

«Pädagogische Autonomie» in the international discussion

1. Internationalization as desideratum and problem

«Internationalization» is a popular term in the discussion within educational studies in Western Europe today. It refers to the fundamental desideratum to overcome the national and also nationalist insignia of the nineteenth century in modern educational theory. To this purpose, research projects have explicitly focused on the period prior to the nationalization of the discussion from the second half of the eighteenth century or addressed the process of nationalization of what had once been a European discussion.¹

Another way to fulfill the desideratum of «internationalizing» is to attempt to translate or explain core concepts of educational theories so that they can be examined and discussed. How difficult this undertaking is, as we know, is amply demonstrated by the core concept in the field of education in Germany, namely *Bildung*, which – similar to the term *Geist* – cannot be translated into other languages without losing its intended meaning.² Other, similar examples are the *höheren Totalität des Ichs* (Herman Nohl) and similar metaphors.

There is another possibility that promises greater chances of stimulating international discussion. Rather than translating concepts, this possibility entails presenting very specific *topoi* in such a way that they are also comprehensible in other national grammars and in this way become accessible to the international discussion. *Topos* is a particular mode of thought, a fixed idea, that can be represented by a core concept such as *Bildung* or *Geist*. I would like to discuss a *topos* of this kind in German education, namely the idea of «pädagogische Autonomie».

2. «Pädagogische Autonomie»

Pädagogische Autonomie, or educational autonomy, is not a core concept in German education in the way that *Erziehen*, *Moralität*, or *Bildung* are. However, as a *topos*, it is a part of the underlying constructions of the worldview of dominant movements and also of prominent exponents of German education in the twentieth century. The roots of the idea go back to German discourse in the late eighteenth century, that is, to the time when the European discussion became nationalized. The concept of *pädagogische Autonomie*, as far as can be demonstrated, arose around 1860 in the wake of the increasingly conservative nationalization of debates in Germany. The idea reached its climax in the movements within the context of *geisteswissenschaftliche*

¹ See here, for instance, examples in *Zeitschrift für pädagogische Historiographie* 9(2003), pp. 31–52.

² Compare here the discussion of *Bildung* in Løvlie, Lars & Mortensen, Klaus Peter & Nordenbo, Sven Erik (eds.) (2002): *Educating Humanity: Bildung in Postmodernity*. *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 36(3), Special Issue.

Pädagogik, or education as one of the humanities in the philosophical faculties of the universities – movements that were skeptical of modernization and modern science and were anti-democratic. *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* was the dominant – although not the only – educational doctrine in Germany in the twentieth century. Logically, affirmative descriptions of the doctrine appeared in monographs, such as works by Gertrud Spiess (1973) and Roland Bast (2000). Only recently, Heinz-Elmar Tenorth codified this *topos* under the headword «Autonomy, educational» in his contribution in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Pädagogik*, a historical dictionary of education, by concluding that discussions today are linked to the ideas of the late eighteenth century – and that there therefore appears to be a circle between then and today (Tenorth 2004). Beyond the uncontested fundamental significance of the *topos* per se, the reason for subjecting it here to international examination is the impression – and surely one not intended – that it turns in circles hermetically. As Tenorth shows clearly, it does not represent a single and clear doctrine or theory – which may explain part of its success. What we find instead is a variety of ideas with a common denominator: the dualization of the world in pedagogical and non-pedagogical. The non-pedagogical side is mostly identified as by far the more dominant side, which, so to speak, claims hegemony over the pedagogical side, thus characterizing the danger of «heteronomy». Depending on the epoch in which the discussion took place, this non-pedagogical side of the world referred to state, society, economy, or church.

These other "cultural spheres" – each also having its own independent laws (e.g., autonomy) – were seen as infringing upon the sphere of education. This was felt to be especially tragic, because education was understood to be the «supreme means» of «protecting human freedom and dignity» (Weniger 1929/1952, p. 72), whereas the other societal practices enslaved man. «The powers in life want the youth to be their succession, their servants, their office bearers; they want to possess man from scalp to toe. But autonomy means insisting on the freedom of man, on his inner consent and his will» (ibid., p. 82). In the «bewildering simultaneity» of society's «claims on youth, educational autonomy means the securing of human unity and wholeness»; it is a protective dam to contain the «danger of being ripped apart or pulled hither and yon» (ibid., p. 82f.)

