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Opportunity in Crisis: An Essay Review of Theobald's *Education Now*

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Paul Theobald is an American intellectual historian who believes that ideas have mattered historically and that they continue to matter today. Like Canadian philosopher Kieran Egan whose book *Getting it Wrong from the Beginning* (2002) challenges foundational education theory, Theobald argues in his new book *Education Now: How Rethinking America's Past Can Change its Future* that educational thought led us astray a long time ago forming the inadequate and deficient taken-for-granted certainties that underpin our ways of thinking about education. Theobald believes that 17th century political philosophy—an even older source of ideas than the late 19th and early 20th century thinkers Egan addresses—has formed a seldom examined conceptual foundation for a range of current educational, economic, political, and social problems. Theobald contends that had different philosophical choices been made at the birth of the United States, the country, its core institutions, its political economy, and even its geography might have developed very differently. He describes a process that begins with an overly hasty and even consciously illegal manoeuvring in the framing of the United States Constitution

and devolves into the atomistic consumerist individualism that now marks the American social experiment; he wonders how it might be unmade with different ideas. Theobald's style is scholarly but highly accessible. He presents complex philosophical debates and ideational trajectories with remarkable clarity. And he offers a range of concrete suggestions for getting things back on track with the help of alternative theoretical principles.

Theobald looks at periods of political instability like the Glorious Revolution in England, the American Revolution, The American Civil War, The Great Depression and the World Wars as historical ruptures that open up competitive space for novel ideas with which to frame constitutional authority and, he believes, propel nations into the future in new directions. For Theobald, these key political debates that take place in times of flux, and the settlements that follow from them, are test cases that illustrate the crucial importance of ideas. The most important historical lessons in Theobald's account stress the openness and fundamentally contested nature of the process of framing key foundational documents.

He emphasizes how there were always vibrant and well-supported alternatives like those of Winstanley and Montesquieu opposing the hegemonic ideas of foundational thinkers like Hobbes whose ideas underpinned the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution, and Locke whose work is foundational in the United States Constitution. This is not just an exercise in counterfactuals or how outcomes might have been otherwise historically. Theobald both wants to

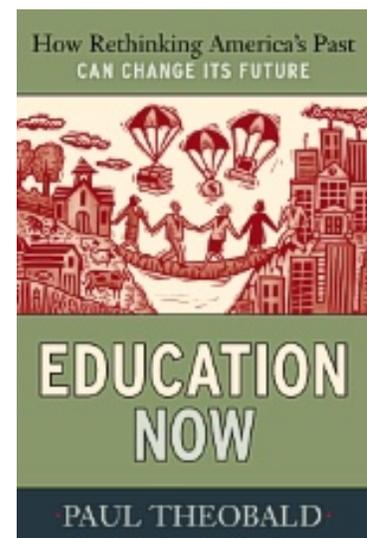
show how it could have been otherwise while at the same time suggesting that it can now again be otherwise because we are now in a similar period of uncertain flux searching for a



Paul Theobald

new center. We might in the space created by the current rupture or legitimation crisis—which has only become deeper since the publication of *Education Now* with the global economic crisis—seek out a very different set of political ideas, ideas which are more pro-social and better suited to conditions of multinational globalization, new forms of environmental challenge and generalized conditions of contemporary risk. Theobald draws a historical thread back to the ideas of John Locke and Adam Smith and asks whether the assumptions of atomistic liberal individualism “work in a world where energy is not abundant and cheap, but scarce and expensive. Do they work in a world filled with people?” (p. 120).

Theobald's presentation of history is one in which the animating debates at historical rupture points contain lessons for paths not taken and alternatives that are less individualistic. In the 17th century for instance, Cromwell had a choice between the democratic hope of a Winstanley or a Harrington and the essentially pessimistic elitism



inherent in Hobbsean ideas. He chose the latter modified by the rider of a power share between a hereditary monarchy and Parliament. In the case of the United States, the enduring central role of Locke's ideas cannot but lead in modernity to a consumerist reduction of political and social agency to a fundamental economic crackpot rationality of self-interest that leads to unending social trouble and even chaos.

