“The Enlightenment was a Huge Pedagogic Project”: Reconsidering the Legacies of Anglo-American Curriculum, North European Bildung, and Chinese Wisdom Traditions amidst the Current Economic, Educational and Social Crisis

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Abstract
The paper is the keynote presentation in the conference at Hangzhou university, China, November 2014 that was dedicated to the publication of the research report W.F. Pinar (ed.), Curriculum Studies in China: Intellectual Histories, Present Circumstances. The presentation deals – as an attempt to theorize the present policy measures - with the present education crisis. The obsessive worldwide audit and assessment culture as an imitation of the economy in education is introducing the policy initiatives by the authoritative bodies like the OECD, EU and the US to which Finnish education policy analyst Pasi Sahlberg has referred by the concept of the GERM, Global Education Reform Movement, “a virus that is killing education”. I tentatively and shortly analyze the historical, theoretical, and theological trajectories in order to better understand historical conditionings of the present and the emerging vistas after the present crisis. In that sense, it may be that light can come from the East as the promising Chinese “liberalization and modernization reforms” in education with its hybrid encounters between Western curriculum theories and its own reactivated “Wisdom Traditions” may imply.

Keywords: International politics; Curriculum theory; Neoliberalism; Protestantism; Chinese curriculum reforms.

Introduction
The general political atmosphere in most West countries is suffering a kind of hangover after the revanchist euphoria the collapse of the Soviet Union caused all over the Western world. The euphoria reached the measures where the social and cultural evolution of the humankind was seen by authoritative yet politically motivated commentators to witness the apex of the human history, “The End of History”, like Professor Francis Fukuyama put it in 1992. Liberal market democracy was declared as the winner in the competition about the best available blueprint for democratic society and an argument for globalized world as united, unitary wholeness tied together by market forces as a basis for politics, morals and education alike. “A major challenge of the millennium is to install freely elected democracies all over the world, under one standard for the world which is the free market system … practiced correctly” (Autio, 2009, p. 70) as the former US foreign minister Colin Powell succinctly phrased the tenor of the new capitalist times in the beginning of the 21st century. The elevation of the market forces as the guiding beacon for all social action, politics and education as no
exception, was prophetically expressed by one of the main architect of neoliberalism, the former UK Prime Minister in her speech at the end of 1970’s where she radically redefined capitalism and its undergirding, initially Christian, ethics (see Max Weber, Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism) by exhaustively secularized, non-Biblical, de-spiritualized, primitively pragmatic concept of ethics and moral (Autio, 2006, pp. 152-153):

Capitalism encourages important virtues, like discipline, industriousness, prudence, reliability, conscientiousness, and a tendency to save in order to invest in the future. It is not material goods but all the great virtues exhibited by individuals working together that constitute what we call the market place.

Now that revanchist, even a revolution-kind political turn seems to be eating its own offspring, capitalism herself is seemingly in deep crisis in its assumed task to organize democratic society and wellbeing of people. The worst victims of the neoliberal reformed, post-Soviet capitalism in the West are mainly youth and already disadvantaged people; when the present capitalist crisis emerged in the American induced banking sector in Europe six years ago, 2008, the rate of youth employment in Spain, for instance, was three million young people without job and five years later, 2013, the number is doubled to six million. It is increasingly recognized that the Western economy, politics and education are all broken: neoliberalism is destroying the basic elements of democracy in the name of market liberalism advocating distrust, competition and with its conscious indifference what comes to increasing economic and social inequality and growing poverty. Indeed, neoliberal democracy is an oxymoron, contradiction in terms; neoliberalism means a dismissal of democracy with pervasive and excessively instrumental and calculative rationality where political visions circulate around entrepreneurship, pressing down the public sector, profitability and cost-benefit effectiveness without further considerations about social and economic goals for sustainable living; in sum: what is lacking is the question and theory what is the civic society and the (nation) state amidst the colonizing globalized pressures of the private sector and the implications for today’s education (cf. Margaret Thatcher: “There is no such thing as society”…).

