

The Pedagogy of Cultural Despair

Robbie McClintock

Teachers College, Columbia University

Reading Stefano Oliverio's essay is educative. It draws one out. He speaks through many authorities, often new to the American context. The essay is compressed, 3,800 words, followed by fifty endnotes, which source the many allusions and short quotations that convey the essay's substance. Lkening these to distinctive gems, perhaps semiprecious stones, we have a bag of them, not well-set jewelry.

Responsibility for that rests, not with the author, but with the Philosophy of Education Society's requirements for submission. When setting type and purchasing paper were big expenses for conference proceedings, these made sense. But our switching to online publication weakened the rationale for a low word limit. True, with imposed brevity, presenters can read their allotted words aloud in fifteen or twenty minutes, but, without it, they could explain concisely the argument of a filled out essay. Having tried a new format for the 2015 conference, why don't we zap the word limit next?

Now, to the essay itself. It presents a rush of interpretative concepts quoting numerous authorities. The standard bearer is the prolific German writer, Peter Sloterdijk, whose recent work sets the pedagogical problematic for the essay. The German philosophical essayist, Odo Marquard, and two prominent French culture theorists, Marcel Gauchet and Denis Kambouchner, add their authority to Sloterdijk's problematic. A second wave modulates and qualifies the core, portentous vision — John Dewey, Jan Masschelein and Maarten Simons, Gert Biesta, and Wolff-Michael Roth. Other prominent thinkers embellish the vision — Georg Simmel, Arthur Rimbaud, Immanuel Kant via Theodor Adorno, a spokesman for conventionalized *Bildung*, George Steiner, Friedrich Nietzsche's Zarathustra, T.S. Eliot, Zygmunt Bauman, Søren Kierkegaard, and Hannah Arendt.

In the first half of the essay, and part of the second, Oliverio, warns that the school, blindly chasing the up-to-date, risks inducing a disastrous mutation in our culture, bringing up a generation, in Gauchet's words, that is "no longer contemporaneous with any past."¹ To prevent this dis-continuation, the school must answer the key question, how is "the new as growth in connectedness educationally possible?" To make an answer possible, in the second half, Oliverio uses a concept from Desiderius Erasmus, *repuerescentia*, becoming a child again,² to explain the educational possibility of the new as growth in connectedness.

My response will briefly address *repuerescentia*, which strikes me as a constructive pedagogical precept, although one that many teachers may find difficult to use with the requisite finesse. Then at slightly greater length, I will contest the historical function Oliverio assigns the school and the threat he alleges absolute modernity poses to the continuity of our culture.

How can *repuerescientia* enable teachers and the school to make “the new as growth in connectedness educationally possible?” As William Harrison Woodward translated Desiderius Erasmus in 1904, the teacher must “in a sense become a boy again that he may draw his pupil to himself.” Denis Kambouchner has imbued the concept with twenty-first-century relevance in “*Retrouver en soi l’enfant*,” because “the more there is to transmit, the greater the need for mediation, that is, the need for the like to recognize the like across differences of status and levels of experience.”³ The teacher, going back to his childhood, becomes a mediator for the student’s transcendence of his childish self.

In his concluding paragraphs, Oliverio adumbrates how an alternative understanding of *repuerescientia* can make the new as growth in connectedness educationally possible. *Repuerescientia* enables a double transcendence: recovering his childhood, the adult teacher establishes a new relation, transcending all that constitutes his adulthood, and, then, with the child, who is transcending himself towards adulthood, the two together in dialogue educationally create the new as a growth in connectedness.

Repuerescientia, understood as a double transcendence, enabling a dialogue that creates the new as a growth in connectedness, is a fine conception. I hope Oliverio will develop the sketch he gives further, especially showing how it can become a standard operating procedure for teachers and students in the school. But leaving *repuerescientia* to future work by Oliverio, I want to close by contesting the pervasive outlook, pedagogical and historical, with which he establishes the importance of *repuerescientia*.

