

# Educationist Reactionaries

Lucien Ellington

J. Wesley Null and Diane Ravitch, eds., *Forgotten Heroes of American Education: The Great Tradition of Teaching Teachers* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006)

J. Wesley Null, *A Disciplined Progressive Educator: The Life and Career of William Chandler Bagley* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003)

J. Wesley Null, *Peerless Educator: The Life and Work of Isaac Leon Kandel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007)

For over eighty years, American K–12 public school establishment elites, including most education professors, administrators, and local, state, and federal bureaucrats have espoused educational progressivism and attempted to implement their versions of John Dewey’s theories in the nation’s classrooms. Despite progressive education’s heterogeneity, certain key ideas, including a rejection of teacher-centered instruction, animosity toward so-called “useless facts,” promotion of learning through “hands-on” activities, a denigration of traditional curriculum and values, a perception of the school as a social laboratory, and an over-emphasis upon the “science” of education, have profoundly changed American public and even some private schools.

Despite some exceptions, progressive

education has substantially harmed the schools. Most public elementary and secondary school humanities curricula are incoherent. Children’s historical studies were long ago replaced with murky “social studies,” and organized attempts to introduce children to classic literature have been supplemented by trend-obsessed language arts. Teachers are often required to waste students’ time with frequently useless and noisy “collaborative learning,” intended to promote thinking skills, but partially responsible for easily distracted students who often don’t listen to adults. Many progressive educators espouse values relativism and condemn “judgmental” teachers. Well-educated mostly middle- and upper-class parents often either remediate their children or escape this educational mediocrity. Poor children, generally lacking familial educational resources, are saddled with wasted educations.<sup>1</sup>

Teacher education is a critical reason for progressive education’s resilience

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through the decades. Most aspiring elementary teachers must devote the greater part of their university years learning only progressive educational theory and practice with little time for work with either academic subject-matter or traditional pedagogical techniques. Although future secondary educators receive less progressivist indoctrination than their elementary counterparts, certification regulations mandate that virtually all who wish to teach in public schools and many who desire employment in private education must first study Dewey and his interpreters. Universities and colleges that provide future teachers with a rich liberal education, knowledge of and passion for subject-matter, and solid professional experiences that include both appropriate preparation in moral education and practical school-based work remain the exception in the United States.

Despite their many successes, progressive educationists have been valiantly and sometimes effectively opposed on other fronts in the education wars for almost a century. In the past, critics such as Josiah Royce, Robert Maynard Hutchins, Mortimer Adler, Mortimer Smith, Bernard Iddings Bell, Russell and Annette Kirk, and Theodore Bestor garnered public attention through their criticisms of an educational philosophy so clearly against what Burke called the "Permanent Things." E. D. Hirsch, Chester Finn, Diane Ravitch and others continue the fight against progressive education's excesses. Occasionally, opponents of progressive education have successfully won federal and state policy battles. The 1983 *Nation at Risk* report is a case in point. It helped to create significant improvement in some state standards and stimulated increased academic requirements for high school graduation.

In contrast, would-be reformers of teacher education have more limited suc-

cess. Alternative teacher licensure opportunities have greatly expanded, but while some programs are effective, many are controlled by progressive education professors, and others have no intellectual and professional coherence because the most critical objective is viewed as licensing candidates as quickly as possible.

Far-reaching changes *within* colleges and universities regarding the education of future teachers are imperative, and there is some cause for optimism. Intellectual opponents to educational progressivism within education colleges gained more national attention in the late twentieth century and the early years of this one than at any time since William C. Bagley and colleagues began the Essentialist movement over seventy years ago. The late Bruce Frazee was an effective national advocate of the elementary-school liberal arts Core Knowledge curriculum. Kevin Ryan resuscitated ethical and character education, making it potentially part of teacher education through founding Boston University's Center for the Advancement of Ethics and Character. James Leming created the Contrarians, who challenge the basic teacher-education premises of the National Council for the Social Studies.

These education professors and like-minded colleagues reject most progressive nostrums and embrace a vision of teaching rooted in a deep affinity for the importance of the teacher. They uncompromisingly focus upon liberal, academic, and moral education as imperative in creating good teachers. Virtually all of these educators who challenge progressive dominance also have significant experience as school teachers themselves—a point not to be ignored.

