

Time, Progress, and the Rise of Reason

Denise Egéa

Nazarbayev University, Kazakhstan

I believe that knowledge of social conditions, of the present state of civilization, is necessary in order properly to interpret the child's power ... We must be able to carry them back into a social past and see them as the inheritance of previous race activities. We must also be able to project them into the future.¹

One of Oded Zipory's main concerns is that "[n]o field exemplifies the devaluation of the present better than education," and his stated main goal is to "discuss the danger of reducing education into mere preparation of the future."² Indeed, it seems that education is all about preparing children for their future lives as adults.

In order to explore the meaning and role of the present in education, Zipory first turns to Dewey, who sees goal-oriented schooling as preparing students for a future which is thus "missed or distorted,"³ a critique as relevant now as it was then, with public education's rhetoric and emphasis on instrumental agenda and its concern for providing industries and corporations with employable graduates, and graduates with job market preparedness and "salability." According to Dewey, this pre-programmed schooling approach to the future may lead individuals to miss the opportunities of what the future may bring. Meanwhile, "the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future."⁴ Zipory raises a further problem in reference to Rancière, that in this neglect of the present in favor of preparing for an elusive future, rather than "realizing equality [or freedom] in the present, progressivists only delay it [indefinitely]."⁵ Zipory also cites Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström, who state that "[s]uch freedom [or equality] is often projected in the future,"⁶ and therefore not sought for the present.

Zipory's paper is very rich, as it touches on several important themes, of time and progress, freedom and equality, with an extensive consideration of Walter Benjamin's experimental children's theater, and a brief mention of Vivian Paley's classroom story approach. In this short response, I will address one overriding problem that runs throughout Zipory's argument, which is not necessarily the result of faulty analysis on his part, but rather is a pervasive and perhaps inescapable problem in education and schooling themselves: namely, a certain perception of time, of past, present, and future, and of the meaning of "progress."

In education, as in life, we conceive time as linear.⁷ Michel Serres does not subscribe to this concept, and a look at his understanding of time is most helpful. He describes this linear perception of time as "not even a line, but the trajectory of the race to first place, in school, at the Olympic Games or for the Nobel prize."⁸ He distinguishes between, on the one hand, time that advances on a line, time that is a chronological date on the line of time, and, on the other hand, time as duration, as a portion of existence. Both science and the humanities assume the linearity of time: "be it cumulative, continue, or interrupted" confirms Serres, "it always remains linear."⁹ In contrast, in his work on Leibniz (1968),¹⁰ Serres presented his "first

intuition” that time “does not always flow along a straight line ... nor according to a plan, but according to an extraordinarily complex variety,”¹¹ like a river. To explain how he perceives time’s complex movements, he uses the metaphor of the Tiber, whose “shallow waters uncover the deposits of its turbulence. The sandbanks are stilled whirlpools, slightly stuck in a longer time. The hourglass, as if viscous, halts the flowing time.”¹² Actually, time does not flow, declares Serres, it “percolates.” Some filters through, some does not. He associates the evolution of time to the theory of chaos, complex and unexpected, where things that appear very close to one another may, in fact, be far apart and vice versa. For Serres, the problem of time and its representation, i.e., understanding the passage of time, are crucial to an understanding of knowledge.

Characteristic of the current approach to knowledge, one reinforced by educational institutions, the separation between past and present provides a questionable view of progress, and constitutes, according to Serres, a serious problem. He points out that “we conceive time like an irreversible line – interrupted or continued, it does not matter – of acquisitions and inventions.”¹³ In the context of modernity, each step in time goes forth, toward ever more exactitude, more truth, “leaving behind ... a trail of errors corrected at last.”¹⁴ When one follows time along a linear path, in a sequential succession of events, the latest occurrence is always said to be the most correct. Zipory cites Rancière on “progress” and comments that progressive pedagogy sees the child as “approach[ing] perfection the more he grows up and becomes farther away from his past.” He compares it to “society that allegedly progresses from a child-like state of imperfection and ignorance to that of self-mastery and knowledge.”¹⁵ This is how, in Zipory’s words, the present comes to be “the most deprived and undervalued of all times.”¹⁶ Serres describes it as follows: “Instead of living at the heart or at the center of the world, we dwell at the summit, the acme, the best of truth.”¹⁷ This leads to the “Descartes effect,” according to which reason did not exist before I; “no one thought before I did.”¹⁸ Indeed, scientists and epistemologists maintain that there was no reason before they came along. Progress is like a mountain peak, and we, in the present time, continuously stand on its point, “at the extreme [point] of development.”¹⁹ Consequently, this perspective enables us to be permanently right, since truth and correctness are inherent in the present moment. Serres does not equate the progression of time with the rise of reason, accompanied by a rejection of the past. He sees any break in time as “a dogmatic exclusion” where all that which is non-“contemporary” is rejected into antiquity, or archaism. Nothing is “false” any longer, but rather “obsolete.”