Adapting a key term from an influential history, I think Sloterdijk and Oliverio, Gauchet and Kambouchner, are advancing a pedagogy of cultural despair.⁴ In their views, civilization verges on breakdown because the school neither can nor will do its work, namely, preventing cultural dis-continuation. Sloterdijk places an unnecessary, unrealistic burden on the school, seeing it to be “that device that endeavors to counter the process of dis-continuation ... due to generational passage.”⁵ He counts sixty to eighty generational passages since Plato. And with each passage, the school could have faltered and failed to prevent the dis-continuation that the generation would otherwise have suffered. And in recent generations, the school has weakened as the bulwark preventing cultural dis-continuation. Modernity and the new are creative qualities, but absolute modernity and the up-to-date become threats, extremes, that put human culture at risk. As the school favors the up-to-date, not the new, it imparts absolute modernity, eschewing the past to accommodate the latest diversities, social needs, and popular interests. As Oliverio writes, “In a nice irony of history, the knowledge society may prove to be the one where a desire for knowledge has no place.”

This pedagogy of cultural despair misunderstands both the historical and educational juncture. In the complexity of human life, a vast array of different activities, achievements, and experiences, the school is not some single, simple, self-subsistent reality acting homogeneously on historical situations. In contrast to the pedagogy

of cultural despair and its view that the school alone serves as the bulwark against cultural dis-continuation, formal education is an ever-changing mix of diverse programs with many different purposes, serving many, many persons, each across a long span of life experience, during which all the many persons scurry briefly into little, varied groups, and then repeatedly disperse into others, according to the play of particular needs, capacities, and interests, each of which merits distinctive care. To nurture the new as growth in connectedness, the countless parts of formal education must interact with specificity in the lifeworlds of innumerable human persons. The school, as such, does not have a single, essential mission.

Warnings against cultural dis-continuation wildly oversimplify. Those sixty to eighty generations since Plato are vague, formless abstractions. Cultural continuity does not arise in a sequence of hypothetical generations any more than it originates through the action of the school, as such. Figures of speech have no power however performative we might wish them to be. Continuity, biological and cultural, is inherent in *life* itself, in its incredible multiplicity and specificity, its living realities, in its churning, ceaseless succession of unique lives, quadrillions and quadrillions tumbling over one another, the lives of cells; of viruses; of bacteria, amoebas, fungi, ferns, flowers; of fishes, mollusks, snakes, lizards, birds; of seals, kangaroos, pigs, horses, gorillas; and, yes, of humans, each a person, living one life interacting with many other persons, day-in, day-out, hour-by-hour in an ever-turning kaleidoscope of concrete situations, as each person incarnates a rich, unique, dynamic rendition of the common, human culture, all teaching and learning together.⁶ There is not and never has been an intergenerational threat of cultural dis-continuation, and rather than sixty to eighty generational passages since Plato, there have been billions of them, parent to child, person to person, over the years in question.

If the new as growth in connectedness does not arise from the essential action of the school as such, how does it emerge as the multiplicity of teachers and students actually interact formatively in their real, historical undertakings. Oliverio situates the concept of growth in connectedness in Dewey's work, as the educator's watchword spoken of in *Experience and Education*. Clearly, the concepts of growth and of connection/connected were central to Dewey's thought, but he was a bit obscure about how growth in connectedness took on direction and gained form, thus becoming recognizable as something genuinely *new*.⁷ In *Democracy and Education*, Dewey has the school in mind from the beginning, but through chapter 11, "Experience and Thinking," his references to the school are rather descriptive elements in what he is saying, whereas, starting with chapter 12, "Thinking in Education," he introduces the school and its curriculum into the picture as an exoskeleton, giving structure to the processes of growth and education.

By reading *Democracy and Education*, Dewey's masterpiece of 1916, in conjunction with another great work, published the next year by the Scottish morphologist, D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form*, we find a powerful basis for a pedagogy of growth in form, which is meaningful connectedness, one entirely in harmony with a democratic individualism.⁸ In 1,100 pages of astoundingly lucid prose, Thompson makes clear how form, the connected articulation of a living

being, results through growth, the being's capacity to direct its internal resources towards points of weakness and stress in interacting with its circumstances, thereby building a structure that has the characteristic strengths and functional capacities of that life form.⁹

Both Dewey and Thompson were theorists, not of transcendence, but of immanence. Their work together suggests that both persons and their polities are complex working forms that grow and adapt themselves by channeling their energies and resources to overcome limits and to do better what challenges and interests them. Dewey gives Thompson, who dealt with the morphological growth of plants and animals, a human dimension, political and historical. Thompson gives Dewey the ability to refrain from dismissing *form* as the dread basis of formalism and to embrace it as a natural, immanent structure, constructed as a living entity grows its parts and their capacities in interaction with its lifeworld.

