

PUTTING MORE EDUCATION INTO THE AMERICAN SURVEY

Ronald E. Butchart
University of Georgia

My choice of title for this paper might suggest to some readers a pompous assumption that the historical survey, as now conceived, is uninformative, badly taught, anti-intellectual, a waste of time, or all of the above, though that is emphatically not my intent. The title might attract a particular crowd, one I am not the least bit interested in speaking to—the barbarians in policy positions that would, if they could, gut college and high school curricula of anything beyond the sorts of technical training that is presumably needed, “just-in-time,” to serve the immediate needs of capitalist employers. I am certain that they would see in such a title as this the sort of ammunition they would like to stockpile for their assault on the “useless” arts.

So here is fair warning: My task is not to denounce the history survey as a burden to efficient education or to argue that the survey is not sufficiently educational. My purpose, rather, is to suggest another tool for fellow history teachers in our on-going efforts to keep the survey vital. This is a modest proposal: Nothing I have to offer here is a panacea or magic bullet. If we learn nothing else from the history of education, let's at least learn the lesson that there are no panaceas or magic bullets when it comes to teaching and learning. My intent is to talk about weaving into the survey more history of education as a means to increase the connection between students and historical inquiry. In my experience, we can increase that connection quite powerfully through this modest expansion of focus.

Let me begin by explaining my underlying theory of the problem we face as history teachers today. I have long argued that part of the struggle we face as historians and history teachers is that contemporary students are deeply alienated from history and from the issues we seek to explicate through history. Their alienation is, itself, a product of historical forces that have transformed childhood and adolescent subjectivity. The twentieth century, particularly, isolated children and youth from the social production of families and communities and extended and deepened their dependency on very few adults, a process now often reaching into the early to mid-twenties. At the same time that they were removed from productive relationships, the world they were allowed to observe was simultaneously dramatically narrowed by that removal, and subject to ghastly distortion by endless media portrayals of unreality in which ideas of production, competence, and human satisfaction virtually disappear. The process of isolation, extended dependency, and crippled observation included,

centrally, their essential incarceration for longer and longer periods in private and state institutions and the colonization of their leisure by the marketplace.¹

The result of that historical process of alienation, I argue, is that contemporary students have a great deal of difficulty making sense of history. Buffered from the traditional means of early, organic integration into communities of production, systematically denied modes of contributing authentically to the well-being of the society, segregated into age-specific institutions, modern young people face their world as classically alienated subjects. The issues that animate history, as a result, simply make little sense to them, for, as teachers have long known, meaningful learning depends upon prior knowledge; young people today have little experience and knowledge of the world they are expected to learn about.

With luck, teachers might continue to motivate students to learn history (or absorb enough to pass the test) through, on the one hand, fear of failure or, on the other, through reliance on their long socialization in the norms of institutional life.² Either modality might get us and our students through the day and across the semester, although neither modality will result in engagement or passion. I think most of us are animated by a desire for an authentic connection to the past and present, not by a desire to see our students merely survive our classes.

If that analysis contains any insights, our task is to find the means to cut through our students' subjective condition—to cut through their alienation. That requires that we begin to help them understand—historically!—their own alienation. That also requires that we remember that as alienated people, they do not easily see connections between the history they study and their own lives. They understand their lives as radically disconnected from the contemporary world, or at least those parts of their world they do not actively create themselves, and thus even more radically disconnected from the past. History for them is most profoundly “one damned thing after another,” signifying little beyond a possible grade on a transcript, itself a symbol of disconnection and alienation.

To begin to overcome that sense of disconnection and alienation from history, we need to add to the curriculum some illustrations from the histories of things our students have experienced intimately. And, excepting rock music and the aggressively anti-historical media and other markets, what have contemporary youths experience

¹Ronald E. Butchart, “Pedagogy of the (Less) Oppressed: Second Thoughts on the Crisis in History Teaching,” *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods*, 4 (Spring 1979), 3-9; Butchart and B. Lee Cooper, “Perceptions of Education in the Lyrics of American Popular Music, 1950-1980,” *American Music*, 5 (Fall 1987), 271-81; see also Ira Shor, *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1980). For an early but particularly sophisticated statement of the same problem, see Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized Society* (New York: Random House, 1956).

