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REVIEW ARTICLE

Japan and the American Identity

BEN SPIECKER

Japan and the Pursuit of a New American Identity: work and education in a multicultural age. Walter Feinberg, 1993, London, Routledge, pp.216, £37.50

This study originated in a concern for the relation between school and work, and later evolved into an enquiry into the nature of a democratic identity in a multicultural society. Feinberg started this project in about 1980, shortly after leaders of government and industry declared that American education was in crisis. Inferior education was thought to be one of the main causes of the growing American trade deficit and (then) declining industry (car industry and consumer electronics). Low scores on standardised tests of American students, particularly in comparison with those of Japanese students, were seen as a sign of the decline of education and as a possible explanation of the lack of productivity of American industry. Both the high scores on tests of the Japanese students and the impressive achievements of Japanese industry were seen as proof of the thesis that good education produces good workers.

In those years a growing numbers of 'transplants', as the branches of Japanese companies are called, settled down in the United States. The Japanese children who came along with their parents were placed in the neighbouring public schools. This enabled Feinberg (Professor of Philosophy of Education and Director of the Study of Cultural Values and Ethics at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign) to subject the relationship between education and labour market/industry to analysis. For this purpose he interviewed many Japanese parents and children, in the US as well as after their return to Japan. Though Feinberg was still interested in the relationship between school achievement and industrial productivity, there was a shift in his research question: what do the achievements of Japanese scholars and workers mean for America, and why do they carry the meaning that they have? One of the reasons for this shift in the definition of the problem was that Feinberg had the feeling that the economic issues had come to be of minor importance, and that behind all the attention on Japan lies a concern for America's own identity and moral character. Consequently his central question became:

What is it about the nature of our self-understanding that leads us to see Japanese performance in the way that we do? (p.4)

For Feinberg the mixture of fear and admiration that is projected onto the Japanese creates a good opportunity to learn more about the American identity, and the way education contributes to this.

The citizens of the US see their country as a democracy, as the leader of the 'free world'. Their political identity is a democratic one. But where does one acquire a democratic disposition? The role of the school in the development of a democratic identity is of crucial importance. In recent years, however, this task of the public school has been grossly neglected. Feinberg sums up several reasons for this. Public education has not succeeded in contributing to a more egalitarian and democratic society. Another reason is located in classical democratic theory itself. In Western democracies the public good is too often reduced to the level of individual interests. One of the central questions in Feinberg's book is whether in Japan another, and probably more adequate, conception of the public good dominates.

In the US the ideal of the education of a public seems to have been lost. Some, the economic conservatives, stress the economic profit of education for both the nation and the individual, and therefore the content of the curriculum must have 'cash value'. Others, the cultural conservatives, see a central task of public education in furthering the specific national or religious identity with the help of traditional symbols and meanings. Is there, Feinberg asks himself, still the possibility of a broad and inclusive view of a public and of public education, and if so, how can that public be connected to a defensible conception of democracy? (p. 11).

The American identity is subject to two conflicting forces, a patriotic and a capitalistic one. There is a striving after a coherent (also racial, ethnic, or gender) identity ('black, professional US citizen') on the one hand, and after an open identity, that allows for porous relationships with other cultures and international markets, on the other. Japan is seen both as a threat and as a model, because as a capitalist superpower it has conquered the world market without losing its strong national identity.

The liberal commitment to equal opportunities and 'colour-blindness' in public education is on strained terms with the liberal concern for cultural integrity. Should the public school serve the specific needs of cultural groups, or must cultural diversity be conceived as something that has to be conquered with the help of public education? In the latter case more attention must be given to a national curriculum and a national system for the assessment of teachers and students.

The above-mentioned issues cannot be considered separately from the question of which qualities, as aspects of identity, should be pursued in upbringing and education. The Japanese, so it is assumed by many Americans, have a greater ability to rein in their desires and to exercise frugality. In short, the Japanese have a better 'work ethic'. Americans are consumers and often want to satisfy their needs immediately, and this does not promote the inexpensive and efficient production of goods. Moreover, according to Feinberg, the (formation of) American identity has become a problem, identity being 'the way people think about themselves, what they care about, the kinds of commitments they make, and the point of view they take' (p. 18). What people used to see as the characteristics that define the identity of a person (sex, origin, occupation, religion) have become a subject of personal choice. Perhaps public education must, as in Japan, again be characterised by more order, more structure, and curtailment of choices and openness.

