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«Educational research must penetrate the cultural construction of the nation ... and leave the comfort zone of moralizing about the world». Interview with Daniel Tröhler

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Daniel Tröhler is an international heavyweight in Educational Sciences who has published, edited, or co-edited over 50 books or Special Issues in Journals, more than 100 journal articles, and more than 150 book-chapters. His book «Languages of Education - Protestant Legacies, National Identities, and Global Aspirations» (Routledge, 2011) was translated into multiple languages and won the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) *Outstanding Book Award*. Since 2017, Tröhler holds the professorship for «Foundations of Education» at the University of Vienna (Austria). Prior to that, he researched and taught at the University of Luxemburg (2008 – 2016) and the University of Zurich (Switzerland) (2002 – 2008) where he also completed his undergraduate degree, PhD degree, and habilitation. His research explores national histories of thought in the field of education and their institutional manifestation from the 18th century to the present. Through historical as well as comparative analysis of laws, textbooks, and curricula, he juxtaposes institutional histories and history of ideas and analyzes their regional, national, and transnational impact. Tröhler was also guest professor in Oulu (Finland), Granada (Spain), and is since 2018 visiting Professor in Oslo (Norway).

Michaela Vogt (MV) & Annemarie Augschöll-Blasbichler (AA): *Professor Tröhler, it is real pleasure having you as an interviewee. As a starting point, let us look at your own life history. What got you interested in Education and the History of Education, and what is their significance in your biography.*

Daniel Tröhler (DT): Well, as a young person I thought that the world needed to be changed and that education and schooling would be an effective means to do so. For some reason, the question of industrialization had particularly preoccupied me, and I was motivated by my then professor to deal with Pestalozzi in the context of this problem area. This became an almost 25-year preoccupation with the Swiss, although it did occur to me how much my reading differed from the interpretation of the «great» German philosophers of education, like Eduard Spranger. Only later did I learn that this had to do with the dominant discourses that are different in Germany than in republican Switzerland. I think this insight into the historicity and cultural intricacy of thinking was then the real starting point of my academic activities.

MV&AA: *Your work has been historical as well as comparative in nature ever since. How did and do you intermingle these two perspectives within your research activities?*

DT: In principle, I see both as indispensable approaches to the discovery of respective thought styles and structures. Of course, many schools of thought appear with the claim of telling the truth, and this is particularly evident in the tradition of German idealism, but if you grew up bilingual like me and then had been in the USA for a long time, you realize that many social practices of cultural identity, many traditions of thought and perceptions of «normality» have this claim to truth. It was probably an advantage that I grew up in a small, multilingual and multicultural country and that I could, so to say, «feel» the diversity of claims to power and truth raised in the surrounding large nation-states. This – comparatively speaking – divergence could of course only be explained historically, while conversely, the interpretation or historical reconstruction of thought styles and styles of reasonings, with more or less direct effects in the organization of the educational institutions, gains in theoretical sharpness when one compares.

MV&AA: *Looking back at your experiences so far, would you say that comparative history of education is a rising field of interest for you? Are there differences between the national and international comparative perspective in that regard?*

DT: For me, yes, in in both cases. But comparative research has a hard time not falling into the trap of national reproduction. As Bob Cowen once aptly put it, many comparatists are talking about global trends and then use their own country as an example ... Taken seriously, comparative research is a questioning of the dominant styles of thinking and is therefore not so readily cultivated. Because it is precisely this historicizing questioning of ourselves that we do not willingly like, because historicizing yourself means to relativize the claims of truths – which is obviously the contrary of «telling the truth.» However, this would indeed be a valuable academic virtue.

MV&AA: *You currently hold the professorship for General Educational Sciences at the University of Vienna while being a specialist in history of education. How would you describe the relationship between General Educational Sciences and the History of Education in the area of teaching and in the area of research?*

DT: We have renamed this to «Foundations of Education» because it is about analyzing the dominant and regressive systems of thought in education. Even if these each appear with a claim to timelessness, they are not, and it is important to locate them in their historical contexts («contextualize» them). In this way, analytical, historical and comparative approaches are linked in a more meaningful way to understand educational reasonings and how they are, for instance, transformed into curricula as instruments for fabricating the future loyal citizens of the respective nation-states with distinct visions of the ideal social order. This is my research program, and students, who often start their studies with as naïve ideas as I did in my youth, must learn that we are not in possession of the truth and cannot define for ourselves who is in need of the «right» education; presuming that we really know what the «right» kind of education is. This is apparent not least in the intercultural sector, where there is a lot of cultural arrogance that needs to be reflected. Foundations of Education does not want to lead to any practical action, but it does want to critically analyze the motives of thoughts and convictions that are at the root of such actions, personal and institutional.