²Peter McLaren, *Schooling as a Ritual Performance* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), is worth contemplating in this regard.

more fully and intimately than school? Although one would not know it from most social history texts today, schooling is undoubtedly the most sustained, universal experience, not just for contemporary youth, but for all Americans in the last two or three generations.³ Our students have not all experienced it uniformly—far from it—but all have experienced it. And that is the key. If we can engage them to understand the institution all have experienced but whose historical purposes and sociological processes they have never been invited to examine, we can, I believe, begin to help them think outward from that institution and that experience to other institutions and experiences, from the historical forces that shaped the school to other historical forces, and from understanding their own subjectivity to understanding broader historical movements.

What I am suggesting is not that we shoehorn one more major topic into an already crowded syllabus. The beauty of paying more attention to the history of education as a part of the larger history of the nation is that the themes and issues we already emphasize in our courses can be illustrated as clearly through the school's history as through any of the historical illustrations we already use, and with, I think, a greater likelihood of capturing the attention of our students. Let me spend the rest of this essay offering examples of that claim.

Every U.S. survey course that I know of, and many of our more specialized courses, deal with the history of industrialization. When we teach that history, we draw on social, political, economic, and labor history to trace the impact of industrialization on families, communities, class formation, gender relations, race, urbanization, and so on. The connections between industrialization and changes in the form and content of education were just as profound as any others. Further, they had dramatic effects on the subjective experience of childhood and hence can speak to our own students' subjectivities.

The modern, public school arose simultaneously with early mechanical industrial processes and spread regionally in rough tandem with the spread of early industrial enterprises. For example, by the 1860s, when the Northeast was a half century into its industrial transformation, the South remained predominantly agricultural. The differential effects on children's schooling were dramatic. While schools were available in both regions, the early, extensive systematization of education in the Northeast followed the lead of early industrial organization. Systems of public education existed in every industrializing state, with hierarchically graded elementary schools, a highly feminized teaching force organized by rank, a regimented curriculum, and modernized classroom social relations. Even though it would be three or four

³ Perhaps the oddest omission in contemporary U.S. social history is social historians' nearly universal failure to include education as central to social life, although it is arguably the most universal experience in the modern world. Virtually every child is subjected to it; teachers outnumber every other profession; it employs, and has long employed, more women than any other occupation; and it has, arguably, grave power over people's lives. Yet even our best social history texts are silent on education.

decades before effective compulsory education laws were written, the vast majority of children in the industrializing Northeast attended school for four to six years, eight or nine months per year, girls remaining somewhat longer than boys on average.⁴

By contrast southern education by 1860 remained traditional despite the best efforts of southern modernizers. No real system of education existed anywhere in the south except for a foundering system in North Carolina; most teachers received only haphazard and inadequate support from the state, and hence operated what were, for all intents and purposes, private schools that were seldom graded. Relatively short terms meant that men could continue to teach during seasons when they were not tending fields, so the feminization of teaching was hardly visible in the south. The curriculum in southern schools was as haphazard as the forms of support and attendance; classroom social relations remained traditional. Fewer children attended southern schools, for shorter terms and fewer years.⁵

The history of education in the nineteenth century illustrates the disciplinary power of the factory, extended beyond the disciplining of workers within the factory walls. That disciplinary power reached into forms of teaching, into the organizational structures of educational institutions, into the gendered allocation of workers to the emerging forms of waged labor, and, critically important to an understanding of the modern alienation of youth, into vast transformations of childhood. Beginning in the first half of the nineteenth century, in other words, young people in industrializing areas of the nation progressively found themselves removed from the forms of social production that prior generations of children had participated in, removed from natural, organic relations with a wide range of adult contact, and held for increasing lengths of

⁴Among many other sources, compare Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983); Frederick M. Binder, *The Age of the Common School, 1830-1865* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1974); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976); and Michael B. Katz, *Reconstructing American Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987). On the history of classroom social relations, see Ronald Butchart, "Discipline, Dignity, and Democracy: Reflections on the History of Classroom Management," *Educational Studies*, 26 (Fall 1995), 165-84, and Ronald Butchart, "Punishments, Penalties, Prizes, and Procedures: A History of Discipline in U.S. Schools," in *Classroom Discipline in American Schools: Problems and Possibilities for Democratic Education*, Ronald E. Butchart and Barbara McEwan, eds. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 19-49.

