

**PAUL MORT AND PAX AMERICANA: FURTHER THOUGHTS ON GLOTZER'S "AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH IN THE DOMINIONS: MAKING THE CASE FOR DECENTRALIZATION IN INTER-WAR SOUTH AFRICA"**

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In a recent issue of NYSFEA's *Educational Change*,<sup>1</sup> Richard Glotzer offered an interesting perspective on Paul Mort, a professor of education at Columbia Teachers College in the 1920's, whose career extended well into the 1950's. While Mort was one of the beacons in school administration and finance, he also expanded his horizons toward the Union of South Africa, a country within the British Commonwealth. This was done with the intention of reforming (how many times have we heard this throughout the 20th century?) South Africa's school system. It seemed an odd voyage on which to embark, but Mort did just that.

Who was Paul Mort and who was his mentor, Isaac Kandel? Richard Glotzer does provide some detail on Mort. A Midwest school teacher at the age of 16, Mort obtained a BS degree at 21 and was later principal and school superintendent. For bright, inspired young men the academic heights were unlimited in the early 20th century. Columbia Teachers College in the 1930's and continuing well into the 1950's was arguably the greatest academic center for the study of education. The often told tale acquired currency as the department of social foundations of education and the department of school administration ascended to greater power and prestige. Mort easily found a home at Teachers College.

In his fine article Glotzer addressed some critical questions regarding the career of Mort and the curious interest he had in the educational system of the Union of South Africa. From among the other questions that need attention, I will focus on two: Why, of all the

places, focus on the educational issues in South Africa? And secondly, was this work consistent with the rest of Mort's scholarship and studies in school finance? One should also ask: why were so many of the Teachers College faculty interested in the educational systems of the British Crown colonies, when America by 1933 was in the middle of a depression with the average wage 60 percent less than in 1929 and unemployment reaching a frightening 25 percent levels? Part of the answer lay in the aforesaid claim that TC was not only going international in its scope and stature, but, as Professor Glotzer notes, students such as E. G. Malherbe from South Africa were attending and obtaining graduate degrees from TC in unprecedented numbers. Malherbe, in particular Glotzer commented, had been an office mate of Paul Mort and by the 1930's both were among the leading educational researchers in their respective countries.

A number of interesting circumstances aligned themselves at this time as well. The increasingly powerful Carnegie Corporation under Frederick Keppel had the monies to dispense on projects that supported the Corporation's "social policies" and those that seemed to serve America's interest. For young academics still in mid-career this opportunity could not be passed up. This interest represented the optimism, so manifest then, that the school models of educational administration and financial structure could perhaps be applied to South Africa's educational conditions. By the mid-1930's Mort was one of TC's leading educational researchers and an academic expert on state school fiscal matters. Blunt and yet so charismatic, as many associated with him claimed, Mort commanded almost unchallenged power in the East when it came to state fiscal expertise, and combined with an unsurpassed understanding of the politics of writing educational legislation, his influence was vast. As Glotzer makes so clear, Mort had set new directions with fiscal options aimed toward "equalization" formulas designed to bring greater balance of money spent per pupil regardless of any districts' wealth or taxable potential<sup>2</sup>.

Given this emphasis it is interesting to observe that Mort and

his generation while remaining oblivious to the moral implications for legal segregation in America and apartheid in South Africa, saw a universality among the world's nations particularly those of the Western world and those that had a long history with the Western nations that colonized them. For Mort and his colleagues it meant that the administrative forms and the fiscal support structure that seemed so successful in the United States could serve countries as New Zealand or South Africa equally well. This represented a *Pax Americana* that began at the turn of the century and continued well into the 1980's. Whether it was led by politicians, corporate heads, endowment benefactors or leading educators, America was seen as a model for education and its meritocratic social structure could be emulated and copied. America's elite schools of education such as TC seemed confident that the American common school was an ideal model to keep upgrading, refining and strengthening. It was inconceivable for leading educators to envision any other educational alternative. Many of these educators were among the major voices of progressive education and this movement, although hardly one without contested issues over direction and purpose, had at least the belief that progressive schooling was directly descendant from the 19th century common school. In addition to this institutional model they had a misplaced optimism about the power of the common school; and it appears, from hindsight, that this faith in some universal model of public supported education that would fit all circumstances was simply naive. We know today, of course, so much more about the subtle interactive components of a culture and its schools, the curriculum variations that must take account of cultural differences within the history of any given nation.