The implications and consequences of those quite recent world political phenomena have been thoroughgoing and radical for the world of education. My conviction is that we, as educationists, cannot really understand what is our current state of education without taking into account the dynamics of the world political big picture. The pervasive and entrenched Culture of Method in education (- in mainstream research as well as in the compulsion of teaching methods as a core of teacher education curricula and as a core image of neoliberal conception of teaching: teaching is teaching to the test -) is structurally, institutionally and intellectually screening off, censoring the bigger historical, theoretical and political panoramas as vital elements of educational erudition, wisdom and understanding.
The PISA as an allegory of current education and curriculum policy and practice

In that big picture the PISA works like an allegory about the globalization of education in terms of neoliberalism. Daniel Tröhler (2011) has most interestingly elucidated those world political events behind our present Western education.

"... the Cold War had become an encompassing educational reform project with single facets that ironically merged into one single new agenda only after the end of the Cold War on 1989. One of the facets was the US National Educational Defense Act in 1958", triggered by the Sputnik shock (Sputnik was launched October 4th, 1957, almost precisely 57 years ago). National Educational Defense Act emphasized the strict curriculum focus “on three school subjects that today may not be unfamiliar: mathematics, sciences, and foreign languages – in other words, almost the trilogy that PISA is focusing today. A second facet was the development of the human capital theory at that very same time, and still another facet was the foundation of the OECD in 1960. The first official OECD conference, held in Washington, D.C., in 1960 was devoted to the topic, “Policy Conference on Economic Growth and Investment in Education” (Tröhler 2011, p. 200).

In retrospect, that conference arguably proves one of the turning points in Western education when the evaluation and assessment starts to dominate education and education policy, and particularly external evaluation and assessment as a precursor to the present audit and evidence–based quality obsessions. Among the invited in that 1960 first OECD Conference was not a single education expert. “However”, as Tröhler insightfully shows and this is of utmost significance: “the enemy was not only the Russians but also the progressive educational ideology that was dominant at that time and supported by the philosophers of education and the powerful teachers’ unions”, (it was called the Life Adjustment Doctrine and the economy- and military-driven critique was particularly focusing if “the taxpayers are getting their money’s worth with such pleasant subjects” as “Life Adjustment” and “How you know when you are really in love” what the pre-Pisa advocators ironically ridiculed.)

Theoretically, the educationalization of the Cold War in the United States marked also a decisive shift toward educational instrumentalism, a shift from Dewey and Pragmatism, a shift “from philosophy to psychology, from a popular interpretation of Pragmatism to cognitive psychology which was at its outset in the late 1950’s – cognition theory being the most important academic reference of PISA today, as the stakeholders admit themselves. (ibid.)”

In the US, there has been a long battle throughout the 20th century between educational progressivism and educational instrumentalism but we need to understand the long and strong European roots in American thinking to make the developments more intelligible. John Dewey is a classic advocate in progressivism in education; Dewey was Hegelian just like Karl Marx (1818-1883) before him. These both monumental thinkers were intellectually enthusiastic about German philosophical Idealism that together with cultural, artistic and literary circles of the time created a very influential intellectual German late-Enlightenment movement called Deutsche Bewegung (German Movement). The aim and also effect of this philosophical and aesthetic movement was explicitly educational in a broad meaning: to create democratic civic society by Bildung, by education where the educated public would guarantee the enlightened aspirations of democracy. Democracy and education is inseparable intertwined in that intellectual, political, aesthetic and education movement. Only against that
noble and most worthwhile initiative, we can understand the shame, guilt and frustration among Germans what the totalitarian Nazi regime brought about while brutally crushing the democratic cause and showing how delicate and vulnerable thing democracy is in practice. The prominent German social theorist Jürgen Habermas has remarked that the German national identity has “irreversibly tainted since Holocaust” (Autio, 2009, p. 18). Still, maybe no other nation has make so conscious efforts to consciously cope with her tragic past like Germany in rebuilding democracy after fascism, but it seems that education and curriculum theorizing has been tainted much worse by the counter-effects of fascism. It seems to be the task of others to rephrase and reactivate Bildung ideas that echoed the original Western wisdom ideals, initially articulated in Athens in works of Plato and Aristotle and in Jerusalem in the teachings of Jesus, the founder of Christianity.

