



# Anthropology & Education QUARTERLY

*The Challenges of Education in Brazil*. Brock, Colin and Simon Schwarzman, eds. Oxford, United Kingdom: Symposium Books, 2004. 232 pp.

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*The Challenges of Education in Brazil* brings together a series of essays that address issues at various levels of Brazil's education system, from primary schooling to post-graduate education. The chapters are written by an exceptionally distinguished group of authors. Many of them—including Simon Schwarzman, Cláudio de Moura Castro, Eunice Durham, and João Batista Araújo e Oliveira—are heroes of the decades-long struggle to improve the educational opportunities provided to Brazilian young people. The chapters consequently reflect the kind of deep knowledge and understanding of Brazilian schools and Brazilian politics that is only available to “insiders” who have devoted much of their lives to educational reform.

This insiders' view is both a strength and a weakness of the collection, particularly for English and American readers. (The collection has also been published in Portuguese.) On the one hand, the authors are superbly qualified to provide authoritative accounts of current policies and continuing dilemmas in all parts of Brazil's education system. The book includes essays on the familiar topics of basic education and Brazilian universities, and also on institutions that are often neglected in scholarly work including technical and post-graduate education. These essays include a great deal of new material and original analysis that is not otherwise available in English. For example, Eunice Durham provides a balanced and penetrating account of the evolution of higher education in Brazil, from the establishment of the nation's first university in the 1920s (remarkably late by Latin American standards) to the present. She provides a compelling analysis of the political and institutional dynamics that lie behind the current policy dilemmas in the sector, assigning responsibility with an even hand. Elizabeth Balbachevsky's chapter on post-graduate education illuminates one of the genuine and often unrecognized “islands of excellence” in Brazil's education system, and explains the policies and institutions that have sustained high standards in post-graduate programs.

On the other hand, however, the authors know vastly more about their subjects than most readers will ever want to learn. Their essays often veer off to include material or address issues that are of limited interest to non-specialists, and several of the authors take too little care to provide their readers with information about background and context that would allow them to follow the “cutting edge” arguments put forward in these essays. Brazilian readers who are already familiar with the institutions and debates that the authors discuss might read the collection with profit, but the number of English and American readers who will do likewise is probably small. To take a single example, the chapter by Maria Helena Guimarães de Castro and Sergio Tiezzi offers a painfully thorough account of recent reforms in secondary education. Many of these reforms were designed and implemented under the leadership of the



authors. Their “insider” account is sometimes fascinating, but more often their efforts to explain complex policies and justify controversial policy choices overwhelms their obligation to provide a compelling overview of what’s happening in Brazilian secondary schools for non-specialist readers.

The book is one of a growing series of “Oxford Studies in Comparative Education,” published by Symposium Books. It is therefore worth noting that some of the book’s production values leave much to be desired. The tables and figures in particular are small, crowded, and badly labeled. As a result, they are often difficult to read or interpret.

The English version of *The Challenges of Education in Brazil* will therefore be of considerable value to established scholars and advanced graduate students who are conducting or planning to conduct research on Brazil’s education system. It provides too much idiosyncratic detail and too little background and context to be appropriate for general readers, or for a course assignment.

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