

Thomas A. Michaud
Dean, School of Professional Studies
West Liberty University, USA

Philosophical Reflections on the “New Progressivism” in Education

The title of this essay implies at least three themes which will be addressed, though each with varying degrees of emphasis. First of all, this essay is just that, an “essay,” or more precisely, a “philosophical essay.” It does not offer detailed accounts, penetrating textual studies or in-depth social scientific analyses of the New Progressivism and U.S. Education. It does, however, communicate philosophical observations emerging from over four decades of experience in higher education, and higher education is, in fact, the ultimate source from which U.S. education flows. University departments and colleges of education, which teach teachers at all levels how and what to teach, have enormous influence, indeed, power over the educational system. To reflect, then, on the philosophical bases of the university-governmental complex of U.S. education from the perspective of extensive higher education experience enables one to assume a vantage point for a comprehensive, critical purview.

U. S. education has been defined and governed by higher education’s departments and colleges of education for almost a century. For the primary and secondary schools, public and even the majority of private schools, require certifications of teachers which can only be obtained from the university education programs. In addition, national accrediting organizations, teachers’ unions, and federal and state educational governing boards and agencies, heavily regulate, if not micro-manage

the educational system. U.S. education is predominately “government education” which is controlled by teachers, administrators and *educrats*, whose pedagogies, policies and authority are ultimately derived from the departments and colleges of education. Their political and educational philosophies rule, and conformity, obedience is mandatory.

The rapid growth of homeschooling and other alternatives, such as on-line schools from the primary through college levels, is in large part a reaction against government education. Citizens, whose philosophical positions and religious credos oppose the government system, have taken it upon themselves to establish their own options. These efforts, unfortunately, have been beleaguered by the government system and strongly challenged by the university education establishment. The movement, nevertheless, continues to grow, resisting conformity at every step, and “gaming the system” when it can to secure their freedom to educate as they choose.

The second theme implied by this essay’s title is that if a “New Progressivism” is being stipulated, there must have been an “Old Progressivism.” Obviously, then, the question arises: What is the difference between Old and New Progressivism in education? Addressing this question leads into the third theme implied by the title, namely what are some of the philosophical disabilities with the New Progressivism, which, as already mentioned, have caused citizen opposition and contributed to the growth of homeschooling and other alternative ways of education.

The Old Progressivism has historical roots which extend as deeply as the European Enlightenment with Modern Rationalism and Positivism. To express it in sketchy “broad strokes,” its origins are with thinkers and works such as Marquis de Condorcet’s *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795), August Comte’s *Course on Positive Philosophy* (six volumes, (1830-1842) and *System of a Positive Polity or Treatise on Sociology and Instituting the Religion of Humanity* (1851-1854). Comte’s friend, John Stewart Mill, was also a main figure in this lineage with the later editions of his

Principles of Political Economy and Some of the Applications on Social Philosophy (original edition 1840, “Chapters on Socialism,” 1874).

U. S. Progressivism arose in the late 19th and early 20th, and it adapted European views, such as those of the aforementioned works, to its indigenous pragmatism, especially in regard to educational philosophy. Principal thinkers such as John Dewey and William James advocated a reformist social agenda, which could be operationalized. One of the main means of such reform was through reform of the schools and teaching. Dewey’s educational Progressivism spawned a transformation of schooling, which, in fact, was in many ways sorely needed. Dewey’s views called for “child-centered” and “social reconstructionist” approaches so that schools could become more effective agencies of a democratic society.¹

Though Progressive educational reforms were significant in the first half of the 20th, they were moderate in comparison to the more extreme post-WWII changes in the 1950s, 1960s and continuing to today. The Old Progressivism was superseded by the New Progressivism, with the specific difference being the extent of the politicization of educational approaches. To be sure Progressive education was always bound to politics and government reform, but the ways in which progressivism instantiated its politics in education became thoroughly ubiquitous leading to the university-governmental complex the U.S. has today.