Although younger by approximately two decades than any of the aforementioned education reformers, Wesley Null, an associate professor of curriculum theory

and pedagogy at Baylor University, is probably now the most articulate proponent of a coherent conceptualization for the education of future teachers that provides a viable alternative to the moribund status quo. Null is a former middle school teacher who works with aspiring educators and schools on a regular basis. Of equal importance, Null, who is an historian of education, has produced three books that draw on the wisdom of prominent teacher educators of the past, such as William C. Bagley and Isaac Kandel, who, in the first half of the twentieth century, vigorously contested educational progressive extremists. Although Bagley and Kandel lost the struggle for intellectual control of America's schools, their thought and writings now live again largely through Null's scholarship.

In his biographies of Bagley and Kandel and a co-edited volume of their and others' writings, Null presents an alternative to progressivism's incoherent curricula and values relativism rooted in liberal and moral education as well as professional experience. While he in no way romantically depicts the past as a panacea, Null's reconstruction of this past, especially when contrasted with progressivism's many abject failures, constitutes a quite appealing reactionary perspective.

William C. Bagley (1874–1946), the subject of *A Disciplined Progressive Educator*, was an upper Midwesterner who received most of his elementary and secondary education in Detroit. Bagley then graduated from Michigan Agricultural College. Intending to be a farmer but with no land or money, Bagley began teaching in a rural school in the Upper Peninsula and found his life's work. After teaching for two years, Bagley, interested in psychology, went on to receive an M.A. in that discipline from the University of Wisconsin and a Ph.D. in psychology and education from Cornell.

Significantly, Bagley's mentor at Cornell was the well-known structural psychologist, Edward B. Titchner. German-influenced structuralists, who focused on understanding consciousness and the components of the mind through introspection, were a minority in the United States and were strongly opposed by an ascendant functionalist/behavioralist school championed by William James and John Dewey. Rather than focus upon consciousness, functionalists concentrated upon overt behavior, which they viewed as the purpose of consciousness. Functionalists greatly admired Charles Darwin and dogmatically worshipped objective education "science." Although Bagley found some aspects of behavioral psychology useful for teachers, as the years passed he grew more and more disenchanted with its overreliance on empiricism and science as major tools for improving teaching. Though not a religious man, Bagley deeply respected the great importance of individual cultivation of powerful inner forces such as will power and integrity that educational scientists dismissed as subjective or impossible to measure. He viewed teaching as a craft that was much more than a technical and soulless enterprise.

After serving as a school administrator in the St. Louis public schools in 1900–01, Bagley accepted a position as a professor of psychology and education and director of the teacher practice school at Montana State Normal School in Dillon. Normal schools, prevalent in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries throughout America, were designed for high school graduates who wished to be teachers before the advent of departments and colleges of education. Although the quality of these institutions varied, all normal school faculties, regardless of academic discipline, shared the common mission of developing good teachers. Academic subjects and

pedagogical and school studies were not rigidly separated into different units as is the case in most contemporary colleges and universities. Normal school pedagogy faculty assisted elementary and secondary schools, worked with practice teachers, and collaborated with colleagues in the liberal arts in research and teacher-education projects. They almost never viewed “what to teach” and “how to teach” as separate domains.

In his long career Bagley’s work patterns were always reminiscent of the normal school perspective. He never conceptualized teacher training as the monopoly of pedagogical specialists and regularly interacted with academics in other fields such as historian Charles Beard, with whom he coauthored an American history textbook. Bagley, who was deeply interested in philosophy and history, managed to achieve national prominence as an educator, published voluminously, yet never abandoned working with practicing and aspiring school administrators and teachers.

In his five years at Montana State Normal School, Bagley served as superintendent of the local school district, created the first regional educational journal, spoke at teacher institutes throughout Montana, and achieved national recognition with his first major work, *The Educative Process* (1905), which became a standard introductory educational psychology text. Although Bagley, along with progressive educational theorists, respected the practical value of educational psychology for the classroom teacher, even early in his career he never hesitated to challenge what he viewed as a growing progressive obsession with the child and accompanying derisive disregard for traditional pedagogical beliefs and practices.

