

Concepts and Paradigms in the Historiography of Educational Change: Some Reflections on the Uses of the Past

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Ever since Butterfield's seminal critique of the Whig interpretation of history, historians have held that judgements about the past should remain independent of the present. With reference to Kuhn and the application of concepts from the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, this paper examines the process by which present-day meanings enter into judgements about the history of educational change. Contrary to the established view, it argues that this phenomenon, better known as presentism, is an unavoidable and, ironically perhaps, a necessary condition for the study and teaching of history.

Depuis que Butterfield a livré sa critique féconde dans *The Whig interpretation of history*, les historiens ont soutenu que les jugements sur le passé devraient rester indépendants du présent. En s'appuyant sur Kuhn et sur l'application des concepts de la Renaissance du XIII^e siècle, cet article étudie le processus par lequel le sens actuel pénètre dans des jugements sur l'histoire des changements dans le domaine de l'éducation. Contrairement aux idées reçues, l'article soutient que ce phénomène, mieux connu sous le nom de "présentisme" est une condition inévitable et - ce qui peut paraître ironique - nécessaire pour l'étude et l'enseignement de l'histoire.

Historians and theorists of history alike have long debated the principle that historical judgements should remain independent of the present. The importance of this principle for the study and teaching of history was pointedly made by Butterfield when he censured those historians who examined the past as a justification of the present (1965). Butterfield's analysis, however, focussed the debate not only on the uses of the past but on the underlying significance of what the historical community has come to identify as the idea of presentism.

As a condition of historical research, presentism occurs when present-day meanings, principles of reasoning and empirical knowledge are read back into earlier periods of time. In the practice of history, it frequently includes the linking of persons and ideas over time on superficial and inadequate grounds. It is defined by a belief in the proposition that similarities between past institutions and attitudes and those of the present can be established by a causal linkage in the course of events (Canon, 1980; Tosh, 1984). These similarities are then judged by anachronistic criteria, often with the intent of justifying some idea or movement in the present. According to its critics, presentism belies sound principles of

historiography, leading to the misrepresentation of historical evidence and, in its neglect of objectivity to distortion in the explanation of events (Elton, 1967).

Contrary to established opinion, however, it could be argued that presentism is a necessary condition of historical research. The attempt to seek its elimination by an appeal to objectivity, however desirable this may be, has obscured the interdependence of the past and the present. More particularly, it has neglected to account for what historian of science Thomas Kuhn identifies as a conceptual framework or paradigm that guides the interpretation of events.¹ For Kuhn, this framework, reflecting the researcher's social and intellectual milieu, provides a context that not only influences the selection of data but the assumptions and the meanings of concepts that as general notions assist in the reconstruction of the past.²

This paper will argue that in the study of educational change the application of concepts and the meanings which they convey are subject to an unavoidable presentist orientation. The investigation of this provocative hypothesis will not focus on the already well-known effects of presentism, but rather on the methodological processes to which it is linked.³ The argument does not belittle the time-honored pursuit of objectivity in the explanation of events, but rather through a study of historical writing, considers its implication for research. How, then, in the light of Kuhn's thesis does the present enter into the use of concepts in the explanation of events, and in what way does it influence the study of the past?

The Foundations of Presentism

The phenomenon of presentism is not an isolated dimension of historical research. It is integral to what might be identified as a conceptual framework or paradigm that for the historian and others in the research community includes the entire constellation of beliefs, values and techniques that influence the interpretation of events (Kuhn, 1970, p. 175). This does not imply that all historians in a "school of thought" necessarily subscribe to an accepted pattern of interpretation, but that in the application of historical concepts there exists general agreement on how events are to be explained.⁴ Such a framework provides a "tacit knowledge" for solutions to similar problems in the field.⁵ Like a gestalt, the paradigm is seldom articulated in an explicit theoretical form. It functions as a "global relationship," showing by model or exemplar the connection between concepts and assumptions in the selection of historical data (Kuhn, 1977, p. 18). Without reference to specific rules and procedures of research, the paradigm allows the historian from the standpoint of the present to apply a consistent pattern in the explanation of events.