The social reconstruction agenda of the Old became socio-cultural engineering through schooling. Schools are not just more effective agencies for a democratic society, but are institutions for the political formation of students, and university educational programs are the centers which train the teachers, administrators and educators to carry out the New Progressivism’s political designs.

The philosophical platforms that subtend the university-governmental complex of the New Progressivism are, to put it mildly, disturbing. They are fraught with shallow, ill-formed views which can confuse and

¹ “A Brief Overview of Progressive Education,” <http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/articles/proged.html>. Accessed 31 March 2013.

debilitate the minds of impressionable students. But, what are those views and what principles do they embody? Experience has taught me there are at least four BIG principles that drive and advance New Progressivism in education.

Those four BIG principles are:

1. Collectivism Triumphs over Individuals

Progressivism's fundamental objective is to achieve the greatest political and economic good for the greatest number of people. This aim is coupled with the supposition: the good of the many outweighs the good of the few.² For Progressives, these axioms establish their concept of the common good, which is clearly a majoritarian precept.

Connected with their devotion to such a common good are their efforts to seek social and economic justice above all else, and to secure government by, of, and for the people. Progressives, accordingly, favor large central government authority, interventionist economics, a mixed political economy of capitalism and socialism, though weighted in favor of socialism and government redistribution of wealth.³ They oppose what they perceive as government by corporations and the excesses of individual wealth and property. The common or collective good for the people is a primary value and any individual good is truly good only if it serves the collective.

It seems at points, however, that Progressivism's preeminent collective is undermined by their individualized pro-choice stances. This is actually not so, and it is most clear in the government schools. Some illustrations from experience will show what this means.

For many years, I designed and conducted leadership and ethics seminars for primary and secondary school teachers. In these seminars

² "Educational Progressivism," <http://www.progressiveliving.org/progressivism>. Accessed 2 April 2013.

³ "Progressivism's Journal," <http://progressivism.livejournal.com/profile>. Accessed 4 April 2013.

I typically raised controversial topics which I knew would challenge the teachers, since they were topics that were directly related to policies at their schools. In one case, I focused on the issue of having students sing traditional Christmas carols during the Christmas season. After much spirited discussion among the groups one teacher stood up and stridently stated that her school’s policy is to ban any carols, like *Silent Night*, that have religious meanings. I asked why and whether she agreed. She responded that she agreed entirely and explained that if one student is offended by singing such carols and chooses not to sing, then the whole school should not be allowed to sing them. I then asked what if all of the school’s students except that one really want to sing the traditional carols. She insisted that she was strongly pro-choice for individuals, and no school group should impose their choices on any individual. Her colleagues voiced their support for her “courageous” stance.

I accepted their views for the moment, but later in the seminar, I raised another issue. Suppose in a sex education class, a 14 year old student brings a letter from his parents that he does not want to attend classes which teach him such things as putting on condoms correctly, teach him that only homophobes oppose same-sex marriage, and teach him that sexual abstinence is impossible to live up to.

The teachers buzzed for a while, and then one stood and stated that his school’s policy is that the student would be allowed to leave the class and do homework in the library, but the class will continue. I then asked the obvious question: Why with a pro-choice policy, would the Christmas carols be banned because of the choice of one individual student, and the sex education classes continue, though without the offended student?

The teachers poured various answers upon me, and the gist of all of them was that the Christmas carols do not serve the common good of education while the sex education classes do. It was confirmed for me that Progressive education’s politicized common good was not in any literal sense the good of the many. Their common good was what they believed served their agenda for what the collective ought to be

taught, regardless if their desired collective was really not of, by and for the people.

Progressive education is fraught with such flawed philosophy. Collectivism triumphs over the individual or even the majority of the individuals only to make the collective conform to the morality and politics the Progressives aim to instantiate.