In Bagley’s Montana years, prominent American psychologist E. L. Thorndike had recently published a widely touted empiri-

cal study disproving the “formal disciplines” rationale for school curricula. Formal disciplines proponents believed that if students mastered difficult subjects like Latin, they would be better equipped to learn unrelated subjects such as algebra, since the mind was thought to be a muscle strengthened by mental exercise. Progressives celebrated Thorndike’s findings as a complete refutation of prior beliefs about the virtues of rigorous curricula. While recognizing the validity and usefulness of Thorndike’s work, Bagley asserted that if progressives overemphasized these findings and successfully reduced the number of difficult courses students were required to study, there would be harmful educational results. The repudiation of the idea that a subject such as mathematics or ancient history is worth study for its intrinsic value would be one, but not the only, negative outcome of attacking the traditional curriculum.

Thorndike’s findings were based on controlled laboratory experiments that have an inherent weakness; development, or the lack thereof, of personal habits such as fortitude and self-confidence that are often strengthened by mastery of difficult content cannot be assessed in clinical settings. Loss of a demanding core curriculum meant attendant diminishment of moral education. Bagley predicted that if the nation’s schools implemented weakened curricula, many future high school graduates would likely be both more ignorant and less disciplined than in the past. History has proven this to be largely correct.

After a brief but successful few years as a professor and administrator at Oswego Normal School in New York State—one of the nation’s most prestigious institutions of its kind—and nine years building an education department at the University of Illinois, Bagley attracted the attention of a prominent Columbia University

administrator because of his defense of liberal arts education for all citizens in a well-publicized National Education Association debate with prominent progressive educator, David Snedden, who advocated restricting study of the liberal arts to only a few college-bound elites. In 1917 Bagley was hired as professor of normal school administration at Teachers College, in part to provide aspiring teacher educators with a different vision than the one promulgated by Dewey's most avid progressive followers. Dewey, also at Teachers College, was a notoriously ineffectual classroom instructor. However, his Columbia supporters, particularly "the million-dollar professor" William Heard Kilpatrick, profoundly influenced thousands of graduate students who went on to staff newly created colleges of education in universities. The basic message Kilpatrick and his colleagues emphasized was that school teachers should largely ignore traditional academic content and promote student's skill-acquisition, problem-solving, and social cooperation.

Bagley strongly disagreed with his colleagues' opinions that schools would improve through further denigration of subject-matter. Throughout the 1920s, Bagley increasingly criticized progressives for promoting such practices as the elimination of comprehensive school examinations, low graduation standards, and the increase of superfluous electives in high schools. He also took a dim view of deliberate attacks by some progressives on schools that taught such values as pride in achievement for its own sake and respect for authority.

Bagley came to believe that progressive ideas were in part responsible for a fundamental shift in Americans' conceptualization of educational opportunity. Formerly, equality of educational opportunity primarily meant working toward the goal of giving enthusiastic and competent students

a chance for an education. Bagley felt that partially because of progressive influences, large numbers of the public had come to define equality of educational opportunity as the schools being mainly responsible for making education at all levels attractive and pleasant for as many youngsters as possible. Schools existed to create and graduate happy students. Bagley predicted that this sea-change in thought about the very meaning of educational opportunity promised to weaken the fiber of future citizens through devaluing the genuine currency of education.

It is important to note that while Bagley is most famous for clashing with progressives, he also had a few fundamental differences with educational traditionalists such as Robert Maynard Hutchins. A portion of Null's title, "A Disciplined Progressive Educator" provides key clues as to where Bagley parted company with both traditionalists and progressives.

Bagley and traditionalists agreed that the liberal arts were important and that knowledgeable teachers should educate students and not merely pander to their interests. Like traditionalists, Bagley stressed the importance of fostering good work habits and ethics and believed such values were critical for both individual success and the greater society. Bagley and traditionalists viewed those progressives who asserted that education was a purely scientific field, as denying the existence of anything deeper within the student than a propensity for action resulting from configurations of stimuli. Nevertheless, Bagley disagreed with many educational traditionalists' views on school teachers, teacher education, and education for democracy.