Within this framework it is difficult, if not impossible, for the historian to separate the explanation of data from the assumptions which identify and define the limits and course of educational events.⁶ The historian's present reality enters into the understanding of the educational past, and in so doing sets the conditions for the way in which historical concepts are selected and employed.⁷ This does not eliminate the historian's traditional commitment to determine "what actually

happened," but brings to a realization that at a methodological level the concepts of history are theory-laden, and in the examination of educational change meaningful only in the context of the intellectual framework in which they are forged (Kuhn, 1970, pp. 85-86).

The Presentist Implications of Concept Development

The presentist implications of this position will be examined with reference to the use of concepts in the study of curriculum change in the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, arguably one of the most celebrated periods in the history of education. Historical concepts in this setting appear to be operative on two distinct though obviously related levels. On one level, they may be imported from existing paradigms outside the period under investigation and then applied to the explanation of events. In this context, attention will focus on the meaning of the "Renaissance" which did not emerge as a descriptive concept until it was introduced to the literature well after the twelfth century. On another level, concepts may be indigenous to the historical period. The concept of "reason," for example, was evident not only in the literature of the twelfth century, but was adopted later by historians to assist in the reconstruction of its past. The emphasis in these illustrations, however, is not to elucidate the many and subtle meanings attributed to "Renaissance" and "reason" during a two hundred year history, but to examine how in the process of adopting these concepts the people of the period and the historians who came after tended to impart a presentist perspective.

The "Renaissance," a Contemporary Concept

The concept of the "renaissance" is not unfamiliar to historians of education. Introduced to the study of the medieval period by Charles Haskins, it played a central role in the social and intellectual history of the twelfth century, and has since been adopted by other historians to explain educational change.⁸ Under the influence of Jacob Burckhardt, Haskins viewed the renaissance as "a revival" of ancient learning and art, emphasizing secularity and classicism as its recognizable features. It signalled for Haskins "an age of new life and new knowledge," beginning with the expansion of the cathedral schools and closing with the founding of the earliest universities (Haskins, 1927, p. 190). During this period, the curriculum experienced significant change in the fields of philosophy, law, medicine and science (Haskins, 1927, p. 6).

Haskins' concept of the renaissance is novel. He places its development in a historical context which for some has been seen as uniform and static. Haskins challenged this established but regressive view of the period and, by way of contrast, questioned but did not ignore the unique and decisive characteristics attributed by Burckhardt and others to the idea of the renaissance, and especially to the later "great" or Italian Renaissance, claiming that the difference in culture between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries "was not nearly so sharp as it seemed to the humanists and their modern followers (Haskins, 1927, p. 6).⁹ For

Haskins, the twelfth century was typified by a “requickened intellectual life” that grew into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. It embraced a variety of “leading ideas” that extended the accepted meaning of the renaissance, implying as Ferguson suggests a process of continuity from an earlier to a later period (1963, p. 25). Whether looked upon as a revival of learning unique to itself or as an extension of either the Middle Ages or the Italian Renaissance, the concept of the twelfth-century renaissance provided a new perspective on the explanation of historical events.

More specifically, Haskins’ idea of the renaissance reflects a “tacit knowledge” about the nature and importance of the twelfth century based in part on the views of Burckhardt. In associating the term with a secular revival of classical literature, philosophy, science and jurisprudence, Haskins’ “renewal” emphasized an intellectual history of education (1927, p. 14). Purposely omitted from his conceptual framework are an equally significant vernacular literature, sculpture and architecture that he admits would further an understanding of the concept.

