Comenius, Johann Amos

Johann Amos Comenius (Czech: Jan Amos Komenský, 1592 - 1670) is one of the most influential figures in the history of education. He lived in a century when revolutionary changes took place in Europe: On the one hand a series of highly destructive wars in Europe ("Thirty Years' War") which basically changed the political balance, impoverished large areas for decades, and deepened the schism between religious denominations; on the other hand the emergence of the modern world – of the territorial state, of mercantilist economy and industrial production, and of the modern sciences.

Comenius himself was raised in the community of the Bohemian Brethren, a protestant movement in the catholic Habsburg territories of Bohemia and Moravia. He studied theology, was minister and school teacher, and later on became bishop of the Brethren. Beyond that he was highly engaged in realizing a vision of peace, unity, and order in a world which he perceived as a chaotic labyrinth - as he described it in his Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart (1631). In his magnum opus The General Consultation on an Improvement of All Things Human (1666) he worked out how to heal the sufferings of the world – in the centre of this work Comenius deals with efforts to create order in all things which are totally disordered: Pansophia, in all thinking which is entirely confused: Pampaedia (universal-education), and in all the languages which are totally discordant: Panglottia. This structure corresponds strictly to Comenius' pivotal concern, namely education and languages. Comenius' Weltbild and thus his theology and his philosophy, was grounded on the tradition of the Brethrens' community on the one hand and on the universal scientific discourse of his time. He tried to bring things together: to work out a pansophia, an ordered encyclopaedia of all that mankind knows and has experienced, and which is based on a Christian concept of the world (Welthild).

Comenius was the first to successfully organize all the knowledge which humankind had accumulated and to turn it to the didactic purpose outlined in the title of his famous Didactica Magna. His famous textbook, the Orbis Sensualium Pictus, a language-picture-textbook, is a telling example of this and one of the classics of education. In this book the world, the circle [orbis] of Creation, is expressed symbolically in words and pictures, with the words explaining the pictures and vice versa. Thus, the world becomes teachable.

Looking back on his life, and to the miserable state of the church and the schools in his mother country, Comenius wrote in 1657:

“before all we should help the youth and establish schools as soon as possible, and provide them with appropriate textbooks and a precise teaching method in order to put the academic, moral, and religious efforts on the right path.”

So in his Great Didactic Setting Forth the Whole Art of Teaching All Things to All Men, he outlined a vision of a comprehensive school system. In Greek and Latin Comenius plays on a little word: pan—omnis—all, that comprises philosophy in its entirety, and his vision of education in particular.

In the Great Didactic Comenius argues in a way that is representative of his pedagogical argument:

“Artisans are accustomed to fix certain limits of time for the training of an apprentice […], according to the case or difficulty of the trade. […] The same system must be adopted in school organisation, and distinct periods of time must be mapped out for the acquirement of arts, sciences, and languages respectively. In this way we may cover the whole range of human knowledge within a certain number of years […]. The process should begin in infancy and should continue until the age of manhood is reached; and this space of twenty-four years should be divided into well-defined spaces. In this we must follow the lead of nature.”

Artisans, nature, and – if helpful – the Bible are in the references in all of Comenius' arguments. The latter source is traditional; the former references indicate the influence of emerging modern philosophy and sciences. For Comenius these references are closely linked as there is one and the same logic behind: the theo-logic of God's creation and the destiny of the world.

In his time Comenius' name as educator stood for his language textbooks. Nowadays one can interpret those famous books as part of a tripartite unity of a sequence of

– comprehensive schools, one building upon another according to the students' age, with

– corresponding textbooks that present the entire world according to the order of God's creation, and

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books that guide a teacher in how introduce the youths into the world they live in, a didactic.

The System of Schools (omnes - for all)

The school system looks like this: “The whole […] must be divided into four distinct grades: infancy, childhood, boyhood, and youth”. The schools should be the mother’s knee, the vernacular-school (our elementary school), the Latin school or gymnasium, and the university and travel – in every house, every village, every city, and every kingdom respectively. This picture mirrors the schools of the 17th century in Europe. Comenius put things together into a system of comprehensive schools for all which is consistent theoretically. This vision was far from being realized at his time; but the idea has encouraged educational reformers down to the present, particularly in countries with non-comprehensive school systems.

