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John Amos Comenius (1592–1670): A Biographical Sketch

Nugzar Ter-Oganov ^{a, b, c, *}

^a Tel Aviv University, Israel

^b Cherkas Global University, Washington, USA

^c Volgograd State University, Volgograd, Russian Federation

Abstract

This work explores the academic and professional pedagogical activity of John Amos Comenius (1592–1670), widely regarded as the founder of modern pedagogy.

The principal sources for this study are relevant biographical studies, as well as Comenius's own works. In terms of methodology, use was made of content analysis, the biographical method, and synthesis.

The study's findings revealed J.A. Comenius to be a fundamental figure in the history of pedagogy. He pioneered the class-lesson system, which was revolutionary for his time and which is used to this day in most schools across the world.

Furthermore, Comenius was a proponent of a humanistic approach to education – something barely sought after in his time. This aspect has been pointed out by most of his biographers.

His didactic ideas are founded on principles of equality, democracy, and universality – these began to be implemented in education much later than his time, but today are honored in schools all over the world.

Keywords: John Amos Comenius, period 1592–1670, pedagogy, history of pedagogy, pedagogical science, didactics.

1. Introduction

John Amos Comenius was born in 1592 in the village of Nivnice in Moravia. He is chiefly famous as the founder of didactics, the branch of pedagogical science concerned with the theory of teaching and learning. A pastor, Comenius was wedded to the ideas of humanism, which pervaded

* Corresponding author

E-mail addresses: nugza19473@gmail.com (N. Ter-Oganov)

all his work. He was a proponent of the class-lesson system, which humanity is still using successfully to this day.

2. Materials and methods

The principal sources for this study are relevant biographical studies, including those by J. Kvačala (Kvačala, 1892), P. Floss (Floss, 1970), A. Heyberger (Heyberger, 1928), J.V. Novák and J. Hendrich (Novák, Hendrich, 1932), K. Schaller (Schaller, 1962), R.F. Young (Young, 1932), R. Alt (Alt, 1959), J. Kopecký, J. Patočka, and J. Kyrášek (Kopecký et al., 1957), F. Kožík (Kožík, 1970), Ľ. Kurdybacha (Kurdybacha, 1957), D.S. Larangé (Larangé, 2008), K. Veverková (Veverková, 2012), V. Stejskal (Stejskal, 1972), M.V. Kratochvíl (Kratokhvil, 1991), K.V. Yelnitsky (El'nitskii, 1893), A.A. Krasnovsky (Krasnovskii, 1953), S.V. Smolyanitsky (Smolyanitskii, 1987), D. Lordkipanidze (Lordkipanidze, 1970), and G.M. Kodzhaspirova (Коджаспирова, 2003), as well as Comenius's own works (Komenskii, 1982a; Komenskii, 1875; Komenskii, 1982b; Komenskii, 1988; Komenskii, 1982c; Komenskii, 1982d).

In terms of methodology, use was made of content analysis, the biographical method, and synthesis.

3. Discussion

There is quite a large body of biographical research on J.A. Comenius, which suggests he was a person of great depth and his contribution to the development of pedagogical science as a whole and didactics in particular is immense.

The relevant historiography can be divided into four sections: 1) Russian prerevolutionary; 2) Russian Soviet-period; 3) Russian modern; 4) foreign.

It is to be noted straightaway that in the Russian historiography the scholar's name tends to be rendered in the Russo-Polish manner as 'Komenski', with the emphasis on the second syllable. This approach traces back to prerevolutionary Russian history, when Poland was part of the Russian Empire. In some of the Western literature, his name is rendered in the Czech manner as 'Komenský', with the emphasis on the first syllable.

During his lifetime, he was mainly known as Comenius – in keeping with the Latin tradition, dominant in Europe at the time. His father hailed from the village of Komňa in Moravia. From this village John Amos took his surname, which means 'a man from Komňa'.

The largest is the foreign historiography. Among the works of the 19th-century Czech historians, of particular note is J. Kvačala's 'Johann Amos Comenius: Sein Leben und seine Schrifte' (German: "John Amos Comenius: His Life and Writings"), released in Berlin in 1892 (Kvačala, 1892), which provides a detailed account of the scholar's life and his most notable writings.

The Czech scholar of German descent P. Floss explores in his monograph 'Jan Amos Komenský: Od divadla věcí k dramatu člověka' (Czech: "John Amos Comenius: From the Theater of Things to the Drama of Man") the humanistic ideas of Comenius, the materialism and idealism in his writings, and a few other philosophical aspects of his oeuvre (Floss, 1970).

A. Heyberger explores in her monograph 'Jean Amos Comenius (Komenský): Sa vie et son oeuvre d'éducateur' (French: "John Amos Comenius: His Life and Educational Work"), published in Paris in 1928, the academic-pedagogical aspects of his creative work and his teaching activity (Heyberger, 1928).