The German Enlightenment idea between education, democracy, and freedom – as inextinguishable legacies of the Enlightenment at large (American, British, Scandinavian, Scottish) – remained to live in other demographic and intellectual locales: in John Dewey’s democratic and progressive contributions to the US education, in William Pinar’s insightful and nuanced readings of the times between internationalization and globalization resulting in contributions to reconceptualize and inter-nationalize the field of curriculum studies against the standardizing, totalitarian efforts of the neoliberal globalization. German educational Enlightenment is distinctively and uniquely reinterpreted and reactivated also in the notions and educational implications of welfare societies in Scandinavian countries Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Norway with social democratic key drivers: equality (is quality), efficiency and solidarity in the building of the Nordic welfare society.

**Curriculum and Bildung**

In order to clarify a bit more my speculation I make an excursion into the history and the present of two master Western discourses within curriculum theory (China will be the third international master narrative, I think) – Anglo-American Curriculum and North European Bildung or Didaktik – that reflect but “two very different intellectual systems” at large (Westbury 2000), two different conceptions of nation formation in particular within themselves. Historically, the European Bildung tradition conceived of the nation and the sense of national belongingness as its starting point, as “the objective structure of education” (Weniger in Autio 2006) whereas for the Anglo-American Curriculum the nation was a goal to be achieved by more direct instrumental means when there were no political resort to uniform national identity as it was imaginable in Northern Europe. The demographic earthquake in the New Continent when, for instance, the size of population in New York City grew ten-fold in fifty years between 1800 and 1850 and when the quality of the immigrating population was most heterogeneous from gold diggers and people looking for better living conditions to religious zealots to escaping criminals, the sheer demographic situation made any imaginings of European style of nation incomprehensible. Instead of North European, Rousseau-driven political concept, “conformity of wills” as the guiding beacon of education and nation formation, in the American context education and
nation formation was resorted to the tenet of “predictability of behavior” (Autio 2006/2012). This political solution disguised in scientific neutrality and objectivity aiming at social cohesion among immigration masses would make the very peculiar over-dominance of educational psychology more conceivable to the relatively marginal status of other disciplines of education in the US. Due to the demographic heterogeneity, the source for the nation formation in the American context was not to be found ‘inside’ the people, unlike in the European context where the internal sense of national belongingness instigated and intensified by the Protestant revolution that underscored the importance of mother tongue, reading skills and personal commitment to belief. The bifurcation of Protestant belief between Calvinism and Lutheranism has profiled these two theological affiliations with significant consequences in education that would justify to speaking of them as “two very different intellectual systems”: Curriculum and Bildung respectively, in terms of curriculum theory and, by implication, in terms of the nation formation, democracy and educational research.

Lutheranism emphasizes the inner, directly and externally unobservable world of a person and the constant, particularly moral, fostering of it. In educational terms, the aim is personality, which as a term already would recognize uniqueness and difference and implicate politically democratic organization of society that ideally would take into account the diversity of its people still tying them to the image of national ethos through education and communication. The concept of the “Moral” as the signified of a person is more often than not experienced in the Anglophone world a kind of atrophy when conceived in translations of “moralistic” (Autio, 2014). However, how this term is interpreted is distinctively implicated in the division between intellectual traditions: how to study human psyche, culture, society and education. Grossly and geographically speaking the question is about the division between the Old and New Continent. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) suggested that the Moral would make a break with a causal Great Chain of natural phenomena; sometimes when we don’t behave according to our natural instincts and habits, we behave so to say unselfishly, we can sense we get liberated for a while from external or internal determination and sense to be able to act freely. This inner perception of the existence of freedom or free will by Immanuel Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” (mind is not ‘the mirror of nature’) in tandem with the Lutheran theological insistence on the individual, inner responsibility for God created the founding pillars for North European concepts for democratic nation as well as those related education concepts and discourses embodied particularly in the largely misunderstood Bildung and Didaktik traditions 2.