The problems that accompany the development of individualism are not (yet) fully known in Japan. Confucianism stresses the primacy of the collective over the individual. The authority of the group restricts individual wishes, respect for the parent is transferred to teacher and supervisor, and loyalty to the family develops into

loyalty to the firm. In the US, individual interests are conceived as essentially antagonistic to nature. In Japan the ideal of harmony in human relations dominates. Solutions to problems must benefit the group at all times. And the line between the public and private domain is not very sharply drawn; all relations must be characterised by trust, warmth, cooperation, and efficiency. The goals of the company influence the private lives of male workers and consequently their identity is strongly defined by the company.

There are different conceptions of self and community in Japan and in the US. According to Feinberg, in the US the dominating ideology is that communities arise and are maintained because they serve the interests and needs of the individual. In order to preserve the community, taxes have to be paid and the law must be upheld. This is a minimal conception of citizenship, but it is also often seen as a sufficient one. Anything more is seen as intrusive and in danger of violating individual rights (consider the successful lobby of the National Rifle Association). In Japan a communal conception of the self dominates, in which the needs and interests of the individual are defined to a larger extent by the norms and expectations of the community. In this country the boundaries between selves within a community are rather vague, and belonging is a stronger value than independence. Pointing out collective responsibility is considered of greater importance than passing moral judgements on individual behaviour.

For Feinberg the comparison with Japan is aimed at opening up a discussion about the conception of education in the US. For many the Japanese have realised the aims that should also govern the American school:

academic achievement for international competition, and the development of a unified national identity. (p. 35)

In the US the former objective is the main concern of the so-called economic conservatives, the latter that of the cultural conservatives.

Individualism, according to Feinberg, easily gives rise to problems with regard to morality and authority. In this he agrees with certain ideas of MacIntyre. According to the latter, developing individualism leads to the loss of a communal moral language; Western man has lost the capacity to participate in a moral discourse that is also defined by tradition. In our Western societies the relationship between social roles and specific obligations has disappeared; the individual has become the sole arbiter of moral standards. How different this is in Japan. In this culture the moral norms that are characteristic of the different roles and the moral identity of individuals are decreed by the community. Americans are educated for independence and self-reliance. They leave home at an early age, and choose their own career, partner and life-style. Japanese, with their orientation towards connectedness and communal ties, stay longer at home and often show lifetime loyalty towards their company. Because of this loyalty, companies can invest in the training of their workers without the fear that they will leave for better positions elsewhere. Applying for a job at another company is often seen as a sign of disloyalty. Feinberg points out that, strikingly enough, commercial values that are considered connected with individualism, such as efficiency, productivity and ingenuity, appear to be closely related to Japanese collectivity too. Nevertheless, in the US the cultural and economic conservatives, despite their admiration for the Japanese economic success, are not attracted to the collectivistic conception of self and community that prevails in Japan.

Economic conservatives are impressed by the excellent educational achievements, in particular by the performance in maths and science, of Japanese students. The misleading thought that there is a linear causal relationship between educational achievement and industrial productivity has quickly taken root: that for the latter it is simply better education that is required. Feinberg points out that radical technological changes call for a new breed of workers. Workers no longer have one clear-cut job description that requires specific knowledge and skills. They must be trained in many different aspects of the system. Experience with both Japanese and American workers suggests that the link between school and work is weak, and there are indications that cooperative relationships, teamwork and interpersonal skills are of vital importance. But this development of the workplace into a flexible, laterally structured one is not often the image that guides school reform proposals. Nevertheless, economic conservatives in the US support the competitive education reform models.

Whereas the economic conservative sees Japan particularly as a model to heighten industrial productivity, for the cultural conservatives (like Bloom) Japan proves that work ethic and moral virtues do pay. A strong national identity promotes harmony and national unity; a communal conception of the public good is thus of vital interest. Social institutions, including family and school, must again become aware of their task. The curriculum must contribute to the development of communal symbols and shared meanings. Despite diversity, the communal (national) heritage must be passed on. Feinberg's commentary on this is short, but clear: 'They seek community, but they neglect democracy' (p. 86).

In Japanese secondary education much attention is given to the development of a moral national character. The child-centredness of elementary school turns into a system of discipline, external control and rigid preparation for standardised examinations. Instructing students not to challenge authority and not to exercise their critical dispositions can have some advantages for industry. Here Feinberg cites Rohlen, who researched the relationship between Japanese schools and Japanese industry (p. 87):

Are we not witnessing in all of this something highly indicative of Japanese character? Many virtues—diligence, sacrifice, mastery of detailed information, endurance over the many preparatory years, willingness to postpone gratification, and competitive spirit—are tied together at a formative period.