This argument supports in part the position of Cassirer (1943) who suggested that periods such as the renaissance were characterized by the interaction of forces within society. For Cassirer, attention must also be given not only to the substance or context of ideas, but to their function and dynamics, recognizing, moreover, that they may never express “actual” historical facts (1943, p. 55). In effect, a concept may serve as a way of linking similar and complementary developments in a particular context, though other events of the time for continuity or emphasis may have been ignored (Kuhn, 1977, p. 17). Even the inclusion of those events which at first sight appear to contradict the renaissance as a revival of learning would not necessarily negate the meaning of the concept itself. For example, the failure of medieval science to submit all statements to verification and proof in no way violated the “historical spirit” of the age (Haskins, 1927, p. 337).

Now it might be argued that Haskins’ use of the term is inconsistent in that at one time he identifies the renaissance with a “revival” and at another with a “new birth.” This leads one to question not only the meaning of the terms but the process employed in the selection of historical evidence in the portrayal of events. After all, a university curriculum represented by a “revival” is different in its nature and purpose from one which has experienced “new birth.” This difference affects the kind of evidence brought forward to establish demonstrated agreement with concepts and data, a task which is made more difficult in using the two meanings either interchangeably, separately, or in conjunction with one another.

The point might be illustrated with differences between Haskins and Ferguson in their conceptualization of the renaissance. In hypothesizing an intellectual basis to the term, Haskins introduces considerable evidence to justify its meaning in the context of what is traditionally identified as medieval education. Ferguson, linking the concept to social and economic changes, more clearly associates its emergence with the Italian Renaissance of the fourteenth century. After all, the medieval revival lacked the definitive characteristics of a proper renaissance

(Ferguson 1963, p. 27). Although both historians endeavor to apply the term consistently within their own conceptual frameworks, they conform to different interpretations of its meaning, inseparable from the assumptions and hypotheses which generate the search for data.

“Reason,” an Indigenous Concept

Equally important to an understanding of educational change are those concepts indigenous to the period in which they developed. These concepts reflect a meaning established by the people of the historical time from the standpoint of their social condition and culture. Since the past cannot be duplicated, the historian on the basis of documentary evidence must reconstruct that which has occurred. Given the time lapse, the historian accounts for both similarities and differences in the meaning of language, seeking not only the primary sources in which concepts are used but, in order to eliminate possible distortion, the understandings and perceptions based on the research of others.

These observations are of particular significance to the concept of “reason” which, during the Renaissance of the Twelfth Century, was employed by educators in establishing the curriculum of the emerging universities. Turning for the moment from Haskins, attention might be directed to the medievalist Etienne Gilson who examined the concept of reason in terms of its relationship to science. “To have faith,” for Gilson, “is to assent to something because it is revealed by God,” and to have science “is to assent to something which we perceive as true in the natural light of reason” (1938, p. 72). As such, the nature of reason, which was rooted in part in Greek rationalism and natural philosophy, contrasts with Christian revelation and faith, grounded in the scriptures as interpreted by the “accepted authorities” of the Church (Cobban, 1975, p. 3). By the end of the twelfth century, reason as a central yet problematic concept had been satisfactorily introduced into university curricula.¹⁰ Incorporated into a program of studies that focussed on the primacy of faith, it contributed to a paradigm that proved able to guide the research of the community (Kuhn, 1970, p. 22).

Hellenistic thought with its new conceptual framework and patterns of explanation was not easily assimilated into a curriculum that in an Anselmian tradition accepted faith before understanding as a guide to theology (Gilson, 1938, p. 24). It led to a confrontation between reason and revelation which ended in a series of ecclesiastical censures upon the course of studies in the hope of controlling the examination of ideas.¹¹ The papacy was alerted by Bishop Stephen of Tournai who pleaded for apostolic correction in order “that the divine word be not cheapened by vulgar handling” (Thorndike, 1944, p. 24).

