

## The Subjective Necessity of National Literacy<sup>1</sup>

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“[T]he concept of ‘national literacy’ in the field of curriculum studies,” Daniel Tröhler explains, “means to focus on the particular ‘cultural context of a single country’ that can also be labelled as the ‘nation’, understanding ‘nation’ as a dominant cultural thesis (or discourse) about who ‘we’ are and who others are not.”<sup>2</sup> In Canada, the dominant culture is Anglophone but Canadian identity is sometimes partly predicated on being “not-American.” That culture’s dominance may be fading, in part due to constant critique, in part due to the country’s endorsement of multiculturalism, in part due to ongoing immigration. Many Francophones remain defiant and the First Peoples decry even multiculturalism, summarizing all non-Indigenous residents as “settlers.” National identity is also racialized – in Canada as the “Great White North” – and gendered, the two intertwined in the United States where race has always been structuring of, as well as structured by, gender.<sup>3</sup> In each instance, those who are not members of the dominant culture necessarily nurture a “double consciousness,” a concept invoked by the African-American activist-historian W.E.B. Du Bois. Hazel Carby reminds that the concept, expressed in the first chapter of Du Bois’ *The Souls of Black Folk*, is a “product of a world,”<sup>4</sup> in that it has allowed the Black man (quoting Du Bois) “no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world.”<sup>5</sup> Carby argues for a revision of the concept to acknowledge that “gender is an ever-present, though unacknowledged, factor in this theory,” that racial self-consciousness is also “a gendered self-consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> Certainly, that was the case for Du Bois’ African-American contemporary, the philosopher Alain Locke, about whom Stewart notes: “Locke decided to believe in a positive double consciousness—that

he could will himself to be both queer and race conscious in America, and succeed.”<sup>7</sup> It may be that the marginalized must, by subjective necessity, achieve national literacy. For the marginalized, national literacy can be a prerequisite for survival.

National literacy means decoding the subjective, social, and cultural contours of one’s place of birth and/or residence, as survival requires self-understanding as well. Freire famously conceived of literacy as decoding patterns of oppression to encourage their contestation.<sup>8</sup> Even among the privileged – always a relative status – national literacy can become imperative, as class, gender, and racial distinctions (focused in) familial lineage can be in play when working for upward mobility, even when preserving what one has already. Discovering (as is said in North American vernacular) “where one is coming from” can be key to decoding identity, especially when identity overdetermined by race, class, gender – all filtered through family, school, neighborhood, homeland.

What I can terming – after Jane Addams<sup>9</sup> – as the subjective necessity of national literacy can also be considered crucial for scholars regardless race or gender, certainly for curriculum studies scholars but for historians as well. Tröhler knows that “inquiry needs to address the researcher as well – not in order to eliminate the researcher’s own world view and epistemological frame but in order to become aware of it.”<sup>10</sup> Such self-address requires historicizing “not only a topic but the construer of the topic as well,” Tröhler’s words, to which he adds: “Doing history is essentially the self-discovering of one’s own standpoint.”<sup>11</sup> It becomes clear that “one of the advantages of history is not only the acquisition of knowledge but also the question of *self-awareness*,”<sup>12</sup> an insight Tröhler emphasizes by quoting Quentin Skinner: “To learn from the past – and we cannot otherwise learn at all - ... is to learn the key to self-awareness.”<sup>13</sup>

That past is national, despite the fact that, as Tröhler points out, “one would never define oneself as national or even nationalist, although knowledge production and science communication are still just as nationalist as education policy.”<sup>14</sup> To unpack one’s nationalism<sup>15</sup> requires, first of all, acknowledging that coming-of-age in specific countries structures one’s subjectivity, how one experiences being-in-the-world.<sup>16</sup> Excavating one’s nationalization – a term akin to socialization in its subjective scope<sup>17</sup> – is in part autobiographical, an exercise Tröhler himself undertakes to make a point about PISA.<sup>18</sup> Such an undertaking is not only autobiographical and even epistemological, it would also appear to be religious, certainly the case for many of us who have come of age in the West, influenced culturally as the West has been by Christianity, Catholic and Protestant. Tröhler reminds that Protestantism<sup>19</sup> – in contrast to Catholicism – tends to “focus on the individual soul rather than on the institution.”<sup>20</sup> That distinction blurs (although not does disappear) when Tröhler quotes the prophet-teacher<sup>21</sup> Dewey: “Democracy will come into its own, for democracy is a name for a life of free and enriching communion. It had its seer in Walt Whitman. It will have its consummation when free social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of full and moving communication.”<sup>22</sup> Such “communion” – while existentially more social (and specifically communicative as Tröhler points out<sup>23</sup>) than it is solely institutional<sup>24</sup> – seems a shared organized experience. In secular terms – “what seems to be secular proves to be – on a quite invisible background – liberal reformist Protestantism,”<sup>25</sup> as God has been replaced by the “common good,” at least in the “classical republican” version, communion sabotaged by the “possessive individualism” encouraged by capitalism.<sup>26</sup>