Fear, fear of cultural dis-continuity in "Absolute Modernity," is a poor, over-worked reason for positive public action. Fear too easily cloaks ulterior agendas.¹⁰ If, "those mocked since Romanticism as Philistines are, in the view of culture theory, the anonymous heroes of continuity," then give us positive grounds for this vision.¹¹ With Plato, let the idea of the good orient each actor in every deed, and with J. G. Herder, let us remember that "one can contribute to the betterment of all humanity only what he himself makes of what he can and should become."¹²

1. Marcel Gauchet, "Des saviors privés de sens?" In Marie-Claude Blais, Marcel Gauchet, and Dominique Ottavi, *Conditions de l'éducation* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard/Pluriel, 2010), 73.

2. Oliverio uses the scholarly edition, Erasme de Rotterdam, *Declamatio de pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis* (edited with a translation and commentary in French by Jean-Claude Margolin, Genève: Librairie Groz, 1966). That edition is unavailable to me and I have used *Desiderius Erasmus concerning the Aim and Method of Education*, by William Harrison Woodward (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1904). Chapter VII provides a translation of *De pueris statim ac liberaliter instituendis* (pp. 179–222). In it, Erasmus presented the concept of *repuerescencia* in ¶ 28, "The Need of Sympathy in One Who Shall Teach Young Children," pp. 211–212.

3. Denis Kambouchner, "Retrouver en soi l'enfant (*repuerescere*): réflexions sur un precept classique," in Kambouchner, *L'École, question philosophique* (Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard, 2013), 339, (my translation, emphasis omitted. See, by way of comparison, "Absolute Modernity.")

4. See Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of German Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961).

5. Peter Sloterdijk, "La Escuela, el invento más fatídico de la historia," *La Maleta de Portbou*, no. 4 (2014): 8.

6. For the importance of *life* as the locus of education and formative experience, see Robbie McClintock, *Enough: A Pedagogic Speculation* (New York: The Reflective Commons, 2012), especially pp. 105–126, drawing on the work of José Ortega y Gasset and Jakob von Uexküll.

7. Oliverio quotes Dewey on the linkage of past and present and the importance of growth in connectedness from *Experience and Education*, and he refers to *Human Nature and Conduct* and *The Child and the Curriculum* as well. Oliverio suggests he will elsewhere develop "an anthropology of (connectedness in) growth." For that, *Democracy and Education* would seem to be central. The online *Past Masters* collection makes it possible to search across Dewey's entire corpus, and *Democracy and Education* is the top locus of hits for "growth" and third, after *Psychology* (1887) and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1938), for "connected" and "connection" combined. Both searches show a substantial number of hits for the terms in all 38 of the volumes in the *Collected Works*.

8. See D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, *On Growth and Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1945). Biodiversity Heritage Library, <http://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/28884#page/6/mode/1up>.

9. There is no sign in Dewey's corpus that he dealt significantly with Thompson's work. A letter (#19213) in the *Dewey Correspondence in Past Masters* by Corinne Chisholm Frost, a teacher with whom Dewey exchanged correspondence, to Roberta Dewey, September 11, 1965, mentions Thompson's *On Growth and Form* as one of several books Dewey recommended to her. A brief letter (#09418) from John Dewey to Corinne Chisholm Frost, May 4, 1942, indicates that Dewey sent Frost an ad about Thompson's *On Growth and Form*, saying "This sounds (or reads) in your line."

10. See Corey Robin, *Fear: The History of a Political Idea* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

11. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Die schrecklichen Kinder der Neuzeit: Über das anti-genealogische Experiment der Moderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2014), 79 (my translation).

12. J. G. Herder, *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität* (Dritte Sammlung, Brief 32, Deutsches Textarchiv, http://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/book/show/herder_humanitaet03_1794, accessed February 28, 2015). In the spirit of solidarity with the positive valuation of the past expressed by Oliverio, Sloterdijk, Marquard, Gauchet, Kambouchner, and the other authorities cited in "Absolute Modernity," let us note that the philosophy of education in the English-speaking world would benefit from greater attention to the educational thought of writers like Friedrich Schleiermacher and from Johann Gottfried Herder. I cite Schleiermacher here as an educational thinker of great posthumous influence and a distinguished interpreter and translator of Plato. And we overlook Herder as an educational thinker who, among his extensive accomplishments, served for many years as director of the Wilhelm-Ernst-Gymnasium in Weimar and oversaw students throughout the Duchy of Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach and most probably was Goethe's *Urbild* for the Abbey in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. His *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, or *Letters on the Advancement of Humanity*, merit translation into English.