As was the case with many progressives, Bagley fervently believed school teaching was a calling and should be an honored profession. He also agreed with progressives that a primary mission of schools

was to improve American democracy, although he strongly differed with dominant theorists on the means to achieve this end. Bagley, like the progressives, firmly opposed those traditionalists who were condescending toward teachers and skeptical about the possibility of education improving democracy.

Bagley considered these perspectives and the attendant traditionalist notion that teachers need only know subject-matter to be dangerously elitist. Bagley shared the strong belief contemporary educational reformers such as Diane Ravitch and E. D. Hirsch still hold: high-quality universal education is the only way to maintain and strengthen democratic government. While valuing the primacy of teacher knowledge of content, Bagley's extensive school experience strengthened his beliefs that knowledge of subject-matter alone was not enough. He was a strong advocate for teacher education programs that encompassed educational philosophy and history, child and educational psychology, and practical experience in school settings with master teacher mentors.

Throughout his career, Bagley opposed progressivism's excesses while respecting the progressives' legitimate contributions to education, most notably, their concern for making school enjoyable and interesting, provided that this enhancement of the school climate did not fundamentally weaken teaching and learning. Bagley's opposition to both progressive orthodoxy and a purely exclusive embrace of educational traditionalism is somewhat reminiscent in another context of Wilhelm Röpke and Russell Kirk's vigorous opposition to state socialism but rejection of an unqualified belief in the perfection of free markets.

In his last years at Teachers College, Bagley and his allies attempted to create a national movement in opposition to pro-

gressivism through founding the Essentialist movement. Bagley described the movement's tenets at a national meeting of school administrators in Atlantic City, New Jersey on February 26, 1938. In his afternoon address, Bagley sharply criticized American education as weak and ineffectual compared to other advanced countries and asserted that extreme progressives were influencing the public schools to abandon rigorous standards and discredit formal academic subjects. He also reiterated his strong belief in education for democracy but warned that if progressives left student personal responsibility and self-discipline out of the equation, democratic government would one day vanish.

The Essentialist movement garnered substantial publicity in educational circles and coverage in the *New York Times* as well as attention in a few periodicals of national importance. Leading progressives such as Kilpatrick vehemently dismissed the group as inconsequential. Dewey, whom Bagley respected and who had substantial reservations himself about how followers interpreted his ideas, nevertheless criticized Essentialist principles as too general and refused to take issue with the aggressive attacks of progressives on Essentialists. Progressive dominance, World War II, Bagley's impending retirement, and the death of Michael John Demiashkevich, an educational philosopher who named the movement and played an important role in its birth, caused Essentialism to have no immediate impact as an educational reform movement. An alternative perspective was established, however, that would provide sustenance as time passed for an increasing number of intellectual opponents of progressivism including E. D. Hirsch, founder of the Core Knowledge movement who dedicated his seminal book, *The Schools We Need and Why We Don't Have Them* to Bagley.



An examination of the life of Teachers College professor Isaac Kandel (1881–1965), a colleague and close friend of Bagley, is also of great value to all who think it critical to provide aspiring teachers with a different vision of philosophy and pedagogy than the one that has been dominant for almost a century. Kandel, a Romanian Jew who was educated in Britain before immigrating to America, agreed with Bagley on the fundamentals of teacher preparation: strong liberal learning, clear attention to moral education, first-hand knowledge of schools, and education for democracy. However, Kandel, because of his own education, drew even more heavily than Bagley upon classical philosophy and the early history of the West to bolster his beliefs as he battled progressives. Fluent in several foreign languages, Kandel also rose to international prominence as one of the founders of comparative education.

As a youngster, Kandel received a scholarship to Manchester Grammar, one of England's more famous public schools and imbibed deeply the institution's classical education that was rooted in the humanities and ancient and modern languages. Kandel also received a thorough grounding in Christianity at Manchester Grammar School, in addition to his religious education in synagogue and home. Kandel majored in classics at Manchester University and then taught Latin in local Manchester schools and German to future teachers while also earning an M.A. in education from his undergraduate institution. Kandel would use both his broad liberal education and his first-hand school experience throughout his career. A prolific publisher and author or co-author of more than forty books, monographs, and reports, Kandel produced both theoretical and applied education scholarship.

