

**Toward a Usable Past**

**A Critique of Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud and their  
Significance for American Education**

[A proposal submitted to the National Institute of Education, Grants for Research in Education, submitted February 28, 1973. Not funded, with the following reviewer's comments:

- a) It was difficult to determine how you planned to handle the volume of relevant material. Reviewers felt that a more detailed analytical scheme or set of organizing questions needed to be imposed upon the literature search task to make it tractable.
- b) The same problem also potentially affects the effective use of the graduate assistants who would be screening the source material. They need to know in detail what they are looking for in the literature.
- c) Using only secondary sources, the attribution of pedagogical or social influences to particular thinkers may be tenuous.
- d) Reviewers felt that the task of writing the four -possibly fine -- books might require more than the time allocated in the proposal.]

## Toward a Usable Past

### A Critique of Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud and their Significance for American Education

- ¶1:20 *Abstract:* In this project I propose to do two things: to study the educational implications in the work of Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their followers; and to evaluate how the education of the American public is influenced by their ideas, especially by those concerning the developmental conception of man (Rousseau), the relation of the alienated person to the polity (Marx), the spread of nihilism in Western culture (Nietzsche), and the quest for therapeutic adjustment (Freud). We can find the project's rationale in Goethe's death gasp -- "Light! More light!": the ideas of a time shape all its efforts to educate; presently ideas deriving from Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are very influential; hence bringing into consciousness how their heritage influences our time would throw light on the education of the American public. My procedures will be those of the cultural historian and critic, procedures well exemplified by Jacques Barzun, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Ellul, and Raymond Aron. The implications: by clarifying the intellectual origins of powerful movements in contemporary education, the study would directly affect the goals of many who offer and seek education, formal and informal, and it would provide perspective enabling people to evaluate their pedagogical surroundings more dispassionately.
- ¶2:20 *General description and justification:* For some time, studies of the educational ideas held by great thinkers have been out of fashion. Even when such studies used to be made, they were for the most part confined to a narrow range of figures, to Pestalozzi, Herbart, Froebel, et al.; and Lawrence A. Cremin's call in *The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley* that we "inquire into the broader educational influence of such men as Marx, Darwin, Hegel, Comte, Nietzsche, Ruskin, Fichte, Goethe, Arnold, and Mill" has gone largely unanswered. In the project I propose, I intend to work towards filling this gap, building on the foundation I have laid in my study, *Man and His Circumstances: Ortega as Educator*. My plan is to scrutinize the educational ideas to be found in the work of Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, and their followers, and to elucidate how these ideas are influencing contemporary education, both for better and for worse.
- ¶3:20 A measure of the degree to which scholars writing in English have been ignoring the work of past theorists can be had by looking at the state of the literature on Rousseau, one of the traditional favorites among "the great educational thinkers." The last significant study in English of Rousseau's pedagogy is *The Educational Thought of Jean Jacques Rousseau* by William Boyd, published in 1911. It is a good book, but dated and far from definitive, yet in the many years since its publication, nothing has appeared in English to challenge it, not even a translation of *Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Sa philosophie de l'éducation* by Jean Chateau. How different the situation is among American students of political theory: in recent years they have been subjecting Rousseau's work to thorough criticism and evaluation, which can be seen in *Rousseau and Nationalism* by Anne M. Cohler, *Rousseau and the Spirit of Revolt* by William H. Blanchard, *Rousseau's Social Contract: An Interpretive Essay* by Lester B.

Crocker, *Men and Citizens: A Study of Rousseau's Social Theory* by Judith N. Shklar, and *The Political Philosophy of Rousseau* by Roger D. Masters, simply a sample of the studies of Rousseau's politics published since 1967.

