COMMENTARY

Remembering the forgetting in schooling

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Before discussing the two chapters on history and education and how that relates to contemporary policy discussions in developing countries, I would like to start with three different strands of intellectual history; this is a bit idiosyncratic, but it brings to bear some literatures that I believe are relevant for our purposes.

First, there is a large 'business management' literature, the stuff about business you can buy in airports and read on airplanes – Tom Peters' *In Search of Excellence*, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras' *Built to Last*, Stephen Covey's *Seven Habits* series (plus a moderate amount of the more theoretical works, like Milgrom and Roberts 1992). While this literature is easy to disdain, any economist who believes in the market test can hardly ignore it. One of the commonplace arguments of this literature is that successful organizations need to have a clear and coherent 'vision and mission'. An organization needs to have a sufficiently concise and directed statement of purpose that any agent of the organization can answer the question: 'Is what I am doing consistent with the organization's goals?' Organizations thrive on a mythic level, preferably with a foundational creation myth of the origins of the organization and its noble purpose.

Second, the approach of economics is pithily expressed in the fact that the branch of game theory that deals with the possibility of allowing people to communicate during negotiations is called 'cheap talk'. This is the view that, no matter what people say, when push comes to shove people will act in their own best interest, regardless of what they may have said or promised to do earlier. (That is, there might be some future reputation penalty for not keeping promises, but one only keeps promises that are to one's own [current and future] advantage to keep).

Some might view this take of economics as cynical, but it seems the consensus of twentieth-century social science outside of economics is that it was not cynical enough. Having read Foucault, I take Foucault as having said that all

important human reality is socially constructed through discourse and that discourse is structured by power relationships, such that ultimately power creates the relevant social and hence human reality. So human communication is worse than self-interested 'cheap talk' – language itself systematically (deliberately?) distorted by power.

The third element is a bit less intellectual history but a bit more pragmatic. Most negotiations over the end of conflicts have some 'hold harmless'-like agreement to them. That is, there is some kind of amnesty for actions committed during the period of conflict. Forgetting about the conflict after the conclusion of the deal was deliberated and essential to a successful conclusion to the conflict.

The upshot of these three is that I believe that:

- Organizations (and by extension, social movements of which successful organizations are a subset) thrive on a clear vision and mission
- The vision and mission of organizations and movements is structured by power, which structures discourse and social reality around its interests, and
- The creation of foundational myths of organizations, institutions, and movements is often a deliberate process of forgetting, precisely to 'hold harmless' and cover up the actual conflicts they were created to mediate.

Perhaps nowhere are these three points better illustrated than in the government ownership and control of schooling. Government-produced schooling is arguably the most wildly successful movement of the twentieth century. Not only has it succeeded 'on the ground' in expanding publicly produced schooling so as to reach universal schooling in nearly every country of the world, but has also succeeded ideologically. The one thing everyone, from the most activist progressive to the most heartless corporate raiders, agrees upon is the importance of schooling, with government responsibility for, and hence control of, schooling taken as the obvious, if not only, solution.

This is, in part, because government schooling has a really fantastic foundational myth and a compelling 'vision and mission'. The foundational myth is that before government schooling there was nothing but a blight of ignorance, or worse, education only for 'the elite' and that then, because of its benign concern for the welfare of its people the government stepped in and provided universal education to lift the masses up out of illiteracy, ignorance and superstition. This foundational myth is consistent with the current 'vision and mission' which is to expand the public production of education to reach everyone to provide equal opportunity to all children to have the education that prepares them to take their place in the world.

What is most striking is that the economics profession – and in particular development economics and in particular the branch that gives 'policy advice' – which can normally be relied upon to at least nominally question the role of the

state versus 'the market', has bought lock, stock and barrel into the foundational myths of government schooling. The main roles of the 'economics of education' have been either to concoct positively silly positive models that rationalize why the government production of schooling is 'optimal' or to provide support to more (quasi-advocacy) and better (e.g. 'educational production functions') government-produced schooling.

All of this brings me to the two chapters by Vincent and by Harper, and to the question of history and policy-making. The study of history is, at its best, the process of remembering. Any remembering will be inconsistent with the perpetuation of foundational myths, which are premised on forgetting. Every element of the foundational myth of government schooling is, depending on one's preference for paradigm and hence jargon, demonstrably false (for people who still believe in attributes like 'true' and 'false') or easily deconstructed (for the post-modernist).

The chapter by Tim Harper on Southeast Asia documents that the foundational myth view that 'before there was government-provided schooling there was nothing' is not viable in this case. In fact, the key issue in the expansion of government schooling has nearly always been the displacement of the already existing forms of schooling. One index of just how powerful a hold the foundational myths of government schooling have on the current imagination is that the people commonly refer to the 'vision and mission' of schooling as a drive for 'universal primary education'. The amazing thing is that almost everyone accepts the implicit premise of equating 'education' with 'modern formal (government-controlled) schooling'. The obvious point is that 'education' is taken as the preparation of a child to adequately fulfill his or her roles as an adult – economically, socially and politically. In this sense, there has everywhere and always been universal primary education.

