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Conservative thought and changes in education : analysis of chosen aspects

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CONSERVATIVE THOUGHT AND CHANGES IN EDUCATION. ANALYSIS OF CHOSEN ASPECTS¹

ABSTRACT

This article concerns chosen aspects of conservative reactions to changes in education occurring in the 20th century. It consists of two parts. The first describes a new education paradigm created by John Dewey, the second part – doctrinal assumptions of conservative thought, which could constitute the basis for constructing a conservative educational ideal.

Keywords:

conservatism, upbringing, traditionalism, school, education, John Dewey, Irving Babbitt, literature-centrism.

INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to imagine a discussion concerning school and its state without one of the four following notions: (1) upbringing; (2) instruction; (3) teaching; (4) education. According to B. Niemierko, all of them picture the field of educational activity. Upbringing should be seen as (1) actions oriented at emotional, and indirectly cognitive changes; (2) instruction is action oriented at cognitive, and indirectly emotional changes; (3) teaching

¹ Niniejszy artykuł w formie referatu pierwotnie wygłoszony został na międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej pt. „Trends and Issues in Adult Education” (Faculty of Economics and Administration, Brno, Czech Republic, 02.09.2013, program konferencji – http://www.projektcias.cz/_media/internacionalizace/ema_e_camp_2013.pdf). Następnie w rozbudowanej formie oraz wersji polskojęzycznej został opublikowany pod tytułem „Konserwatywne ideały wychowawcze w dobie dominacji deweyowskiego paradygmatu edukacyjnego” w czasopiśmie „Colloquium WNHiS AMW” (nr 4/2013, s. 79–92).

is balanced activity in emotional, motivational and cognitive aspects; whereas (4) education is the totality of educational actions².

The objective of this article is to analyze chosen aspects of conservative reactions to changes in education occurring in the 20th century. The author tries to answer such questions as: when and according to what thought did the new paradigm of education start to emerge; what are its most important features; does a conservative teaching ideal exist; if yes, on what assumptions is it based?

JOHN DEWEY AND THE NEW EDUCATIONAL PARADIGM

One of the most important persons related to the creation of the new educational paradigm is J. Dewey – philosopher, pedagogue, creator of the American progressivism³. He understood the human being as a system reacting to a set of impulses, claiming that personality was a secondary matter. The human being comes true primarily in the process of cooperating with others, his habits occurring only in conditions of social interactions. This is where Dewey's conviction emerged from - about the fundamental role of communication as a tool constituting community of thought and people. This community is not given, it is constantly under construction through superimposing many individual interactions⁴.

Dewey's reflection revolutionized the way of seeing educational processes. The philosopher understood knowledge not as external, which has to be transmitted. He claimed that everybody had it inside, that it had to be aroused. He saw the foundation of teaching in interests and predispositions of the child. The teacher, according to Dewey, is not only an authority, but also a kind and understanding assistant, accompanying the pupil in his process of self-fulfilment. He should help the child adapt to modern life in a rapidly changing world. Skills gained in the process of learning at school should also enable him function in and realize the idea of a democratic state⁵.

² B. Niemierko, *Kształcenie szkolne. Podręcznik skutecznej dydaktyki*, Warszawa 2012, p. 34–36.

³ John Dewey (1859–1952) – creator of the concept of work school in Chicago (1896–1902). He taught in New York universities, University of Columbia from 1904 and in Chicago. See: Encyclopedia of World Biography, <http://www.notable-biographies.com/De-Du/Dewey-John.html>, (22.05.2013).

⁴ J. Szacki, *Historia myśli socjologicznej*, Warszawa 2003, p. 551.

⁵ H. Buczyńska-Garewicz, *Instrumentalizm Johna Deweya* [in:] Z. Kuderowicz (edit), *Filozofia XX wieku*, Warszawa 2002, p. 332–333; See: R. Horowitz (translate J. Tokarski), *John Dewey* [in:] L. Strauss, J. Cropsey, *Historia filozofii politycznej*, Warszawa 2010, p. 861–878.

J. Dewey's followers opposed the traditional belief according to which education was mostly a system of fair hierarchy of the society. They criticised the vision of the teacher as a person empowered with knowledge with which anybody could do what they wanted. The new teacher should elicit impulses of knowledge laying deep inside each pupil. From now on, it was the teacher, not the pupil, who became responsible for school failure⁶.