- ¶4:20 If the historical study of educational theory has atrophied with Rousseau, it has been almost non-existent with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. In recent years we have learned to look on the Marxian corpus as classical rather than subversive; Marx and Engels are read by diverse people and exert a many-sided influence. Yet in English, there is no anthology like *Bildung and Erziehung: Studentexte zur Marxistischen Bildungskonzeption*, edited by Horst E. Wittig. The distinguished study by the Pole, Bogdan Suchodolski, *Fundamentals of Marxian Pedagogy*, has been translated into practically every Western language except English. Among American educators Marx has been too highly charged ideologically, he has been someone educators either accept or more often reject, and hence he has not been used as an aid to dispassionate diagnosis as Bernard Tollkötter has used him in *Arbeit, Bildung, Gesellschaft: Pädagogische Grundprobleme bei Pestalozzi, Marx and in der Gegenwart*. Characteristically, in English, students of political theory have been much more active than educators in examining the Marxian corpus, and one, the political philosopher István Mészáros has done much in *Marx's Theory of Alienation* to show that there are important educational consequences in Marxian thought.
- ¶5:20 For Nietzsche, the literature is even more sparse. *From Hegel to Nietzsche* by Karl Löwith includes a brief section on "Nietzsche's Criticism of Education." The French work, *Nietzsche, éducateur: De l'homme au surhomme* by Christophe Baroni covers its subject well, but tells little about Nietzsche's pedagogical influence in & trope, let alone the United States. The two most distinguished studies of Nietzsche available in English -- *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist* by Walter Kaufmann and *Nietzsche: An Introduction to the Understanding of His Philosophical Activity* by Karl Jaspers -- both make clear that one of the major intentions motivating Nietzsche's work is educative, but so far no student of educational theory has taken up this hint.
- ¶6:20 Freud's work has had an immense direct impact on American teaching methods, clinical psychology is an area widely studied in schools of education, and psychoanalytic therapy in one form or another is an educative experience that millions of Americans have sought out. Yet Lawrence A. Cremin's observation in *The Transformation of the School* that "there is no satisfactory discussion of Freudianism in American pedagogical thought" is still true. Many psychoanalysts, among them Alfred Adler, Anna Freud, Otto Rank, and Erik Erikson, have prescribed how they think psychoanalysis *should influence* education, but few have tried to ascertain how it has *influenced* education and the Italian study by Antonello Armando, *Freud e l'educazione*, is much too cursory to even constitute a beginning. Once again, while scholars in education have been ignoring the seminal figures, others have not, and thus the Harvard political theorist, Paul Roazen, has recently brought out a substantial study, *Freud: Political and Social Thought*, and the distinguished sociologist, Philip Rieff, has published two significant works, *Freud: The Mind of the Moralizer* and *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*.

- ¶7:20 So much for what has not been done by students of education: the gap in the literature is not a mere lacuna in the web of esoteric trivia; it should be filled. Despite their having been ignored by American scholars in education, Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are powerful influences in American education; we should seek to understand their sway. It is my aim to try to do so in the study here proposed.
- ¶8:20 Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud are seminal figures in the history of education for they give rise to pedagogical outlooks and concerns that are still central to present-day education. Rousseau taught ensuing generations of educators to conceive of man as a developmental being, one that unfolds from within according to a natural pattern. The child-study movement, Dewey's ideal of growth, Piaget's genetic epistemology, and the cult of the open classroom have all been profoundly influenced by Rousseau's developmental concept of man, and like Rousseau we have had to deal with the difficulties of reconciling this conception with the outward forms of institutions. Marx showed how the material conditions of life can educate, almost irresistibly, ideologically distorting a person's ideas and alienating the aspiring man from the fruits of his aspirations. Much of the current crisis in the authority of educational institutions stems from the art of ideological analysis that numerous critics have learned from Marx and much of the discontent that students feel over the lack of meaning in their education results from Marx having made many hypersensitive to the process of alienation in which a person's own interests are subordinated to those of the people who dominate the institutions in which he lives and works.
- ¶9:20 Nietzsche made manifest the problem of nihilism in contemporary Western culture and suggested that ethical and educational standards, both personal and institutional, would no longer be generally forthcoming from the traditional religious and philosophical fountains of value. The institutional inertia and moral vacuity that characterize most contemporary educational institutions, as well as the sense of purposelessness that bothers sensitive students and teachers, indicates that the crises of value that Nietzsche studied are significantly present in American education. Finally, Freud devised and disseminated a new form of adult education, which, when it works well, has helped people immensely in clarifying the nature of their motives and in enhancing the effectuality of their actions. Psychoanalytic theory, however, in the hands of both Freud and his followers, has been used to raise profound questions about the ultimate compatibility between the healthy human psyche and significant social and cultural traditions, and the implications of these questions for educative agencies such as the family, school, and the higher learning are serious.
- ¶10:20 It is matters such as these that I plan to study. I want to master the works of the four men, attending not only to what they say "on education," but more importantly, to the full implications "for education" of all that they say. Then I want to follow leading ideas such as those indicated above into the works of their followers and critics, especially those who have been read widely in the United States. On the basis of such research I want to write four short books, all sharing a common title of *Toward a Usable Past*, and each devoted to a succinct critique and appreciation of the educational significance of one of the four. Each book should be under 200 pages typescript in length and I expect to finish the four within the three years duration of the project. Finally, if my suspicion that the educational ideas developing from the