MV&AA: *You taught and researched at multiple institutions all across Europe and abroad. How does history of education differ between nations and what are the similarities? Has history of education become a truly global discipline?*

DT: There are not only different stories but different foci of stories. Many are organized around a dualistic structure, but in different ways. German historiography has long been idealistic and focused on ideas and great men, but largely ignored school and curricular issues; it was about moral good versus moral evil, and if it looked at schooling, it was with regard to vertical advancement («up the ladder»). French historiography, like Italian or Swiss historiography, was characterized by the duality of liberal versus conservative positions in politics (often including the tensions between modern science and religion) and focused much more than German historiography on the school and its social institutionalization and broad anchoring of mass education. In contrast, American historiography has been organized around the duality of successful and unsuccessful reform and, unlike continental European historiography, places much more emphasis on the question of content and curriculum and addresses the question of social justice more explicitly. So not only are the stories different, but also the types of historiography, and this has to do with the respective notions and ideals of social order and the assigned role to education that dominate in the different places.

MV&AA: *History of Education did not have an easy time establishing itself as an independent discipline. What would you say needs to be done to further strengthen history of education's profile and establish itself more deeply in universities and beyond?*

DT: After all, the history of education has always been in the service of dominant ideas, a maid that became increasingly unattractive in the face of the psychological turnaround in the course of the 20th century, especially in the Cold War. For too long, it has moralized instead of shown how modes of thought – and this includes test psychology – are historical performances, which in turn are in the service of non-educational ideas in the shaping of the world. But instead of analyzing these moves and developments as historical, historians of education have preferred to complain

about the loss of meaning that has rightly occurred to them in the way history has been conducted. The solution? I advocate for «better historiography,» which is international and comparative, taking into account one's own (premises of) thinking.

MV&AA: *Which potential for further developments do you see in the field of history of education and which opportunities have not been taken yet? What are your personal visions for the further development of the discipline? What are the exciting, new, and/or under-researched areas in the field?*

DT: The potential all lies with us. The whole world is historical, we are historical, thinking is historical, educational systems are historical, and the ways of exploring these thoughts and systems are historical. Let's make something of it and remind our colleagues in philosophy, sociology and psychology that they are certainly historical products and think and act within learned conventions, just as they will one day bless the temporal.

Let us understand the national limitations and facilitation of systems of thought and schooling, the national epistemologies that seek to rule the world, like German Idealism, American Pragmatism, French Positivism and English Utilitarianism, and how these national labels are used as swear words in other places. Let us go back to the early modern period and see how to do research with relevant sources and ask intelligent questions that are not nationally biased, because nation-states did not yet exist. And let us think again about whether the self-image we have of ourselves as rational heirs of a rational enlightenment is correct. Sometimes we are a bit too kind to ourselves and thereby do not do ourselves any favors when it comes to the quality of research we conduct. Let us finally learn at least two or three foreign languages very well and open ourselves up to culturally different ways and means of making sense of the world.

MV&AA: *Which kind of advice would you give a (post-)doctoral researcher coming into the field of history of education? With hindsight bias, what kind of advice had you wished for when you first entered history of education?*

