

**Volume 3 Number 1 (2009): 154-157**

<http://www.infactispax.org/journal/>

**Reclaiming a Democratic Political Community:  
A Review of**

**Paul Theobald, *Education Now: How Rethinking America's Past Can Change Its Future* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2009).**

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In his new book, *Education Now*, historian of education Paul Theobald offers a deeply insightful and historical rigorous exploration of the interconnection between the political, economic, ideological, and educational spheres of society. His nuanced historical and philosophical analysis focuses on the *assumptions* that underlie and shape American culture, including the existence of interrelated political, economic, and educational arrangements. The basic premise of the book is that American culture is a manifestation of interrelated assumptions that underpin these arrangements. Therefore, Theobald argues that cultural change, and in turn educational change, requires a critical examination and transformation of these assumptions. Situated within the social reconstructionist and communitarian traditions of educational studies, Theobald illuminates the complex historical relationship between education and the social forces that shape it. Speaking of the interconnection of these spheres, he writes, “Changing one sphere requires change in all three (p. 5).”

It has long been recognized that education is contingent upon the specific social and political organization of the society within which it is situated.<sup>1</sup> For example, Aristotle maintains that citizenship and civic education are logical expressions of the constitutional order (*politeia*) of the society.<sup>2</sup> The *politeia* is not merely the formal juridical structure of the legal system; it comprises the basic structure of values and institutions that define the society's social organization. This orientation is of critical importance to peace studies and peace education as well. The recognition that there exists an intimate relationship between education and society is of fundamental importance to the field of peace education.

In his historical analysis Theobald demonstrates that there are at least two prominent ideological traditions, streams of thought, that underlie and shaped American culture and in turn education: (1) the Lockean, essentially Libertarian, Tradition -- the "L-Stream" and (2) the Montesquieu, essentially, Communitarian, Tradition -- the "M-Stream."

The L-Stream maintains that human nature and life are essentially economic and only secondarily political. It constitutes the tradition of *economic libertarianism*, premised upon individualism, free markets, and the pursuit of property. From this perspective, life is predominantly economic, and politics is reduced to protecting the pursuit of private property. This political philosophy is founded upon a right to *negative liberty*, a basic right to define and pursue one's own conception of the good life consistent with the equal right of others to define and pursue their own good. Implicit in this right is an assumption of about that the nature of freedom, that it constitutes *self-ownership*.<sup>3</sup> If we are self-owning, then we have an exclusive claim to the ownership of all that we produce. In other words, as free, self-owning individuals, we have a basic right to unlimited property. This understanding of liberty and property defines the L-stream and it has exerted enormous influence on American culture. Theobald documents the rise and eventual hegemony of the L-Stream in European and American history, which has placed economic individualism and the endless pursuit of property at the core of American life, including its education institutions.

This ideological assumption can be understood in terms of our orientation to life and identity. At the roots of language are the two verbs: "to be" and "to have." These

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education, Text-Book Series in Education* (New York: The Macmillan company, 1916); Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970); Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education*, revised edition ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); Werner Jaeger, *The Greeks and the Education of Man* (Annadale, NY: Bard College Papers, 1953); Plato, *The Republic*, trans. R. Larson (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Aristotle and Stephen Everson, *The Politics, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought* (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974).

verbs represent the basic dimensions of our existence: having and being.<sup>4</sup> They constitute two different orientations toward identity and relationship. Having defines the identity and relationship to the world in terms of possession. This orientation is expressed by the phrase: “I am what I have.” Under the influence of L-Stream assumptions our culture and identity assumes a deep having orientation. There is a strong tendency, often unconscious, to define our worth and the worth of others in terms of possession. Even our conceptions of educational equity and excellence are dominated by the having orientation. From this perspective, the purpose of education is the accumulation of a body of cultural artifacts that serve as background knowledge necessary for functional, predominantly economic, membership in the society. There is little concern for the inner life of the student, whether or not she will realize authentic selfhood, wide-awakeness, imagination, or critical judgment, nor, as Theobald maintains, an authentic experience of community. The chief concern is whether the appropriate body of information has been transmitted, assimilated, and regurgitated. The having orientation perpetuates a system of distributive justice that is based upon exclusive self-interest masked by claims to liberty and property. This system undermines the democratic hope of a public educational system as the great equalizer, rendering it a subtle and complex mechanism for social class reproduction. As Theobald demonstrates, this orientation leads to social dysfunction and individual unhappiness.

The logic here is simple: If I am what I have, and if what I have can, in principle, be lost, then I live in a constant state of insecurity and anxiety. From the perspective of having, the source of self-worth is found in owning the right property. Our worth here is contingent upon possession. However, being contingent our self-worth is based upon a very shaky foundation. If our self-worth is based upon ownership, then we are constantly faced with an immanent threat to our worth as a human being, for all of that can be lost at any moment. To cover our cultural and existential anxiety, we seek to possess more, grasping and craving an endless consumerism.

The “M-Stream,” however, offers an alternative orientation. It maintains that human nature and life are primarily social and political, and only secondarily economic. From this perspective, sociability is the measure of justice and authentic political community the core of a republic. This tradition is essentially communitarian. Human well-being is centered in a life lived in community with others. The communitarian, M-stream tradition issues from a being, rather than a having, orientation. It maintains that we find our authentic identity and in turn our fundamental happiness in authentic relationship with others. Human life finds its meaning in community; participation in

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<sup>4</sup> Stephen Batchelor, *Alone with Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism*. (New York: Grove Press, 1983); Erich Fromm, *Man for Himself: An Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1947); Erich Fromm, *The Art of Being* (New York: Continuum, 1992); Erich Fromm, *The Essential Fromm: Life between Having and Being.*, ed. Rainer Funk (New York: Continuum, 1995); Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be?* (New York: Continuum, 1976; reprint, 2000).

the political community is thereby a basic element of the good life. An education for reasoned judgment, for, in Theobald's terms, "genius and virtue," is primary.

As Theobald demonstrates, this communitarian tradition is also deeply grounded in our history. It, however, has been eclipsed in our cultural life. It can though, as Theobald suggests, be reclaimed. Perhaps Theobald's most important insight in this book is that there exist critical historical junctures, often periods of social instability, wherein alternative assumptions and world views compete for primacy. The orientation that emerges in these moments profoundly shapes the future constitutional order of the society. Libertarianism has triumphed over Communitarianism in keep moments of our history. However, Theobald argues that we are currently immersed in a critical historical juncture. He is hopeful, and he makes concrete economic, political, and education recommendations to propel a shift in our political, economic, and educational assumptions toward a Communitarian perspective. He maintains that there exists a profound path, present in our history, but yet taken, that offers a brighter, more fulfilling future.

He asks us to contemplate whether to continue down the path of economic libertarianism or whether to change course toward a democratic alternative. He asks us to contemplate whether economic materialism trumps all, or whether a life lived in robust political community offers the greatest chance of human fulfillment.

*Education Now* is an important book, deeply grounded in history and philosophy. It offers insight into our past as it has shaped our present, and contemplates rich alternatives for political and educational renewal.