2. Utopianism and the Limitless Perfectibility of Humanity

Progressives' zealous belief in collectivism, even when it makes little logical sense, is related to their undaunted commitment that a society, a nation and even the world can be engineered into a utopia wherein egalitarianism, peace and justice reign, and evil is eliminated. Like the "New Prometheus," Progressives further believe that their government education systems, as well as a "nanny state" which regulates out of existence all risks, such as health, motor vehicle, and employment, can transform and perfect humanity. Their vision of utopia through government engineering is their supreme value for the collective.

If individuals do not accept their utopian vision, no matter even if it is the majority, they are, for the Progressives, just not enlightened, not fully evolved and have to be engineered by government education and legislation to be made to conform. They must learn to hope and change properly, in order to abide by the superior vision of the Progressives, because that vision is the only way in which utopian ideals can be achieved and evil eliminated. Progressive utopianism is the moral standard: whatever serves that vision is good, whatever contradicts it is evil.

Today, after the horrific shooting tragedies in Newtown, Connecticut and Aurora, Colorado, Progressive educators are convinced that madmen with guns must be eliminated to secure the path to utopia. It is not the madmen on which they focus, however, but it is the guns which must be eliminated. Progressive educators throughout the U.S. now believe

that all students of any age must be engineered to reject, if not despise guns or any weapons, for that matter, which includes even imaginary guns and weapons. Their zeal has resulted in some bizarre cases.

A seven year old child was punished by suspension from school for chewing on his pastry in such a way that according to his teacher it sort of looked like a hand gun. The child's protests that he never intended to chew his pastry into a gun shape were dismissed as irrelevant. Another young child playing an imaginary game with an empty box on the school playground was also suspended. He was pretending that he was a virtuous warrior and had trapped all evil in the world in the box, and then exploded the box destroying all the evil. The child, of course, could not understand that the imaginary evil he pretended was the wrong sort of evil the Progressive teachers and administrators imagined as threatening their utopian vision. The Progressive imagination of evil punished and suppressed the child's imagination: even the imaginations of children should be engineered when they do not align with Progressives' imagined utopia.

3. Nature is a Construct

This principle in regard to practice is interpreted quite literally. Physical and biological nature is defined by the Progressives in whatever manner fulfills their utopian designs. Nature becomes, then, a malleable, fluid phenomenon configured by political conceptions. Laws of nature are not firm but are constructed and reconstructed to support the Progressives' agenda, including within educational curricula. Certainly the New Progressivism is an extreme politicization of Dewey's reconstruction in philosophy, society and education.

Two of the most troubling examples of the politicized re-construction of nature are in regard to sexual biology and environmental science. In sex education classes, Progressives teach that homosexuality is genetically determined. A homosexual has no choice in regard to his or her sexual identity and practice. In this way, homosexuality is

constructed as natural phenomenon, and homosexual practice should not be denounced as immoral because a homosexual is only doing what comes naturally. At the same time, however, Progressives teach that sexual gender is a social construct. They even posit five diverse genders which ought to be socially and politically recognized, namely, heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

It is indeed the case that social influences do contribute to forming gender roles, but to maintain that gender is entirely a social construct is simply to ignore the laws of nature regarding genetic and chromosomal make-up: xx is female and xy is male. Progressives, therefore, on the one hand appeal to “genetic determinism” to claim that homosexuality is “natural”, and, on the other hand, dismiss natural genetics and chromosomes to support their politics of gender diversity. This contradiction does not matter because for them nature is such a malleable construct. Natural science is politicized science in service of educating students in the social justice of sexuality and gender that the Progressives advocate.

Another area in which nature is constructed to advance the Progressive agenda is the phenomenon of “global warming.” Students are taught as unassailable fact that human-caused global warming, or climate change, is a dire threat to global justice. Rich nations are destroying the planet with their carbon pollution and causing poorer nations and people to suffer the threats of massive natural catastrophes, like hurricanes, tsunamis, and droughts. Rich nations should therefore be punished and be made to pay poor nations for “carbon credits” to compensate for the injustice they are perpetrating. This process would redistribute the wealth of rich nations to poor nations in order to rectify the evil injustice.

