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the quest for modern
vocational education -
georg kerschensteiner
between dewey,
weber and simmel

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1. Introduction

In most European countries, compulsory schooling was introduced in the 19th century and answered one of the fundamental claims of the Enlightenment, namely to spread knowledge in order to foster democracy through education, and to foster education through democracy. This claim was summed up by the liberal Johann Heinrich Zschokke in the formula “popular education is liberation” (“*Volksbildung ist Volksbefreiung*”) (Zschokke 1859: 171). Zschokke already included the idea of continuing education, including adult education, after compulsory schooling.

In addition, education was also meant to foster economic prosperity. In this conception, education was not reserved for the elite of society but for the masses. In turn, these masses had to adapt to new developments in economic production. Apart from the ambition to popularise the achievements of culture and science there was the question of how the rural population, the middle classes and the industrial workers could qualify for employment. How could the elementary school impart further useful knowledge apart from the four Rs reading, writing, arithmetic and religion? And how could youths be integrated into modern society after compulsory schooling? These were some of the questions which educational policy had to deal with at the turn of the 19th century. The focus had shifted to the aspiring working class and the middle classes who felt threatened by the newly established freedom of trade; the answers to their claims – often connected to the so-called ‘social question’ – necessarily included educational measures.

The same problems appeared in similar forms in every nation with industrial ambitions. Since 1875, elementary schooling was being supplemented by instruction in handicrafts (for both sexes) in all of Europe and in the USA. Libraries and museums of arts-and-crafts should serve the purpose of further education for the workforce. Specific institutions for the needs of commercial and industrial, but also

agricultural, home economics and mercantilist education were created. These were schools specifically intended for the training of skilled workers. Additionally, there was a first wave of legislation to regulate in-firm apprentice training and the creation of vocational educational institutions (Gonon 2008). In other words, there were a number of issues that indicated a need for reform in order to contribute to a modernisation of society:

- The existing elementary school was in need of reform. Instruction and curricula should take into account the latest developments in science and the arts. In particular, manual work and personal experience relating to modern culture – understood as revaluation and reform of industrial culture – should be included.
- In political discourse, a new concept of education was to be established, one which took heed of economic, industrial and social realities. In fact, it could even be said that educational policy at that time actually depended on such a new concept of education. For example, the natural sciences and ‘realistic’ contents quite generally needed to be re-valued vis-à-vis classical philology.
- Vocation-oriented and work-oriented education should be allowed room by acknowledging its educational value next to classical education and by accepting it as an independent area of education. These demands anticipated the development towards parity of esteem of general and vocational education.
- Until the end of the 19th century, pedagogy had normally been a sub-discipline of philosophy. At the beginning of the 20th century, pedagogy was to be established as a legitimate and independent university discipline in order to deal with educational issues, especially relating to school matters. Around the same time, psychology and sociology also became established as independent disciplines.
- The professionalisation of teacher-training was of particular importance. This was to be achieved by a more pronounced orientation towards scientific disciplines and by designing teacher-training at least in part as university education, though the practical components of the training were to be retained.

- In addition, specific post-elementary educational institutions had to be established. The vocationally oriented continuation schools that had developed out of optional local institution were to be redesigned in order to provide youths with further necessary skills and attitudes for their professional and social lives.

1.1 Kerschensteiner's approach – conservative modernisation

Georg Kerschensteiner took an active part in all of these issues, which becomes apparent already in his 1907 essay collection *Grundfragen der Schulorganisation* on basic questions of school organisation (cf. Kerschensteiner 1914 for an English translation). These essays deal with such topics as general and vocational education, the educational value of manual work, continuation schools and teacher-training (Kerschensteiner 1910).

Kerschensteiner's pedagogy provided specific answers to these basic questions insofar as for him it was not a matter of merely modernising the methods of knowledge transfer or of supplementing infirm training with theoretical training for apprentices. He rather wanted education to be oriented towards everyday life and the world of work. Furthermore, he considered vocational education – which he wanted to be recognised as an essential component of education – to be an important requisite for citizenship.

