

Thinking Critically About History: Ideological Management and the Culture Wars

By Joel Spring

I wrote this book with the intention of combining a particular approach to teaching history with a broader perspective on the content of the history of education. The reader will be presented with a variety of historical interpretations and historical issues. The presentation of material in this fashion allows the reader to think about history as opposed to being a passive recipient of facts. The reader should decide which interpretation of history is correct.

The most important interpretive question is "Why?" For example: Why were public schools established? Historians might agree on dates and personalities involved in historical events, but they might not agree upon motives. For instance: Were public schools established to ensure that all citizens would be able to protect their political and economic rights? Were public schools established to protect the power of an elite by controlling the economic and political ideas taught to students? Were public schools established to ensure the dominance of Protestant Anglo-American culture over Native American, Irish American, and African American cultures? Were public schools necessary to ensure the education of the whole population? These questions exemplify issues debated in the writing of history.

The answers to these questions have important implications for a person's future choices and actions. The answers shape images and feelings about the past. Many people do not remember the details of history, but they do develop images and emotions about past events. For instance, if a person concludes that public schools were established to protect the political and economic rights of citizens, then their attitudes and feelings about public schools will be quite different from those of a person who concludes that public schools were established to protect the political and economic power of an elite. Or, for example, if a person concludes that the establishment of public schools was necessary for the education of all children, then their attitudes regarding privatization of schools will be quite different from those who conclude the opposite.

Therefore, thinking about history involves both an intellectual consideration of conflicting interpretations, emotions, and images of public schools. For example, at an early age a person might be taught a history that is designed to build an emotional attachment, in the form of patriotism, to the political and economic organization of the United States. Later in life this person's emotional feelings about the United States might be challenged if the person reads a critical history.

One's knowledge, images, and emotions regarding the past have an impact on future actions. Individuals often make decisions based on what they believe to be the historical purposes and goals of an institution. The varieties of interpretations presented in this book provide the reader with an opportunity to judge past events and think about future actions. Like historians who weave together the drama of the past, consumers of history have their own political and social opinions. By engaging in an intellectual dialogue with the historical text, readers should be able to clarify their opinions about educational institutions and about the relationship of education to other institutions and to social events.

THERE IS NO *CORRECT* OR *RIGHT* INTERPRETATION OF HISTORY

Unfortunately, there is no right answer but only differing opinions about which historical interpretation is correct. *You must make the decision* based on your own social and political values.

My goal is to provide a variety of ways of viewing educational history. You might find some of these interpretations to be personally offensive. From my perspective, I think this is good because it will result in critical thinking about history and schools.

MY PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

While this book contains a variety of historical interpretations it is dominated by what I consider are important historical themes. These themes are my interpretative perspective. Similar to other perspectives referred to in the book, *you must decide* whether or not my interpretative framework is correct.

My interpretative framework includes:

- A major part of the history of U.S. schools involves conflicts over cultural domination.
- Schools are one of many institutions that attempt to manage the distribution of ideas in society. I call this process ideological management.
- Racism is a central issue in U.S. history and educational history.
- Economic issues are an important factor in understanding the evolution of U. S. schools.
- In the following sections I will elaborate on the different elements in my interpretative framework.

CULTURAL DOMINATION AS A CENTRAL THEME IN EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

A major part of the history of U.S. public schools is the attempt to ensure the domination of a Protestant Anglo-American culture in the United States. The struggle over cultural domination in the United States began with the English invasion of North America in the sixteenth century and continues today in the debate over multiculturalism.

The "culture wars," a term originating in the work of Ira Shor, is a distinguishing characteristic of American history. English colonists declared their superiority over Native American cultures and attempted to impose their culture on Native Americans. In contrast, Native Americans found English culture to be exploitative and repressive, and they resisted attempts by colonists to transform their cultures. The hope of the leaders of the newly formed United States government was to create a national culture that would be unified around Protestant Anglo-American values. One reason for the nineteenth-century development of public schools was to ensure the dominance of Anglo-American values that were being challenged by Irish immigration, Native Americans, and African Americans. Public schools became defenders of Anglo-American values with each new wave of immigrants. In the twentieth century, the culture wars were characterized by Americanization programs, civil rights movements demanding representation of minority cultures in public schools, and the multicultural debate.

