

The First Progressive Educator

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Review of: Robert Loudon, *Johann Bernhard Basedow and the Transformation of Modern Education: Educational Reform in the German Enlightenment*, London, Bloomsbury, 2021, 225 p. ISBN: 9781350163669.

Johann Bernhard Basedow is known to philosophers and historians of the 18th century primarily as the impetus for Immanuel Kant's letters of support to the *Philanthropin*, or the school that Basedow ran in Dessau, Prussia. He is also known as one of several Enlightenment figures who inaugurated the progressive movement in educational thought. Beyond this, he is little known in contemporary Anglo-American intellectual circles, and this despite his stature in Europe and especially, Germany. Indeed, there is so little scholarship in Basedow in the history of philosophy in Anglo-America, one would be tempted to say he is of little importance. But this would be a gross error. Basedow is important not only as a figure for the study of Kant, but the history of educational thought. It was he, and not Rousseau, Loudon will claim, that deserves the moniker, father of progressive education. German scholarship has long held a place of importance for Basedow and his pedagogical theories; the place for Basedow's role in progressive education that should be occupied by him sits empty in Anglo-American understandings of educational thought and philosophy and this lacuna inhibits us from telling a complete story of the history and development of progressive education.

Very fortunately, we now have Loudon's biography and history of the development of the *Philanthropin* and Basedow. This is the very first exposition of both Basedow and his school available in English. Though there are numerous monographs in German on Basedow and the *Philanthropin* (most recently, perhaps, is Jürgen Overhoff's *Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724-1790)*, such scholarship has never been forthcoming in English until now (Overhoff, 2020).¹ Loudon's book is a biography—an intellectual biography—of Basedow, together with lengthy sections on the development of *Philanthropin* and his

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¹ Jürgen Overhoff (2020). *Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724-1790): Aufklärer, Pädagoge, Menschenfreund, Eine Biographie*, Göttingen, Wallstein.

various publications, including his *Methodenbuch* and his multi-volume *Elementarwerke*. Along the way, we are given an account of Basedow's early intellectual development, as well as key experiences that led him to become the chief proponent of progressive education in 18th century Prussia.

I will discuss Louden's book by examining four stages in Basedow's life that it outlines. The first is his childhood and early adult intellectual development. The second is his publication of the *Methodenbuch* and *Elementarwerk*. The third is his management of the *Philanthropin*, including his relationship to Kant. Finally, I will discuss his uptake in broader German and European history of educational thought and say something more of why and how Louden's book is so important for contemporary scholarship.

Chapter One introduces the *Philanthropin*—Basedow's school that opened December 27th, 1774 and closed (well after Basedow resigned for the final time as head in 1778) in 1793. The school was unique for offering a non-denominational, though nevertheless Christian, education. Beyond this, the pedagogy of rote learning was de-emphasized if not abandoned, and a conversation-based approach to foreign languages was introduced. Books were designed to instruct children in various disciplines. Many of these contained copper engravings, which proved popular for children, teachers, and parents alike. Clothing rules were relaxed (somewhat), the poor were invited to attend (set-asides were established to cover the expense). (It appears the education children received was heavily gendered, in keeping with the times as well as Rousseau's edicts in *Émile*.) Teacher-training, which was novel in the 18th century, was also provided.

Chapters 2-3 cover Basedow's personal and intellectual development from childhood to early adulthood. We learn that Basedow had a voracious appetite for learning, but he was also a difficult person. He was easily provoked, especially when his ideas were not taken seriously or dismissed without due consideration. He had a tendency to be quarrelsome, even bellicose. This would ill-serve him when managing the *Philanthropin*. His pedagogical ideas emerged quite early; by 1749, at the end of his period as Hofmeister to the von Qualen family in Borghorst, he had a rudimentary establishment of the principles of pedagogy that would later find their way into his Magister's thesis, as well as 1770's *Methodenbuch* and *Elementarwerk*.