four men actually link together and form the underpinnings of a single, quite influential outlook, I anticipate extending the project to write a fifth, summational study, *The Origins of Educational Radicalism*.

¶11:20 *Procedures:* In this study I will be using the procedures of the cultural historian and critic, working primarily out of books and periodicals, and using reasoned judgment as the basis for justifying my conclusions. I anticipate adhering to the following schedule of activities.

- 7/1/73-9/10/73: Concentrated study of Rousseau's work.
- 9/11/73-2/1/74: Write first draft of book on Rousseau. Direct graduate assistant in a survey of contemporary educational literature for influence primarily by Rousseau and secondarily by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.
- 2/2/74-5/15/74: Concentrated study of the work of Marx and Engels. Direct graduate assistant in a survey of contemporary educational literature for influence primarily by Marx, and secondarily by Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Freud.
- 5/16/74-9/10/74: Write first draft of book on Marx.
- 9/11/74-11/1/74 (Sabbatical): Polish Rousseau manuscript and send to press.
- 11/2/74-2/1/75 (Sabbatical): Concentrated study of the work of Nietzsche. Direct graduate assistant . . . primarily on Nietzsche.
- 2/2/75-5/15/75 (Sabbatical): Write first draft of book on Nietzsche. Direct graduate assistant . . . primarily on Freud and Nietzsche.
- 5/16/75-7/1/75: Polish Marx manuscript and send to press.
- 7/2/75-11/1/75: Concentrated study of the work of Freud. Direct graduate assistant . . . primarily on Freud.
- 11/2/75-1/1/76: Polish Nietzsche manuscript and send to press.
- 1/2/76-6/30/76: Draft and polish Freud manuscript and send to press. Direct graduate assistant in drawing together sources to be used for a comprehensive book on *The Origins of Educational Radicalism*, should such a work prove feasible.

¶12:20 Cultural historians have difficulty reducing their procedures to a neat set of methods that, if only followed faithfully, can ensure reasonable success. The cultural historian must always be ready to respond to that which is unique and telling in his sources and to do so he must be willing to follow his personal judgment about the particulars before him. Hence his methods are deliberately ad hoc. Yet he works with certain aims in view.

¶13:20 To begin with, it is not enough simply to know what leading figures said and did; it is necessary to understand their work as well as possible, for cultural history is the history of the meaning that ideas and actions have had for men. My first aim in

research will therefore be to understand the work of Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as well as I can. There are no real technical problems in this effort: the works of the four men are available in good editions; my reading in French and German is good enough to work profitably with the original texts; for each, there is a useful secondary literature, which, when used selectively, will be an aid.

¶14:20 With each of the four thinkers, I expect to emphasize certain sides of their work in my study. With Rousseau, *Emile* is most important, for which I will use the excellent edition in the fourth volume of his *Oeuvres* published in the "Bibliothèque de la Pléiade." This volume also contains a good edition of Rousseau's substantial preliminary version of *Emile* as well as excellent critical notes. In addition I will devote considerable effort to Rousseau's political writing and to *La nouvelle Héloïse*, which is considerably more important for an understanding of Rousseau's thought than is generally realized. With Marx I will emphasize the early writings up through *The German Ideology* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*, for in these Marx was writing more as a cultural diagnostician, formulating his insights into alienation and ideology, not as a scientific leader of a revolution. This does not mean that I will completely ignore his later works, for these have important bearing on the questions that interest me as do several of Engels' expositions on the Marxian outlook.

¶15:20 With Nietzsche, I will stress the discussions of nihilism which run through his mature works and I will rely mainly on the *Werke in drei Bänden* edited by Schlechta, which has a very useful index published separately as a fourth volume to the set. With Freud, I will concentrate on his later studies of culture and its character such as *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Also, through study of Ernest Jones biography of Freud combined with a reading of Freud's major theoretical works, I want to acquire a clear sense of the development of his views. I further want to understand how some of his early collaborators, especially Adler and Jung, broke off onto separate paths. Such would be my basic strategy in developing my understanding of the four men.

