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Philipp Gonon

The Quest for Modern Vocational Education - Georg Kerschensteiner between Dewey, Weber and Simmel

Bern: Peter Lang 2009

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Based on the papers that have been published previously in mainly German language, Philip Gonon's book on Kerschensteiner is not only an answer to the international interests in this mentor of the Dual System of vocational education in German speaking countries, but also a contribution in examining education and its modernization in a globalized world, an endeavor to present the modern relevance of the classical approaches to the contemporary education concern.

According to Gonon, Kerschensteiner and his educational thoughts are still of great value today, because that two of Kerschensteiner's major concerns are still highly important, namely 1) "the redefinition of general and vocational education", and 2) "the combination of regulated in-firm training with expanded and strengthened vocational schools" (20-21). After offering a brief answer to each of the concerns in the first chapter, Gonon goes on and explore these central themes in relation to many other aspects throughout the book, including the backgrounds of the education discussions at the time, the ideas of some other major thinkers of the time and their relevance to Kerschensteiner etc.

Besides the introduction (chapter one), the book consists of three parts, the first part is from chapter two to chapter six.

Chapter two of the book provides a brief biography of Kerschensteiner, who was a teacher at the early phase of his career without showing special characters of becoming a classic pedagogue and became a school inspector and royal school commissioner partly due to good luck at the age of 41; later Kerschensteiner established his reputation as a education politician and school reformer; by publishing considerable amounts of books which attract widespread attention he successfully transferred to an education theorist.

Gonon introduces the context of the German discourse at the turn of 19th century, namely the German concept of Bildung and school reform in chapter three, and the discussion of the labour question (Arbeiterfrage) in chapter four. In comparing the two most influential thinkers on their ideas concerning education and state, Gonon summarizes that Condorcet's view was more dynamic and open to the scientific progress whereas Humboldt's view was much more historical and anthropocentric. Based on this comparison the debate between the philanthropists and the neo-humanists was shortly described, the results being that the German concept of Bildung was closely connected to subjects such as literature, philosophy and history and is still to a certain degree restricted to "a privilege for the elite even today" (40), whereas natural sciences and other realistic subjects were only officially accepted in the grammar school at the end of 19th century. Although the labour question was intensively discussed in the German speaking countries triggered by the dominance of industrialism and its negative influences, the German pedagogy of the time seemed to have not paid much attention to it.

However, education became inevitably an important component in the discussion because of the significant role of education in offering a possible solution. At first glance, scholars at the time seemed to have discussed about the education level of the workers, but actually what matters the most was the relevance of education to social policy, namely how education could contribute to the integration of young workers into the society. Hans von Nostitz for example, whose intensive works "can be seen as the actual blueprint for Kerschensteiner's work on civic education of German youth" (49), stressed the necessity of developing an education system that could domesticate socialism and help integrating the working classes in society productively. Such intentions were thought to be realized through an education for joy in work, whereas the idealization of work and imbuing it with spirit had been issues in education discourse before Kerschensteiner's activity school appeared.

After giving the background and context of Kerschensteiner's ideas on activity school, in chapter five Gonon turns to Kerschensteiner's works itself and analyses the thematic core of Kerschensteiner's concept-work. At the beginning of the chapter a brief introduction to the path-breaking book "Begriff der Arbeitsschule" (The Concept of Activity School) and its various editions was given. Gonon then narrates the main idea of Kerschensteiner's essay which was awarded the coveted prize of the Royal Academic of Useful Sciences in Erfurt.

This essay, which was known as the foundation document of the vocational school in Germany and made Kerschensteiner famous, advocates that schools for further learning should be made accessible to the greater masses where practical-industrial instruction for the specific vocational group, theoretical-industrial instruction and civic education shall be integrated together and form the main body of curriculum.

For Kerschensteiner, vocational work within schools is "the most appropriate means for civic education" (76); Kerschensteiner also believed that the curricula shall not be organized in the concentric circles as the followers of Herbart suggested and he turned to Pestalozzi, Dewey and some other scholars for resources of ideas; meanwhile his own backgrounds as teacher in natural sciences and mathematics also helped.

