

Introduction: Do We Have Good Reasons to Commemorate Rousseau in 2012?

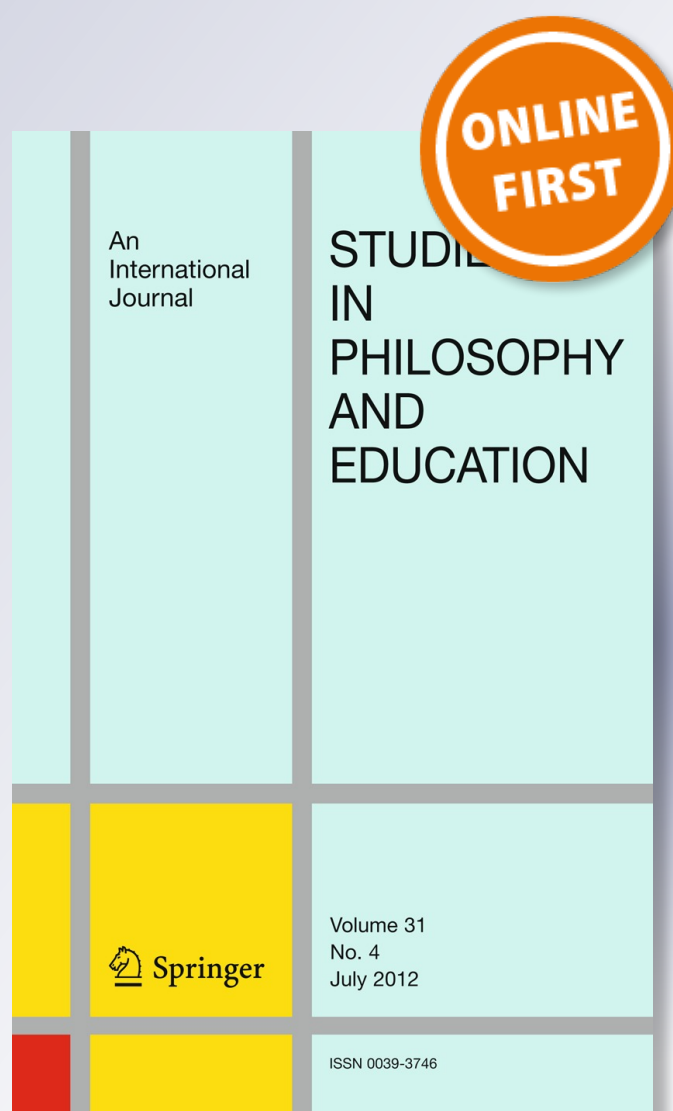
Daniel Tröhler

Studies in Philosophy and Education
An International Journal

ISSN 0039-3746

Stud Philos Educ

DOI 10.1007/s11217-012-9315-6



Your article is protected by copyright and all rights are held exclusively by Springer Science+Business Media B.V.. This e-offprint is for personal use only and shall not be self-archived in electronic repositories. If you wish to self-archive your work, please use the accepted author's version for posting to your own website or your institution's repository. You may further deposit the accepted author's version on a funder's repository at a funder's request, provided it is not made publicly available until 12 months after publication.

Introduction: Do We Have Good Reasons to Commemorate Rousseau in 2012?

Daniel Tröhler

© Springer Science+Business Media B.V. 2012

In fact, 50 years ago, in 1962, it would have been easier to justify a special issue on Rousseau in an educational journal than it is today. The OECD was hardly a year old, cognitive psychology was still in the hands of a few military psychologists, the problems of comparative statistics was not even detected let alone solved, and the school was still a school and not a system. It was only in these years around 1962 that some political stakeholders in world peace began to educationalize the Cold War by fostering sciences, mathematics, and secondary education in general and by starting an educational crusade, whose major instrument was developed only after the end of the Cold War, namely, PISA and other comparable large-scale tests.

