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ABSTRACT

The document examines the past and present functions of educational history. By focussing on the contradictions between the organization of public education and the values upon which it is supposed to rest, critical history can be the most dynamic source of educational change. In the past, history as conceived in history departments differed greatly from the history of education which was primarily written within schools of education. The purpose of educational historians was to provide inspiration to educators-in-training; these historians demonstrated how the public school idea triumphed over its many enemies. Currently, however, the history of education has emerged as a serious, respectable branch of general historical scholarship as historians have grown to understand the role of education in intellectual, social, and cultural history. Present historians argue that the actual results of education have been different from its official goals, and that public education has contributed more to the reproduction than to the alteration of social structure. More specifically, contradictions between the schools and social order include: the contradiction between unequal education and democratic values, the continued production of highly skilled workers in a stagnant job market, and the demand for acceptance of diminished expectations confronted by a crisis of legitimacy. Since the critical version of educational history allows educators to comprehend their own experiences and to understand the reasons for apathy, hostility, and violence, the sources of educational change must be historical and grounded in the analysis of conflict. (Author/KC)

PAPER FOR SYMPOSIUM ON

"VALUES IMPOSED ON EDUCATION BY HISTORY"

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This paper begins with a confession. I wish I had not agreed to write it. Upon an unhurried look, the questions posed by the sponsors of this symposium appear not only vague, in some cases unintelligible, but phrased in a misleading way, covering assumptions and implications with which I am in profound disagreement and which seem to me both academically and politically regressive. Therefore, these remarks begin with what I take to be the assumptions in the questions posed by the symposium organizers and attempt to show their inadequacy.

Those assumptions, it appears to me, may be stated in the following way: (1) There exists a unified discipline of history governed by a clear set of theoretical and methodological assumptions. (2) That discipline contains a distinctive set of values which can be separated from the values of the academic community at large and from those which motivate educators. (3) Distinct differences exist between the discipline of history and between research and policy in education, including the history of education. (4) The distinctive influence of disciplinary values and of the political and ideological presuppositions of historians are somehow harmful to educational research and practice. And (5) the discipline of history, magically stripped of its biases, can be of some positive use in educational research and policy.

The place to begin is with the discipline of history. As a field of study, the subject matter and methodological repertoire of academic history have altered dramatically within the last two decades. For example, none of the nearly forty applications recently submitted to the

N.E.H. history panel could be considered traditional by disciplinary standards. None of them proposed studies of political, diplomatic, or military history in the conventional sense. Those few applications concerned with politics sought to integrate political processes with social structure, social change, or main currents in intellectual and cultural life. Only two applications proposed biographies, and both were conceived as important excursions into social and cultural topics. Probably a majority of applications proposed to quantify at least some data, or to use data already quantified, and the research teams included not only people trained in history, but anthropologists, sociologists, economists, and psychiatrists. In short, the discipline as it was conceived professionally until not long ago, and as it still is conceived by people unfamiliar with recent work, does not exist.

However, these observations do not imply that a unified set of ideas or a methodological and theoretical consensus has emerged. Indeed, to return to the same example, in very few cases did consensus exist among the reviewers of proposals, and sharp differences of opinion about matters of substance and method separated experts in the field who commented upon the same project. This lack of consensus underscores the diversity that exists among professional historians. The field is rent by sharp divisions over the proper subject matter of history, acceptable sources of data, the validity of alternative methodologies, theoretical models, and political orientations. It would be hard to find consensus among card-carrying historians on any aspect of their discipline other than the dreadful job situation.

This lack of consensus should not be deplored, for the ferment within the field makes academic history especially exciting at the

present moment. Historians are asking questions previously thought impossible to answer, utilizing methods developed in other disciplines, and making both substantive and methodological contributions to social research and social theory.

One of the heathiest consequences of the centrifugal tendency of historical research has been the dismantling of the wall that for many years separated the history done in history departments from the history of education, primarily written within schools of education. That division reflected the gulf which began to grow between schools of education and the rest of university campuses in the early twentieth century when professors of education mounted a concerted drive for autonomy. Their drive culminated on university campuses in the creation of independent schools of education which sought self-sufficiency through the creation of a science based upon a survey of the occupational divisions in the exploding public educational bureaucracy. In these circumstances the academic study of education became increasingly divorced both from theory and from the work in academic disciplines.

In this setting history was written by professors of education with minimal historical training. The purpose of their work was less to advance scholarship than to provide inspiration for educators-in-training. The history of education was to show how the public school idea triumphed over its many enemies and thereby to instill in educators-to-be the notion that they inherited a fragile and precious charge, fragile because public education always had its enemies, precious because public education was the very cornerstone of democracy. History written this way was evolutionary in character, the story of the victory and establishment

of a system that emerged from seeds planted in the Colonial era and cultivated by men of humanitarian and democratic vision throughout the centuries.

