

An Uncompleted Symphony: Fradkin's Study of Pedology in East and West

MARC DEPAEPE
Universitat Catòlica de Lovaina

On the occasion of a Seminar, held in Suzdal during the spring of 1991, I had the opportunity to meet Felix Fradkin, the gentle and humble historian of education from the university of Vladímir. He was a specialist of Russian pedology, a field of study that interested me particularly, for I had finished in 1989 a comparative analysis of this phenomenon in the West. Together we have had interesting conversations about the processes behind this phase in the history of educational sciences. One of the outcomes was the elaboration of joint research plan for the history of pedology in East and West. The sudden death of Fradkin made of this, however, an unfinished task that ended up in wishful thinking ...

The point of departure for my comparative study of pedology was, of course, Belgium, where mainly Medard C. Schuyten, the Antwerp pedologist of world fame, started a pedological -laboratory in 1895. As pedologist, Schuyten published not only in Dutch, but also in French, German, English, and Spanish, and his work was further translated into Hungarian, Russian, and Portuguese. From the outset, Schuyten tried to get an international association for pedology off the ground. Already in 1903, he sounded out Hermann Griesbach on the subject. On the occasion of the sixth international congress of psychologists in Geneva in 1909, the Bulgarian Gheorgov and Schuyten decided to form an international pedological committee. It succeeded in organizing the first (and only) international congress for pedology, which took place in Brussels in the summer of 1911. Schuyten, who chaired the committee that was charged with the organization of the international pedological congresses, served as vice-chairman of the congress. The famous Belgian reform pedagogue, Ovide Decroly, served as chairman. In the same year, Schuyten also became an honorary correspondent of the pedological institute of St. Petersburg and -still before the outbreak of the First World War- he was offered chairs in Amsterdam and Groningen in the Netherlands and in Columbia.

As far as the nature of pedology was concerned

Schuyten claimed a true and neutral science of the child. In the presentation of the first *Paedologisch Jaarboek* in 1900, Schuyten spoke out sharply against the "empiricism" -by which he meant the old way of dealing with children, rooted in experience and the tradition- and the "metaphysical" misconceptions to which education had fallen prey. In his opinion, education must be supported by the discoveries in physiology and psychology. Above all, the science of education had to acquire a mathematical character and "follow the way of all the other exact sciences". Helping this "dream" come true was the object of pedology in general and of the Antwerp pedological Laboratory in particular. Thus, pedology was conceived by Schuyten, as it was by its founder, Oscar Chrisman, as a kind of integrating synthesis science whereby the disciplinary identity was determined primarily by the material object, the child.

In spite of all this high-flown rhetoric, the pedological paradigm collapsed like a soufflé after the First World War, at least in Western Europe and the United States. As a consequence of the war, not only did the main figures seem to have disappeared from the scene but also the need for more realistic subsidiary disciplines with their own and much more limited focuses had developed. The integralistic striving for one single science of the child could not be realized. Except that all the research concerned the child, there was little unity to be found in pedology, which wanted to have its say in psychology and pedagogy as well as in school hygiene and in the history, anthropology, and sociology of the child. In any event, pedology remained, methodologically, a "Fremdkörper". A pedological research method, which could have formed, as it were, the centrifugal force of this new scientific discipline, was never found. Pedological research was compelled to make use of the already tried methods and techniques of physiology, psychology, anthropometry, and the like. In the long turn the term pedology gradually disappeared from the language of the psychology of education. In some countries, such as the Netherlands,

"pedology" acquired the more specific meaning of diagnosis and care for handicapped children. Moreover, experimental research also had to deal with the revival of the philosophical-hermeneutic tradition. New life was blown into it primarily in Germany but also to a degree in the Netherlands.

Although the concept of pedology had certainly a different meaning in Russia, its development was neither very successful. The vivid interest in experimental research of the human soul, existing at the end of the XIXth century and exemplified by scholars like Nechayev and Bektherev, disappeared gradually after the Great October Socialist Revolution in 1917. Particularly at the end of the 1920s, the Left wanted to develop psychology and pedagogy from the orthodox standpoint of Marxist doctrine concerning the human being and the determinants of man's activities. This led towards the total ban of pedology, to which P. P.: Blonsky had contributed with outstanding publications. On July 4, 1936 the Central Committee of the All Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) suppressed all pedological activities. Only during the educational perestroika of the late 1980s, it became possible for Fradkin to edit printed materials from that period, he had studied before. In his *Search for Pedagogics* - published by Progress Publishers, Moscow 1990 he considers this documents as key sources for the history of Russian education: "The materials of the discussion on pedology considered in this book acquaint the reader with the contribution of Soviet scientists on such fundamental problems as the subject-matter and limits of the emergent pedological science and its links with pedagogy, methods of pedological studies, the relationship between biological and social factors in the development of the individual, and the role of heredity in bringing up children. The fact that these questions were not worked out was a major cause of the practical ineffectiveness of pedagogical investigations right up to the 1970s and 1980s" (p. 15).

In our Suzdal-discussion we developed a plan for a comparative analysis of pedology in West and Central Europe. One of its aims was to relate this phenomenon to its socio-historical background. Such an approach would be, and still is today, a relatively new factor in the history of educational sciences. Apart from what had been accomplished in Germany, most works in the history of educational research lack the history of science approach, which we consider necessary. Often they are written by representatives of the experimental sector, so it is not surprising that their interpretation of the past, if it even transcend the level of facticity, reflects excessive optimism

and has the air of hagiography and triumphalism. And as one cannot speak of a multifactorial and multidimensional analysis of the historical reality, the traditional -literature in this field has no concern for the cross-cultural interwovenness of experimental educational thinking. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the influence of new theorems in education in large measure crossed the various national borders. By bringing together specialists from East and West, Fradkin and I wanted to refine the global picture both of us had contributed to formerly. In view of the further development of educational research such an enterprise was far from being superfluous. The historical analysis of pedology would have given a better insight into the real potential of this approach. First, it can clarify what unsuspected wealth was present in the former efforts to build an empirical science of education, second, the history of science in general--insofar as it is not only concerned with the rational reconstruction of educational ideas and theories but also involves the social determinants of the production of science in its discourse--must lead to the qualifying of the absolutist claims of the previous theory designs.

Therefore, the question remains for my part open: who wants to pick up that project, and so complete an uncompleted symphony in pious dedication to our beloved friend and colleague Fradkin?