The Czech researchers J.V. Novák and J. Hendrich analyze in their biographical monograph 'Jan Amos Komenský: Jeho život a spisy' (Czech: "John Amos Comenius: His Life and Works"), published in Prague in 1932, the scholar's life's journey and most significant academic contributions (Novák, Hendrich, 1932).

K. Schaller provides in his monograph 'Die Pädagogik des Johann Amos Comenius und die Anfänge des pädagogischen Realismus im 17. Jahrhundert' (German: "The Pedagogy of John Amos Comenius and the Beginnings of Educational Realism in the 17th Century"), published in Hamburg in 1962, an analysis of the scholar's academic legacy in the field of pedagogy (Schaller, 1962).

R.F. Young offers in his monograph 'Comenius in England', published in Oxford in 1932, an in-depth analysis of the scholar's activity in England (Young, 1932).

The German researcher R. Alt explores in his fundamental work 'Der fortschrittliche Charakter der Pädagogik Komenskýs' (German: "The Progressive Character of Comenius's Pedagogy") the scholar's creative legacy and attempts to make the case for it being progressive in character (Alt, 1959).

A fairly detailed biographical sketch of John Amos Comenius is offered in the monograph 'Jan Amos Komenský: Nástin života a díla' (Czech: "John Amos Comenius: A Sketch of His Life and Work") by J. Kopecký, J. Patočka, and J. Kyrášek, published in Prague in 1957, which provides an in-depth analysis of the scholar's professional and creative endeavors (Kopecký et al., 1957). Similar in spirit is the monograph 'Světlo v temnotách: Bolestný a hrdinský život J.A. Komenského' (Czech: "A Light in the Darkness: The Painful and Heroic Life of John Amos Comenius") by F. Kožík, which explores the scholar's personal, creative, and professional issues (Kožík, 1970).

The Polish historian Ł. Kurdybacha provides in his monograph 'Działalność Jana Amosa Komeńskiego w Polsce' (Polish: "The Activity of John Amos Comenius in Poland"), released in Warsaw in 1957, an insight into the scholar's life's tough journey, including within Rzeczpospolita (Kurdybacha, 1957).

Among the foreign modern works, of particular note are the monograph 'La Parole de Dieu en Bohême et Moravie: La tradition de la prédication dans l'Unité des Frères de Jan Hus à Jan Amos Comenius' (French: "The Word of God in Bohemia and Moravia: The Tradition of Preaching in the Unity of the Brethren from John Hus to John Amos Comenius") by the French historian D.S. Larangé, which approaches creative work from a religious standpoint and discusses the transformation of the Hussites' ideas into Comenius's humanistic ideas (Larangé, 2008), and the work 'Comenius's Ideas as an Inspiration for Education in a Multicultural Society' by the Czech researcher K. Veverková (Veverková, 2012).

A discussion of the coverage of issues of nurture in the oeuvre of John Amos Comenius by V. Stejskal is provided in the monograph 'Nurture and the Arts: On John Amos Comenius' (Stejskal, 1972).

An analysis of the didactic aspects by M.V. Kratochvíl is provided in 'The Life of John Amos Comenius: A Book for the Teacher' (Kratokhvil, 1991).

Among the Russian prerevolutionary works, of particular note is the monograph 'John Amos Comenius and His Pedagogical Ideas: A Public Lecture Delivered on the Day of the Celebration of the 300th Anniversary of the Birth of J.A. Comenius in an Effort to Raise Funds for the Society for the Care of Primary Education in Omsk' by K.V. Yelnitsky, focused on the biographical and professional aspects of the scholar's activity (El'nitskii, 1893).

Among the works of the Soviet period, of prime interest are the monographs 'J.A. Comenius' by A.A. Krasnovsky (Krasnovskii, 1953), 'Three Centuries of John Amos Comenius' by S.V. Smolyanitsky (Smolyanitskii, 1987), and 'John Amos Comenius' by D. Lordkipanidze (Lordkipanidze, 1970). It is to be noted that the Soviet historiography is very well disposed toward Comenius, and there is even an aspiration to put his ideas into practice.

Among the modern fundamental works, worthy of particular mention is the work 'The History of Education and Pedagogical Thought: Tables, Diagrams, and Supportive Notes' by G.M. Kodzhaspirova (Kodzhaspirova, 2003). Comenius's work is also discussed in a number of scholarly articles (e.g., Kumarin, 1998 and Perezhovskaya, 2015).

Also most definitely worthy of note are the encyclopedic articles (e.g., BSE, 1969).

4. Results

Comenius (Figure 1) was born in a troublous time, when a plague was ravaging the world. The story goes that his parents and sisters died of bubonic plague. Taken in by the church, he was christened with the name Amos. He eventually became a priest. His innate passion for learning and science led him to receive an excellent education at the Herborn Academy and the University of Heidelberg.

A highly educated person, John Amos began his pedagogical activity in the city of Pířerov. He studied the works of T. Campanella and other authors of the Renaissance era, which would shape his progressive humanistic views and determine his future in life and career. However, his journey toward pedagogical science did not start at once – this was preceded by his conduct of some research in geography.