The Knowledge (omnia – all things)

In his lifetime Comenius was famous for his textbooks, or more precisely speaking for his language books. Above all, his Janua Linguarum Reserata: The open(ed) Door to the Languages, established his fame. The book’s pattern has been well known down through the ages. In this textbook as well as in all the others the world is represented symbolically in our languages, Latin being the lingua franca. (In particular, Comenius rendered outstanding services to the Czech language, his mother tongue.)

Comenius’ idea was to elaborate one appropriate textbook for each of the different types of school that he had outlined. The best known even in our day[s?] is the Orbis Sensualium Pictus: The World in as far as we can conceive it with our senses. This textbook was designed for the mother school, the school “for infancy that should be the mother’s knee”. In this book Comenius represents the entire circle of the world, the orbis, in words and in pictures. A closer look into this kind of primer discloses Comenius’ didactical philosophy: First of all his textbooks are more than mere dictionaries, rather they tell stories about the world as it reveals itself to the human senses. These stories are about nature and human life, and they are embedded in a concept of what use to make of things and how to act humanely in human society. The introduction to his Unum Necessarium (The One Thing Needful) gives the principle of selection, composition, and presentation of things in all of his language-matter-books – all “what every human really needs for this transitory life, under the guidance of sense and the word of God”.

This is a second point to make. The manifold of human knowledge is ordered according to the lives of humans in this world[,] that prepares them for their eternal life. The Orbis Pictus is the persuasive demonstration of Comenius’ basic philosophy, and it is, in so far, a key to the understanding of the bulk of Comenius’ didactical writings:

- Its title could also be translated as: “The world as God’s creation in pictures”.
- The content itself is framed according to a Christian Weltbild: The book begins with God and His Creation; the last picture is the Last Judgment.
- The entire matter in turn is explicitly framed didactically through an invitatio (“Come boy, learn to be wise …”), and a clausula (conclusion):

  “Thus thou hast seen in short, all things, that can be shown, and hast learned the chief Words of the English [German, Czech etc.] and Latin Tongue. Go on now and read other good Books diligently, and thou shalt become learned, wise, and godly.”) Furthermore the corresponding pictures are identical, a fine example of the pictures’ message.

The Method (omnino —throughout)

In the course of developing his didactic Comenius first of all refers to the Bible and to the ancient philosophers and theologians. This way of arguing was an age-old practice and a sort of legitimating his argument by recourse to generally accepted authorities. But when it came to the substance of the didactic he followed the philosophical reasoning of his time, i. e. that of the emerging philosophy of the Enlightenment. In the words of René Descartes (whom Comenius occasionally visited):

“I perceived it to be possible to arrive at knowledge highly useful in life; and […] to discover a practical [philosophy], by means of which, knowing the force and action of fire, water, air the stars, the heavens, […] as
distinctly as we know the various crafts of our artisans, we might also apply them in the same way to all the uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature.”

In this sense Comenius’ textbooks—for all schools or grades—were up to date for his times. But what is more, Comenius adopted as a theoretical foundation for education the method Descartes claimed for mathematics, biology, and the like.

Conclusion

Whosoever worked out a didactic in a strict sense after Comenius came to almost the same principles and practical advices we find in Comenius’ works. A prominent example is the old Latin repetitio est mater studiorum (“repetition is the mother of study”). Even neuro-didacticians have reinvented this age-old maxim. But the underlying Weltbild differs: Soon after Comenius the theological one was replaced with the concept of enlightenment.

So, for example, in Johann Bernhard Basedow’s famous Elementary Work (1787) the matter is anthropocentrically organized; its copper-plates follow a human’s path from birth to death, instead of presenting the history of the salvation of mankind. Furthermore it is not the “world” as such that the Orbis Pictus and Comenius’ other textbooks represent symbolically. It is rather the world of the Brethren, the world as seen with the eyes of a prominent member of that proto-bourgeois community. School-books generally represent the specific Weltbild of a given society. The didactical maxims are alike over the centuries, for they always are about teaching and learning. Nevertheless there is a lesson didacticians have learned from Comenius, and still can learn nowadays: Didactical reasoning and practical advice make sense only if grounded in a concept of human destiny.

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References and further readings

The article is based on a chapter of

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