If any point of reference outside the sphere of education was accepted at all, it was the idea of the «unity» of «the true Volk». On the parliamentary and school policy debates on the education law after 1920, Wilhelm Flitner wrote that educators should look exclusively to a higher instance for orientation: the true community (Flitner 1928/1989, p. 244). In Flitner's understanding, this is the true Volk, the invisible church, the true community, whose contents are legitimate if they have a place in the inward spiritual world of the person. It is in this that the autonomy of education lies when we examine the societal dependencies (op. cit.). Flitner does not negate the necessity of tension in political life, but it means merely that education has some intrinsic laws that must not

be denied, for that would mean abandoning educational responsibility (p. 248). Politics is external – meaning controversy and plurality – and its limits lie where the inner freedom of the duty of education begins (p. 252).³

Not all of these *arguments* from the Weimar Republic survived after the war, but the *idea* that education is a practice in society that ultimately works towards the well-being of children, their freedom and dignity, and the future of humanity altogether and thus must defend itself against other practices, has been essentially upheld up to now – not infrequently in the form of secular paraphrases of the originally religiously conceived ideas of world redemption (Osterwalder 1999). With modernity interpreted as a world spiraling into decline, this idea of world redemption and education as redeeming people is seen as even more important and pressing (Baader 2004).

3. Dimensions of international discourse

Fundamental skepticism towards contemporary life has been a motif in educational discourse since antiquity and can be also found in modern European and Anglo-Saxon education. Just one example is the educational engagement of the Chicago School of John Dewey, Jane Addams, George Herbert Mead, James Hayden Tufts, Ella Flagg Young, and Margaret A. Haley, who were closely connected to the autonomy efforts of the teacher's unions in Chicago (which focused primarily on teachers' decision-making authority) and to the industrial democracy movement and fought against the proposals for educational reform coming from big business circles (Wrigley 1982; Reid 1982; Murphy 1990).

Upon this background, the question that should be examined is not so much the phenomenon of the striving towards better practice (however defined) with regard to individual, group, society, or humankind through education. The issue is: Does the *topos* of «educational autonomy» that distances educational practice from and defends educational practice against the believed or actual independent laws (e.g., autonomy) of other social fields of practice, which it sees fundamentally as a threat, make any sense at all? Or, to put the question another way, what can modern education gain from continuing to think and research in terms of the dualistic conception of autonomy versus heteronomy, which, moreover, are seen as standing in a hierarchical relation (autonomy being "better" than heteronomy)? How much potential for innovation is there in the science to overcome such dualisms? Does giving them up mean forfeiting all ambitions of "improvement" – and is this desirable? Is the conception of a *Grammar of Schooling* (Tyack/Tobin 1994; Cuban 1995; Tyack/Cuban 1995) an alternative to the idea of *pädagogische Autonomie*, and if so, does it have advantages?

³ For a discussion of specific concepts of «pädagogischer Autonomie» and its contextual determinants in «geisteswissenschaftlichen Pädagogik», see Tröhler 2003.

These questions are directed to diverse exponents of international education along with the request that they offer their commentaries to some or all of these questions. The object here is *not* to evaluate the specific German discourse, but rather to address the principal issue of the scientific meaning of the idea of "autonomy" for the field of education specifically. From a *historical* perspective, it will be shown to what extent one can speak of the Germans again taking a "special path" – or others taking "special paths" for that matter – and whether the phenomenon of "educational autonomy" is possibly linked to Protestantism, or Lutheranism even, and may never have been an issue at all in Catholicism nor in Congregationalism. From a *systematic* perspective, the issue that stands in the foreground is whether we can find consensus within the international (and interdenominational) discourse on the specific character of education, and whether this possibly even expresses itself as education having independent laws (e.g., autonomy), and, if so, who actually is the addressee of this autonomy (child, school, teacher, educational action, education as a science?), or, in other words, how this autonomy can be explained.

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