

Balkanizing John Dewey
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This short paper examines the circulation of John Dewey's writings in Yugoslavia in 1920s and 1930s with a particular emphasis on uses of American pragmatist philosophy in Yugoslav pedagogic literature. This research is part of an on-going project of examining pedagogic publications and teacher and student travel literature to research the historical formation of curriculum and pedagogy in Eastern Europe. Here, I will begin by looking at the translations of Dewey's texts and the writings on Dewey that appeared in Yugoslav pedagogic literature. My overall objective is to explore the particular configuration of discourses and practices that made Dewey comprehensible in Yugoslavia in the 1920s and 1930s, and towards this end I will devote attention to Yugoslav Pan-Slavism and the ideas of Slavic modernity and Slavic cosmopolitanism. In the second part of the paper I will discuss the circulation of pragmatism more generally within Yugoslavia, in order to think about how ideas of action and progress appear in Yugoslav education.

In the 1920s and 1930s the works of Edouard Claparède and Sergei Hessen were particularly significant in the movement of Dewey's writings into Yugoslavia. Claparède (1873-1940) was professor of psychology at the University of Geneva, the founder of the Rousseau Institute and a pioneer in 'experimental pedagogy', whose legacy was taken up, most notably, by Jean Piaget. Hessen (1887-1950) was a Russian émigré who studied in Heidelberg and Freiberg and taught at universities in Germany, Prague and, towards the end of his life, in Warsaw. This analysis of the multiple sources, routes and permutations of Dewey's educational ideas is not meant to suggest that the 'balkanization of John Dewey' was a dilution, pluralization or splintering. In English, the word 'balkanize' frequently refers to unraveling of some entity into various sub-parts, akin to the 20th century pattern of countries on the Balkan peninsula of South-Eastern Europe disintegrating into many smaller ethnic and religious units. Contrary to this, however, my use of 'balkanization' refers to the localization of Dewey's writings – the local, particular and hybridized assemblage of discursive practices in Yugoslavia through which Dewey traveled. Instead of dividing, the balkanization I am speaking of with regards to Dewey is actually more of an assembling.

Claparède was a child-study advocate who saw in Dewey's pedagogy three primary elements. First, the pedagogy was "genetic", which meant that the education occurred not from outside but from within the child. Second, it was "functional", which meant that activity was an instrument for spiritual unfolding that took account of the present and the future. Third, it was "social", which meant that it prepared the individual for a productive role in the larger society. Claparède put forth this analysis of Dewey in the introduction to a 1913 French translation of a collection of Dewey's articles. The essay was published in Serbo-Croatian in a 1918 journal and again 1920 as a pamphlet in a series of publications on pedagogy edited by Milan Šević.¹ In the inter-war era Claparède and the work of his institute were frequently cited in Yugoslav literature as examples of the modern, scientific study of teaching and learning, and this essay on Dewey reappeared in 1930 when a two page summary was published in the leading Yugoslav education periodical, the Belgrade based *Učitelj*.² Thinking about Dewey as offering a genetic, functional and social pedagogy

¹ Edouard Claparède (Claparède), *Pedagogija Dona Duia*, trans. Milan Sevic (Beograd: Izdanje Knjizarnice Rajkovic i Dukovica, 1920).

² Z. Diric, "Pedagogika Dona Duia - Ed. Claparède," *Učitelj* 10, no. 6 (1930).

moved into Yugoslavia through Claparède's texts.³ The notion of development that Dewey elaborated, for example in Democracy and Education, was somewhat different from the sense of a genetic unfolding that circulates in the Yugoslav literature, however for our purposes here it is most important to note that this way of reasoning about Dewey's educational ideas closely overlapped with Yugoslav thinking about the 'Slavic'.

Yugoslavia first came into existence after World War I as a political synthesis of the Croats, Serbs and Slovenes, all of whom spoke languages that, like Russian, Polish and Czech, were part of the Slavic language group. In the 1920s and 1930s notions of ethnic and racial 'Slavicness' were drawn into Yugoslav thinking about the child and schooling. On the one hand this provided a framework for working towards national unification through schooling so that, in the words of one reformer, "in place of tribal feelings a national consciousness and national feelings rule."⁴ On the other hand, through the Pan-Slavic movement, 'Slavicness' provided Yugoslavs with a cosmopolitanism that associated their educational reforms with educational modernization and professionalization across the Slavic 'world'. Pursuing the Slavic was a nostalgic project (the return to a time when the Slavic tribes were united) and a modernizing project (the achievement of advanced consciousness). For Yugoslavs, the Slavic was a transcendental sublime and a quasi-theological construct. The Slavic was – in perfect concordance with the schema Claparède applied to Dewey – genetic, functional and social.