⁵See for example William A. Link, *A Hard and a Lonely Place: Schooling, Society, and Reform in Rural Virginia, 1870-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Bruce W. Eelman, "'An Educated and Intelligent People Cannot be Enslaved': The Struggle for Common Schools in Antebellum Spartanburg, South Carolina," *History of Education Quarterly*, 44:2 (Summer 2004), 250-70; and James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988). On regional differences in rates of the feminization of teaching, see Joel Perlmann and Robert A. Margo, *Women's Work? American Schoolteachers, 1650-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

time in specialized state institutions where their face-to-face relationships were limited to age-peers and a single young female.⁶

The links between industrialization and the school become even more fascinating toward the end of the nineteenth century. The rise of monopoly capitalism and the corporation accelerated some trends in education, reversed others, and transformed (created, some argue) adolescence. For example, the corporate bureaucracy became an explicit, intentional model for school organizations, while the centralizing, rationalizing ethos of the corporation accelerated the centralization of control in elaborated state departments of education in virtually every state in the Union by the second decade of the twentieth century. Increases in productivity led circuitously to child labor laws, compulsory attendance laws, and other means of limiting young people's access to the workplace, and to dramatic increases in the number of years youths spent in schools and to the reformulation of the high school as a mass institution. The corporate fetish for efficiency and specialization invaded the schoolhouse, transforming the common, democratic curriculum of the nineteenth-century common school into the differentiated, vocationalized curriculum of the twentieth-century progressive school.⁷

Given just that much history, I have found my own students fascinated to think about what the transformations of childhood and youth mean to their own lives, both in what was gained and what was lost. They end that discussion convinced that the historical transformations that construct their social and political positions today were mixed blessings.

⁶The literature on the history of childhood and the family is remarkably rich and dense. Among many sources, see for example Harvey J. Graff, *Conflicting Paths: Growing Up in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995); and Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

⁷Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974); Joseph F. Kett, "Adolescence and Youth in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 2 (1971), 283-98; Joseph Kett, *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1977); Raymond E. Callahan, *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962); Reed Ueda, *Avenues to Adulthood: The Origins of the High School and Social Mobility in an American Suburb* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Joel H. Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972); Harvey A. Kantor, *Learning to Earn: School, Work, and Vocational Reform in California, 1880-1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Herbert M. Kliebard, *Schooled to Work: Vocationalism and the American Curriculum, 1876-1946* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999). Studies that touch specifically on issues of youth alienation include Herbert J. Cross and Randal R. Kleinbesselink, "The Impact of the 1960s on Adolescence," *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 5 (Winter 1985), 517-32; Mary Louise Adams, *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); John Modell, Frank Furstenberg, and Theodore Hershberg, "Social Change and Transitions to Adulthood in Historical Perspective," *Journal of Family History*, 2 (Autumn 1976), 7-32; and Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

Or take another theme common to many history courses, the exploration of America's democratic heritage. The history of the school, arguably, can illuminate much of what my students tell me is their sense of political inefficacy and alienation from democratic norms and thinking. The common school of the nineteenth century was, arguably, as much a creature of democratic aspirations as it was a creature of the industrial revolution. Thomas Jefferson did not invent the notion that a republic required an informed electorate; he merely articulated its more conservative formulation. The idea permeated much of the eighteenth and nineteenth-century political thought and informed the ideological foundation of public education. Yet, paradoxically, the form and content of the common school did little to foster the norms of democratic political and social life. Rather than the independence, critical understandings, and intellectual acuity requisite to democratic efficacy, the common school's classrooms stressed obedience, memorization, and deference to constituted authority, virtues inimical to democratic efficacy.⁸ As might become clear later, the subsequent history of the American school took formal education even further from the idea of education as the practice of democracy and toward education for political incompetence.

Or consider a third objective in many survey courses, helping students understand the complexity of the Progressive era. In my experience, Progressivism and its reform impulse is so foreign to students that they engage only with great difficulty. Yet they are fascinated with the impact of Progressive education on the schools they attended. Once they understand Progressive education, it is a small step to understand it as a component of the larger Progressive movement, with all the contradictions and problems of that movement, for Progressive education was quintessentially Progressive, if seldom progressive. Just as there were many sorts of reforms marching under the banner of Progressivism, constituting a bevy of strange bedfellows, there were many varieties of Progressive education. In the popular imagination, John Dewey and the romanticism of child-centered education were the sum total of Progressive education; for some observers today, Dewey and child-centered education were also the sum total of all that was or is wrong with contemporary education.⁹

What is most interesting in the history of Progressive education, however, is the great variety of educational Progressivisms. In the first half of the twentieth century, everyone *read* John Dewey, but everyone *did* Edward L. Thorndike, whose notion of Progressivism was the exact opposite of that advocated by Dewey. When we pay less

⁸Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Christopher Lasch, *The Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995); Stephen Preskill, "Educating the Democracy: Charles W. Eliot and the Differentiated Curriculum," *Educational Theory*, 39 (Fall 1989), 351-58.