On the Polish ground, changes in education according to Dewey's ideas are observable from the end of the 20th century. T. Merta, by commenting the reform of Polish education performed in 1999, drew attention to the fact that it was built on the basis of a different paradigm than the one in force until then. Its core is leaving the traditional elitist model in favour of an egalitarian model. This change is fundamental as it brings: (1) different goals of education, (2) a different definition of its social role, (3) a change in means and didactic methods, (4) a different definition of educational success and failure⁷.

In the process of crystallization of the new vision of school, the most aware people became also defenders of the traditional model. One of their most prominent members is I. Babbitt⁸, creator of a conservative movement called "the New Humanism". For him, education was a process of discovering and using natural talents of the few. In the centre of this elitist vision lies the idea of improving the human being, so that he is able to defend *humanitas* and spirituality. He opposed humanitarianism based on a naturalist vision of the human being reduced to the level of senses and impulses. He wanted to rebuild the American education system and base it on classical, Greek and Latin, upbringing⁹.

The idea of progress through studding literature plays a very important role in Babbitt's concept. He drew attention to the fact that the traditional education model was mostly centred on literature. Reading classic and modern works was the basis for good education, not only a way to discipline and exercise the brain, but a primordial source of knowledge about the world,

⁶ E. Claparède (translate. H. Bleszyńska), *Wstęp* [in:] J. Dewey, *Szkola i dziecko*, Warszawa 1930, p. 14–15.

⁷ T. Merta, *Nieodzowność konserwyzmu. Pisma wybrane*, Warszawa 2011, p. 371.

⁸ Irving Babbitt (1865–1933) – American literary critic, culture philosopher, pedagogue and translator (from Sanskrit and pali), graduate and professor of French literature on Harvard, member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; initiator of movement called the new humanism. See: J. Bartyzel, *Irving Babbitt*, <http://konserwatywnaemigracja.com/2013/07/15/irving-babbitt/>, (30.07.2013).

⁹ K. Chojnicka, H. Olszewski, *Historia doktryn politycznych i prawnych*, Poznań 2004, p. 174–175.

the human nature, about what motivates men to act, about human longings, vices and virtues. Reading literature was supposed, in a certain way, to give opportunity for intellectual participation in all social sciences. I. Babbitt opposed the fact that in the postdeweyan model of school, literature occupied the same place as all other subject matters. Moreover, along with the decrease of its domination at school, new subject matters appeared, as points T. Merta – frequently of a parascientific feature, such as: assertiveness courses or problem solving¹⁰.

The dispute over the role of literature in school is truly a symptom of a bigger problem of the purpose of education itself. Supporters of the traditional model used to describe it in many different ways, but in the centre, they always put the idea of teaching as a purpose in itself, without additional utilitarian explanations. In the new model it is seen differently, the purpose is not teaching for teaching, but communization and adaptation. One should not think that the traditional model did not adapt or socialize, quite the contrary, but it was a secondary consequence of gaining knowledge. The shift in purpose bears some obvious consequences, that: (1) things considered useful and practical take the place of typical academic knowledge; (2) skills are seen as more important than facts; (3) group work is more valuable than individual achievements¹¹. A. Bloom states these consequences with unmarked regret, as he writes that “When conscience falls, which we owed almost exclusively to literary geniuses, people become more and more alike, as they do not realise that they could be different. What pitiable substitutes of a true diversity are the patchworks of dyed hair and other superficial differences which say nothing about the inside”¹².

An important consequence of the importance of the new educational type is also the differentiation between forming knowledge versus instrumental knowledge. The first one is centred on “being and becoming” a human being, it is not linked to practice; the instrumental knowledge deals with “doing and gaining”, whereas practice is its inseparable element. In the traditional model, it was claimed that for the first twenty years of life a person should encounter mostly forming knowledge, and only then there would be time for learning practical skills. According to some conservatists, the lack of differentiation leads to depreciation of a large part of forming knowledge. T. Merta asks in this context two questions: (1) is it better to learn at school

¹⁰ T. Merta, *Nieodzowność...* op. cit., p. 376.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 377.

¹² A. Bloom, *Umysł zamknięty*, Poznań 2012, p. 77–78.

how to write an office document or an essay concerning an important work of literature?; (2) how much time can take learning how to write an office document to a person who did not learn it at school but instead wrote many essays and knows classic literature perfectly, wouldn't it take only a few minutes?¹³.

