

## TRUTH AS HOME, AS SHARED, AS COMMUNITY

“Throughout all periods,” David G. Smith begins, “education and teaching have had their role to play, defined in character largely by regnant ideas and dreams circulating in the political realm, as those in power have sought to secure the present into the future through the minds of the young.”<sup>1</sup> If we define “education” and “teaching” as culturally as well as historically variable, acknowledging that for maybe millennia they were not institutionalized, that first assertion is accurate as well as introducing the reader to the remarkable range this esteemed scholar often demonstrates in his *oeuvre*, of which this article is only a glimpse. The second half of this opening gambit discloses Smith’s assertion that education and teaching – I would subsume the second in the first and not name it as its first or primary element<sup>2</sup> - is always everywhere predominantly political, an assertion I would contest. Of course there are time and places where it is pre-eminently, when policy-makers intend it to be propagandistic, but there are other places and time – think of early twentieth-century Progressive education – where education was conceived as sabotaging the present for the sake of a very different future.<sup>3</sup> However contestable, Smith’s privileging of the political structures his rather original analysis of “the two tropes of globalization and teaching,” tropes he finds “circulating together,” noting that “globalizers, operating in organization like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank and even in local and state governments, rarely develop their educational policies with a concern for the experience of teachers.”<sup>4</sup> That last topic – the experience of teachers – Smith seems to subsume in the former, calling for “a more open and vigorous examination of the historical construction of globalization phenomena; a more profound analysis of how we are all implicated in the web of their operations.”<sup>5</sup>

Smith anticipates intensifying economic inequality<sup>6</sup> when he acknowledges that “today economies may boom while quality of life for the average person declines, and those in power of necessity turn a blind eye.”<sup>7</sup> Economic inequality – economic exploitation – has a history Smith reminds, noting that the United States’ “version of economic development is a product of its own time-space configuration as a frontier New World culture that privileges geography over history, seeing the rest of the world in terms of spatial conquest with little regard for other people’s historical sensibilities,”<sup>8</sup> a sweeping somewhat simplistic assertion. (After all, even the C.I.A. – and certainly formal diplomatic initiatives - require regard for “other people’s historical sensibilities.”) Even “the period of post-World War II to the 1970s, sometimes called the Long Boom, is marked by many contradictions in terms of educational as well as economic development,” he notes.<sup>9</sup> Ignoring other countries’ state-protected capitalism – including Canada’s – Smith observes that “the new global economic competitiveness forced U.S. businesses to seek from their federal and state

governments new rules of taxation protection, especially as much of their industrial manufacturing was not now being conducted on local soil.”<sup>10</sup>

Turning to education, Smith extends his range, even including American education among the victims of capitalism: “Public education, first in the U.K., then the U.S., New Zealand, and the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Ontario, began to fall to the logic of market rule, with language such as educational ‘choice’ and ‘education-business partnership’ gradually infiltrating the halls of educational decision-making under pressure from federal, state, and local political administrations.”<sup>11</sup> While there were national – and provincial – differences in how these slogans became expressed in policy and practice, it is true that globalization enforced uniformity, primarily through standardized assessment and technologization.<sup>12</sup> That latter phenomenon Smith also acknowledges: “If market logic has become the new rule of governance, nothing has been more instrumental in its habilitation and entrenchment than the revolution in computer and communications technology.”<sup>13</sup> He acknowledges the historicity of ideas and practices – “revolution” occurs in historical time of course – when appears to dismiss postmodernism’s progressive moment – William Doll definitively expressed that<sup>14</sup> – when he writes:

Postmodern worry over what may be authoritatively taught is merely exacerbated by the difficulty of understanding what it means to teach authoritatively, especially when in the so-called new knowledge economy teaching is so often reduced to simply “managing” the educational space without any special personal qualities being required of teachers other than organizational and planning skills.<sup>15</sup>

Smith’s point is profound: authoritativeness is not authoritarianism. In an age where ignorance – think of climate-change deniers and vaccine skeptics – authoritativeness is very much needed.