A major theme of this book contends that Locke was just plain wrong, dead wrong ... and thus, we are adrift on an intellectual (philosophical, ideological and social) trajectory that cannot lead to a desirable future Operating on this erroneous assumption, we have relegated a future to ourselves and our children marked by problems of huge proportions, problems that indeed threaten the very existence of humankind on earth. (p. 29)

Yet there remains for Theobald a core tension (drawing on the work of Charles Taylor) between what he calls the communally-focussed M-stream, which draws on the thought of Montesquieu, and the individualistic Lockean L-stream. This tension sits at the very root of American political and social institutions, tilted consistently and unfortunately toward the L-stream. Referring to the work of Robert Putnam on the decline of social capital in America, Theobald puts it this way: "... though Putnam doesn't put it in these terms, *Bowling Alone* essentially chronicles the ascendancy of the L-stream in American consciousness along with the complete subordination of the M-stream" (p. 36). This for Theobald has "contributed to the demise of virtue and communal solidarity" (p. 37). As a result, the idea of community comes to be subordinated in American political thought to what Theobald characterizes (drawing on arguments similar to those he made in his earlier book *Teaching the Commons* [1997]) as a risk-oriented, atomistic, competitive individualism that sits as the hegemonic conception of human nature. He writes: "The suspicion with which community was held by those who chose to maximize the advantages of a free society meant that community would eventually all but disappear from the list of criteria used in the formation of policy" (p. 40). This shift, Theobald argues has led to an inevitable marginalization of the rural/farmer/land in favor of the urban/merchant/market. This shift combined with widespread industrial transformations made possible by the ascendancy of the factory system. In addition, the rise of economics as both a prescriptive force and at the same time an analytical frame for the understanding of human life commodified increasingly large segments of behavior.

It is now well established at least since Foucault if not the Frankfurt School or Nietzsche that foundational social theories of human nature do more to create behavior than they do to understand it (whatever "it" might be). Theobald demonstrates how Social Darwinism buttressed the economic individualism of Locke and Smith hammering yet another nail in the coffin of alternate philosophies that kept surfacing in times of crisis. When communal or pro-social ideas arose, elites drove them back down. With Social Darwinism and the eugenics movement, this process came to be aligned with institutional

science and essentially, the game was lost. This is, incidentally the ground upon which contemporary models of mass schooling were constructed throughout the West. Hopefully we are slowly emerging from the long nightmare of quests for human nature most powerfully illustrated by the Holocaust (Bauman, 1989). Be this as it may, Theobald returns to the almost abandoned idea of utopian thought and the idea of a community founded on, “a lifelong commitment to citizenship education” (p. 60) as a middle path between violent revolution on the one hand and molasses-slow reform on the other. To do this he draws on Thomas Paine’s concept of “agrarian justice” (p. 64) that reintroduces the idea of the commons into educational and social discourse. These ideas were not at all marginal well into the early 20th century. There were always alternatives and there are still alternatives, he essentially argues.

In a sense Theobald’s vision of United States history is an ongoing interplay of crisis management and a relentless weeding out of popular and pro-social ideas that emerge from the rupture in equilibrium (e.g., wars, depressions, legitimation crises). L-stream ideologies of individualism and self-interest always fail and always come up short in hard times. The ideological trick for elites is to re-establish the hegemony of ideas that support their interests and which resist the socialization of wealth (the commons), a wealth which they take to be their private property.