STARTING POINTS OF A CONSERVATIVE EDUCATIONAL IDEAL

Conservatism is usually defined in three ways. The first depicts it as moderation and scepticism toward radical change, with a consequence of attachment to tradition and proven institutions; the second sees it as a philosophy based on human nature; the third understands it mostly as an ideal and political movement, striving for sustaining rules of social order acclaimed as traditional (frequently identified as absolute, transcendental and unchanged)¹⁴. Another frequent definition of conservatism interprets it as an ideological traditionalism – traditionalism which became conscious. J. Szacki is one of supporters of such a definition. He defines traditionalism as a belief putting tradition in the centre of social life; he divides it into primal and ideological. The first one consists of an instinctive reluctance to change; the second one concerns all political doctrines created in Europe after 1789, which make tradition their key element. J. Szacki claims that the primal version of traditionalism occurs in conditions of a relative social stability, when the order seems to remain unthreatened. The ideological traditionalism, otherwise called modern conservatism, is, according to J. Szacki, an attempt to rationalize changing society, divided into fractions, from the position of affirmation of basic values of a pre-revolution society¹⁵.

In the context of many types of conservative thought, their three basic common ideas are reminded: (1) traditionalism; (2) a sceptical view on political knowledge; (3) organicism. Traditionalism concerns keeping politics continuous, caring about institutions and traditions, being mistrustful towards any concepts willing to make changes, especially sudden. The main intellec-

¹³ T. Merta, op. cit., p. 378–380.

¹⁴ J. Bartyzel, *Konserwatyzm*, Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii, <http://www.ptta.pl/pef/pdf/k/konserwatyzm.pdf>, (12.12.12).

¹⁵ J. Szacki, *Tradycja*, Warszawa 2011, p. 27, 188, 195–196; Compare: K. Mannheim (translate S. Magala), *Myśl konserwatywna*, Warszawa 1986, p. 34. See: J. Szacki, *Konserwatyzm* [in:] P. Mazurkiewicz, S. Sowiński (ed.), *Religia i konserwatyzm: sprzymierzeńcy czy konkurenci?*, Wrocław 2004, p. 13–22.

tual support of traditionalism is a sceptical view on the possibility of gaining genuine political knowledge. In conservatism, wisdom lies in inherited laws and institutions, developed for centuries and slowly improved. It is all completed by the assumption that human beings have an organic relation to society and that the human being (putting his biological aspect aside) could not form without social institutions and practices¹⁶.

As a result of the above, it is clear that an univocal definition of conservatism is almost impossible to make. It is similar with the content of traditionalistic doctrines. R. Legutko points to the fact, that the content of conservatism is every time dependent on the object of behaviour. He claims that the category of reality is a key point in conservative reflexion. It is such an important factor, because the mission of conservatism is to protect what exists in reality from hypothetical constructs and speculated projects. The researcher notices that in a conservative thought, there are three ways of using the category of reality: (1) as something eternal; (2) as a relatively long historical process; (3) as something immediate and present¹⁷.

For conservatives, who see reality as an eternal and a fundamental element of everything that exists, invocations to religion and philosophy become very important. Religion talks about eternal existence in transcendental categories, whereas philosophy turns the human being in direction of seeking explanation of eternal truths. Plato is undoubtedly the prototype of conservative attitude, as he was the first man to show that everlasting moral standards exist and he suggested that transcendental sanctions should accompany political activity. The Greek philosopher rejected a flexible and relativist relation to politics, that makes the human being creator of his own fate and wanted that political reflexion was created with reference to reality that he saw as transcendental towards the world of things. W. Tatarkiewicz talks about it in the following words: "(...) the theory of state built by the Greeks (for example, the sophists) held to actual relations and aimed at (...) rationalizing means, but did not set goals to the state. Plato's theory of the state (...)

¹⁶ A. Quinton (translate C. Cieśliński, M. Poręba), *Konserwatyzm* [in:] R. E. Godin, F. Pettit, *Przewodnik po współczesnej filozofii politycznej*, Warszawa 2002, p. 322–323.

¹⁷ R. Legutko, *Trzy konserwatyzmy* [in:] *Podzwonne dla błazna*, Kraków 2006, <http://www.omp.org.pl/stareomp/indexc950.html?module=subjects&func=viewpage&pageid=611>, (22.03.13). More on the meaning of category „real reality” in conservative thought. See: A. Wielomski, *Konserwatyzm. Główne idee, nurty i postacie*, Warszawa 2007, p. 20–26.

was a normative theory of >the best< state, constructed according to ideas of goodness and justice”¹⁸.

