KNOWING OURSELVES

"There is virtually no debate on the Canadian context of curriculum," Ken Osborne writes, complaining that curriculum theory in Canada "is dominated by American and British names."[1] To these are added "exotic flavouring … by the inclusion of a Michael Young or a Pierre Bourdieu."[2] He notes (ruefully?) that "phenomenology has become the latest fashion," and "even the occasional Marxist is allowed to say a few words, but there is rarely any Canadian dimension to this."[3]

Osborne quickly cautions that "none of this should be taken as the advocacy of educational chauvinism," as "Canadian educationists can and must learn from others' experience."[4] "There is," even so, "a conspicuous lack of attention being paid to the meaning of curriculum theory in a Canadian context."[5] He cites Robin Barrow's *The Canadian Curriculum: A Personal View*: "there is not yet a very clear or long standing tradition of educational theory in Canada."[6] Despite his disparagement of British (and American) domination of curriculum studies in Canada and evidence to the contrary,[7] Osborne seems to accept this British pronouncement without qualification, rationalizing his attention to it by writing:

> His essay is intended as a contribution to the development of such a theory and it would be a shame if it were to pass largely unnoticed or dismissed as lightweight, as seems to have been the case to date. This paper is an attempt to continue the debate that Barrow has begun. It is more a series of reflections upon Barrow's argument, perhaps, than a response to it in the narrow sense. It is written in the conviction that it is long past time to root educational theory, and, more narrowly, curriculum theory, in its Canadian context.[8]

Osborne then adds, "parenthetically," that "one reason why many Canadian curriculum theorists have nothing to say about the direction of curricula in Canada is that they themselves do not know enough about the country,"[9] a rather remarkable generalization. But instead of blaming the recruitment of British and American scholars,[10] he blames the "field of curriculum," devoid, evidently, "of history, the humanities, or the social sciences."[11]

Osborne turns to Barrow's emphasis upon asking "why," writing that "it is too easy" to insist "that the 'why' question must precede and is ultimately more crucial than the 'how' question on which we spend so much time."[12] Osborne insists the "how" and the "why" questions "cannot be so easily separated in the daily world of curriculum committees, schools, ministries of education, or, indeed, anywhere else except the philosopher's study," adding: "They are inextricably connected, practically and even conceptually."[13] They be "inextricably connected," but Osborne clearly prefers one

over the other: "To indulge in the 'why' without ever considering the 'how,' or considering it as of only secondary importance, is surely misguided," as they must be treated not sequentially but "together."[14] Moreover, Osborne insists that "it is not that we are spending too much time on the 'how' question, but rather that we are not spending our time very well."[15] Moreover, he finds fault with Barrow's book for failing to attend to "the implications of the influence on American cultural institutions and mass media," citing the Canada Studies Foundation's expression of "major concern" over "Canada's exposure to strong external influences."[16] Osborne reports that "elementary schools worksheets … speak to Canadian children about 'our president' and 'our capital,' meaning Washington, D.C.."[17] "In April, 1980," he continues, "a group of Grade XI students in Winnipeg organized a formal protest to the Manitoba Minister of Education against having to write American tests of skills."[18] It is Canadians' grappling with "the curricular implications of knowing ourselves" that Osborne affirms that constitutes to his appreciation – "despite all these reservations" – for Barrow's book.[19] Already underway, "knowing ourselves" would become, twenty-five years later, a clarion call.[20]

COMMENTARY

Osborne uses Barrow's book to call Canadian scholars to think deeply about the *Canadian* aspect of curriculum, including how it should differ from that of Canada's colonizing powers: the U.S. and the U.K.. Barrow's book was no blueprint; Osborne highlights its omissions and under-theorizations. In his conclusion, Osborne appears unaware (or unappreciative) of the many efforts underway – including those of the Canada Studies Foundation and scholars like Aoki – to enable Canadians to "know ourselves."

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ENDNOTES

[1] Osborne 1982, 94.

[2] Osborne 1982, 94.

[3] Osborne 1982, 94. Ignoring its emphasis on lived experienced, Osborne seems to miss phenomenology's plausibility for "knowing ourselves" as Canadians.

[4] Osborne 1982, 95.

[5] Osborne 1982, 95. Contextualizing something implies emplacing it in its larger setting. When appended to "Canada" it implies situating the country among other countries,

accenting its embeddedness in larger economic, political, and cultural relationships, but also diverting attention away from the specificities of Canada. I have never once heard the phrase "American context."

[6] Barrow 1979, 20-21; quoted in Osborne 1982, 95.

[7] It's true that George Tomkins' canonical history of Canadian curriculum (Tomkins 1986) was not yet published, but he had published on related Canadian topics by this time (see Tomkins 1974, 1981, as had Aoki (1005 [1979]), and many others. I suppose a historian's critique of Canadian "educationalism" (Neatby 1953) did not qualify. Nor did a canonical study of philosophy and culture in Anglo-Canada (Armour and Trott 1981).

[8] Osborne 1982, 95.

[9] Osborne 1982, 96.

[10] See Cormier 2004.

[11] Osborne 1982, 96. While it's true that in the early 1980s proceduralism and scientism remained dominant – at least in U.S. curriculum studies – a reconceptualization of the field was well underway in the U.S. that relied extensively on scholarship in the arts, humanities, and social theory. It was not unknown in Canada: Aoki 2005 (1978).

[12] Osborne 1982, 97; Barrow 1979, 14. "Why" was the question George Grant asked throughout his career (Pinar 2015, 43ff.)

[13] Osborne 1982, 97. They may be "connected," but surely they are also different, the "how" question positioning the educator as an engineer – preoccupied with issues of curriculum design, implementation, teaching strategies – and the "why" question supporting the educator's independent thinking. Yes, both are necessary but surely the "why" question is the casualty in the schools' obsession with outcomes.

[14] Osborne 1982, 97.

[15] Osborne 1982, 97.

[16] Osborne 1982, 99. George Grant, too, considered American influence highly problematic: see, for instance, Pinar 2019, 6. Concerning the Canada Studies Foundation, see research briefs #52, #55, #59, #62.

[17] Osborne 1982, 99.

[18] Osborne 1982, 99.

[19] Osborne 1982, 108.

[20] See research brief #34.