In schools the students are taught that the planet must be saved from global warming and the global redistribution of wealth is the way to do it. Students are not taught, however, the “inconvenient truth” that there has not been any global warming for about a decade and a half. As the *Economist* magazine reports, “Over the past 15 years air temperatures at the earth’s surface have been flat while greenhouse emissions have continued to soar.” The *Economist* continues that, “The world added

roughly about 100 billion tons of carbon to the atmosphere between 2000 and 2010. That is about a quarter of all the CO₂ put there by humanity since 1750.”⁴

The warming trend has stopped, at least for 15 years, which contradicts the models and forecasts of the climate change experts. But, this is not taught to students and is not communicated by Progressive political leaders. The data do not conform to the agenda, so they are simply dismissed. Schools continue to make students fearful about the looming global warming cataclysms, organize special “Earth Day” events to inspire students’ pursuit of economic justice, and praise students who are striving to make themselves and their families “Go Green.” To paraphrase the Protagorean dictum, Progressive politics is the measure of all natural things.

4. Moral and Epistemological Relativism

In his January 2013 State of the Union Address, President Obama, the Progressive in Chief, exhorted the nation that Americans should not “mistake absolutism for politics” His words were directed at other politicians and citizens who hold to certain objective truths and firmly, absolutely establish their political principles upon such truths. Though Obama did not say explicitly that a “right to life” political position based on the absolute evil of abortion was such “mistaken absolutism,” the implication was apparent. Obama’s denunciation of absolutism thrilled the Progressives, for whom moral and epistemological relativism are trademarks of their beliefs and their university-governmental educational complex.

Progressive relativism permeates education in a variety of pernicious ways. One clear example is the cult of “critical thinking” that

⁴ Reported in “Global Temperature Not Up” by Rich Lowry, *Wheeling Intelligence*, 4/3/13. References are from “Global Warming Apocalypse: Perhaps a Little Later,” *The Economist*, March 30, 2013.

has ascended. John Dewey championed teaching critical thinking as a necessity for accomplishing his educational reform.⁵ What it has become, unfortunately, bears little resemblance to the logic and rhetoric he advocated. So, then, what does “critical thinking” mean today in Progressive education?

An anecdote from experience will serve to show how critical thinking is understood in the university. At a university faculty meeting a few years ago, the faculty decided to make critical thinking a key learning outcome for all students. A colleague then asked, but what is critical thinking? Another colleague from the Psychology Department spoke and said bluntly that to teach critical thinking, we must teach skepticism. The psychologist continued with words to the effect that to think critically, the students must learn to be skeptical of all truths; they must learn to be skeptical of so-called objective, universal and absolute truths; they must learn to question what is fact and question all authority.

Most of the rest of the faculty murmured agreement with the psychologist, but I was actually frightened. I asked why critical thinking was not logical reasoning, which is a cognitive tool for inquiring into truth. The “truth” part of my claim was strongly denounced since, of course, truth is unattainable. Then, various faculty also began to reject the “logical reasoning” part of my statement, since for them critical thinking can be done by the imagination without involving logic or reasoning whatsoever. At this point I realized that serious philosophical discourse was just impossible.

For Progressives, critical thinking today is a Sophistic exercise, imaginative opinions replace reasoned argumentation. There are no criteria, no logical principles, no rules for correct reasoning to assess these opinions, except whether they advance or obstruct the political agenda of Progressivism. A student is assessed as having advanced critical thinking skills if he or she can accurately express, in writing or orally, the politically correct views of the Progressives. Critical thinking has become another construct fabricated to serve the Progressive vision.

⁵ See *ibid.* Note #1.