Finding pedagogy to be his true vocation in life, Comenius commenced work on what would become his magnum opus – 'Didactica magna' (Latin: "The Great Didactic"), which he wrote in Czech.



Fig. 1. John Amos Comenius (1592–1670)

Compelled to immigrate to Poland due to religious persecution, Comenius took up employment in the city of Leszno, where he also wrote several textbooks. Arguably, it is at that moment in his life that he separated pedagogy from other sciences. During that period, he released ‘The Door of Languages Unlocked’ (1631), ‘School of Infancy’ (1632), ‘Astronomy’ (1632), ‘Physics’ (1633), and ‘The Great Didactic’ (1633–38).

It is during that period that Comenius made the case for the advisability of using the class-lesson system in schools. He believed that the use of this system would make education accessible to the widest section of the population, as well as help develop in learners a certain system of values that would be beneficial to the state (which was impossible to achieve under the home teacher-based education system, dominant at the time, whereby children’s education was entrusted to home teachers whose views regarding the political world order did not always tally with the official standpoint).

However, amid the military conflicts in mid-17th-century Europe, the political elite seemed blind to the potential of Comenius’s didactic ideas. Having moved to Holland, Comenius continued work on ‘De rerum humanarum emendatione consultatio catholica’ (Latin: “General Consultation on an Improvement of All Things Human”), in which he set forth a plan for reforming human society. However, his ideas would go largely unnoticed.

Comenius passed away in Amsterdam in 1670. It is only after his death that his ideas truly began to be valued. As an indication of appreciation, his likeness would appear on the 200 Czech koruna banknote and on stamps produced in the Federal Republic of Germany and the Soviet Union.

Let us now move on to an analysis of Comenius’s creative legacy.

Without question, Comenius’s magnum opus is ‘The Great Didactic’, in which he makes the case for the advisability of using the class-lesson system, which was revolutionary for his time (Komenskii, 1875). Comenius does so from a standpoint of students passing their knowledge along to others, describes the conditions for it to be effective, and lays down the methodological foundations of the class-lesson system. Furthermore, ‘The Great Didactic’, as is the case with his other writings, has a philosophical slant to it, with the work exploring the educational process, with its goals, objectives, methodology, etc. Many are convinced that it is in ‘The Great Didactic’ that both didactics in particular (as the branch of pedagogy focused on the theory of teaching and learning) and pedagogical science as a whole have their source.

The first experience of using the class-lesson system, which was untraditional at the time, was described in ‘Schola pansophica’ (Latin: “School of Pansophy”) (Komenskii, 1982c), published in 1651. It was the result of his teaching in the town of Sárospatak. The Prince of Transylvania, George Rákóczi, embraced Comenius’s ideas and suggested that the pedagogue implement the new system throughout Transylvania. Afterwards, a revised and enlarged version of ‘School of Pansophy’ was incorporated into his fundamental opus ‘General Consultation on an Improvement of All Things Human’, which Comenius began writing in 1644 and finished near the end of his life. One of its chapters, ‘Panpedia’, is devoted to the idea of lifelong education (Komenskii, 1988;

[Komenskii, 2003](#)). In fact, the term ‘panpedia’ has become a household term that refers to the principle of lifelong education.

Comenius was the first to make the case for and demonstrate the use of teaching aids in instruction. He also pioneered emotional involvement via dramatizing educational material. The medieval scholastic system of education was distinguished by the use of tedious and abstruse learning material, and Comenius was staunchly against this approach. As a proponent of play-based learning, he wrote several plays and published them in ‘School as Play’ (1656). His ‘School of Infancy’ ([Komenskii, 1982b](#)) and ‘The World of Sensible Things Pictured’ ([Komenskii, 1982d](#)) are indicative of the significance he assigned to the use of teaching aids in instruction.

Near the end of his life, Comenius completed his ‘General Consultation on an Improvement of All Things Human’, which he had started writing back in 1644. In that fundamental work, he searches for a path to prosperity for all humans and offers practical advice on how to improve the lives of common people. A pedagogue at the beginning of his creative path, he revealed himself as a philosopher at the end of it.

The scholar’s creative path was concluded by the work ‘Unum necessarium’ (Latin: “The One Thing Needful”) (1668), in which one detects a transformation of his philosophical ideas, with Comenius discoursing about humanism, humane nurture and education, and the need to implement the principles of humanism in the education system. In the latter years of his life, he would reveal himself as a true philosopher.

A highly creative and hardworking person, Comenius left behind a rich legacy of research, much of which was revolutionary for his time.

5. Conclusion

J.A. Comenius is a fundamental figure in the history of pedagogy. He pioneered the class-lesson system, which was revolutionary for his time and which is used to this day in most schools across the world.

Furthermore, Comenius was a proponent of a humanistic approach to education – something barely sought after in his time. This aspect has been pointed out by most of his biographers.

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