So, in many ways this perceived departure of Mort's from his major career paths was not such a radical step after all. It was in fact an easy transition from his work on state fiscal policy in America to that of other nations in the world, particularly those eager (and abetted by American investments) to adopt a model of schooling that was seen as extremely successful in the eyes of the world and further reinforced by the words of America's educational elite situated in

many of her fine universities. On the practical side, research monies from willing foundations were available at this time. Isaac Kandel had a major international study enterprise going for him at TC; and, since he represented that growing number of educators who became disenchanted with the direction the Progressive Movement had taken by the 1930's, a closer look at him highlights some significant issues. Did he become more interested in the comparative study of education of other countries as he saw more and more of America's schools falling under the spell of the child centered pedagogy? He had long been an educational theorist and for the greater part of his career interested in comparative education. Might it not be tempting to explore the rise of state school organizations in a climate where the fierce debates over curriculum directions were for all purposes absent? Were foreign posts seen as virgin territory that would allow American ingenuity to create something of an ideal system of education unblemished by the ideological struggles (such as strong child-centered schools vs. affirmative social role schools) that characterized the American school of curriculum debates?

Not the least of the ideological struggles was that between those who sided with a strong child centered position for schooling and those who were beginning to push for an affirmative social role for the schools.

Although most of the TC faculty were solidly within the progressive camp of educators, there was hardly unanimity among these professors. Kandel in particular and most likely Mort began to side with the more conservative side of progressive education. As America in the 1930's became mired deeper in the depression and the perceived threats to the social order became more alarming, a certain group of the TC faculty, later known as the "TC crowd" urged American schools to directly address the economic urgency and challenged educators to build a new social order in the famous words of one of this group, George Counts. The men who spoke from this extreme wing of the progressive education movement included Counts, John Childs, Harold Rugg, and to some degree William Kilpatrick. In many

ways this group of social reconstructionists was becoming the leading voice among progressive educators in spite of their small numbers and indeed it could be argued they represented the most articulate challenge to the school of thought variously known as child centered education. As Herbert Kleibard has drawn out in his studies, this child centered position provided the original network of ideas that gave substance to the early progressive education movement and enlisted none other than John Dewey in their support for their counter curriculum proposal against the entrenched classical studies curriculum. So the Progressive Education Association's bias toward this child centered pedagogy could well be understood, but in this new social climate of the 1930's, this position was seen as grossly ignoring the larger social concerns of depression ridden America.

At stake was the monumental task of preserving what educators cherished in the individualism of the child, while trying to prepare youngsters for their social responsibilities in a complex, industrialized modern society. These depression years brought the ideological tensions to the forefront seldom seen with progressive educators. The question now was just how seriously should educators take Dewey's words expressed years earlier in his seminal publication, *The School and Society*? The issue, indeed, now had a sense of urgency. American society could not afford the excessive individualism that seemed to set the tone for much of the early history of the Progressive Education Association, and neither could a large number of American schools, at least, as expressed by the social reconstructionists.<sup>iii</sup> For Edward Krug this struggle over ideas and indeed school practices, meant that American education began to give greater attention to social goals as he said it "renewed approval of the ideals of social efficiency and control."<sup>4</sup>

Esteemed thinkers from Plato to Tousseau set forth their views of the good and just society, and further attempted to show the relationship of individuals to the collective society. No less a thinker as Dewey joined this debate in his many writings. In his *Individualism, Old and New*, written in 1929, he tried again to address this problem

because of renewed attention it received in educational debates from a variety of social scientists and educators.

As usual, Dewey was most subtle and at times his rich ideas were obscured in a wordy vagueness, and as a result some dismissed Dewey altogether. He attempted to redefine the sanctity of individual freedom within a modern industrial age, and did not shrink from this difficult task, ever fearless and idealistic (i.e., not in a philosophical sense, but in remaining ever optimistic about future possibilities for Americans). He had considerable sympathy for the older conservative view of individual freedom seen as potentiality unlimited in its capacity for development. Freedom is not complete in itself, Dewey went on, “waiting to be bestowed on the world,” instead it will develop only through interactions with actual social conditions.