Claparède's reading of Dewey put a strong emphasis on the centering of education in the child, in "genetics". Yugoslavs read through Claparède that for Dewey the psyche was not a static system but dynamic processes. It is possible to see here some connections with Henri Bergson's vitalism;⁵ and, quite analogously, we could see the Slavic circulating as a kind-of Yugoslav *élan vital*. In the Serbo-Croatian introduction to Claparède's essay on Dewey Milan Šević wrote, "everyone has a certain capital in their aspirations and impulses that must be pursued in order to move forward." Šević continued, "the problem of education is this, to discover that capital."⁶ This something hidden inside the child, which child-study could reveal and child-centered pedagogy could nourish, closely resembles the inner, motivating spirit that was thought to lie within the Slav.

Finding a 'Slavic soul' and properly putting it to use was a major goal of the many Pan-Slavic meetings that were held in the 1920s and 1930s. (In this period Yugoslav sociologists, geographers, beekeepers, and mathematicians as well as educators attended international Pan-Slavic conferences with Poles, Czechoslovaks, Bulgarians and other Slavs.) The Pan-Slavic movement was, in one respect, embodied in the child who was thought of as Slavic and in possession of this 'Slavic soul'. Pan-Slavism additionally crossed into education through a frequent valorization of village/rural schooling. Milan Šević also happens to have been the chief Yugoslav delegate to the 1931 Slavic Pedagogical Congress in Poland and in one of his reports he described a field-trip to a Polish village school near Warsaw, writing that the village preserved values and personality, "which the cities lost, not only for themselves but for the entire nation".⁷ For Yugoslavs, the genetics of the village, of the child and of the Slav were enchanted and guiding objects that could be pursued both through past-regarding nostalgia and, simultaneously, through future-oriented advancement.

³ Yugoslavia was not the only Central/Eastern European Slavic country to confront Dewey through Claparède. Claparède's essay was also frequently cited in Czechoslovakia. For example, Jan Uher, in his book on American education written after travels in the United States, explained Dewey's educational ideas to Czechoslovak readers in part through Claparède's essay. Jan Uher, *Základy Americké Vychovy* (Praha: Cin, 1930) 103-06.

⁴ Jovan P. Jovanovic, "Zadaci učiteljske organizacije u ujedinjenoj domovini Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca," *Ucitelj (Belgrade)* 3, no. 1 (1922): 7.

⁵ Claparède was apparently quite familiar with Bergson's work. Daniel Hameline, "Edouard Claparède," *Perspectives: revue trimestrielle d'éducation comparée* 23, no. 1-2 (1993): 6.

⁶ Milan Sevic, *Prvi Slovenski Pedagogski Kongres* (Beograd: Pedagogijska Knjiznica, 1932) 4.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

Sergei Hessen's reading of Dewey was associated even more strongly with the Slavic, for, as a Russian and hence a Slav himself, he appeared to Yugoslavs in the 1920s and 1930s as one of the leading Slavic modernizers in the field of education. In addition to Dewey, Hessen wrote on Montessori and Tolstoy. Unlike Claparède Hessen frequently framing his analyses in terms of desirable democratic ideals,⁸ although similar to Claparède Hessen emphasized Dewey's notion of dynamic development. Hessen noted a focus in Dewey's pedagogy on the 'life' of the child, and on schooling that wasn't thought of as separate from living, and claimed that it bore close resemblance to Tolstoy's notion of 'life'. Like Dewey, Tolstoy had run experimental schools, the most famous of which was Yasnaya Polyana where he developed "student-directed" programs⁹ that Yugoslav writers often referred to as "free schooling". In the inter-war era Yugoslav educators claimed Tolstoy as an important Slavic forefather. To put Dewey in comparison with Tolstoy, then, was to fit Dewey into a 'Slavic world'.

The peopling of Yugoslav pedagogic literature with international figures such as Dewey, Tolstoy and also Hessen himself was an important part of constructing a unity of opinion and a common grounding on which to base educational modernization. These people circulated as 'conceptual persona', individuals whose stature became iconic. This means (and this is one of the premises of this paper) that the Dewey that moved within Yugoslavia isn't a simulacrum of the original but a particular local assemblage. This also means that these individuals appeared as cited references, frequently en masse in lists. A good example of this is the Yugoslav who, in 1934, wrote of Czechoslovak pedagogic journals that they cited many foreign authors: there were few Germans (a welcome move in his opinion) but one did find influences from "Tolstoy, J. Dewey, Spencer M. Montessori and others."¹⁰ Such lists of individuals take us, in one sense, far afield from the specific Balkan readings of Dewey. This is a general pattern that one finds in many parts of the world, and we could take this as a substantively empty but symbolically full practice of 'credentializing'. I'm going to propose, however, that the practice has a noteworthy significance as it actually has very much to do with the circulation of pragmatism into the Balkans.