After teaching classical languages for two years at the Royal Belfast Academical Institution, Kandel met Bagley in the sum-

mer of 1908 when both were studying education and philosophy at the University of Jena. Kandel followed Bagley's suggestion that he immigrate to the United States for doctoral studies at Columbia. At Columbia, Kandel worked on both the historical and philosophical foundations of education and comparative studies. In his doctoral dissertation on German teacher education, completed in 1910, Kandel lauded the liberal education of aspiring German teachers and the marriage of content and pedagogy but criticized the bureaucratic impediments that seemed at times to stifle German academic and moral education. It took Kandel thirteen years to secure a full-time faculty position at Teachers College, and in the interim, he worked as a researcher at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, where he participated in a variety of educational policy studies, but most notably co-authored a comparative educational study of six developed nations' educational systems.

As a fulltime faculty member at Teachers College by the mid- to late 1920s, Kandel was working with foreign students on American and comparative education in the International Institute, teaching comparative education, educational history and philosophy, and gaining international prominence for editing and contributing to the annual *Yearbook on International Education*, which was published from 1925–44. He was also increasingly debating, critiquing, and reacting in print to progressives.

Although out of the country when Bagley formed the Essentialists, Kandel was an ardent supporter and challenged the array of fundamental progressive tenets through scholarly publications, including two books, at least one radio address, and articles in mass trade publications like *Parents* magazine. Kandel offered powerful refutations of such progressive ideas as:

students can teach other students while the teacher is merely a guide; children should play a major role in determining what they learn; and effective citizenship can be taught through having students intelligently discuss the issues of the day with little or no background knowledge.

Drawing upon his knowledge of history, Kandel countered progressives' claims that their educational philosophy was new by asserting that sophists had argued for values relativism and freedom for students in ancient Athens. Although respectful of science, Kandel viewed progressive trumpeting of science as *scientism* rather than the real thing and intensely critiqued quantitative educational studies that ignored cultural and historical contexts. Teaching, Kandel argued, was an intellectual and moral profession, and progressives were trying to turn it into a purely scientific one. The progressives' dismissal of thousands of years of educational history was a recipe for promotion of confusion, ignorance, and nihilism among teachers and students.

As a strong believer in the value of subject-matter curricula and effective teachers, Kandel utilized titles for his works such as "Is the New Education Progressive?," "The Fantasia of Current Education," and "Alice in Cloud Cuckoo Land" that give one a sense of his often biting criticism of the ascendant progressives. Several of Kandel's short articles as well as many of Bagley's writings and excerpted speeches are included in *Forgotten Heroes*. Anyone who is interested in improving teacher education should mine this treasure trove of primary sources.

Kandel was particularly sensitive to citizenship education because he was a witness to the rise of a new form of progressivism in the early 1930s: George Counts's Social Reconstructionism and the call for using the schools as tools for radical social and economic change. During the same period

in 1935, Kandel, who was closely following Hitler's rise in Germany, published *The Making of Nazis*. Although it sold few copies, Kandel's close examination of education in the Third Reich depicted how young Germans were taught to shun individualism. As a democratic traditionalist, Kandel recognized the dangers of politicization of the schools, whether it occurred in Germany or the United States. Like Bagley, Kandel was a firm believer that education could improve society, but he saw schooling as achieving this goal in an indirect way, through providing each individual with the best possible intellectual and ethical education.

After his retirement from Columbia in 1947, Kandel, who won numerous international awards for his achievements in comparative education, remained professionally active until his death in 1965 and influenced educational thought and practice in a variety of countries including Australia, France, and Japan. Serving as a member of the Occupation's influential United States Educational Commission to Japan, Kandel chaired the teacher education committee. Kandel's footprint is evident today in the strong academic backgrounds of Japanese education professors as compared with many of their American counterparts.

Generally, historians of American education, regardless of their perspectives on progressivism, assert that the publication of *A Nation at Risk* in the early 1980s stimulated an embrace of Essentialist ideas in much of the American public as well as in many policymakers. Through his work on the history of teacher education, Null now provides academics, teacher educators, and policymakers who desire to improve fundamentally the quality of American elementary and secondary school teachers, rich sources for new thought and reflection on the issue that were heretofore largely unavailable for the last fifty years.