Chapters 4-6 detail Basedow's emerging scholarship as a leading pedagogue. Basedow's early experiences as pedagogue began after he defended his Magister's thesis at Kiel in 1752. He was first employed as a professor at the *Ritterakademie* in Denmark and was subsequently "demoted" and sent to the *Gymnasium Christianeum* in Altona. This would be the first of many subsequent transitions from employment to employment, until settling down with the establishment of the *Philanthropinum*. During this time, he continued his trend of voluminous publication, averaging at this time approximately 3 books per year. He completed over 100 books in his lifetime, perhaps much of his prodigious output due to insomnia. In the 1760's he was employed by the Danish court, and his star had begun to rise. So, too, however, had his notoriety: many thought he had effectively banished the Bible from instruction and numerous complaints were made to the Danish court. Basedow prevailed, however, and by the late 1760's was on the threshold of his two masterpieces—the *Methodenbuch* and *Elementarwerk*.

In my opinion, chapters 7-8 are the central ones of the book. Here, both the *Methodenbuch für Vater und Mutter der Familien und Völker* (1770) and *Elementarwerk* (1770) are given lengthy consideration. Not only do we see how Basedow's earlier iterations of his pedagogy inform the later, but we are also treated to a comprehensive examination of the books themselves. Numerous and frequent quotes from Basedow's manuscripts are provided for English readers unable to access the originals. Copious citations from the books helps the reader unfamiliar with Basedow's work get a good sense of his achievement. This feature of Loudon's is particularly welcome, as it provides many with the first exposure to Basedow's own writing. As these are lengthy volumes (the *Elementarwerk* stretches to 4 volumes), they are difficult to summarize, yet Loudon does an able job of teasing out the highlights.

Basedow's *Philanthropin* concerns the content of Chapter 9 and Chapter 10 the last years of his life. Basedow's attempt to put his ideas of the *Methodenbuch* and *Elementarwerk* into practice yielded mixed results. On the one hand, Basedow presided over the most enlightened of all schools yet developed. On the other, the leadership of the school betrayed the divisions between Basedow and his teaching staff. Funding was a perennial issue. The school itself was a curious mix of freedom and regimentation: children were subjected to a rigorous and demanding daily schedule despite the prevalence of play in the curriculum. There was a marked difference in the treatment of pensionists, whose parents had purchased a seat for their child, and famulants, or impoverished children provided an education with a reduced tuition. The pensionist's curriculum was more detailed and rigorous, while the famulant's curriculum emphasized 'basic' education, together with a stress on trades (e.g., carpentry) as well as serving the pensionists during mealtimes. Non-denominational religious studies, perhaps the most progressive element of Basedow's progressive curriculum, were staple curricula for both pensionists and famulants.

Basedow would resign the directorship of the *Philanthropin* at least twice during his tenure. The final resignation occurred in 1778. He remained the liturgist of the school until 1780. After his departure, the school continued under new directorship. Basedow's temperament led to a succession of qualified teachers and organizers to leave, including his successor, Heinrich Christian Wolke. If Basedow's German biographers are to be believed, his final days were anti-climactic. He volunteered at Anna Maria Dorothea Kalisky's school for girls in Magdeburg. He died in 1794, age 66.

Louden's intellectual biography shows us that Basedow was decidedly not the 'German Rousseau.' Indeed, his ideas, in germination as early as the 1740's can properly be said to precede the latter's. While Kant's insistence that the *Philanthropin* is the future of humane education, and his active sponsorship of the institute helped establish its bona fides among Prussia's intellectual circles (to say nothing of Kant scholarship), Loudon's book shows us that it was Basedow, above all, who theorized what would become progressive education. Loudon's book details the intellectual and biographical dimensions of Basedow and the *Philanthropin*. It gives us a deep summary and discussion of his leading publications. It should be read not only by Kant scholars and those interested in Enlightenment philosophy, but those interested in the history of progressive education and

educational thought. It is a crucial first step in what we truly need; a fuller approximation of Basedow's major works in English, including perhaps an abridged translation of the *Methodenbuch* and *Elementarwerk*.