In his 1899 essay "The School and Social Progress" Dewey addressed the circulation of ideas from a historical perspective, noting that "if we go back a few centuries, we find a practical monopoly of learning."¹¹ The fact of this essay's publication in Serbo-Croatian translation in 1926¹² in itself substantiated one of Dewey's arguments about the increasing spread of knowledge. Dewey identified a shift, arguing that with the industrial revolution,

Printing was invented; it was made commercial. Books, magazines, papers were multiplied and cheapened. As a result of the locomotive and telegraph, frequent, rapid, and cheap intercommunication by mails and electricity was called into being. Travel has been rendered easy; freedom of movement, with its accompanying exchange of ideas, indefinitely facilitated. The result has been an intellectual revolution. Learning has been put into circulation.¹³

Yugoslavs could see themselves as part of this circulation. Listing Dewey might be thought of, following some of Timothy Mitchell's recent work,¹⁴ as a performative act, an action to be understood in pragmatic terms as engendering and achieving some kind of modernity. In his "School and Social Progress" essay Dewey continued with the claim that

⁸ See Tadeusz Nowacki, "Wstęp [Introduction]," in *Sergiusz Hessen: Filozofia - Kultura - Wychowanie*, ed. Maria Hessenowa (Wrocław: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1973).

⁹ See Bob Blaisdell, *Tolstoy as teacher: Leo Tolstoy's writings on education* (New York: Teachers and Writers Collaborative, 2000).

¹⁰ Salih Ljubuncic, *Skolstvo i prosvjeta u Cehoslovackoj: s osobitim obzirom na pedagogsku i skolsku reformu*, ed. Salih Ljubuncic, *Biblioteka "Skole Rada"* (Zagreb: Naklada A. Brusina Naslj. V. i M. Steiner, 1934) 53.

¹¹ John Dewey, *The School and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1900/1990) 24.

¹² John Dewey, "Skola i Progres u Drustvu," *Ucitelj* 6, no. 6 (1926).

¹³ Dewey, *The School and Society* 25.

¹⁴ Timothy Mitchell, "The Stage of Modernity," in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2000).

"knowledge is no longer an immobile solid; it has been liquefied," adding that "it is actively moving in all the currents of society itself."¹⁵ In Yugoslavia in the inter-war era, to be able to read, cite and list Dewey was to illustrate that there was no monopoly on educational progress. The exchange of ideas, now indefinitely facilitated, meant that a place that had for several centuries been a relatively undeveloped periphery (both geographically and intellectually; and to both the Hapsburg and Ottoman empires)¹⁶ could, in the early 20th century, envision that there were no barriers to participation in the international community of educational and social reform.

I would suggest that the major grounding common to Yugoslavs and other educational reformers across the globe was effectively a very pragmatist notion of action. A pragmatism that was prefigured, as it were, in the framework through which Yugoslavs balkanized Dewey. Daniel Rodgers, in his book Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age, suggests that the tremendous volume of social reform projects moving between countries in the late 19th and early 20th century required the "recognition of underlying kinship" and had "relatedness" as a "core assumption".¹⁷ I have similarly argued that Yugoslavs saw no barriers and drew on notions of relatedness, affinity and the 'universality' of social problems in their formulation and resolution of educational problems; however, I would like to extend this argument further and claim that this progressive point of view meant that Yugoslavs were, almost by necessity, drawn into the project of pragmatically creating a universe. Through Claparède, Hessen and other translations Yugoslavs read about the importance of action in Dewey's pedagogical ideas. Ironically perhaps, these very principles inhered in way Yugoslavs approached Dewey, listing him, re-circulating him, balkanizing him. The theory of action in play here is the (pragmatist) notion that actions generate their own knowledges; serialistic, repeated actions reinforce and create a mental world in which these actions fit. The progressive point of view in Yugoslavia in the 1920s and 1930s was a view on a world built around doing and progressing – a world of (pragmatic) involvement in that acting and advancing.

The underlying kinship of Yugoslavs was, as I have argued, an orientation toward their Slavic relatives (Czechoslovaks, Poles, Russians, etcetera). There doesn't, however, seem to have been anything that would interfere with the 'Slavic world' being a world built around doing and progressing. The Slavic, after all, needed finding and nourishing, i.e. acting upon, in the same fashion as Dewey's child. In this sense the Slavic was a very pragmatic construction. The balkanization of John Dewey in Yugoslavia in the 1920s and 1930s had a pragmatic character from the outset. The circulation of his ideas made possible and the ideas themselves made coherent by Yugoslavs acting on their world.

¹⁵ Dewey, *The School and Society* 25, Dewey, "Skola i Progres u Drustvu," 387.

¹⁶ Recent literature on the construction of the Balkans' and Eastern Europe's 'marginality' includes Dusan I. Bjelic and Obrad Savic, *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), Vesna Goldsworthy, *Inventing Ruritania: The Imperialism of the Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University, 1998), Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University, 1994).

¹⁷ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 33-4.

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