not take place. However, such a scenario did not translate into egalitarian settings: segregation between schools was replaced by higher levels of segregation within schools, through tracking or the creation of magnet programs.

The book’s last chapter draws connections between the failure of desegregation, the rise of the “school choice movement” and the spread of the charter schools and educational vouchers. The change of policy from forced desegregation to school choice programs in many districts has revived the debate around segregation in public schools. The debate is, in authors’ view, largely out-of-target because in the majority of the districts affected by the presence of charter schools white affluent families have left since decades and they are not expected to return in any case. The authors present these programs as more preferable than court-mandated desegregation because they allow a larger number of families to implement their personal choices. They warn, though, that charters and voucher will not solve the problems connected with inequality as long as the educational marketplace will remain a highly competitive field: as soon as these options will configure

themselves as a kind of redistribution, advantaged families will seek new ways to flee and maintain their status.

Overall my judgement of the book is positive: it is definitely well argued, well documented and very well written. The educational model, that combines element of economics and sociology, is parsimonious and elegant. A major merit of the authors is to have entered the hot debate on desegregation by explicitly challenging and questioning some of the ideological assumptions of the desegregation movement. As social scientist they ask themselves not whether segregation is right or wrong, but how education works and why desegregation policies have failed. The authors show that the interpretation of the actual level of segregation as failure of the public will to enforce the law is incorrect: desegregation policies in the US failed because they were doomed to do so since the very beginning.

There are, though, some unresolved issues in this work. The first is related to the nature of the educational value of schooling. For the purposes of the book the authors mostly refer to the *relative value* of an educational experience with respect to another. Relative value lies at the core of the exclusivity of education and the seek for exclusivity entailed in the preferences of the families leads, inevitably, to the conclusion that any attempt of redistribution provoke by itself the flight of those trying to keep their advantage. Few has been discussed about what we can term "*absolute value*" of education and why it is so low in minority schools. This is not just an analytical problem. The book in fact ends with bitter but inevitable considerations about the fate of redistributive policies aiming at redistributing educational opportunities, doomed to fail. However, if we do not maintain that low scores and poor (or even dangerous) educational environments are an intrinsic property of the poors or of minorities, this closing leaves to the reader some open questions: what can we do to address the problem of equality of opportunity? Are minorities condemned by the inflexible laws of the educational marketplace? Even if this is not the main concern of the book, I would have liked to read some more elaboration on this issue, maybe drawing some connections with the school effectiveness and school improvement literature. This would have been beneficial for the discussion also because the claim that equality of opportunity is not a necessary condition for the educational system to reach its goals (as advanced by the authors in chapter one) may not hold anymore in presence of levels of educational value so strikingly low as the one observed in certain US districts.

The second point is related to the definition of the context. The book would have greatly benefited, in my view, from a clear-cut quantitative introduction supporting authors' narrative. First, as a European reader, I do not have a clear picture of the quantitative relevance of the phenomenon of school desegregation, and the book does not provide figures on the share of districts involved in desegregation efforts and how these figures have risen/declined over time. Second, the authors dismiss with ease, but without any evidence, alternative hypotheses about white flight from desegregated districts. As the authors recognize [p. 96], "Some may argue that whites left [...] for reasons that had nothing to do with the schools." Even if the documents and the figures showed by the authors seem to indicate that school desegregation played an important role, I would like to see what happened in similar districts (if any) in which law-mandated desegregation did not occur or where it was not heavily pushed in order to be fully convinced of their argument.

Abbiati

Giovanni Abbiati
FBK-IRVAPP, Trento