In line with the relativistic construction of critical thinking is the way in which social research design and methods are defined and taught by Progressives. In Colin Robson’s widely used university textbook entitled ironically, *Real World Research*, he offers an enumerated list of the traits of “A Realist View of Science.” Trait #1, the prime directive, reads, “There is no unquestionable foundation for science, no ‘facts’ that are beyond dispute. Knowledge is a social and historical product. ‘Facts’ are theory-laden.”⁶

Epistemological relativism and constructivism permeate this directive. With Robson’s popular view, any sort of scientific research begins in skepticism, there are no basic facts, no foundational truths and all knowledge is relative to the time and social conditions in which it is asserted. This is today’s Progressive version of scientific research and realism. With such beginnings in skepticism, how can the ends of scientific research be anything but more skepticism?

In regard to Progressivism’s moral relativism, another example from the Leadership and Ethics seminars I conducted for teachers will be illuminating. In introducing the Ethics portion of the seminar, I asked the teachers if they accepted objective, universal standards for right and wrong, good and evil. A secondary school Social Studies teacher at a back table with his colleagues raised his hand and proclaimed that there was no real right and wrong in ethics; it was all relative to different cultures. If something is wrong for one culture, then it is wrong for that culture. The exact same thing could be right in another culture, and thereby it is right for that culture. We should not, moreover, ever impose our cultural standards on a different culture because to do so would be to disrespect that other culture. There are no higher ethical standards that can and should be applied to all cultures. His tablemate colleagues and many other teachers in the room voiced their agreement, and I was dismayed to realize that their young students are victims of their Progressive confusion.

⁶ Colin Robson, *Real World Research*, Third Edition (The Atrium, UK: John Wiley and Sons, Ltd., 2011) p. 31.

After collecting my wits I asked the Social Studies teacher whether he would agree that human slavery, the buying and selling of human beings, is always wrong. At first he seemed stunned by the question, but then, perhaps pursuing a foolish consistency, he exclaimed, "No! It depends on the culture. If a culture accepts slavery, then it is right for them, and no one from another culture that thinks slavery is evil should judge the slavery or try to eliminate it." At this point, a table in front with mostly African-American teachers erupted. They vociferously and aggressively challenged the Social Studies teacher, and he and his like-minded colleagues in the room tried to defend themselves.

I stood back and let the debate melee run its course. The African-Americans and their supporters won: human slavery is always wrong. After things had sufficiently calmed down, I resumed discussing ethics, though with the principled basis that there really are some universal right and wrongs.

This scene was a clear illustration of the moral and epistemological confusion which Progressivism imposes upon students. Without education in genuine critical reasoning, without an appreciation of truths in science, and without an understanding of the perils of relativism, Progressives and their educational systems should ultimately implode, collapse in upon themselves. This implosion, however, will likely not happen as long as the Progressives continue to control the universities, advance their seductive collectivist utopian vision, and maintain their politics within the university-governmental educational complex.

This essay has hopefully exposed and illustrated the deteriorating condition of US education in the grips the New Progressivism. The homeschooling and alternative education options are legitimate and growing, but truly at this time they are nothing but an irritant for the Progressives. As the theme of this Congress specifies, education is at a crossroads, though Progressives are presently turning it in the direction of their imagined utopia. Only solid commitment from educators and graced wisdom, can nudge Progressivism away from veering toward and finally crashing within the dystopian future they want for all of us.

Philosophical Reflections on the “New Progressivism” in Education

Summary

This philosophical essay identifies and critiques some basic principles and practices of the “New Progressivism” in US education today. An overall aim of these critiques is to offer some reasons why citizens’ dissatisfaction with “government education” is contributing to the increase in homeschooling and alternative education. Various basic principles, some express large philosophical ideas and others very specific agendas, are explained and then exemplified with anecdotal situations which expose the principles’ flaws in conception and practice.

Key words: education, Progressivism, homeschooling, alternative education, relativism