In Anglophone countries, particularly in the quickly developing United States, Calvinism through its diabolical genius of the Predestination Doctrine about the existential uncertainty whether one is among the limited number of the elected for Salvation created the obsessively competitive, progression- and development-driven social atmosphere, still perceivable as a pillar of education, curriculum and the nation. The locus of focus and control is not inside, like in Lutheranism, but outside the individual, in methodological terms: in outer observation that relates Calvinist intellectual interests to preferring precise outer observations and the use of exact research methods à la natural sciences to “futile philosophical, metaphysical or theological speculations”, as Max Weber
argues in his famous Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Autio, 2006). According to him, the now prestigious East Coast universities in the US was established by Calvinist scholars thus authoritatively instigating the spirit of Calvinism and capitalism as dominating ethos of education in the New Continent. The moral and individual progress came to be estimated in cumulative terms of outer or worldly success and achievement instead of the Lutheran permanent internal struggle for the moral worthwhileness that the doctrine of Divine mercy and forgiveness would temporarily alleviate. The Calvinist stress on the external and outer, exemplarily and consequentially presented in the adoption of behaviorist psychology with its universalizing methodological efforts toward the dream of “predictability of behavior”, as an epistemic creator of the nation through education, is evidenced in the successive theory parade from behaviorism to cognitive theories to “Learning Sciences”.

Behaviorism’s initial dismissal of the existence of the psyche, of the unpredictability of human subjectivity, human relations and individual personality (on which the variety of Bildung and Didaktik schools of thought are at least implicitly predicated) has been instrumental in cognitive theories’ envisioning the mind as an information processing programs, producing ideally new but theoretically non-convincing and torso concepts about humans, expressed mathematically and in formulas, tables and graphs. The instructional objectives promoted by educational psychologists like Robert Glaser, Robert Mager and Robert Gagné were translated in collaboration with information technologies and the military interests from a behavioral paradigm to a cognitive one. The shift from behaviorism to cognitive theories meant no more than the shift from a strict focus on behavior to internalized representations of that behavior (Taubman 2009, p. 166).

That knowledge-power mindset as the core curriculum of the nation making is embodied in present Anglophone accountability, standardization and privatization movements in education with very few exceptions of that global rule (Finland on a minor scale and China on a major scale). Externalized and reified notions of human psyche in behavioral-cognitive theories as kinds of a-psychological psychologies have been complicit in the corporatization of education in present official education policies. The collapse of the USSR with the disappearance of any competing big political visions strengthened the instrumental and method-driven, “evidence-based” orientation in politics and education and its research. The most glaring example from the USA is efforts at the federal level to legislate “correct” scientific method (Lather, 2010, p. 38): “what is new are efforts at the federal level to legislate proper scientific method … ‘scientifically’ based education research”.

The economic and managerial stress on education, as part of ongoing globalization process, draws on political demands for uniformity instead of heterogeneity, difference and diversity as activators of democracy. The big political picture infusing such maxims is a vision of the world united by standardized, normative, even coercive notions of One Subjectivity, One History, One Humankind, One Politics – and, consequently, One Curriculum. Globalization in these terms would denote the pressures toward increasing uniformity, toward colonization and standardization of all spheres of human action
education as no exception (Autio, 2009).

The long arch of modernization from Descartes (1596-1650) onwards maybe summarized: to be is to think; to think is to calculate. In our days, in the curriculum of nation making the rationale of modernization has arguably reached the extreme point where all the eggs are in the same basket: “economic thought is coterminous with rationality” and the concept of neoliberal democracy is an oxymoron (Couldry, 2012). Yet, the shift from the nation state to the “market state” as an aspired global model of society, education and curriculum as one of its main vehicle, may nevertheless be not erasing nationalism. It is argued, that “there is every reason to assume that nationalism, at least in the near future, will endure, despite all the attempts by politicians and scholars to herald the start of a post-national period. The multipolarity of nations is too deeply embedded in Western political culture to be removed from it within a few decades. And this is the situation we have to deal with, whether we like it or not” (Hirschi, 2011, p. 220).