The shift towards government schooling is not that societies previously did not educate their young and now they do, but rather a contestation about what constitutes an education. Modern schooling is fundamentally a contest of world views. In 'the West', the historical battle of world views between religion and religious belief as a primary organizing principle and the modern secular state has been won so decisively by the forces of the modern it is difficult, if not impossible, to even recreate a non-secular world view. Charles Taylor's recent book *A Secular Age* (Taylor 2007) emphasizes that it is impossible even for a religious believer to reconstruct the intellectual and social milieu¹ in which religion was the default mode of thought. As he puts it:

The change I want to define and trace is one that takes you from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others. (Taylor 2007: 3)

Hence, in the modern West an education into a world view that is an alternative to the dominant mode of thought is treated as no education at all – merely the

perpetuation of superstitions. The forgetting of the actual historical origins of modern schooling is therefore nearing perfection.

This triumph of the foundational myth of modern schooling is part and parcel of the success of 'modernization' in the west. We have collectively sold our religious souls for a mess of pottage – but what a mess of pottage it has been. The levels of prosperity of every type (not just consumer goods, but health, personal security, social equality) that have come about in the West simply stagger the historical imagination. There simply is no historical analogue for the improvements in material well-being from the late nineteenth century to today.

What Harper's brief account of the history of education in Southeast Asia brings to the surface is that the transition to modernism has not in fact been nearly as complete nor nearly as successful in 'the rest' as in 'the West'. Having myself lived in Indonesia, the passage he quotes from the Indonesian educator Dewantara is particularly poignant: 'Thus we have sacrificed what was ours but have not gained in its place anything that might be considered its equivalent; we have lost our world, but we have not entered another' (Harper, this volume, p. 213).

This historical view is particularly informative for development as one of the phenomena of our age is that the four-fold broadly synchronous 'modernization' of the West's historical experience has not been reproduced successfully in many parts of the world. The enormous success in spreading modern forms of schooling – which are fundamentally about the transformation of world-views – has not been matched by a similar success in other areas of economic, political, administrative and social modernization. The 'failed states' of the world – countries like Afghanistan, Nepal, Cambodia, Sudan, Somalia, Yemen – have also sold their soul, but for a very paltry mess of pottage.

This contrasting success and forgetting in the West with failure creates an awkward situation. 'The West' and its institutions (in particular the array of donor institutions) live in a *mental* world with only one possibility – the modern – having forgotten that anything else ever was. In poor countries, governments maintain the fiction of the modern, but other possibilities exist and are the reality. This means that the reaction of 'development' policy – which is more or less adequately defined by the attempt to replicate the historical transition experience of the West – to failure is always a doubling down of the bets, an intensification of 'more of the same' as it literally cannot see (Scott 1998) any other possibility.

The chapter by David Vincent is similarly revealing about the extent to which forgetting is essential to the maintenance of the status quo of education. The triumph of the government school was a two-fold process of defining schools as either 'modern' or not (hence ruling out community and religious schools as legitimate contenders) and then tainting private schools as either bastions of the elite (and hence socially suspect) or of insufficiently low 'quality' or 'professionalism' such that schooling became not just 'modern' in content but also the

quintessential representative of what Michael Woolcock and I elsewhere have called ‘the Solution’ (Pritchett and Woolcock 2004). That is, the view became that the appropriate mode for the provision of schooling had to be a modern Weberian bureaucracy. This ruled out private schooling or arms-length contracting as even potentially legitimate modes of accomplishing the public purposes of a modern school. Thus, even in countries with a long tradition of belief in free markets, such as the USA and the UK, the private share of primary school enrollments is about 5 and 10 percent respectively, and proponents of ‘vouchers’ seem slightly out of touch.

Development policy is trapped. Having forgotten the history of viable alternatives to the modern school, the policy dialogue is completely constricted by the powers of the present. Governments want to, and have the power to, maintain the myths that maintain modern forms of schooling because they so perfectly fit their interests. A move to more community control of schooling or relaxing the constraints on private modes of schooling are portrayed as steps ‘backward’ because the modern school is ‘forward’ looking. But precisely the main benefit of history for development policy is to expand the range of current possibilities by undoing the successful, deliberate forgetting that has both created successes, but also closed off the range of alternatives considered in response to failure.

References

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- Taylor, Charles (2007). *A Secular Age*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Notes

- 1 Taylor also uses the word ‘milieu’ and provides this, perhaps clarifying, explication that by that he means ‘context of understanding’ and that ‘by “context of understanding” I mean both matters that will probably have been explicitly formulated by almost everyone, such as the plurality of opinions, and some which form the implicit, largely unfocussed background of this experience and search, its “pre-ontology,” to use a Heideggerian term’ (Taylor 2007: 3).