For Dewey these “actual conditions” included the corporate world. Ideals and individual freedoms will only be realized as they are forged in remaking the social conditions that advance the potentials of individuals and mankind. As was often with Dewey, he was of course saying the industrial order of the past two centuries is emotionally and morally bankrupt, but it is the world we now have. He did not present the grim details of this social breakdown as Karl Marx did, but he did lay claim to new directions Americans could take. These directions are not found in retreating to the older notion of individuals finding resources within themselves; it is found in “many and multiple associations.” These are the only means “by which the true potential of individuality can be realized.”<sup>5</sup>

Dewey put this conviction nicely in an apt Emersonian metaphor:

“To gain an integrated individuality each of us needs to cultivate his own garden. But there is no fence about this garden: it is no sharply marked-off enclosure. Our garden is the world, in the angle at which it touches our own manner of being. By accepting the corporate and industrial world in which we live, and by thus fulfilling the precondition for interaction with it, we, who are also parts of the moving present, create

ourselves as we create an unknown future.”<sup>6</sup>

This was a Dewey terribly concerned about the social and individual disintegration in American culture. But the individualism of the past was not a solution to this disaster and he was equally alarmed by fascist and communist reactions. A renewed social intelligence was needed and the nation’s schools could become part of the renewal. All was not lost in the midst of the corporate and industrial growth in American society.

In the center of this debate, alarm understandably arose over the ascending fascist and communist states in Europe and their perceived threats to what many cherished in the American form of democracy. As we now are aware these fears may not have been grounded in fact, but the perceptions nevertheless added another emotional layer to the debate over child centered pedagogy and schooling for social responsibility. At a time when any stand for a stronger social role for the school was branded socialism, or even worse communism, then any defense was bound to throw the social supporters not only on the defense, but often forced them to side once again with the child centered progressives. Dewey, for all his acuity, was often in this position. This was not an easy time to advocate publically a favored ideological position.

Reconstructionists and other sympathizers pursuing a greater social purpose for the school, in their enthusiasm, had to avoid pushing a social efficiency position to fascist extremes. There was an element of indoctrination in their zealotry that put them uncomfortably close to some of the extreme social efficiency claims for the social role of the school. Kandel in 1935, in fact, spoke against reconstructionism stating that trying to build a new social order was granting “the right to conduct propaganda in the schools.”<sup>7</sup>

## II

Issac Kandel and in some measure Paul Mort, as TC colleagues, inevitably were thrown into this controversy. Kandel, of the two as

his various publications have shown, was far more the theoretical thinker and thereby became equally well known for his “essentialist” stand which in a curious way aligned him, at least indirectly, with the social reconstructionists in his stinging criticism of the child centered pedagogy. But in his rebuke of the classroom catering to the individual, he attributed it to much of the pragmatic philosophy underneath this pedagogy, something Counts and Childs could not accept. This showed just how subtle and complex the debate over the social role of the school had become in these difficult times in America. The alignments on various sides of the issues were not easily distinguished, or to put it another way, these intellectual positions could not be easily compartmentalized into forms that could help scholars make sense of the debates. Drawing the lines too sharply between let’s say the social conservatives and the so-called progressives reconstructionists distorts the views in question. Both Kandel and Dewey in their many writings reveal the tensions and, indeed, the frustrations within these intellectual distinctions.

As I said, by the 1930’s Kandel was a leading spokesperson for the essentialist school curriculum. The dangers besetting America’s schools, at least those Kandel observed, were the pedagogies that focused too readily on the here and now, “felt needs,” “social issues,” “real world problems.” For Kandel these represented a thoughtless leap to methods that were inspired by a pragmatic “cult of uncertainty” as he called it. This was not a direct attack on Dewey, although the very title of Kandel’s Kappa Delta Pi lecture published in the early 1940’s, *The Cult of Uncertainty*, would lead the reader to believe otherwise. However, Kandel was quite sympathetic to the message delivered in one of Dewey’s last statements on education, the influential *Experience and Education* published in 1938. In that book, students of Dewey will recall, he severely criticized the excessive “bookish” cultural curriculum favored by traditionalists such as R. M. Hutchins, but he was even more hostile toward the child centered progressives who were becoming exceedingly romantic in their views of the learning child, while overlooking the need for the intellectual levels of experience. It appeared these progressives ignored

the reasoning intellect and the need for its cultivation.