**Conclusion: pointing to the future in education?**

Against this background, the case of China is most interesting. We can argue that China, because of its hugely long and amazingly variegated phases of history is as much a nation state as it is a civilization state. Due to the weight of history, as exposed throughout in those very informative accounts in the Curriculum Studies in China –book, democratization takes cultural forms, as Prof. Zhang Hua (2014) emphasizes. The reactivated legacy of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism through curriculum studies without the obsessive quest for certainty and ultimate foundations like the postmodern scholarship of Prof. Zhang Wenjun (2014) proves against the Western biased practice and search for “evidence” and “base”, will arguably be reactivating also the European educational landscape where the violent colonization of education by accountability, standardization and privatization measures has been canceling out the project of the Enlightenment and its democratic drivers: liberty, equality and solidarity. Neoliberal democracy is an oxymoron indeed. The reactivated great Chinese wisdom traditions, in cultural-political tandem, are really invoked to address the cultural, political, ecological and economic crisis capitalism in the disguise of democracy creates. The reform in China for quality education coded as creativity, innovation and academic freedom to teach seems to me at the same time very familiar and astonishing. In Finland, my country of origin, philosophy, arts, education, teacher education included, are closely intertwined. The highest stage of self-awareness is reached through art like the German philosopher Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831) tells us. Hegel is behind John Dewey, Karl Marx and the Finnish national philosopher Johan Wilhelm Snellman (1806-1881) whose insistence on freedom, democracy, and broad-based erudite personality against the shallow scientification of education still matters in Finnish education and teacher education. Teachers are traditionally idealized as “the candles of the folk”, erudite personalities as the embodiments of wisdom rather than the walking batteries of de-personalized teaching methods. On the scale like China and USA, as a citizen of a minor country, I am used to perceive that education systems in superpowers are through their systemic interests unintentionally more inclined to wasting talents and human experience,
standardizing and normalizing people than attuned to actualizing the potential of all people—what is the core idea of education and democracy since Antiquity. In small countries, like Finland, they cannot afford wasting the potential; the concept of democracy would ideally denote the actualization and activating of the potential of every single child and individual by and through education.

Against these perceptions, the determined efforts in China for quality education: creativity, innovation and academic freedom—against the Western mainstream standardization and accountability—as proclaimed by the official government agencies in China are to me, personally, a real spark of hope—“the contrasts with the West”—as professor William Pinar (2014) notices—“with the West’s dogged determination to destroy creativity, innovation and academic freedom—could not be sharper”. In that sense it is easy to join with Professor Pinar’s concluding sentence in our book project: “Reconstructing the past and recontextualizing concepts imported from abroad, supported by its distinctive and dynamic field of curriculum studies, China is recasting the character of curriculum.” I cannot resist the temptation to add in the same spirit and for the reasons I can intellectually and hopefully anticipate on the basis of our collaboration in the book project and my incurable love of big picture dynamics: if the urgently needed second Enlightenment since the first one, the 17th and 18th Enlightenment, as a huge pedagogic project and social reconstruction—and as enthusiastically embodied in Hegel’s words: to be fully spiritual is to be cognitive, moral, social, political, aesthetic, religious and philosophical being—is still available to the humankind, it may start in China.

Notes

1. Finland is a more authentic example of that than Germany herself.
2. By the way and curiously enough, I think that the high appeal and prestige of teaching profession among youth in Finland, above law and medicine, is related to the Lutheran-Kantian combo of deep-seated internalized image of freedom, individuality, responsibility, and democracy in the nation making through teaching and the implied tacit precondition for personal satisfaction at teaching work due to its artist kind of “freedom” in Finland. This collective mindset across political parties and the public is probably one of the factors that Finland has remained almost the only nation relatively untouched by the Anglophone standardization, accountability and privatization education policy reforms. A telling instance was when one of the former educational adviser of the President Bush Jr’s cabinet visited Finnish state educational stakeholders and asked about teacher’s accountability systems and she got immediately an answer: “accountability is a book keeping term, we trust our teachers and we use instead the terms responsibility and trust in the provision of education”.

References


Received: 29 January 2015
Accepted: 23 February 2015