⁹Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade: American Education, 1945-1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

attention to Dewey and more attention to what actually transpired in classrooms, curricula, and pedagogy, we find that the gospel of social efficiency ruled the historical development of the twentieth-century school, leavened by the perversions of child-centered learning that Dewey and his followers explicitly rejected throughout their careers. The Progressivism that came to dominate American education, thoroughly anti-Deweyan, radically redefined educational democracy and child-centeredness to mean that it was undemocratic and unfair to give all children equal access to the same intellectual skills and political knowledge; each child's future role in the labor force, divined by the new high priests of Progressive "scientific" testing, and that child's successful "adjustment" to her role, no matter how exalted or demeaning, would determine the curriculum to which each child attended. At least four varieties of Progressivism can be identified within Progressive education, each largely mutually exclusive of the others, and matching well the varieties, interests, and intentions of the larger Progressive movement; three of those four had scant influence on Progressive education. If students are invited to explore Progressive education and understand its history in relation to the education they received, they will, I contend, find Progressivism writ large to be a fascinating part of their own history and one they will master quickly, though perhaps with rising anger.¹⁰

Allow a final example. Our surveys usually include coverage of the Cold War, a subject that, being closer to our students' lives chronologically, might pique their interest more than some other topics we cover. Yet here, too, illustrations from the history of education might help students make the links from their own lives to history. For, as most of us argue, the Cold War had nearly as much effect on domestic social life as it did on global political life. One of the more dramatic effects of the Cold War, at least indirectly, was the explosive growth in higher education. After the Second World War, roughly one out of every ten college-age persons attended college; within four decades that had grown to one out of every two, while the youth population exploded with the Baby Boom. Indeed, in the late 1960s the nation was building entire new campuses at the rate of one every two weeks. That growth came in part as a result of

¹⁰Like the history of childhood, the history of Progressive education is made up of a rich and dense literature. The classic study is Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), but see also, among many others, William J. Reese, "The Origins of Progressive Education," *History of Education Quarterly*, 41:1 (Spring 2001), 1-24; Herbert M. Kliebard, *The Struggle for the American Curriculum, 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987); Herbert M. Kliebard, *Schooled at Work: Vocationalism and the American Curriculum, 1876-1946* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999); and Susan F. Semel and Alan R. Sadovnik, eds., "Schools of Tomorrow," *Schools of Today: What Happened to Progressive Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999). On the irrelevance of Dewey to Progressive education, see for example David F. Labaree, "Does the Subject Matter?" Dewey, Democracy, and the History of the Curriculum," *History of Education Quarterly*, 31:4 (Winter 1991), 513-21; Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, "Contested Terrain: A History of Education Research in the United States, 1890-1990," *Educational Researcher*, 26:9 (December 1997), 5-17.

the GI Bill, but more fully as a result of the National Defense Education Act and the phenomenal growth of defense research and development. It had the effect for a vastly increased proportion of the young generation of adding still more years to its effective dependency on its families and institutions and of delaying still further its integration into the full life of the community.¹¹

There are many ways to bring the history of education into the history survey. For some teachers, the process will amount to reworking some lectures that have grown stale or seem no longer to be particularly effective, weaving in examples from the history of education. For others, it will result from student assignments to spur class discussion. Even those who do not have time to bring more history of education into the classroom will find it helpful to include some of the many high quality books and articles in the field in class bibliographies and to encourage semester projects on the history of education. Those who assign local history projects as a way to increase interest in history will find that the local history of education is a particularly rich field.

I have little faith in history as therapy, and I am not particularly sanguine that adding the history of education will have a dramatic impact on the deeper alienation and anomie that has plagued young people for several generations, although I continue to hope. I am certain, though, from my own many years in the classroom, that recognizing that alienation and its historical roots, and letting young people in on the dirty little secret regarding it, will make history more vital and interesting, will make our survey classes more lively, and will result in authentic learning that need not rely on fear of failure or on socialization-induced docile compliance.

¹¹David Nasaw, *Schooled in Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 161-238; Joel Spring, *The Sorting Machine Revisited: National Educational Policy since 1945* (New York: Longman, 1989).