¶16:20 In addition to aiming at understanding, the cultural historian should also seek to develop a comprehensive view of his subject, to understand the work not only in its own terms, but also for its effect upon the world. In attaining this comprehensive view, others can be of great assistance, and it is for this purpose that I would like to employ a graduate assistant to help sift through the many things that should be examined in an effort to estimate the significance of Rousseau, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud for contemporary American education. I presently see four types of influences that should be surveyed for each writer. First, direct influences on instructional methods, such as those resulting from child study and the psychology of adjustment, should be examined. Second, indirect influences shaping public attitudes about education, formal and informal, such as the prevalent use of social class in defining educational problems, should be traced back, insofar as it is appropriate. Third, mediated influences exerted by critics whose views have been molded by ideas of one or more of the four -- Herbert Marcuse and R. D. Laing are good examples -- should be scrutinized. And fourth, prophetic influence in diagnosing cultural problems that presently exacerbate educational efforts should be analyzed. In these surveys, a graduate assistant would be a great aid in winnowing the grain from the chaff, seeking out under my close supervision the more important examples of each type of

influence for each writer. This work would be good research training for the student and it would allow me to concentrate on the high quality examples of influence.

¶17:20 Writing is as important to the success of a cultural history as is research and I anticipate taking pains with the texts of the four short books I propose. I want the books to be brief, direct, persuasive, and authoritative; I will aim for as wide an audience as possible consistent with the maintenance of intellectual rigor. Since the object of the study is to make us better aware of how we are being affected in education by the thought of the four men, it is important that the findings be read by diverse people who are involved in education in many different ways. In this effort I shall draw inspiration, if not my point of view, from the examples of writers such as Jacques Barzun, Hannah Arendt, Jacques Ellul, and Raymond Aron, who have managed to win audiences for their work outside their academic specialties without compromising their scholarly standards. As is indicated by the schedule of activities above, I anticipate getting all four books to press by the end of the three years duration of the project, an anticipation that may seem more reasonable if one thinks of the four books as one longish text divided into four parts, each of which for convenience, and for sake of impact, will be published separately. If, on concluding the work outlined above I think it worthwhile, I should like to extend the project to write a comprehensive study modeled on *The Origins of Totalitarianism* by Hannah Arendt, which I presently contemplate calling *The Origins of Educational Radicalism*.

¶18:20 *Personnel and Facilities:* The project will be conducted through the facilities of the Institute of Philosophy and Politics of education at Teachers College, Columbia University. I will be principal investigator and, as one can see from my attached vita, I am a Research Associate of the Institute and Associate Professor of History and Education in Teachers College's Department of Philosophy and the Social Sciences.

¶19:20 Through the library collections of the Institute, Teachers College, Columbia University, and the New York Public Library, I have ready access to one of the most extensive collections in cultural and educational history anywhere available. Since research for my project will be done in books and periodicals easily available in these collections, I foresee no need for funds for travel or the acquisition of books. Since I have a good reading knowledge of French, German, and Spanish, as well as a more labored one of Italian, I expect to encounter few linguistic limitations in the pursuit of my study. Should the study not succeed, it should not be as a result of any lack of facilities.

¶20:20 Whether the study can succeed, however, depends primarily on whether my skills as a cultural historian are adequate to the task. I think that in my book, *Man and His Circumstances: Ortega as Educator*, a comprehensive study of the Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset, I showed the capacity to do high quality work on the educational significance of a major thinker. Since then, I have been teaching a course at Teachers College on Rousseau, Marx, and Nietzsche and their significance for education, through which I have been developing the basis for the project here proposed. Also, in my book on Ortega and in essays such as "Towards a Place for Study in a World of Instruction," I have indicated an ability to relate ideas drawn from the Western cultural tradition to current concerns in American education.

Among doctoral students who have been working closely with me in my on-going; seminar, there are several with the imagination and breadth of interests that would make them suitable graduate assistants in the project. The vitae of two who are interested in working on it are attached. Thus I think myself qualified to undertake the study and am confident that on completion it will be a significant contribution to our understanding of American education.