Enter education – specifically *Bildung*<sup>27</sup> – as “educating the young towards self-examination thus appeared as key to the resolution of the conflict between ideals of classical

republicanism and the modern economy, as guarantor of an ordered modernity that does not fall prey to the passions but instead will ensure economic progress and social justice.”<sup>28</sup> When the distinction blurs between self and others - narcissism is one such syndrome - order may prevail but modernity (insofar as it enacts an Enlightenment faith in reason) disintegrates. In 1915, Werner Sombart wrote that – this is Tröhler’s paraphrase – “each individual person can perfect himself only in the framework of the typical characteristics of his folk,” adding: “True individuality is ... the German who serves Germanness.”<sup>29</sup> (Tröhler dates a “decidedly nationalist education theory in Germany” to the year 1806, when Napoleon ended the “Holy Empire.”<sup>30</sup>) In 1914 Rudolf Eucken had claimed – consonant with *Bildung* - that the “greatness of the German character” lay in that it was a “folk of deep inwardness,” which, in the face of the ever more commercialized countries contained “world historical importance.”<sup>31</sup> In Germany, Tröhler points out, the “Western world was seen as materialistic, which was quite often equated with democracy.”<sup>32</sup>

Pragmatism, too, protested capitalism (the commercialization of everything) and also owed its genesis to Protestantism.<sup>33</sup> Tröhler shows that in the field of psychology Pragmatism contradicted “causal empiricism, and in the field of philosophy it was the tool against (German) rationalism or idealism.”<sup>34</sup> “Pragmatism was harshly rejected in Germany” while accepted in Switzerland,<sup>35</sup> the home of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, whom Tröhler characterizes as a “figurehead within a sweeping cultural change that can be called the educational turn,” an “evolution that occurred in Northern and Western Europe as well as in the USA between the middle of the eighteenth and first third of the nineteenth century, when variously perceived social problems came to be interpreted as *educational* problems.”<sup>36</sup> Tröhler demonstrates that “this phenomenon continues unabated and finds expression in the framework of the World Bank,

the United Nations, UNESCO, and the OECD. It is based on the premise that the central problems of the present and planning for the future are in fact basically educational concerns.”<sup>37</sup> Over a century ago that “turn” expressed itself in “American Pragmatism [which] is basically egalitarian, communal, and in this sense democratic.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, as Tröhler points out: “The Americans had never been unworldly scholars but socially engaged professors who were involved with their environment.”<sup>39</sup>

That involvement has taken innumerable turns, several of which even many Americans judge unwelcome, one early twentieth-century instance of which was behaviorism, the goal of which was the “prediction and control of behavior.”<sup>40</sup> Its major exponent was John B. Watson who, Tröhler notes, was “socialized in the context of the Southern Baptist Convention.”<sup>41</sup> Tröhler reminds that “behaviorism never developed in Germany,”<sup>42</sup> perhaps because the project of socio-political control<sup>43</sup> in Germany needed no disguise.<sup>44</sup> In America that project posed as “psychology.” Today, and not only in America, it takes the form of cognitive psychology,<sup>45</sup> a “turn” one can trace to the nineteenth-century American psychologist James McKeen Cattell who, Tröhler points out, “in silent opposition to [Wilhelm] Wundt ... did not use the word “soul” but instead “brain.”<sup>46</sup> Yet another form the educationalization of the world took was (ongoing, indeed intensifying) technologization. Tröhler points out that “Whereas European intellectuals were skeptic or even hostile toward technological innovation, the Americans interpreted it as a part and an expression of sublime political and moral development,” although many Americans did come to appreciate that “technology and mass production ... had some problematic effects,” that realization reached as early as the “end of the nineteenth century,” when the “mismatch between technological and industrial progress and the ideal of a mutually interacting democracy society became apparent.”<sup>47</sup>