However, Kerschensteiner's frequent use of work as the reference point of the activity school also led to loss of clarity and the opposition from even the proponents of the activity school, such as Hugo Gaudig. It was exactly due to the discussion with Gaudig, Kerschensteiner gradually revised and modified his conception of work and moved "away from a manually centred instruction heavily oriented to school workshops" (87). In Kerschensteiner's late world of thought work was integrated into "a comprehensive view of education and seen as a contribution to the formation and development of character" (88).

In chapter six Gonon explains and analyses how Kerschensteiner was shaped into the Pestalozzi of his time and what consequences this Pestalozzianising Process could have. On the basis of literature review it became clear that Kerschensteiner did not really possess a deep understanding of Pestalozzi and he shall not be regarded as a well-versed expert on Pestalozzi except in his late period. Besides the existing similarities of personalities between the two educators, the Pestalozzianism of Kerschensteiner in the reform pedagogy depends also on the "biographical

stylisation" and "a certain modicum of interpretative boldness" (111). But this Pestalozzianising Process, despite its basic success until at least the end of 1960s, is also accomplished with the price being the devaluation of scientific analysis and discussion. As for Kerschensteiner himself, as Gonon puts it, the late theoretical ambitions finally led to his personal tragedy and even self-destruction as a pedagogical hero.

The second part of the book (chapter seven to nine) deals with Kerschensteiner's relation to three important thinkers of his time, Dewey, Weber and Simmel. As Gonon puts it, Pestalozzi and John Dewey "formed the pillars of Kerschensteiner's plea for school reform" and a reading of Dewey "encourage him at a time of hectic school reforms in Munich" (117). However, both Kerschensteiner and the German education community have been very selective in their conceptions of Dewey and his pragmatism. Dewey's ideas on socio-political reform, the social and political aspects of his thoughts on education as presented in *Democracy and Education* were largely ignored; Dewey was perceived mainly as a school reformer, as the father of teaching through projects, as a psychologist of learning. Even after 1950s the attitudes toward the political aspect of Dewey changed dramatically. The reason why Dewey was not perceived in its essence is, according to Gonon, a lack of sufficient familiarity with them, and especially "the lack of readiness to recognize the philosophical foundations on which education is based" (134).

In chapter eight, the differences between sociology and pedagogy, both becoming established as scientific disciplines at the beginning of the 20th century, are exemplified through the discussion of two influential representatives, namely Max Weber and Georg Kerschensteiner. Despite their apparent mutual disregard, the certain scientific points of reference and modernization concerns they have in common as well as their similar political views make a comparison between the two possible. Gonon carries out the comparison of the two scholars mainly by comparing and analyzing the lecture they gave on the same series of lectures at the University of Munich at the end of First World War.

While Weber regarded the politician vocation as a calling rather than profession, Kerschensteiner also believed that the ability to educate, which is the core of education as a vocation, is a gift that cannot be learned. Beside the similar arguments against dilettantism and emphasis of vocation as a calling, both scholars stressed the importance of subject-specific requirements. Meanwhile their concepts of vocation are clearly different from each other: Kerschensteiner regarded vocation directly linked to education, whereas the sociologist Weber was "concerned with change, restructuring, social restriction and rationalisation" which are related to "one's conduct of life" (162).

Kerschensteiner's late-year pedagogical theory developed partly on the basis of Simmel's philosophy of life, as Gonon observes in chapter nine. The contrast between life and form in Simmel's discourse was reinterpreted by Kerschensteiner as a pedagogic problem; for Kerschensteiner "the bridge between the object of culture and the subject to be educated" is made possible "by concrete work" (183); Kerschensteiner regards work as "the mediator between subjective psyche and objective intellectual product" (176) and the education process as "a reinvigoration of the objectified spirit in ever new individuals" (178). For Kerschensteiner the task of educator and teacher lies in "exploring the individual pupils' psyche and in organizing

education in a larger frame in keeping with the corresponding cultural goods and assets", the majority of which should be practical manual behavior (178).