As for the future, Zipory talks about “the danger of reducing education into mere preparation for the future.”²⁰ In his “My Pedagogic Creed,” Dewey reminds us that “[w]ith the advent of democracy and industrial conditions [and I would add technology, especially information technology], it is impossible to foretell definitely just what civilization will be twenty years from now.”²¹ So what future are they talking about? The future Zipory bemoans, or Dewey’s future? What is the meaning of their “future”? Following Jacques Derrida, I would like to recall that, in the context of education, we need to consider two kinds of future. On the one hand, there is the

future of programs, curricula, tests, etc., a predictable future, prescribed, which can be fore-planned. This would be the future whose danger Zipory is warning us about. Then on the other hand, there is what we call in French, *l'avenir*, which Derrida discussed often as the concept of the “to-come,” *l'à-venir*. The latter refers to someone or something that comes, an event, a coming of which we are not cognizant, which is not expected, otherwise it would not be an event – the future Dewey writes about in his particular statement. For Jacques Derrida, that is the deepest sense of the future, what is totally unpredictable, what cannot be anticipated, cannot be foreseen. So beyond the known future, the anticipated future of programs, curricula, tests, etc. there is *l'avenir*, the unknown, unpredictable future to-come, with all its possibilities and opportunities, all its dangers too, for which schooling “preparation” cannot, in Dewey’s words, “[be] made the controlling end.”

And now, much too briefly to address a complex concept, I would like to add a few words on the present, the “now,” what Jack Reynolds calls the “temporal immediacy.”²² In his criticism of phenomenology, Derrida problematized the “metaphysics of presence,” its focus on what he calls the “now,” and the desire for immediate access to meaning, “the privilege of the actual present, the now.”²³ Reynolds discusses Derrida’s understanding of time and criticism of Husserl’s own sense of temporality as exposed in *Speech and Phenomena*. In Derrida’s notion of time, “What is really going on in things, what is really happening, is always ‘to-come.’ Every time you try to stabilize the meaning of things, try to fix it in its ... position, the thing itself, if there is anything at all to it, slips away.”²⁴ Hence the “now” is never stable, always ephemeral, changing so instantaneously that changes can be perceived only retrospectively, from the future, a future which becomes present, and which as such, goes through the same process.

Leaving you with more questions about the play of past, present, and future, I will close with these words by Dewey, who stresses the importance of not forgetting that the child is “the inheritor of the funded capital of civilization. The most formal and technical education in the world cannot safely depart from this general process. It can only organize it or differentiate it in some particular direction.”²⁵

1. John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” *The School Journal* vol. LIV, no. 3 (January 16, 1897): 77-80, 77-78.

2. Oded Zipory, this volume.

3. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 49.

4. Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 49.

5. Zipory, this volume.

6. Gert Biesta and Carl Anders Säfström, “A Manifesto for Education,” *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 5 (2011): 540-47, 541.

7. Time has been a topic of philosophical enquiry ever since Aristotle. In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger wrote: “Aristotle’s essay on time is the first detailed interpretation of this phenomenon [time] which has come down to us. Every subsequent account of time, including Henri Bergson’s, has been essentially determined by it” (§6, 26). For the purpose of this response, suffice it to quote this definition of time from Aristotle, in which he clearly privileges the “present-at-end” between past and future (Arendt’s own title cited in Zipory’s paper): “the number of movements in respect of before and after” (*Physics*, Book IV, part 11), and to note that for Heidegger time consists of three “ecstasies”: the past, the present, and the future.

8. Michel Serres, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time: Michel Serres Interviewed by Bruno Latour*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 49.
9. Serres, *Conversations*, 57.
10. Michel Serres, *The System of Leibniz* (Bolton, UK: Clinamen Press Ltd., 2003), 284-286.
11. Serres, *Conversations*, 57.
12. Michel Serres, *Rome: The Book of Foundation*, trans. Felicia McCarren (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), 266.
13. Serres, *Conversations*, 48.
14. *Ibid.*, 48.
15. Zipory, this volume.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Serres, *Conversations*, 49.
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. Zipory, this volume.
21. Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," Article 1, par. 7.
22. Jack Reynolds, "Jacques Derrida (1930-2004)," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://www.iep.utm.edu/derrida/>
23. Jacques Derrida, "*Speech and Phenomena*" and *Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), 62-63.
24. Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena*, 104.
25. Dewey, "My Pedagogic Creed," Article 1, par. 1.