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Book Review: Pedagogies of Globalization: The Rise of the Educational Security State

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Book Review

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Pedagogies of Globalization: The Rise of the Educational Security State.
Joel Spring. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006.

While in graduate school during the 1990s, many of my peers took up Paulo Freire and decided that they would “subvert” the “capitalistic nature of American education” by “empowering” their writing students in the composition classroom. No longer would they stand in front of their classroom and lecture on the comma. Rather, they would send their students out to work on collaborative projects that would be brought back and shared with the rest of the class, now a community of interested scholars rather than a collection of empty minds waiting to be filled by the insights of the instructor. Their “bogeyman,” of course, was the “sage on the stage” standing at the front of the traditional classroom with its perfect rows of seats, filling those empty minds with the valuable knowledge of the hegemonic culture in the way that a child might place pennies in a piggy bank. This sort of education, they reasoned, only prepared students for life in the factory with its long lines of employees who sat quietly along the assembly line and who listened attentively and in silence to the boss man shouting orders.

I imagine that Joel Spring, the author of *Pedagogies of Globalization: The Rise of the Educational Security State*, would recognize the humor of one faculty member, having had his pedagogy piously critiqued in class by one of my peers, reminding the student that (a) none of the graduate student’s upper middle-class writing students were likely to wind up working on an assembly line; (b) composition, a general education requirement of all students, was one of the courses most symbolic of the “system” that the institution offered; and (c) it was even questionable whether the United States still had an industrial economy. From this last point, he moved the class into a more productive discussion as to whether the group projects, collaborative learning, and experiential knowledge that were advocated by some of the composition scholarship as “radical” were not more helpful for the global service economy of the United States at the

end of the 20th century than the rigid, traditional pedagogies that had been advocated at the first part of the century.

It is not that Spring would object to Freire or classroom pedagogies that emphasize collaborative learning, shared knowledge, and experiential projects. Indeed, Spring advocates progressive education as “empowering people as actors in the reconstruction of society” (p. 253). In the same way he finds the search in classical education for “the source of human happiness and the just society as exemplified by Confucianist, Islamic, Christian, Buddhist, and Hindu traditions” (p. 253) and the traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples “based on centuries of experience with how humans interact with each other and the environment” (p. 254) as important tools for education in a global society. Instead, I think that Spring would smile at the exchange mentioned above because of my friend’s naïve understanding of the relationship between the state and various pedagogical systems, and I am even more certain that he would have chuckled as my friend drove me and our professor home in his beat up old BMW.

For Spring, the relationship between the state and various educational practices is complex, particularly when it involves cross-cultural fertilization, as say, from villages in South and Central America to an urban university in Louisville, Kentucky. The opening line of the first chapter, in fact, reads, “The globalization of common educational practices involves an interplay between classical, industrial-consumer, progressive, and indigenous pedagogies, global and local languages and cultures, and the nation-state and civil society” (p. 1). At one moment, for instance, the state might advocate progressive education in its schools as a means of reaching out to minority students and bringing about greater community and equality as it did in the 1960s, while within a heartbeat, the same state might revert to standardized testing and teaching as was first advocated in the 1980s in *A Nation at Risk* and later realized in George H. W. Bush’s No Child Left Behind. In either case, Spring observes, the state was responding to its economic and military needs. When diversity was thought to be a way to bring new workers and, more importantly, additional consumers into the global marketplace, not surprisingly, progressive practices were staunchly argued and rewarded by the state. However, when America’s economic hegemony seemed threatened by Japan, the United States ironically adopted the conservative education model of the Japanese, which emphasized strict discipline, rewards for students who rose to the top, longer hours, more homework, and more standardized testing.

However, what interests Spring the most is not just the relationship between the United States and its constantly changing system of education, but rather the interplay of various well-established pedagogies on a global scale. For example, in the case of Japan and the United States in the 1980s, each state felt threatened by the other. As I noted above, the United States began advocating

the long hours and intense workload of the Japanese school system, arguing that its own educational system had created a culture of mediocrity. Yet, at the same time, Spring quotes Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori as warning, "At the threshold of the 21st century ... the reality is the Japanese education system is deteriorating and this cannot be overlooked" (p. 216). Spring then quotes the Prime Minister's Commission on Education which sought blame in the system's strict nature: "Through the standardization of education resulting from excessive egalitarianism, and the cramming of immoderate levels of knowledge, education orientated towards the individuality and competence of the children has been given neglect" (pp. 216-217). Even when pedagogies are the same, such as in the recent emphasis on English instruction, Spring notes the nuanced differences among various states. For example, in Southeast Asia, English instruction is viewed as a means to competing in the global market whose language is becoming English. In Central Asia, where there are pockets of Muslim fundamentalism, English instruction is teaching the enemy's language, while in the United States it is maintaining hegemony.

Spring's book is not simply an analysis of comparative systems of education. Rather, it states and seeks solutions to some of his own fears of an industrial-consumerist global economy. Spring worries that too great an emphasis is placed on producing workers who find fulfillment in the goods they consume, advertising that creates new needs within the system, the use of "planned obsolescence" to sell new products that replace old ones, and branding (pp. 239-240). Ultimately, he fears that the industrial consumer culture has created workers who define happiness in terms of unattainable desires that are somehow located in the most recent product that can be bought. For Spring, there are no easy answers. Instead, states must combine various educational theories and practices that would find the attainment of happiness in the greater personal freedom of the worker and the fulfilling nature of his or her work. What that combination might look like, Spring never indicates—he knows that the specific context of each state and its educational system will determine the solution. Rather, he leaves us as readers and citizens of our own state to ponder the solution.