By and large, the historiography of education did not reflect contemporary historical scholarship. Indeed, it was not very good history and it was, with snobbishness to be sure but with considerable justification as well, looked upon with disfavor by the members of history departments. Given its reputation, an ambitious graduate student or assistant professor would hesitate to identify himself or herself with the history of education, and he or she would be right. For an identification with the field would do a career little good.

Gradually, this situation has ended. Graduate students within history departments work on topics in the history of education. History of education courses frequently are cross-listed. Intellectual and social historians often write about education, and historians of education break out into the history of the family, social structure, culture, and ideas. The History of Education Quarterly has become a respected academic journal, and books that deal with the history of education often are assigned in regular history courses.

The history of education has emerged as a serious and respected branch of general historical scholarship for a variety of reasons. Certainly, in the years after the Second World War, schools of education seriously began a process of up-grading, which included an attempt to move closer to the rest of the university communities of which they were a part. Enlightened deans sometimes furthered this process by appointing scholars who had not previously been identified with education.

For example, at Harvard Francis Keppel's appointment of Bernard Bailyn and Israel Scheffler to teach the history and philosophy of education, respectively, has had an enormous impact upon both fields.

In addition to the desire of schools of education to improve their work and status, the intellectual and political climate of the time encouraged academics to look seriously at educational affairs. These were, after all, the years in which the theory of education as human capital became prominent and, in the wake of Sputnik American education suddenly was viewed as a rusty weapon in the Cold War. Added to these factors was the re-awakened interest of historians in intellectual, social, and cultural themes. This movement away from traditional subject matter led many historians quite naturally to pragmatism, which they recognized played a critical, albeit dimly understood and inadequately documented, role in the stories they wished to tell.

Finally, the social, political, and moral concerns of the 1960's gave an immense boost to the re-direction of historical scholarship already underway. Reflecting the widespread concern with social reform and civil rights, many historians attempted to shed the elite, white male bias that long had dominated the profession by focussing on the history of ordinary people and of minorities, the vast majority of the population excluded from conventional historical sources. These historians sought not only to change the focus of historical scholarship, but to provide an historical account that made comprehensible the conflicts, contradictions, and inequities of contemporary America. None of the conventional themes of American history—the expansion of humanitarian concern for the poor, the triumph of democracy, and the benevolent

character of American foreign policy—made sense to young historians nurtured on Civil Rights struggles, frustrated by the intractability of poverty, urban blight and the ineffective, custodial quality of social institutions, and appalled by the Vietnam War.

The critical historiography that resulted when young historians began to publish in the 1960's was very much a product of its times. But so is all written history. And this is the point I wish to stress. Value free history, like value free social science, is a myth. Each generation re-writes history, said Charles Beard, according to the questions uppermost in it's mind. Any segment of the past, no matter how narrowly defined, consists of a multiplicity of events whose mere narration, even if it were possible, would produce a formless string of trivia. Therefore, the essence of historical scholarship is selection and interpretation. It is the questions asked by historians that determine the type of evidence sought and selected. The interpretation of that evidence almost never is unambiguous, and the historian's point of view inevitably shapes the construction which it is given.

These remarks are not meant to justify an extreme relativism, Scholarly and moral obligations rest as heavily upon historians as upon any researchers. One must ask historians never to say that which they know to be untrue, not to suppress evidence which damages their case, to search thoroughly, to obey rules of logic, and to use tools such as quantification properly. But these boundaries leave ample scope for imagination and interpretation and for the framing of questions that reflect the concerns of the moment.

The question underlying a good deal of the most interesting history of education written since the 1960's might be put this way: How did

we acquire the system of education whose insensitivities, inadequacies, and biases have been documented so mercilessly in recent years?

The answers given that question have varied. Historians constructing a critical version of the past have had different orientations. Some have written social, others intellectual history. That is, some have concentrated on the origins, role, and operation of institutions, others primarily on the genesis of ideas. The political points of view underlying the work have varied as well, from anarchist, to socialist, to left liberal. More than that, the quality of the work has varied, and these historians have been sharply critical of each other.

The easiest task has been to demolish myths, to expose the weaknesses at the heart of conventional interpretations of the history of education. Nor has it been difficult to show the historiographical neglect of various factors and influences upon educational development. Harder has been the reconstruction of a sophisticated and subtle new story, and here very difficult theoretical and methodological problems remain. Some of the most pressing are: the conceptualization and application of class as a historical concept: the delineation of the relative role of class and ethnicity; the discrimination between the influence of various socializing agencies at different points in time; the measurement of the results of education for individuals, families, and society. These, it must be stressed, are topics currently of central concern to American historiography more generally.