The second conservative way of understanding reality embraces it as a relatively long historical process, which usually becomes concrete in relation to another civilization and cultural entity. This construct has to possess its own dynamics of development and a distinct identity, for example, the Western civilization, Europe. Conservatives see their role in the defence of this entity (at least of what they think are its most valuable elements). Impossibility to bring things down to simple technical procedures is the criteria according to which the most valuable parts of a given entity of civilization and culture are distinguished. The idea that the human world is created by indirect human interference is rejected. Progress is everything that cannot be created by intentional actions. Foundations and characteristics of a valuable human order are for conservatists: (1) authorities (the opposite of power based on force), (2) customs (the opposite of rules and decrees), (3) religion (the opposite of ideology), (4) traditional loyal relationships (the opposite of political relations), (5) spiritual bonds (the opposite of contract bonds). It is a typically organic idea, claiming that various elements of social order must grow and match each other; it also assumes the necessity of a hierarchy and division into the ruling and the ruled¹⁹.

Conservative ideologies created with reference to the third way of understanding reality (what is current and indirect) may be considered as strongly relativist and irrational. They allow to call a conservative anyone who defends the current order only because he is used to its existence. The ideal basis on which a given order leans does not matter (in this version, conservative communists are permitted to exist). Nevertheless, R. Legutko claims that this kind does not have to base on a psychological reaction only, but it can also be motivated to some kind of responsibility resulting from fear of a revolution which might take away the peace of private life and safety from the human being²⁰.

CONCLUSION

The answer to the question of when and in relation to what thought the new educational paradigm started to take form and what are its most im-

¹⁸ W. Tatarkiewicz, *Historia filozofii*, Tom I, Warszawa 1997, p. 100.

¹⁹ T. Buksiński, *Współczesne filozofie polityki*, Poznań 2006, p. 134–144.

²⁰ R. Legutko, op. cit.

portant features, seems to be quite easy. The new educational paradigm came to life in the 20th century and it may be said that it accompanied the democratisation of society. J. Dewey was the man who formulated it in the way which still has the most powerful effect. The main features of the new educational paradigm are: (1) a different approach to teaching – responsibility for successes and failures of the pupil was transferred to the teacher; (2) a shift of gravity point from an education centered on literature to teaching practical skills, including those adapting to function in a democratic society.

The second problem is much more difficult to solve. An univocal answer to the question – does a conservative educational ideal exist – is very difficult. As R. Legutko rightly notices, the contents of conservatism always depend on the object it wants to preserve. Consequently, it should be stated that there can exist many conservative educational ideals.

If we assume that conservatism is only a psychological fear of any change, linked to the assumption that reality is only what exists at the moment – the currently used model will be a conservative educational model, regardless of what values it relates to. Only what exists will be worthy of protection, precisely because it exists.

Conservatives with philosophical explanations of their ideology will have much more to say about teaching (giving also an chance to create organized conservative movements). Nevertheless, they will also construct many different educational concepts, but they will always explain them with reference to the claim that changing educational model proven in historical process is socially harmful. Different societies will favour different traditions, as we can see in many national variations of conservatisms.

The most concrete educational model seems to be the one created by conservatives according to J. Szacki's definition – conservatism as an ideologized traditionalism. They always make references to the social model from before the revolution, claiming that the order from before 1789 was a genuine reality. Their educational model will invoke such elements as: (1) respect for religion; (2) respect for tradition and customs; (3) respect for authorities. These factors make, in a wider context, values of the Western civilization.

Education based on literature is another interesting conservative proposal, worthy of a separate reflexion. It seems that it fits perfectly almost every conservative ideal of education. It is also important to notice that education which places at its centre studying literature does not necessarily have to be conservative. It is possible to imagine a situation where only books published during the last few years became the canon. Although such a possibil-

ity is conceivable, it seems purely theoretical. Such a drastic constraint would cause a drastic decline of quality of education – grand literary works surely do not emerge every year.

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MYŚL KONSERWATYWNA A PRZEMIANY W EDUKACJI. ANALIZA WYBRANYCH ASPEKTÓW

STRESZCZENIE

Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy wybranych aspektów konserwatywnej reakcji na XX-wieczne przemiany w edukacji. Składa się on z dwóch części. W pierwszej opisany został nowy, stworzony przez Johna Deweya paradygmat edukacyjny; w drugiej – doktrynalne założenia myśli konserwatywnej, mogące stanowić fundamenty pod budowę konserwatywnego ideału wychowawczego.

Słowa kluczowe:

konserwatyzm, wychowanie, tradycjonalizm, szkoła, edukacja, John Dewey, Irving Babbitt, literaturocentryzm.