In the second half of the book, Theobald shows how M-stream ideas, which initially animated the formation and conduct of public schooling in the 19th century, came under the sway of the same L-stream ideas that were simultaneously transforming politics, social life, and the economy. Rather than a schooling based on common social experience of citizenship, there was a gradual and inexorable shift toward a form of schooling which by the 20th century would sort and separate different orders of student and, at the same time, differentiate curriculum in accordance with notions of unequal intellectual endowment. The school came to be seen as the principal locus for the control of dangerous populations in the swelling cities of the late 19th and early 20th century United States. Schools became a laboratory for Social Darwinism and the emerging security state so familiar to us today. In tandem, Social Darwinist pseudoscience came to provide the intellectual legitimation for this vision of schooling, just as it had played the same role in the body politic and in the economy justifying existing structures of oppression, inequality, and domination. Theobald argues that this discredited ideology continues to undergird contemporary educational practice in forms such as the rigid “scientific” testing regimes of *No Child Left Behind*.

...the same scientific minds that gave us the society-as-organism metaphor were ready to give teachers the tools they needed to do their job. In 1912 Joseph Mayer Rice summarized those tools in a book called *Scientific Management in Education*. In it he called for clearly defined, fixed standards that students must meet, a scientific system of pedagogical management, and the use of scientifically based measurement tools that could tell teacher

whether standards were effectively met. Readers today who are familiar with the educational philosophy undergirding the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act will recognize that it is exactly the same philosophy that Rice was spearheading almost 100 years ago. It is a kind of inside joke among professional educators that any grant proposal headed for a federal office these days must modify every noun with the phrase “scientifically based.” (p. 95)

Of course the sorting and selection would allegedly sift appropriately configured minds into their appropriate slots in the economy. Ultimately the Social Darwinist epitomized by the father of curriculum studies, scientific manager Franklin Bobbit won out over progressives like John Dewey and George Counts. What has followed is a persistent and powerful ideologically driven brew of pseudoscience and rhetoric to create the image of a decaying public school system eternally bereft of rigor, discipline, and standards. The treatment is more testing and more meticulous disciplining of both teachers and their professional associations on the one hand, and the ever burgeoning swarms of “dangerous children” manufactured by fast, consumer capitalism. All of this is set within an ongoing rhetorical mantra that links educational control directly to national economic outcomes.

As [Lawrence] Cremin so aptly described it the good school-good economy thesis is such an exaggeration as to make it largely propaganda—there is no evidence to support it, and much that renders it false. But it has been effective propaganda, becoming a mainstay in the corporate curriculum taught to Americans via media networks. (p. 105)

But then as Noam Chomsky has long argued, a lack of dissent and the elevation of ideological principles to the level of common sense that requires no defence is the measure of a successful ideological campaign. Echoing a Chomskyian perspective and following other American social critics like Neil Postman, Henry Giroux, and Joe Kincheloe, Theobald goes on to examine the mass media as the *de facto* education system that provides contemporary social actors with the information they need to conform. Corporate concentration in the knowledge production industry yields, once again, rather predictable results for democratic discourse and citizen education. Theobald puts it this way: “[C]ontrolling what people hear and don’t hear, what they discuss and don’t discuss, has long been a desirable goal among those with power” (p. 111).

From here Theobald returns to alternative visions, this time in education specifically as opposed to larger community experiments. Here he invokes a “long list” of educational projects which have reframed schooling in the M-stream. These range from Dewey’s laboratory school, to Kilpatrick’s “project method,” to specific place-based community responses to crisis and poverty, to John Goodlad’s prescription for responsive and effective schools. These alternative visions all seek to prepare students for democratic

citizenship and the broad social roles and engagements that citizenship demands as opposed to those of narrow economic functionality and self-interested accumulation/acquisitiveness.