Kandel chose to address the two most publicized progressive movements in education, the aforementioned child centered pedagogy and social reconstructionism. Both were at bottom, Kandel concluded, the products of pragmatism. The one, the child centered position chose to ignore the cultural heritage of America; the other, reconstructionism, although heavily critiquing the prevailing American cultural and industrial scene, did not examine this heritage well. In chastising American culture reconstructionism overlooked its strengths. For Kandel and his followers (as we have said, Mort gave most of his attention to fiscal policy and never directly got involved in their curriculum debates) American schools had to reassert a commitment and respect for the traditions of western humanism to foster the civic virtues they valued within a democratic society. As America's schools searched for a theory of education Kandel could only see the hand of pragmatism emphasizing the immediate needs of learners in a society in which the prevailing climate of uncertainty looked far too much toward the practical advantages of any course of study. Aggravated further by a false notion of the aristocracy of the classical studies (the classical heritage was all but swept away in school studies), Kandel was understandably horrified. Yet Kandel clearly missed the subtleties of Dewey's pragmatism; he could only see a philosophy morally adrift never standing firm on any set of human values.

Kandel and other essentialists looked to the cultural heritage of the past, at least that part of western culture educators could agree upon, and perhaps that may have been easier to identify in 1930 than today. Nevertheless, it was this liberal education, the bedrock of educational conservatives that seemed the answer for American educational dilemmas. They evoked the age-old argument that it is a liberal education that provides the tools, techniques, and the intellectual discipline for understanding and controlling man's affairs. The idea was (and remains) as old as Aristotle's writings and this position always had an audience throughout 20th century discussions over

the course of study to which schools should subscribe.<sup>8</sup> The number of educators who tilted in this direction was remarkably small, although they represented a powerful and modestly influential voice.

It was within this landscape Kandel and Mort labored. Both increasingly looked to other countries not only for potential research but perhaps with faith and hope that some form of the American common school could become the leading means of education in these far away lands. This in itself is ironic because New York City, the home base for TC, in the 1930's was a mess; as has been shown by documented studies and detailed analyses, by many who have looked at the power structure and the public administrations of this remarkable city.

Added to years of administrative neglect, graft, and corruption the deepening depression aggravated and multiplied the ills in the city's civic life. This was evident in the deterioration of the city's parks, public spaces and the city's schools; and it was true in reform administrations as well as in the administrations of the smoothly oiled Tammany Hall machine.<sup>9</sup> There was immediate cause for concern right in the home base of many of these leading progressive voices.

Did any of this urban deterioration and suffering of the city's inhabitants strike the TC progressive professoriate as outrageous? If so, little was said other than in broad claims about the effects of the depression on the social conditions in America as a whole. Again the question: when their own New York City desperately needed fiscal and thoughtful attention, why turn to the problems of South Africa? The irony in this choice says something about the lack of a deep moral commitment to the immediate school conditions that were evident among progressive educators.

### III

As a coda to this discussion, I would be remiss if some comment were not made concerning the Union of South Africa some 70 years after the period examined in this essay. South Africa and the

United States shared some common characteristics. They were both the subjects of England through substantial portions of their history and hence the free whites were very much a product of the English culture. Second, they are multi-racial societies with a slave holding past. Legal segregation existed largely in America and the practice of apartheid was written into South Africa's legal institutions. Thus, it is readily understood why white scholars in the 1930's did not respond with any moral concern over South Africa's policies of apartheid since very similar legal restrictions were in place on blacks in America. The two nations were quite similar in other less important ways: population makeup and the sheer numbers of people, powerful white ruling classes and, of course, scholarly exchange programs such as those at TC.

By the 1990's South Africa arrived at a negotiated break up of the apartheid regime, but as with the United States in the 1960's this in itself did not guarantee full citizenship rights in terms of fairness of treatment and justice to black people. In the wake of a story of a violent central government that often responded brutally to even the most peaceful protests of segregation, the country has not found the means to take advantage of the opportunity of this newfound legal freedom. Hence, South Africa in recent years remains one of the most dangerous countries in the world that is not formally at war. The transition to a more inclusive post-apartheid society has not been easy and added to this burden is an impending AIDS crisis of epidemic proportions. Fear of crime, paranoia grips everyone, white, black, Asian, the rich and the poor alike. These conditions inform the nation's politics and as observers have noted it has contributed to the ambivalent response to the AIDS threat. Various AIDS dissidents particularly in the United States have not heeded the scientific facts regarding the HIV virus link to AIDS, instead look to a variety of environmental and social factors as the precipitating cause of AIDS. This view has captured the attention of President Thaba Mbeki and within the confusion of the nation's politics, South Africa is not responding to this impending health disaster. However, this is only one aspect of this highly unstable nation. South Africa never experienced real war

conditions (such as the Civil War in America) in its anti-apartheid movement, however, a post war atmosphere prevails, a nation with no visionary leaders willing to confront frightening health and social problems.<sup>10</sup>

So we come back to those years when Kandel and Mort looked to the school system in white South Africa for purposes that still remain unclear except to say they too easily cast their faith in the schools (an American form at that) as an institution of social change without understanding the fuller cultural context within which these schools would operate. It is with some sadness to see this land so wrenched with social dislocations some 70 years following the earnest efforts by Kandel and Mort to bring to it the kind of humanity their brand of American progressive education envisioned possible.