A solution was advanced by Thomas Aquinas who employed the ideas of Aristotle and Averroes to reformulate the relationship between the concepts of reason and revelation. He concluded that theology depends “upon the philosophical sciences, not as though it stood in need of them, but only to make its teachings clearer” (Aquinas, [trans] 1947, p. 1). Aware of the forces tending towards the

separation of reason and revelation, Aquinas proposed an alternative solution. It led to a reinterpretation of Averroes' "irreconcilable" split of reason and revelation, reflecting the impact of competing paradigms on the development of scholastic thought.

Nevertheless, after 1272, decrees directed against Averroism were identified with Aquinas through their Aristotelian heritage (Thorndike, 1944, pp. 80-81). Especially significant was the condemnation of 1277, which Leff rightly infers, "effectively meant the end of the independent efforts of the philosophers to fashion their own outlook" and "ensured that the main doctrinal and intellectual developments remained the prerogative of theologians" (Leff, 1968, p. 209).

It would seem that the historian plays a critical role in establishing reason as a concept in the reconstruction of events. The task, however, is made exceedingly complex in that attention must be given to the use of the term in its indigenous and subsequent settings. For example, in examining Aquinas' understanding of reason and its relation to theology as "queen of the sciences," the historian focuses on Aquinas' attempt to resolve the conflict between Hellenic and Christian traditions.¹² This suggests an investigation not only of Aquinas' writings but, as indicated in the illustration, the ideas of his rival Averroes. There is a need to address both original and secondary sources, requiring a careful scrutiny of translations which were themselves influenced by the interpretations of translators.

As secondary sources, the historical interpretations of Gilson and Leff, for example, are equally significant to understanding the views of Aquinas. Although they allow for the benefits of a distant and, perhaps, an even-handed view of the historical context, they may also introduce particular and frequently conflicting conceptual frameworks whose importance the contemporary historian should not ignore. Above all, in considering the indigenous concept, the historian must be aware that the inclusion as well as the exclusion of data has already been made by people of the past. At best, the historian is working with incomplete and previously interpreted evidence.

It is claimed that such presentist intrusions into the past can be overcome by getting to the "inside" of events by means of empathy or *verstehen*. The historian would re-enact the past by intellectually understanding the thoughts of individual historical subjects (Collingwood, 1956, p. 282). In adopting this procedure, the historian enters the mind of Aquinas to identify the assumptions and meanings attached to the concepts of reason and revelation. However desirable this may be, is it possible for the historian not only to determine the evidence of the period, but in so doing negate presentist social and cultural elements which consciously or otherwise influence the historian's interpretation of the past?

Educational Implications

It is evident from this study of concepts that presentism is an unavoidable and, ironically perhaps, a necessary condition of historical research. Whether the concept is indigenous to the period of history under investigation or derived from the historian's culture and then applied to the past, the meaning which the

concept conveys is inseparable from the interpretive framework that guides the historian in the explanation of events. If this is the case, then the application of a concept in history, irrespective of its place of origin, is invariably a product of the historian's present. At best, the historian examines events established by others who, in their selection of concepts and data, provide the primary and secondary sources with which the historian works. Presentism in this context is not exclusive to the anachronistic standards of today, for the intellectual framework as a product of the historian's environment necessitates a contemporary orientation to historical research any time the selection of data occurs.

The implications of the analysis extend beyond the meaning of particular concepts to the purpose of history as a field of study. Conceding the inevitability of presentism, it may easily be argued that there is little if any distinction between truth and falsity in historical inquiry. There is, after all, nothing to prevent the deliberate selection of evidence to confirm one's bias in the presentation of events. As indicated, this could lead not only to the linking of persons and ideas over time on superficial and inadequate grounds, but to the use of the past as a means of justifying some idea or movement in the present. To put it differently, if presentism is inherent and, hence, inevitable to historical research, how can one challenge the intentional misrepresentation of the past?

Perhaps a first step is to confirm the existence of the events under question through the analysis of documentary and other evidence. This requires the investigation not only of such standard data as records, diaries, and letters, but where appropriate the corroboration of oral history. Selection on these lines of course does not eliminate the possibility that data may be purposely ignored. Attention must, therefore, be given to the hypotheses and especially to the paradigm or conceptual framework that serves as the context for the explanation of events. Under these conditions appeal must be directed to the community of historians which acts as the arbiter whenever historical data and their interpretation are questioned. However diffuse it may be, the community by means of publication, review, and symposium determines the contribution of its members for the development of the field.