The world was different in 1962 not only in terms of education policy but also in educational thinking. Giorgio Agamben had not even started his law studies in Rome, Michel Foucault was offered a rather insignificant job in Clermont-Ferrand and was completely unknown in those days, and Pierre Bourdieu taught some sociology at the small University of Lille. Deconstruction of modernity was a foreign word and became popular only towards the end and after the end of the Cold War, and it was only then that the history of ideas was interpreted as grand narrative. Whereas the stakeholders in world peace tried to defend the values of the West and to trim education and schooling to its core virtues—rationality and efficiency, the deconstructivists declared that no such a thing as the West and its virtues existed, and if they existed, they existed only as constructions resulting from power conditions and deserved to be deconstructed.

Some more data on 1962: John F. Kennedy was still in office; the Rolling Stones were founded; the Beatles recorded *Love Me Do*, Elvis Presley dominated the charts in many countries with *Can't Help Falling in Love*, *Return to Sender*, and *Good Luck Charm*; Edward Albee's *Who is afraid of Virginia Wolf* was performed for the first time; John Steinbeck received the Nobel Prize for Literature and became famous all over the globe; and Rachel Louise Carson's book, *Silent Spring*, helped to launch an international environmental movement that shortly afterwards became educationalized, too, under the label

D. Tröhler (✉)
University of Luxembourg, Campus Walferdange, Route de Diekirch, 7220, Walferdange,
Luxembourg
e-mail: daniel.troehler@uni.lu

environmental education. In 1962, the world became, beyond or despite the efforts of the world peacemakers, more and more global in science and culture, despite the fact that McDonald's remained for another 5 years strictly within the borders of the United States.

Evidently, between 1962 and 2012 the world has become very different. It is surprising, then, that some of the heroes of that time are still heroes in educational thinking today, and the superhero among them is certainly Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Unimpressed by technocratic standardization or postmodern deconstructions, scholars all around the world keep publishing books and articles about the Genevan and his intellectual world, a majority of them—according to the classification provided by the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)—within educational philosophy: “Exploring Fear: Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire on Fear and Learning” is a (randomly selected) publication of 2010 (English and Stengel 2010), but as far as the title is concerned, it might have also been published in 1962, and the very same applies to a paper classified as history of education, “Rival Visions: J.J. Rousseau and T.H. Huxley on the Nature (or Nurture) of Inequality and What It Means for Education” (Currie-Knight 2011).

This continuity is an interesting phenomenon, and it has a lot to do with the founding myth of modern education. In the international discussion—now and then—there is a common agreement that with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, respectively with his *Emile* (1762), a new era of education or at least of educational thought began. Despite some conceptual or even moral problems with his private life conduct, “there is no denying Rousseau's genius,” English writer on education Robert Hebert Quick said in 1868 in his *Essays on Educational Reformers*: “His was one of the original voices that go on sounding, at first hand from imperfect echoes, everyone who studies education must study Rousseau” (Quick 1868/1890, p. 248).

This assessment was shared not only in England but also in the United States: Franklin Painter declared, “there are few men who have exerted a greater influence upon education than the celebrated author, Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (Painter 1896, p. 249), and Paul Monroe, the influential professor of the history of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, in his very successful *Text-book in the History of Education* of 1905, described Rousseau's impact on the history of education in a way that reflects Quick's and Painter's assessments:

Finally, it is to be noted that in Rousseau's teachings, notwithstanding their extravagance, is to be found the truth upon which all educational development of the nineteenth century is based. Rousseau was the prophet denouncing the evil of the old; foretelling, yet seeing vaguely and in distorted outline, the vision of the new. (Monroe 1905, p. 572)

A few years later, Ellwood P. Cubberly reaffirmed the “iconoclastic nature of the Work of Rousseau,” and praised him as “inspirer of the new theory as to the purpose of education” (Cubberly 1920, p. 530). And in 1982 the German educationalist Herwig Blankertz added that the impact of *Emile* cannot be overestimated within European educational theory and that there were good reasons to believe that with *Emile* the new age of modern education began (Blankertz 1982, p. 70). This list could be extended to infinity.