Kerschensteiner was ambivalent towards social and economic change. In his view, all the rights that were valued most highly in the modern state, i.e. freedom of speech, freedom of press, right of association, right of assembly, universal suffrage and freedom of trade, led to excessive and state-threatening individualism. In his essay *Das Problem der Volkserziehung* ("The Problem of National Education") he therefore argued that "the old forms and formulae of education" were no longer sufficient (Kerschensteiner 1910a: 1).

Kerschensteiner's reform concept was not the result of a scientific analysis or of deliberate educational planning, but it developed pragmatically over a period of time, in part motivated by fear of social upheaval. His ideas were influenced by an idealistic conception of society as had already been sketched by Plato. In his essay *Begriff der staatsbürgerlichen Erziehung* ("The Idea of Education for Citizenship") he argued that the realisation of an ethical, virtue-based community represented the ideal of the constitutional state and of national culture (Kerschensteiner 1912a: 27, 32). Character building that granted every individual a role in the state organism should contribute to this same end. Regarding his educational reforms, Kerschensteiner modelled himself on the astute Prussian politician Bismarck and on the Swiss pedagogue Pestalozzi.

This comprehensive perspective on reform was pivotal also for vocational education. In an essay on the system of continuation schools he argued that the neglect of education and training for craftsmanship had led to the establishment of a versatile and thorough education in apprenticeship workshops as an alternative, for example in France, but later on also in Austria and Switzerland. Even though he lauded the advantages of these institutions, he nevertheless pleaded for the enhancement and 'vocationalisation' of continuation schools in order to foster vocational education on a larger scale (Kerschensteiner 1912b: 288). Note that Kerschensteiner did not speak of a 'dual system of vocational education'; this term was introduced only in the 1960ies (Bohnenkamp/Dirks/Knab 1966: 429). He considered the continuation school for apprentices to be the right means to fulfil the tasks of education and strengthening of a sense of community (Kerschensteiner 1912b: 289). He argued that it was a shortcoming of existing continuation schools to be geared only towards economic benefit, while the ultimate goal of education in a modern state could not be limited to a purely vocational goal (ibid.: 295).

Kerschensteiner was obviously not the only one concerned with these issues. He shared the reform pedagogues' enthusiasm for Pestalozzi, and like the Neo-Kantian philosopher and pedagogue Paul Natorp he chose a social-pedagogical approach. Together with his younger friend Eduard Spranger he furthermore glorified Pestalozzi as

a pedagogical classic, and with his colleague Aloys Fischer he established pedagogy as a discipline at the University of Munich.

From a contemporary point of view, Kerschensteiner was impressively powerful and influential, which in his first phase as an educational politician allowed him to implement the changes he deemed necessary. He was soon famous for his school reforms, and the fact that he was an exceptionally gifted speaker and gave many lectures in Germany as well as abroad added to his high profile. He received a host of prominent visitors who praised the “Munich Model” (Best/Ogden 1914: 21) as an example of educational reform because it had been possible to convert youths into “capable workmen” and “good citizens” (*ibid.*: 2). It is thus Kerschensteiner’s merit that the German educational reforms at the beginning of the 20th century, in particular with regard to elementary school and vocational education, became internationally visible.

1.2 The literature on Georg Kerschensteiner

There are a large number of publications in German on many different aspects of Kerschensteiner’s work. His lectures and some of his important texts have been edited by Gerhard Wehle (Wehle 1966, 1982). Most publications focus on one single aspect of his work, for example, on his role as vocational pedagogue, as educational theorist, or as an exponent of reform pedagogy. For a long time he had been portrayed very favourably, even with a lack of critical distance (but cf. also Wilhelm 1957; Walder 1992). Since the 1960s, however, a critical view on Kerschensteiner has developed, focussing on his backwardness regarding his stance on political and technological developments (Stratmann 1999, 1999a).

As far as publications in the English-speaking world are concerned, there is a detailed portrait and well-informed presentation of his work by Diane Simons (Simons 1966). In this monograph, she traces Kerschensteiner’s impact in many areas and especially his pioneer work for educational reform in England (Simons 1966: 136).