DT: It is always important to stress that history can be understood in two ways. The less seminal one is the idea that history concerns something that is past. It has no relevance for today. The other is that all institutions and all questions and all methods are the results of historical developments that could have turned out differently. Foucault called this the history of the present. Isn't it nice to demonstrate that today's test psychology owes its existence to the Cold-War motives of the USA in the 1960s, which were based on models of efficient school administration that had been developed around 1900 mainly by Presbyterians at Teachers College in New York, especially as an alternative to democratic pragmatism as advocated by Congregationalists like John Dewey and others (Barack Obama belongs, for instance, to this denomination)? The vision that the PISA-actors and activists are ultimately Cold War-like Presbyterians is charming, isn't it? And they can't even contradict it, because they have absolutely no historical consciousness. Conversely, the historicizing approach also helps us understand why the cultural performance of the «German professor» can be so irritating for non-Germans. One often has the feeling that a fundamental moralizing Lutheran pastor in the guise of an East Prussian Junker is speaking, and this somehow even makes sense if one understands that in Prussian Germany, in addition to the military, the university was seen as the vehicle

for social advancement, i.e. to (almost) equaling the nobility. This is completely different in the republic of France, with the significant exception of its extremely elitist utilitarian higher education, or in the U.S.-American republic where the academic has been seen as responsible for doing research for social improvement and justice, but it is also different in the very egalitarian Nordic countries, and obviously international cooperation is often more pleasant with these colleagues.

When I had studied education in Zurich, the history of education was largely the history of Platonism. We read through centuries of work to find out where Platonism was to be discovered. We learned a lot, but it was very one-sided. Social history and institutional history were ignored, and something like the linguistic or cultural turn did exist at that time, somewhere, but not in Zurich: Platonic ideas were eternal truths, not constructions that were also connected to power. From today's perspective, I would have liked to have been confronted with the multitude of historiographies, with the multitude of ways of imagining the world – in other words, what I try to teach my own students.

MV&AA: *Looking at recent social as well as cultural developments, which are the most pressing problems we, as history of education scholars, are dealing with in the present? What could the discipline do to solve these problems?*

DT: I am not of the opinion that science has to solve social problems, at least not until it has solved its epistemological and methodological challenges, which often have to do with national patterns of thought. The most pressing social and cultural problems have to be solved by politics. After all, «problems» are often cultural constructions, and before attempting to solve them with a lot of educational morality, the effective urgency of the problems should be analyzed. As already mentioned, educational thinking is still too much guided by the conviction that many problems are to be solved educationally, instead of the educational sciences asking itself where this «educationalization» comes from, which is namely from Protestantism, which as a religious attitude and conviction has easily survived so-called secularization and lives on, especially in the languages of psychology and education. We should first analyze our historically concealed languages with their inherent value systems before we try to save the world in their service.

MV&AA: *In 1992, Francis Fukuyama foresaw *The End of History* and argued for global dominance of Western ideals (democracy, capitalism, individualism) after the defeat of the USSR and the end of the Cold War – a misprediction he later corrected. In your later publications, you contribute some critical accounts on the harmonization of education through international organizations (i.e. the OECD) and globalization in general. Do we soon witness the end of (national) education?*

DT: Quite the opposite. What Fukuyama, like the representatives of world culture theory, said at the time was sheer national imperialism, which was then sold as «globalization.» Because so many colleagues have devoted themselves to attacking, interpreting or defending «globalized» educational reality (it's getting boring), they have missed investigating what really works: nationalism. At the seats of even formally democratic states are elected nationalist nutcases like Trump, Johnson, Erdogan, Orban, Modi, Netanyahu, Duda, Morrison, etc. We would need to understand how curricula has helped to generate these national sentiments in their future citizens, which can become radically nationalistic in times of (perceived)

danger. This, in turn, means that educational research must penetrate the cultural construction of the nation and the political order systems of states and their forms of government and leave the comfort zone of moralizing about the world.

MV&AA: *Do you have any wishes for or any other thoughts about the history of education which you would like to share with us?*

DT: Write interesting things and ask yourself again and again: «who cares?» Too much is written without intellectual ambition just so that it is printed and published, but who in the world should be interested in it is hardly asked. I actually require my students to be able to tell me why the work they want to write is important and for whom. What is it a case of? What is the bigger story that is of interest beyond the case itself? I always say, for example, why should anyone in Adelaide, Addis Ababa and Anchorage care about your story? This is also one of the crucial questions we ask while deciding on whether to publish a submitted article or book review in our *International Journal for the Historiography of Education*. It helps to be more international and in turn to produce better historiography, even if the case is national.

MV&AA: *Thank you for insightful answers, it was a real pleasure talking to you! All the best for your future endeavors.*

DT: Thank you for your interest in my work.