Theobald's list continues in chapter 5 with a series of proactive suggestions for sustainable living and learning ranging from a general attitude and practice of frugality (how odd even this word sounds today!), to growing one's own food, to learning about the source of the things we consume. He follows up with other suggestions for political engagement such as support for caps on corporate executive wages and ethical investing. All of this is part of Theobald's broader vision of what counts as an education. This conception is a broad critical sensibility that supports students in seeing beyond the piffle in the corporate media and the shallowness of their own lives. For Theobald, the L-stream has led us to the brink of collapse, a crisis point which is deeper and more profound than any previous one we have known. Inhabiting this time-space he argues, we need to move beyond philosophical positions which end up focussing us on "passion and greed" and shift toward those which promote "genius and virtue." For Theobald we are at a crucial juncture in which it is well understood that the old order is broken and new forms of thinking, governance and education might be imagined.

Here's where we stand. Our embrace of the L-stream interpretation of economics, that is, empty world economics with no accounting for the finite nature of natural resources, has brought us to the brink of ecological disaster When L-stream logic was applied to education, it gave us a sorting machine that put students on waiting lists to enter "evident and probable" occupational tracks. In so doing it decontextualized curriculum and reduced the definition of an education to a test score. (p. 156)

Theobald is at his best when he imagines the kind of governance structures that might address trouble of this magnitude. School governance and legislative advisory bodies, chosen by lot, and the establishment of local schools as crucibles of democratic action are two such exciting ideas. But Theobald's prescriptions go deeper than this. He calls into question the power of corporate lobbies and presents a cogent argument for proportional representation in federal politics to replace the first past the post system that has been abolished in most western democracies with the notable exceptions of the United Kingdom and Canada.

Theobald's bold suggestions for institutional reform remind me how thoroughly entrenched so much of our thinking about education tends to be within the current structures that frame them. I am also reminded how seldom education discourse actually touches on conditions of the wider political structures that continue to generate apathy and disengagement in our youth. Theobald's book addresses this level of problem in a highly

creative and challenging fashion. While the examples he uses are American, the larger educational problems he addresses are not. The tendency and indeed the compulsion to disconnect thinking about “education now” from our own political, economic, and social turmoil has been one of the core problems in Canada as well. Our narrow specialization and trepidation around issues outside those little boxes of specialist expertise in which most of us labor have indeed rendered too many questions about education sterile, technical, and empirical. Theobald ends his book citing sociologist C. Wright Mills, an iconic and outspoken American public intellectual who consistently raised big issues, nagging questions and who also pointed to the crises which he believed might provide opportunity for the expansion of democratic engagement. It is frightening to think that education now has contrived conditions in which many technical experts are produced but few intellectuals, many sheep but few citizens. Perhaps though we can take hope from Theobald’s illustration of how this new and possibly ultimate crisis in the L-stream which has recently taken the form of a full-blown economic melt-down might actually push us all toward more humane and less technicist educational thinking. This is the hope I see in Theobald’s book.

Nevertheless, Theobald’s juxtaposition of risk and predictability is somewhat problematic. This discussion could benefit from a reading of contemporary sociological work on risk society, manufactured risk, and the rise of expert systems (Beck, 1992, Giddens, 1990, Bauman, 1990). Theobald’s positioning of risk and predictability as historically related concepts as well as outcomes of L-stream or M-stream philosophical thinking is a bit too stark. He is dealing, I think, with the rise of new sorts of risk in modernity while seeming to dismiss how the communal traditions of premodern social orders also contained significant elements of risk. As Anthony Giddens (1990) shows, it is the rise of the twin forces of expert systems and symbolic tokens (e.g., money) that distances social actors from an intimate knowledge of the physical, technological, political, and economic infrastructure that supports life in conditions of modernity. Life in the 17th century may have been more communal for most people, but it is difficult to see how it was more predictable. The difference is that most risk is now manufactured as the unanticipated consequences of the very technological processes meant to control risk. This, it seems to me, is the grand irony of modernity and the conundrum we need to face today. Modern society now encounters a compounded series of risk environments in the political/security field, the economy, the ecology, and even in a highly organized but poorly understood cocoon of daily life mediated by life-giving systems, grids and flows that few of us understand (e.g., power and water grids, rapid transportation machinery, the internet). That we might have or might someday solve the problems introduced by manufactured modern risk through a different configuration of political ideas is an interesting possibility, but I am not convinced that contemporary risk environments would be so different under the sway of the M-stream. We may need to accept that we live in a new and expanding environment of risk that we have little choice but to continue to manage as well as we can.