How might the writings of Bagley, Kandel, and other “forgotten heroes,” as well as a study of teacher education institutions before progressivism’s ascendancy, contribute to significant improvements in a teacher-training enterprise that is now transparently dysfunctional and intellectually bankrupt? Many of us interested in this transformation believe that success depends on the articulation and successful realization of three overarching goals: liberal education, subject-matter expertise, and professional education. Bagley, Kandel, and the theoretical and structural features of some of the normal schools provide partial blueprints for attainment of these goals.

In contrast to normal schools, when colleges of education were created, administrators delegated primary, if not exclusive, responsibility for teacher preparation to education faculties. For almost eighty years, teacher training has been largely ghettoized in the education colleges where progressives still dominate.

This has substantially damaged the prospects that future teachers, especially elementary educators, will leave college with a good liberal education and subject-matter expertise. The dominance of progressive ideology in the education colleges has also ensured that most teachers enter classrooms for the first time with virtually no training in the art of the lecture, effective teacher-centered classroom management, and other practical skills child-centered progressives scorn. The normal school belief that preparing school teachers is an all-encompassing institutional responsibility must be re-created in American colleges and universities.

An array of specific strategies and policy changes within the academy must accompany this re-conceptualization of institutional mission. The collaboration of academics from a variety of disciplines

with teacher educators who respect and have great affinity for and knowledge of subject-matter must be encouraged. The ideological dominance of progressive education must be challenged at every opportunity in the marketplace of ideas through debates, conferences, and dialogue within and outside of universities. Every future teacher should be required to enroll in at least two courses in educational history and the philosophy of education. The instructors of these courses, regardless of their personal beliefs, should have not only disciplinary expertise, but the integrity to allow student exploration of multiple epistemological and historical perspectives ranging from the Greeks and Confucius to educational philosophies and practices of contemporary developed and developing nations.

Elementary and secondary laboratory schools attached to universities and colleges should be revived, and future teachers, professors from different disciplines, and teacher educators should be involved in governance, instruction, and collaboration in these institutions. Many of the nation’s most effective school teachers long ago rejected progressive ideas. They should be recruited for faculty positions in colleges of education because of their expertise and credibility and success as teachers of children. Within the academy, coalitions must be built that fight for coherent liberal education for all future teachers.

The teacher’s role as moral educator should be a central part of the education of the pedagogue. Recent American educational history has proven Bagley and Kandel correct in their recognition of the vital interrelationship between the life of the mind and moral education. Every teacher is, for better or worse, a moral educator, and it is imperative that those who prepare for the classroom understand this critical aspect of their vocation.

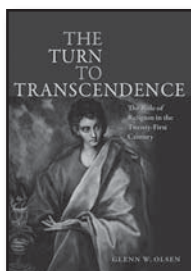
Success will not be easy. Opponents of change within education colleges still far outnumber proponents, and the former have strong advantages, including a disproportionately high influence in the politically powerful National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. Nevertheless, increasing the intellectual

quality and effectiveness of the nation's teaching force is a critical intellectual and moral task that must never be abandoned, and Wesley Null has substantially furthered this cause by motivating those of us who have opposed much of progressive education to examine the past more closely for inspiration and guidance.

1 What E. D. Hirsch labeled the "thoughtworld" of progressive educators has made inroads into universities beyond the education colleges, as arts and sciences and other professional school faculty are advised in seminars on teaching to adjust instruction for "multiple intelligences" and cater to individual learning styles allegedly associated with ethnicity and gender differences. Higher education accreditation organizations

excessively focus upon more scientific identification and formulation of educational objectives juxtaposed with estimated outcomes and outputs. The deadening and ineffectual brand of managerial pragmatism that "efficiency-oriented" educational progressives have touted for years in K-12 education is now part of many, especially state-supported, colleges and universities.

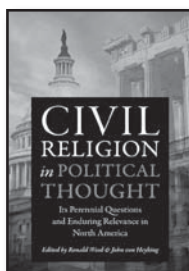
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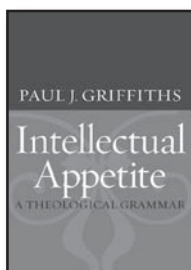
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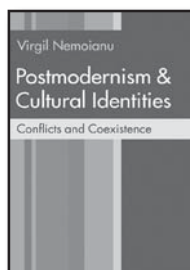
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