The attempt to provide a critical version of the educational past has called forth a counter-attack which attempts to buttress a varient of a more traditional and benign historical view. In this way the history of education is experiencing the same type of divisions current

in other areas of history, such as American foreign policy. As of yet, the new conservatism, or as I like to call it, the apologist case, has not been very effective. It has shown weaknesses in specific works, which are widely acknowledged—even by those politically sympathetic—to be inadequate. But it has not shaken the foundations of a critical view of the past or substituted convincing new interpretations. My own view is that it cannot.

Predictably, the debate has left the scholarly level. With the publication of Diane Ravitich's recent book (The Revisionists Revised), it has become pure politics. For in this book Ravitch launches an assault on the group she terms radical revisionists. Because that assault rests on distortions, omissions, and falsifications—points which I document elsewhere—it is a polemic, and it has moved the debate about the field out of the academy.

Ravitch, and many others, feel that the critical history of education written in the last several years has had a disastrous impact upon educational policy and upon people in the field. Their point is that by arguing that education does not matter historians have sapped the will to action and eroded the morale of educators.

That argument may be answered in different ways. First, it is a distortion of the work criticized. Historians have not argued that education does not matter. They have stressed that its actual results have been different from its official goals, that public education has contributed more to the reproduction than to the alteration of social structure. Second, the argument carries the implication that historians should not tell the truth as they see it. If the legitimacy of public

institutions requires myths that cannot withstand scrutiny, then so be it. The dangers for academic freedom in this view are apparent. Third, all that the apologists can offer is to kill the messenger who brings bad news. By contrast, the critical historians have an important contribution to make to the current situation, and it is to this that I wish to turn briefly.

A critical version of history offers school people, first, the capacity to comprehend their own experience, to understand the reasons for the apathy, hostility, and even violence which they confront. By clarifying the sources of their failures and frustrations, a critical version of history allows school people to direct their anger where it properly belongs, away from themselves and toward the system of structured inequality of which they and their students are mutual victims. Critical history, in short, can help them to survive their daily lives with their sanity and dignity intact.

Once it is realized that public education always has reinforced rather than altered social structure and helped to legitimize inequality, then it becomes possible to refocus questions of equity in education in a way at once realistic, yet not quiescent. Realism, it should be stressed, must be a component of any theory or plan of action. For the history of American education can be told as a story of implausible expectations whose predictable failure led to recurrent periods of cynicism, apathy, or despair during which the most popular reform has been financial retrenchment and when, by and large, the inequities in the system have been left to flourish unchecked.

Realistic expectations should not lead to apathy. Rather, by eliminating false optimism, they permit the evaluation of reform by different

and more appropriate standards. For the measure no longer solely is success. The question is not only whether racism or the effects of social class have been eliminated. Rather, the issue is whether we have made the effort itself. The standard, that is, is political and moral, not sociological. The inequities of the system reveal a contradiction between its structure and the democratic values which this society alleges to profess. If it is believed that the organization and conduct of public education systematically violates democratic values and human rights, then the struggle must continue. For to abandon the effort is to permit inequity to spread without opposition and to admit the hollowness of our ideals.

By focussing on the contradictions between the organization of public education and the values on which it is supposed to rest, critical history highlights the most dynamic source of educational change. For the forces most powerfully affecting schools do not flow from educational planning or policy. Nor have they ever. Rather, the sources of change, past and present, rest in the contradictions between the schools and the social order. Space does not permit the development of this argument here, but consider three of the most powerful sources of educational change today: the contradiction between unequal education and democratic values; the continued production of highly skilled workers in a stagnant job market; and the demand for obedient acceptance of diminished expectations confronted by a crisis of legitimacy.

Not only does this point of view mean that an understanding of the sources of educational change must be historical; it also means that

notions of educational change—either descriptive or proscriptive—must be grounded in an analysis of conflict. Any model which portrays a calm, rational, evolutionary adaptation of new politics to altered circumstances will fail to comprehend the nature of past educational development and will provide an inadequate perspective from which to launch new efforts. Finally, a focus on conflict and a realistic assessment of the social role of public education pose an important question: why have Americans since the early nineteenth century turned to formal education to resolve the most important conflicts or contradictions within their social order? The answer is especially urgent since that habit presists despite more than a century of evidence that education is not adequate to the tasks which it has been assigned.

Only through an historical analysis can the peculiar American faith in education be understood. But not through any analysis; for the apologist case perpetuates the myths upon which the naive faith or unrealistic expectations rest. Rather, what is needed is an analysis that shows the stake which successive generations of affluent Americans have had in obscuring the roots of social problems. This analysis is one contribution which a critical approach to the past has begun to offer.