Given the scope of his critique, it is surprising to see Smith turn almost optimistic, writing: “Empire always means an encounter with Others, who at first may be contributive to the empire, but eventually serve to undermine its original character and authority. This is clearly the case today. The Euro-American empire is disintegrating under the very structures and influences its originally put in place. For example, the postcolonial critique is rewriting the rules of epistemic authority for schools, academies, and curricula.”<sup>16</sup> However intoxicating optimism can be, the decades following Smith’s pronouncement counsel sobriety, as the “Euro-American empire” seems never stronger, not only economically (as China enters economic slowdown) but also military, as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization<sup>17</sup> mobilizes to assist Ukraine against Russia’s invasion. Despite the de-globalization these events portend – not all agree<sup>18</sup> - Smith seems right (still) when he writes: “The radical commercialization of human values on a global scale introduces into the discourse surrounding possible futures the question of human values itself, and increasingly forms of resistance are emerging that may prefigure a global conversation, if not

confrontation, regarding what it means to live well humanly speaking.”<sup>19</sup>

Since humanity is structured temporally, odd is Smith’s assertion that we in “the West,” live “in a kind of frozen futurism in which what was expected to be revealed has been revealed, and what the revelation discloses is that the future will always be more of this, a perpetual unfolding of more and more of this,”<sup>20</sup> clearly not the case but perhaps a rhetorical overstatement recognizing the repetitiveness of certain office work and, for many even after the Covid-19 pandemic, traffic-clogged commutes to work. “Education,” Smith continues, “seems like a preparation for something that never happens because, in the deepest sense, it has *already happened*, over and over,”<sup>21</sup> an ambiguous phrase here but one I have invoked to reference the Holocaust that ended any master narrative<sup>22</sup> of inevitable progress. For Smith, this sense of nothing happening and/or that the worst already has happened means that “teaching is a mask of the future that freezes teaching in a futurist orientation such that in real terms there is no future because the future *already is*.”<sup>23</sup>

Apparently Smith doesn’t believe that – at least entirely - as he then asserts that “the first thing we may do as teachers is to make problematic this belief in the inevitability of the present course, not just in the usual manner of protesting its influence, but more creatively in affirming what the wisdom of our experience has taught us to be true of the work of teaching itself, ” a form of life “discovered to be worth living through teaching.”<sup>24</sup> Any suspension of time turns out to be illusory, as “teaching must first and foremost involve the practice of truth-dwelling in the Now,” a surprisingly complex concept<sup>25</sup> but one that implies that there is time. In time is the revelation of truth: “*Personal truth, truth as shared; and finding truth as finding home.*”<sup>26</sup> Echoing Heidegger, Smith clarifies what he means: “*Alethea* indicates both *unconcealment* and *concealment*. Beware of the fulfillment of one’s dreams, truth seems to say, because in the very fulfillment what has been realized will begin to slip away, to turn into something one could easily regret.”<sup>27</sup> Echoing Freud, Smith writes: “Personal truth arises out of the experience that I can never know it completely, but only live within the thresholds of human possibility defined by the limits of what I know and what I have yet to know, what I understand and what is yet to be revealed.”<sup>28</sup> In the gap between the present and the future – not unlike Aoki’s conception of “bridge”<sup>29</sup> – resides the opportunity to act, for Smith action to create a sense of shared experience, a “public.”

“Today,” Smith writes – and remember that, given the publication date, “today” was at the end of last millennium – “the challenge of globalization for teachers is not really about education per se, but about the meaning of *public* in a world dominated by private enterprise, and about how there can be any sense of community if self-interest is the defining public logic.”<sup>30</sup> I suspect he means by “education” in a technical sense, as studying “self-interest” in the closure of “community” could be quite educational. And seeking the truth is itself community-building,<sup>31</sup> as “Truth as shared. If the recovery of personal truth is a necessity in the age of globalization, so too is its

possibility only recoverable in the context of relations.”<sup>32</sup> Personal truth is always already relational, but emphasizing that fact seems politically obligatory in an era of narcissism.<sup>33</sup> “If truth as shared is difficult,” Smith continues, “its inspiration arises from the realization that the practice of truth is nothing less than the practice of finding oneself at home in the world.”<sup>34</sup> Once again Smith expands the lens through which he invites us to look, reminding readers that his “article attempts to examine the requirements for a renewed understanding of what it means to live Now, as an act of human healing, and as a prospect for a world that is not afraid of itself.”<sup>35</sup>