But perhaps I am wrong. Theobald remains idealistic in the face of risk society, arguing for instance in his analysis of the rise of markets as the allegedly unassailable foundation for human economic activity that the L-stream has engendered. It is rather obvious how in the wake of the current global economic crisis that unfettered markets can generate huge imbalance, social chaos, and an actual crisis the proportions of which elevate risk to unprecedented levels. And this risk is no longer bounded within the nation state, it is now global requiring both new interconnected policy solutions and what Appiah (2004) and Beck (2006) call a new ethical sensibility built on cosmopolitan principles of connectivity rather than isolationist notions of separation and individual autonomy of the subject. Here Theobald would agree, and perhaps his specific policy recommendations for the revitalization of democracy in the United States could be one part of the development of a more outward looking kind of education there. The danger is however, that a return to a kind of communitarian focus can also be part of a turning away from a cosmopolitan sensibility into the alleged security of the small community. This is indeed already happening as many groups seek to return to communal simplicity and exclusivity. For instance, on page 89 where he addresses the place of religion in early 19th century American schools, Theobald wonders how anyone today could imagine schooling so closely connected with religion and Bible reading. The truth is that a great many American schools are returning to exactly this form of Bible-bound insularity, including a young earth view of natural history that would not have seemed out of place in the 1830s. There is no going back; the social consequences of modernity, capitalism, and urbanization have moved us now into a space where we need entirely new political theory. Perhaps this is what Theobald is trying to achieve and to help us imagine, a cosmopolitanism that takes into consideration both human actors as well as natural and manufactured objects in the sense that Latour's Actor Network Theory does. There can be little question that we need new theory and Paul Theobald's accessible tour of the ideas which have helped to shape our worldviews and political institutions might just raise some of the questions we need to be asking ourselves as we seek to transform school and society in the 21st century.

Finally, Theobald seems to suggest that the standardized testing fetish will eventually run out of steam in the United States because the scores they produce never really predict anything useful. I think he is wrong about this for a couple of reasons. One is the extent to which state educational bureaucracies in both the United States and across the developed world have imbricated their systems with the technologies of standardized testing. This imbrication includes the private interests that feed curriculum and testing software and hardware into the system and which have a powerful stake in keeping the ball rolling. State bureaucracies themselves have also come over the past couple of decades to define their mandates in terms of the standardization required for optimum performance in test-driven educational regimes. The second reason is the extent to which the reporting of scores, however meaningless and however predictable, has become part of the ritual practice of schooling and of public educational discourse in contemporary democracies. The scores may be as meaningless as baseball scores to the economic performance of the nation, a point which Theobald makes throughout the book, but the process of

quantification that they represent mirrors a deeper fetish for measurement and commodification which is now so deeply sedimented it seems difficult to imagine a reversal. One key aspect of the generation and publication of test scores in league table form is that it feeds directly into the construction of schooling as a market rather than a public responsibility. In fact, by quantifying what is imagined as “performance,” the idea of responsibility itself is conflated with the raising of scores which itself is assumed to be a *de facto* indicator of improvement. Finally, the reporting of standardized test scores both reassures the middle classes that their children are indeed superior and allows them at the same time to strategically choose schools that will protect their social advantage.

All of this said, I do hope that Theobald is right and that in the current crisis it might be possible for a different set of philosophical principles to emerge out of the ashes of neoliberalism. Theobald’s timely book gives us a coherent set of possibilities and a cautionary tale about philosophical roads not taken. Perhaps we have been listening to the economists long enough and that broader visions of education like Theobald’s might just allow us to overcome the current malaise.

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