Napoleon is said to have remarked that "History is but a fable agreed upon." To concur with this observation is to forsake the pursuit of historical truth. Yet to ignore its admonition is to deny the reliance of that truth on the present. Such an hypothesis does not diminish the value of history as a study in the schools, for it alerts the student to the complexity of the past and its possibilities as a guide to the future.

NOTES

- ¹ Although Kuhn has written extensively on the idea of the paradigm, the following works are especially relevant to this study: "Objectivity, value judgment and theory choice" in Kuhn. (1977). *The essential tension*, pp. 320-339; "Preface" in Kuhn. *The essential tension*, pp. ix-xxiii; "The relations between the history and the philosophy of science" in Kuhn. *The essential tension*, pp. 3-20; and Kuhn. (1970). *The structure of scientific revolutions*. Rev. Ed.
- ² The terms "explanation," "interpretation," and "reconstruction" will be used interchangeably with reference to historical events.
- ³ Although the question of presentism may be as old as history itself, its appearance in the history of education is quite recent with much of the discussion tending to focus on the impact of the problem rather than the process by which it has emerged. For brief but cogent remarks that consider the phenomenon as a "condition" of historical research, in the light of the post-Bailyn debate on traditional and revisionist historiography, see Feinberg, W. (1983). *Understanding education*, especially pp. 3-4 and 118-123.
- ⁴ For a seminal study of Kuhn's ideas in relation to history, see Hollinger, D. (1973).
- ⁵ See Kuhn, "The relations between the history and the philosophy of science," p. 17, for the idea in history of the "global partnership" and its similarity to the paradigm. From this perspective, history as a study may be considered pre-paradigmatic. See, for example, the arguments in *The structure of scientific revolutions*, Ch. IX.
- ⁶ See Carr (1964, pp. 23 and 47) and compare with Kuhn, "Logic of discovery, or psychology of research," p. 270, and Kuhn "Preface," p. xxi.
- ⁷ Mommsen, W.J. "Social conditioning and social relevance of historical judgements." *History and Theory*. Beiheft 17, (1978), vol. xvii, no. 4, p. 23. Compare with Kuhn. *The structure of scientific revolutions*, pp. 158-159.
- ⁸ For discussion of the Renaissance see Cassirer, E. "Some remarks on the question of the originality of the Renaissance." *Journal of the History of Ideas*. (1943), IV, pp. 49-56; Cebik, L.B. (1975). *Concepts, events, and history*; Ferguson, A.K. (1963). "The reinterpretation of the Renaissance" in Ferguson. Ed., *Renaissance Studies*, pp. 17-30; Haskins, C.H. (1927). *The Renaissance of the twelfth century*; Haskins, C.H. (1957). *The rise of universities*; and Haskins, C.H. (1929). *Studies in medieval culture*.
- ⁹ Compare with Barnes, H. (1962). *A history of historical writing*, p. 313.
- ¹⁰ See, for example, Féret, P. (1894-96). *La faculté de théologie de Paris et ses docteurs les plus célèbres*. "I"1, pp. 207-209 and Rashdall, H. (1936). *The universities of Europe in the Middle Ages. I*, Powicke, F. and Emden, A. Eds., p. 477.
- ¹¹ For a study of forces shaping theological thought at both Paris and Oxford during this and the subsequent period, see, Chenu, M. -D. (1943). *La Théologie comme science au XIIIe siècle*. 2nd Ed.; and Leff, G. (1968). *Paris and Oxford universities in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries*.
- ¹² For a discussion of the reception of Aquinas' views within the religious community, see Callus, D. (1963). *The condemnation of St. Thomas at Oxford*.

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