That late nineteenth-century national crisis caused by technological and industrial progress prompted Pragmatists to respond. Tröhler points out that the “overcoming of the weakness of democracy in view of the capitalization of life did not lead Dewey into agrarian nostalgia,” but “instead, he fostered two strategies for the stabilization and development of democracy,” one affirming the “crucial role of academic knowledge,” especially knowledge that, like a “seismograph,” registered shifts within society.<sup>48</sup> Key was knowledge’s dissemination throughout society, “enabling citizens to discuss their social and political affairs without being in danger of manipulation by the ‘captains of industry,’ as long as communication between the citizens is ensured.”<sup>49</sup> Through communication – the second strategy – knowledge could be acquired.<sup>50</sup> Dewey could not have foreseen how social media today weaponize communication, eviscerating the sincerity and authenticity prerequisite to democratic dialogue.<sup>51</sup>

In our era it is, I suggest, a subjective necessity to study history to come some self-awareness of who and where one is, what (historical) time it is. Secularism sheds the soul but spirituality still circulates, as does soul’s substitute - the psyche<sup>52</sup> - so *Bildung*, as one’s “subjective way of existing in a culture,” and specifically a national culture,” might still encourage the human subject, “through its own power,” to grapple with “everything that comes to it from the outside towards forming a unified life.”<sup>53</sup> Unlike the German version, in my version of *Bildung* the *Volk* is not required; indeed, it can easily function an anti-educative influence insofar as it stimulates ethnically-focused social cohesion, compulsory political solidarity, one’s compatriots fantasized as a “manifestation of God.”<sup>54</sup> Even the republican idea – that the human subject is a “political being by nature, a being who can find full development only in the *polis*”<sup>55</sup> – does not require us to expunge experience, plurality or negotiation in order to affirm “inwardness ... sentiment,” and “personhood.”<sup>56</sup> After all, as Tröhler appreciates,

American Pragmatism was (is) “conservative and progressive at the same time: conservative, because it carried on the Puritan vision of the congregation, progressive, because it tried to enhance more democracy.”<sup>57</sup>

“The nation has become an ugly duckling,” Tröhler observes, “something one prefers not to have too much to do with, especially not with regard to how it influences one’s own thinking.”<sup>58</sup> “The only way out of our own personal and academic socialization,” Tröhler knows, “is to contextualize ourselves.”<sup>59</sup> Cultural, academic, personal socialization all occur in time and place(s), and even when one is stateless, within nation-states. Contextualizing ourselves requires decoding our conditioning that occurs through curriculum, through family and friends, the very banality of our national formation. One’s life that cannot become even slightly sensible (i.e., intelligible) unless national literacy - as Tröhler so insightfully performs it – is a key component of a reconceptualized curriculum. It is, I suggest, a subjective necessity.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In *National Literacies in Education: Historical Reflections on the Nexus of Nations, National Identity, and Education*, edited by Stephanie Fox and Lukas Boser. Palgrave Macmillan, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> 2020, 634 n. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Pinar 2001.

<sup>4</sup> 1998, 37.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in 1998, 37.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> 2018, 769.

<sup>8</sup> Freire 1968.

<sup>9</sup> I am referencing Addams' 1892 *The Subjective Necessity of Settlements*:

[https://wnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch24\\_05.htm#:~:text=The%20Subjective%20Necessity%20for%20Social%20Settlements%20%281892%29%2C%20Jane.of%20the%20most%20prominent%20and%20tireless%20social%20reformers.](https://wnorton.com/college/history/archive/resources/documents/ch24_05.htm#:~:text=The%20Subjective%20Necessity%20for%20Social%20Settlements%20%281892%29%2C%20Jane.of%20the%20most%20prominent%20and%20tireless%20social%20reformers.)

<sup>10</sup> 2011a, 193.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in 2011a, 193.

<sup>14</sup> 2022, 19. Tröhler (2011b, 70) demonstrates that the “educational ambition of the Cold War, the OECD, and PISA has made apparent how little the education sciences have emancipated themselves from their religious and national roots.” Indeed, the “education sciences have



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nostalgically celebrated taken-for-granted convictions of their own national histories” (2011b, 56).

<sup>15</sup> Tröhler (2020) notes that in curriculum research when nationalism is discussed, as a rule, it is often characterized as a problem, to be corrected through teaching tolerance, ignoring the fact that it tends to hide itself in everyday practices, becoming banal. See also Tröhler 2022, 9.

<sup>16</sup> As Tröhler (2011a, 175) notes, in Pragmatism the “crucial notion here is ‘experience.’ In the Pragmatic conviction, people stand in everyday connections of experience; they interact, communicate, and cooperate.” I add to that depiction a phenomenological concern with “lived” experience; the final phrase (“being-in-the-world”) comes from Heidegger.