However Georg Simmel and Eduard Spranger, whose theories are the central reference points for Kerschensteiner's theory, are not very convinced of Kerschensteiner's education theory; for example, Simmel and Kerschensteiner had different understanding of education and individuality. As Gonon points out, Simmel's pedagogic concepts as presented in the posthumously published book "Schulpädagogik" share little common with his other publications.

Part three of the book which includes the last three chapters of the book deals mainly with the question of system formation of vocational education.

In chapter ten after briefly introducing Adam Smith's critique of the apprenticeship, Gonon presents one of the expert opinions of the Verein für Sozialpolitik; a member of this club, Brentano rejected Smith's predictions based on empirical evidence and called for the preservation of the apprentice system through reform. It was through a debate among the economists associated with the German "Verein für Sozialpolitik" that the Dual System of vocational education in Germany evolved. By comparing the German and British experiences Gonon concludes that the apprenticeship system should "not be abolished, but reformed" (206). Kerschensteiner's notion that education of the working class should help them integrate into the society assisted the breakthrough of vocational education in Germany into a new form. The perspective of combining vocational learning in school and firm based on regulation and social partnership thus established itself in the field of apprentice training in the German speaking countries.

Using the dual apprenticeship system in Germany as a reference point, Gonon offers a basic insight into the pedagogical and educational political discussion about vocational education in the USA in the 20th century. From the beginning of the 20th century the education for industry in the USA has oriented itself toward the principle of efficiency and vocationalism. Although for a quite long period in the 20th century the vocationalism was appreciated in the education discourse and discussion, scholars such as Snedden has argued against vocationalism based on the principle of external efficiency and today's high schools in the USA have little relation to vocations. As Gonon puts it, "efficiency has been put forward as an argument for general education" (223) and against the orientation toward practical use.

Gonon concludes the book with a chapter on the development of vocational pedagogy in Germany. Gonon summarizes that vocational pedagogy has experienced some paradigm shift and the classical pedagogic arguments have gradually faded out and "partially replaced by a more pluralistic and social-scientific discourse" (225). The reason why many classics disappeared is exactly because that "much of what they introduced has become a matter of course" and that "the concepts and ideas if the classics and Kerschensteiner have become so firmly established that they are unconsciously taken for granted and are no longer perceived as particularly remarkable" (247-248).

Coming back to Gonon's intentions to write this book, namely to answer the international interests in Kerschensteiner and to examine vocational education and its globalization with a classic perspective, as a reader from the Chinese background, I find this book and the ideas embedded in extremely insightful and meaningful. In

China during the past two decades, the legitimacy of vocational education has seemingly derived mainly from its economic usefulness. In justifying the reinforcement of vocational education and training, vocational pedagogues and other advocates of vocational education have constantly referred to issues such as how vocational education could improve the quality of the products, raise the competitiveness of the certain companies and therefore benefit them and the nation as a whole. There has been not enough concern about the development of personality of the learners, neither were there much considerations of helping the learners integrate into the society nor become a responsible citizen.

Except some aspects of not letting too many youth wandering on the streets, vocational education and training was in the academic discourse and justification process largely reduced to a means to increase economic productivity. What Gonon warns in the preface, "to pay heed to the fragile relation between school and workplace, not to establish a monoculture of exclusively school-based vocational education, or to submit squarely to a regime of economic exigencies" (22), and what Kerschensteiner and other classics have long ago argued for, that the vocational education is not merely some "technical training and the achievement of occupational qualifications", that vocational education shall also intend to "develop attitudes and virtues that are relevant for social participation beyond the world of work" (247-248), remains very modern to us. Regardless of culture and socioeconomic conditions, a successful vocational education should undoubtedly "balance different interests" (20).

It is impossible to simply borrow some meaningful insights and apply them in another context other than the one from which they developed, but what Kerschensteiner has argued for could always serve for a reference point when developing, building and reforming a relatively new vocational education system.

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