I leave the reader with a thought raised earlier. Did Kandel, grown weary of the curriculum debates in America, look to other lands where perhaps a brand “essentialism” could find a comfortable beginning at least within the context of let’s say South African culture? I am sure he could see that his essentialist brand would never attain great popularity amidst the many progressive voices vying for attention in American schools debates. We will never know for sure, but it strikes me that there was a dual side to these progressive idealists and perhaps a naivete’ in avoiding moral choices or perhaps in not seeing the moral issues at stake in the case of South Africa or for that matter in America.

To be fair, in assessing choices made in those difficult depression years, it is always important to avoid imposing contemporary thinking on times past. Still, there are judgements to be made or at least serious questions raised about the choices made by leaders in the past for they often set pathways that later generations followed - sometimes to dubious ends.

Paul Mort and Isaac Kandel were but two men in the emerging study of education and schooling (nationally and internationally) who represented the best of their generation, the educational elites be-

tween the two World Wars. Their contributions to the educational literature of ideas and fiscal policy stand on their own merits. Their venture into the South African culture, however, strikes me as a good example of *Pax Americana*, a doctrine that so often saturated 20th century foreign policy and, yes, education in a manner that hardly lifted the specter of humanity to the level their public statements proclaimed.

This period in American history between the two World Wars remains ever fascinating. The society and its thinkers labored to extend many of the benefits of the progressive period and reinterpreted some of these benefits while America began to dominate the world in so many ways with its unprecedented power and wealth. But as this brief excursion into the South African episode revealed, many intellectuals were having difficulties finding comfort in adapting the humane principles of progressivism to an America that was becoming increasingly powerful, bureaucratic, and beset with a number of conflicting ideologies. Defining America's role in the policies of other nations remains as perplexing today as it was in this earlier Progressive period.

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#### ENDNOTES

1. Richard Glotzer, "American Educational Research in the Dominions: Making the Case for Decentralization in Interwar South Africa," *Educational Change* (Spring 1997), pp. 52-65.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 56-57.
3. It should be noted that even in its heyday the influence of the PEA particularly on American secondary schools was marginal. See David L. Angus and Jeffrey E. Mirel, *The Failed Promise of the American High School*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1999, in their recent study of secondary education in America.
4. Edward Krug, *The Shaping of the American High School*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972, vol. 2, p. 221.
5. Dewey was equivocal in his thoughts on American capitalism. Theo-

retically, as I have tried to make clear, Dewey was not yet calling for the demolition of the capitalist economic structure. David Kennedy, writing on the intellectual discontent with the liberalism of Roosevelt's New Deal, cites Dewey that a compromise with a decaying system is impossible. That seems to draw Dewey into a far left radical camp where the philosophical Dewey would not be entirely comfortable. No doubt there was sufficient ambiguity between the social Dewey with certain political convictions and Dewey the pragmatic philosopher. See David Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

6. John Dewey, *Individualism, Old and New*. New York, 1929, Capricorn edition, 1962, p. 171.
7. See Kandel, "Academic Freedom and Noblesse Oblige," *Teachers College Record* (December, 1935), quoted in Krug, *Shaping*, Vol. 2, p. 238.
8. As intellectual confluences shift, it is interesting to note that within the last decade or so the value of a strong liberal education for all students is once again gaining much support. The lack of a general level of knowledge among our youth, increasing dissatisfaction with various brands of vocational education, and a sense of the undemocratic quality of the multilevel curricular structures for different populations of students have once more brought the arguments for a strong liberal education to the front in the various curriculum debates. Might it not be that prior to the 1990's this support primarily came from the arts and sciences faculties in America's elite colleges and universities.
9. See a number of studies on the state of New York City in this period, but among the finest Robert Caro's *The Power Broker*, New York: Random House, 1975, remains a superb work.
10. For one of the best reports on the current health crisis facing South Africa see Helen Epstein, "The Mystery of AIDS in Africa," in *The New York Review of Books*, July 20, 2000, pps. 50- 55.