<sup>17</sup> Tröhler (2020) suggests that national literacy entails the capacity to decode national symbols, understanding how they function to assure collective identity.

<sup>18</sup> PISA is the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment. “Allow me to go back to my own youth,” Tröhler (2011a, 203) begins, concluding: “All these skills – the basic ones that are needed – are largely neglected by PISA, because it is obviously not interested in the present lives of students but in speculating on future lives” (2011a, 204).

<sup>19</sup> Within Protestantism, Tröhler (2013, 9) points out, the “difference between German Protestantism (Lutheranism) and Swiss Reformed Protestantism (Zinglianism and Calvinism) led to two different educational ideologies. Whereas Luther’s unworldly political and social ideology led to the political indifferent and contemplative educational ideology of *Bildung*, Swiss Reformed Protestantism developed an educational program heading at active citizenship as a reaction to these fundamental transformations.”

<sup>20</sup> 2011a, 134.

<sup>21</sup> Such a characterization could follow Dewey’s characterization of the teacher in *My Pedagogic Creed*, which Tröhler (2011a, 112) quotes: Dewey: “I believe that in this way the teacher is always is the prophet of the true God and the usher in of the true kingdom of God.”

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in 2011a, 111.

<sup>23</sup> “In Dewey’s view,” Tröhler (2011a, 111) explains, “the project of communion and immediacy must start with education, namely, education in the home within communal “face-to-face relationships” (Dewey’s phrase).

<sup>24</sup> This distinction blurs as well when Tröhler (2011a, 51) quotes from George Herbert Mead’s review of Jane Addams’ 1907 book *The Newer Ideals of Peace*, endorsing her main thesis, namely that “government must arise out of these immediate human relations,” (government here as analogous to the Catholic Church), human relations defined by Mead as “sympathetic contact with men, women, and children,” perhaps a more Protestant than Catholic conception.

<sup>25</sup> 2011a, 116.

<sup>26</sup> 2011a, 33. In contrast to individuality, the concept of possessive individualism—associated with the Canadian political philosopher C. B. Macpherson—emphasizes freedom from constraint, converted by capitalism into the right to exploit labour and land for maximum profit.

<sup>27</sup> The term, Tröhler (2011a, 152) reminds “coined by Goethe and particularly only to the Germans that refers to the cultivation, the forming of the inner spiritual life of man.”

<sup>28</sup> 2011a, 35.

<sup>29</sup> 2011a, 153.

<sup>30</sup> 2011a, 154.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in 2011a, 54.

<sup>32</sup> 2011a, 145.

<sup>33</sup> 2011a, 97.

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<sup>34</sup> 2011a, 117.

<sup>35</sup> 2011a, 113.

<sup>36</sup> 2013, 3.

<sup>37</sup> 2013, 4.

<sup>38</sup> 2011a, 144.

<sup>39</sup> 2011a, 145.

<sup>40</sup> 2011a, 137.

<sup>41</sup> 2011a, 147.

<sup>42</sup> 2011a, 143.

<sup>43</sup> That behaviorism was a project of socio-political control is a point made by the great Finnish curriculum theorist Tero Autio (2006).

<sup>44</sup> Tröhler (2011a, 143) asserts that “If there were any political aspects [of *Bildung*, they] “were racial ... and always anti-democratic.”

<sup>45</sup> Tröhler (2011a, 201) points out that the “educationalization of the Cold War in the United States marked a transformation of the dominant reference discipline for education, for it switched from philosophy to psychology, more precisely from a popular interpretation of Pragmatism to cognitive psychology, which was at its outset in the late 1950s – cognition theory being the most important reference of PISA today, as the stakeholders admit themselves. The rise of cognitive psychology came along with the rise of new governance ideologies of the Cold War.”

<sup>46</sup> 2011a, 137.

<sup>47</sup> 2011a, 99.

<sup>48</sup> 2011a, 176.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> 2011a, 177.

<sup>51</sup> Pinar 2023.

<sup>52</sup> “No one has ever seen a society,” Tröhler (2022, 10) notes, “just as no one has seen the soul, which in the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was nobly called ‘psyche’ to cover its theological origins.”

<sup>53</sup> 2011a, 163.

<sup>54</sup> 2011a, 168.

<sup>55</sup> Tröhler 2013, 44. Tröhler is here discussing Pestalozzi.

<sup>56</sup> 2011a, 168.

<sup>57</sup> 2011a, 175.

<sup>58</sup> 2022, 16.

<sup>59</sup> 2011b, 70.