

## Book Review

### *Education Now: How Rethinking America's Past Can Change Its Future*

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The slim size of Paul Theobald's new book belies its ambitious vision for transforming not only the educational system in the United States, but the structure of political and economic systems as well. In the last century, Theobald argues, education has become merely about students' future economic roles in the country rather than their roles as citizens that more broadly account for being participants in the economy, democracy, and community. The purpose of Theobald's book is to examine how education has become this way, and how we can change it. He argues that the many ideas forwarded as school "reform" are not viable solutions to the nation's educational problems, and that an overhaul of "the purposes for which [schools] exist" is needed (2). The central assumption undergirding *Education Now* is that governance, schooling, and economics are deeply intertwined, and therefore meaningful transformations in our educational system cannot occur as long as our political and economic spheres remain unchanged. Thus, Theobald's book is spent demonstrating how U.S. society, like most modern democracies, has made economics its primary concern, delineating the consequences of this choice, and proposing possibilities for how the nation must change its political and economic institutions to save its system of education.

The first half of the book is devoted to a complex overview of why and how particular seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century European political and economic theories emerged as hegemonic forces, and the consequences for our current political, economic, and educational systems. Theobald begins in the 1640s, a historical moment in which England was faced with starting a new government or recycling the old; the political theories from this time "continue to shape the course of history in virtually all of Western democracies"(11). Thus, he describes

in detail the political and philosophical contexts and choices of this era, examining the ramifications of both major and all-but-forgotten theories. In tandem, he discusses how theories became dominant or buried at critical junctures throughout history. The importance of this discussion is not just to reveal the junctures at which what are now considered foundational theories were in fact contested, or uncover how alternative theories lost footing. It also provides a reminder that massive cultural shifts are still possible and in so doing argues that the moment is ripe for such change.

In clearly delineating dense histories in *Education Now*, Theobald, drawing upon Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, demonstrates how a tension between two philosophical strands created the United States as we know it. The predominant strand is the "L-stream," referring to the philosophical lineage of John Locke, and the subordinate strand is the "M-stream," referring to Charles de Secondat Montesquieu. Theobald argues that the L-stream (which Hamilton and Madison championed) embodies a view of freedom "that enables material accumulation" (37). The M-stream (consistent with Jeffersonian thought) "suggests that man is essentially a social and political being, and an economic being only secondarily" (31).

Chapter 2 follows with economic histories that paralleled or followed thinkers from the previous chapter, beginning with Adam Smith's foundational *The Wealth of Nations*, published in 1776. Theobald devotes much of the chapter to demonstrating the profound influence of Smith's ideas on modern Western economic theory. Specifically, the assumption by Smith that "economic activity would proceed in a self-correcting fashion in an ever upward mode" has led to the capitalist ideals that dominate politics, economics, education, and culture in the United States (46). Theobald describes alternative economic theories, some that briefly surged (John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, William Ogilvie, Thomas Paine, John Ruskin, and others) but finally couldn't compete with the idea that the pursuit of unchecked economic

growth would provide the foundation for a healthy society. A reascendancy of the L-stream occurred despite strong M-stream challenges in large part, Theobald contends, because of social Darwinism, the ideology of survival of the fittest that linked nicely to Locke's ideas of life as an economic struggle. Thus, if economics was understood to be the core of the human condition, in terms of education, one's route should match one's "economic destiny" (92).

Theobald then uses Chapter 3 to describe how the U.S. educational system has historically moved within and against L-stream philosophies, arguing how U.S. political and economic systems led to schools becoming "a direct conduit to a particular economic role" (95). This chapter will likely find more readers in their comfort zone—though also frustrated, not with the book but with the Goliath that is "corporate curriculum" (83)—as Theobald talks about Channel One, a company providing free televisions to schools that air "specially packaged news programs interspersed with commercials" (108).

Chapters 4 and 5 move from looking back at how we arrived at this cultural moment to strategies for moving forward to create changes both in the structure of education and the organization of community, which Theobald argues should be deeply wedded. He provides concrete ideas such as a local Board of Assessors to help education become more aligned with M-stream orientations, in which schools are deeply tied to community, a term that Theobald reminds readers means "a place where people can will, and work for, a better world through efforts at home...[so] democracy can flourish" (137). His suggestions for change are strongest, not surprisingly, when articulating the ways local schools could connect to community activism and responsible citizenry. Those invested in rural education, in fact, will recognize how Theobald's knowledge in rural education influences his larger arguments (place-based education, for example, fits naturally with M-stream goals), and it's gratifying to see how carefully rural and urban issues are tackled in the historical chapters of this broader book on education.

In his final chapter, Theobald imagines in more detail how a Board of Assessors or Constitutional Convention might stir the changes needed to bring balance to a U.S. mired in L-stream politics, economics, and education. While even the most supportive readers might balk at suggestions such as changing the Constitution, the possibilities he delivers feel less utopian with the backdrop of exhaustive historical research behind him.

As readers have come to expect from Theobald's earlier books (*Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918* and *Teaching the Commons: Place, Pride and the Renewal of Community*), the text, while historically and theoretically dense, is also straightforward and structurally clear. There is, however, an inherent tension within the book in which Theobald appears to actively anticipate resistant readers—implying an invitation for a more general lay audience to grapple with these ideas. Yet he also connects his arguments in ways that suggest he's preaching to the choir, and thus I found myself wondering about the reactions of readers

who aren't "members of the choir" and for whom this isn't required reading (though provocative conversations certainly await graduate and advanced undergraduates assigned this text). I can imagine Theobald, or even his hopeful readers, would want *Education Now* to reach those who might resist it most. Further, the directives Theobald provides readers for becoming more virtuous consumers and community citizens might feel a bit overwhelming for some, and an opportunity is missed for grounding such readers by not tapping into accessible cultural touchstones such as *Fast Food Nation*, Michael Pollan's works, or the movie *Food, Inc.*

The book's ability to find and connect with a broad audience for its ambitious calls for change leads to a notable gap in the text: the absence of any discussion of online spaces as a hopeful source for activism. Clearly the book was completed before the 2008 election, but even well before then, organizations such as MoveOn.org (started in 1998), the Center for Rural Affairs (which has a blog: <http://www.cfra.org/blog>), 350.org (started by author Bill McKibben), and countless others have been working to fight L-stream dominance and the Big Five (corporations controlling the media). I suspect readers daunted by the work facing concerned citizens would find it useful to be pointed to these sites. Given this, I think Theobald's project, as outlined in *Education Now*, would clearly benefit from a companion website not unlike Barbara Kingsolver's for *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (<http://www.animalvegetablemiracle.com/>) that provides resources and recipes for those motivated by the book to eat locally or grow their own food (see also Raj Patel's *Stuffed and Starved* at: <http://stuffedandstarved.org>, providing an online space for researchers and activists to meet). I could imagine a website with links to grassroots organizations, resources (even an appendix to the book to easily assemble the texts he points to throughout his book as must-reads), and more. What this means, of course, is that I think Theobald's careful research and arguments should be found by a wide and varied audience in this kairotic moment.