What Immanuel Kant seems to be to philosophy—in philosophy it is agreed that there is an era before and an era after Kant—Rousseau is in education: an unquestioned watershed in the development of the relevant way to think (the fact that Kant admired Rousseau adds to the dignity of both of them). The paradox is more than evident: although Rousseau did not add an iota to the great educational endeavors of modernity, the erection of the mass schools (unless we identified the critiques of this endeavor that were raised in the name of

Rousseau as a contribution), he still enjoys a great popularity among advanced and young career scholars. It seems that despite technocratic globalization and postmodern deconstruction, Rousseau gets off scot-free: he still seems to have something important to say to us. But what?

Rousseau's unbroken popularity tells us a lot—about education as an academic discipline. It seems that institutionalized educational research and discourse needs a identifiable starting point, recognizing some predecessors, John Locke, for example, or maybe Fénelon, accepting some inconsistencies in Rousseau's conception of girl's education, and admitting that there is no professional institution of teaching and learning: apart from that, we are told and we repeat it with new research, that Rousseau paved the way to modern education.

It is said that Shaftesbury invented once the “test of ridicule” to examine the true faith of the Huguenots escaping France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in October 1685 by Louis XIV and coming to England. Our test of ridicule would be to ask to what extent our educational thinking resembles the educational visions developed in Rousseau's *Emile*, and we would have to agree that there is, in fact, little. Isolate a child in order to raise him or her? Withhold books from a child? Punish the child in the way that Rousseau suggests? Plan public humiliation to as a lesson to discourage the child's vanity? Plan deep frustration to teach the child the idea of property? Sacrifice a whole life of an unmarried adult to educate one single child? Arrange a whole environment so as to prevent any direct educational interferences? Choose a future spouse and educate her in a separate way and arrange a marriage?

But if Rousseau's educational idea is not modern, why is he considered to have contributed substantially to education in modernity? It seems that Rousseau serves in an excellent way to demarcate a line to an imagined past rather than to associate him with us. The labeling of Rousseau as “modern” is not to mate him with us but to draw a historical line that we need not trespass. Rousseau's “modernity” is not a prospective but a retrospective construction. To be sure that something has indeed started somewhere that is clearly identifiable relieves us from tedious research and helps us to project our ideas into history.

Rousseau himself defined himself as opposite to his time, and he identified himself with a tradition that he meant to recognize in the classical republics of Sparta and Rome, and he believed that the Geneva of his own youth still had the spirit of classical republicanism. He interpreted his contemporary situation as a state of decline to which he had nothing to add other than his writings, often polemical, brilliant, passionate, and not seldom full of contradictions. Most of his arguments, motives, and visions were derived from ideals of an (almost) past time and thrown into the intellectual, political, and cultural performances of his time. What Rousseau's arguments, motives, and visions were is the topic of this special issue dedicated to his 300th anniversary and the 250th anniversary of *Emile*. One might say that this approach is historical. Yes, it is. But it aims at understanding Rousseau's thinking, which is philosophical. Maybe the traditional split between history and philosophy (at least in education) is not so promising as generally assumed. If the analyses in this issue help build a bridge over the rather unnecessary gap, Rousseau would have helped us—indirectly—in a considerable way. This gives the guest-editor a chance to thank the editor-in-chief of *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, Gert Biesta, for his support of this special issue on Rousseau.

References

- Blankertz, H. (1982). *Die Geschichte der Pädagogik. Von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart*. Wetzlar, Germany: Büchse der Pandora.
- Cubberly, E. P. (1920). *The history of education*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

- Currie-Knight, K. (2011). Rival Visions: J.J. Rousseau and T.H. Huxley on the nature (or nurture) of inequality and what it means for education. *Philosophical Studies in Education*, 42, 25–35.
- English, A., & Stengel, B. (2010). Exploring fear: Rousseau, Dewey, and Freire on fear and learning. *Educational Theory*, 60(5), 521–542.
- Monroe, P. (1905). *A text-book in the history of education*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Painter, F. V. N. (1896). *A history of education*. New York, NY: Appleton.
- Quick, R. H. (1890). *Essays on educational reformers*. New York, NY: Appleton. (First edition 1868).