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## COMMENTARY

The research assistant – Bruce Moghtader - who summarized Smith’s article notes that Smith explains (quoting Moghtader) “how particular visions of education became formulated from the post-war era as a commodity, “a purchasable ‘thing’ available to the rising middle class under equal access legislation and other forms of ‘right’ politics” such a “particular vision of education is now dying.”<sup>36</sup> Such commodification occurred while government turned from representing the public to protecting “the Market—contemptuous of social and cultural interests but supportive of privatization and self-interests.” The rise of neo-liberalism and globalization during the Cold War “extended the superiority of Western economic theory over other traditions,” a political and economic development supported by the revolution in computer and communication technology harnessing global instability in production and financial system.” Communication technology rewrites the rules of “both material and intellectual spheres.”<sup>37</sup> Seeking truth requires sustained reflection on common condition we share. Moghtader concludes: “Smith, once again, brings us to a global understanding of ourselves and our relations where the discovery of truth is a practice of teaching and learning.” Smith’s vision is impressive panoramic, informed by several strong scholarly traditions, laser-focused on the “big picture.”

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> 2000, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Pinar 2023, 35-53.

<sup>3</sup> See Cremin 1961; Christou 2012. Also consider – sixteen years after Smith’s article - Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation and its calls to action: <https://crc-canada.org/en/ressources/calls-to-action-truth-reconciliation-commission-canada/>

<sup>4</sup> 2000, 8. As the publication date indicates, Smith is writing twenty years before globalization threatens to devolve into regional trading agreements (like NAFTA, now USCMA: <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/united-states-mexico-canada-agreement> ). For de-globalization see: <https://www.rsm.global/insights/finding-opportunity-in-change/what-is-deglobalisation>

<sup>5</sup> 2008, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Not only associated with globalization: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/03/pikettys-new-book-explores-how-economic-inequality-is-perpetuated/>

<sup>7</sup> 2008, 9.

<sup>8</sup> 2000 10.

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- <sup>9</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>10</sup> 2000, 11.
- <sup>11</sup> 2000, 12.
- <sup>12</sup> Pinar 2023, 123-137.
- <sup>13</sup> 2000, 13.
- <sup>14</sup> See Doll 1993. For the sweep of Doll’s canonical *oeuvre*, see Trueit 2012.
- <sup>15</sup> 2000, 14.
- <sup>16</sup> 2000, 15.
- <sup>17</sup> <https://www.nato.int/> Both China’s economic slowdown and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine occurred in 2022.
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/17/idea-of-de-globalization-is-a-mirage-says-historian-niall-ferguson.html>
- <sup>19</sup> 2000, 16.
- <sup>20</sup> 2000, 17.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>22</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Metanarrative>
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> 2000, 19.
- <sup>25</sup> North “2018, 17) writes: “*Now*, it seems, is one of the words that fools us into believing it represents something real,” almost amending the assertion four pages later: “What is the present? The most obvious and natural answer to that question may be provided by a simple graphical representation: a point on a [time] line” (2018, 21).
- <sup>26</sup> 2000, 21.
- <sup>27</sup> Ibid. Smith’s invocation of “regret” here reminds me of Reynolds Price’s concept of “permanent errors,” mistakes for which one cannot make amends, errors that cannot be corrected but deform whatever follows: <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/98/07/12/specials/price-errors.html#:~:text=By%20Reynolds%20Price.%20he%20permanent%20errors%20of%20these,others%2C%20Reynolds%20Price%20seems%20to%20say%2C%20is%20tragic.>
- <sup>28</sup> 2000, 22.
- <sup>29</sup> Lee, Wang, Ursino 2022, 18, n. 10.
- <sup>30</sup> 2000, 22.
- <sup>31</sup> See Smith 2021.
- <sup>32</sup> 2000, 23.
- <sup>33</sup> The definitive statement of this fact is Lasch 1978. While focused on the United States, Lasch’s analysis can speak to all inhabitants of capitalist countries.
- <sup>34</sup> 2000, 24.
- <sup>35</sup> 2000, 25.
- <sup>36</sup> 2000, 11.

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<sup>37</sup> 2000, 15.