The Japanese educational system is characterised by a conflation of human capital with human potential. The development of the latter also implies that students become citizens who can participate in a democratic society. It becomes clear that the way in which the cultural conservatives want to restore the American unity and identity, that is, by the formation of a communal identity, is not a practicable proposition. Their fear that as a consequence of incompatible racial, ethnic and gender contrasts society will fall apart is not unfounded. But the re-establishment of a single, dominant, white, male-gendered, Christian identity can no longer be a central aim of public education.

Though this is not a complete reconstruction of the contents of Feinberg's book, one can conclude that the author connects a great number of themes of topical interest. Moreover, he frequently illustrates his treatises on the Japanese and American identities with quotations from the interviews. This has contributed to making the study readable. The interviews provide a clear insight into the ideas and experiences of the

persons concerned; the conversation between Feinberg and the Japanese wife, who has been uprooted by her stay in the US, is a good example of this (pp. 148–150). After reading the book, however, one is assailed by the feeling that not all of the problems that are raised by Feinberg have been discussed adequately.

The value of Feinberg's study lies in the fact that he discusses a great number of educational issues in the context of recent political–philosophical discussions. The *relative* weakness of his investigations, however, is the sometimes rather rough elaboration of these philosophical backgrounds. The analyses of the problems raised would have gained in strength, if these had been somewhat more systematically elucidated in the context of the so-called 'liberalism–communitarianism' debate (Mulhall and Swift, 1992). It is striking that Feinberg often refers to the communitarian MacIntyre, but that any reference to Rawls' recent publications on political liberalism is missing. The relationship between the different conceptions of identity, among which is that of (the minimal conception of) democratic identity, and what Rawls calls conceptions of the good, would then surely have been under discussion. Democracies are (almost) by definition multi-cultural societies, that is, societies in which different substantial conceptions of the good are found. Apart from that, what Feinberg writes about Confucianism is rather limited. What is really surprising is that in the index 'Buddhism' is mentioned only once. And though it is sometimes said that someone is Shintō in the same way as she or he is Japanese (Buruma, 1983), any reference to Shintoism is missing.

The distinction between 'nation' and 'state' current in political philosophy could also have been helpful to Feinberg in elucidating the Japanese identity as well as the positions of the cultural and economic conservatives, and of the patriotic and capitalistic powers in the US. A nation is, in the words of Raphael (1990), a community, whereas a state is an association. Membership of a nation is a matter of sentiment, depending on common experience, language and history, while membership of the state is (primarily) a matter of legal status. According to Tamir being a member of a state and a community not only relate to two different issues, 'but also the notions of what a good member is – a "good citizen" and a "good member of a nation" are certainly not one and the same' (1992, p. 21).

The Japanese self is defined to a large extent by the strong community of which it forms part: particularly tradition-bound ideals define their national identity (Lebra, 1992). The American cultural conservatives want to rehabilitate the (almost vanished, so they say) national identity. Highlighting national identity, however, often leads to failure to recognise the interests of the many ethnic, cultural, and religious communities. Moreover, citizens of one state can have different national identities. Belgian citizens, for example, consider themselves either as Flemish or Walloon. The title of Feinberg's book speaks of '*the pursuit of a new American identity*', and therefore the author could have pursued at greater depth the issue of the strained relationship between civic education (formation of the public identity) on the one hand, and the specific group identity, that is to say, being a member of a specific cultural, religious, ethnic community (Inuit, Indian, Afro-American), on the other.

The economic conservative on the other hand will not attach great importance to the national and democratic identity and pleads in particular for us to go 'back to basics'. (About 15 years ago Kohlberg already suspected that this slogan was dictated by individualistic-economic motives.) Feinberg, as I have noted, pays relatively much attention to the communitarian ideas of MacIntyre, whereas the importance of a

democratic identity in a multi-cultural society is relatively under-exposed (Rawls, 1993; Moon, 1994). The question that Feinberg has raised, namely whether there still is the possibility of a wide and inclusive view of a public and public education and how that public can be connected to a defensible conception of democracy, is not answered in an entirely satisfying way. The promise that seems to be implied in the subtitle of his study, '*Work and education in a multicultural age*', is not quite redeemed.

My comments are essentially a proof of the stimulating character of Feinberg's splendid study. The author has succeeded in clarifying the relationships between education and modern industry, between conceptions of schooling and philosophical and anthropological issues. The study covers a lot of ground and it should be consulted by students and scholars in education as well as by policy-makers. Feinberg has rendered philosophy of education a service: his book demonstrates again that good philosophical analyses of educational problems do have societal relevance.

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