The concept of cultural perspective is important for understanding the culture wars. For instance, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, some Native Americans decided that literacy might be an important tool for protecting their tribal lands and culture. In contrast, many whites considered the education of Native Americans as a means for acquiring Native American lands and transforming Native American cultures. This difference in perspective resulted in both major misunderstandings and a cultural war that continues to the present. The mixture of cultures in the United States has resulted in the necessity of constantly asking: How do other cultures perceive this event? In the nineteenth century, many Irish Catholics

believed the public schools were attempting to destroy the Catholic faith. In the twentieth century, many educators considered the development of separate curriculum tracks in high school a means of serving individual differences. In contrast, many African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans considered separate curriculum tracks as another means of providing them with an inferior education.

SCHOOLS AS ONE FORM OF IDEOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT

The culture wars are one aspect of what I call ideological management. Ideological management involves the creation and distribution of knowledge in a society. Schools play a central role in the distribution of particular knowledge to a society. Public schools were established to distribute knowledge to children and youth. Because knowledge is not neutral, there has existed a continuing debate about the political, social, and economic content of schooling. Presently, for example, there is a heated debate over the content and purpose of multicultural education in public schools. How this debate is decided will have important implications for shaping a student's perspective on the nature of society and politics in the United States. Also, in the 1990s, a major debate erupted between liberals and conservatives led by Newt Gingrich over the role of public schools in providing equality of opportunity.

Recent historical interpretations stress the importance of the influence of differing political and economic groups on the content of knowledge and the cultural values distributed by schools. In the same fashion, political and economic pressures influence the knowledge and cultural values distributed by sources other than educational institutions. Ideological management refers to the effect of these political and economic forces on the ideas disseminated to society.

I include mass media along with public schools as important managers of ideas and cultural values disseminated to children and youth. Consequently, this book includes sections on the development of movies, radio, and television. In the twentieth century, the media is considered the third educator of children along with schools and the family. Currently, schools and the media compete for influence over children's minds and national culture.

THE ROLE OF RACISM IN U.S. HISTORY AND IN THE HISTORY OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Certainly, a major strand of American history has been the quest for democracy and equality. However, there is another strand dating from the first arrival of English settlers that is characterized by claims of racial and cultural superiority. The most violent and troubled parts of American history were a result of the clash between racism and demands for equality, including:

- Almost 1 million dead from the U.S. Civil War
- The Trail of Tears covered by the bodies of European Americans and Native Americans resulting from the Indian wars that began with the arrival of the first European settlers and lasted through the nineteenth century
- The lynching and beating of Chinese in nineteenth-century California
- The killing and beating of enslaved Africans
- The lynching and beating of African Americans during reconstruction and segregation periods in the South
- Race riots in northern cities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries
- The murder and beating of Mexican Americans during the "Zoot Suit" riots in 1943

- The murders, riots, and church bombings during the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s

Violence and racism are a basic part of American history and of the history of the school. From colonial times to today, educators have preached equality of opportunity and good citizenship, while engaging in acts of religious intolerance, racial segregation, cultural genocide, and discrimination against immigrants and nonwhites. Schooling has been plagued by scenes of violence including:

- Urban riots between Protestants and Catholics in the nineteenth century
- The punishment of enslaved Africans for learning to read
- Racial clashes over the education of African Americans, Asians, Native Americans, and Mexican Americans
- The riots and killings over integration of schools from the 1950s to the 1970s
- The racially motivated killing of a black student along with fourteen others at Colorado's Columbine High School in 1999

How is it possible to believe in a republican form of government and political equality but still be a racist? How is it possible to argue that public schooling is the backbone of democracy, but still engage in discriminatory and racist educational practices?

It is important to understand that from colonial times to the present, racism and religious intolerance for *some*—and I want to emphasize the word "some"—Americans of European descent are part of their beliefs in republicanism, democracy, and equality. This intertwining of what on the surface appears as contradictory beliefs has been a major tragedy and a deep flaw, from my perspective, in the unfolding history of the United States and American schools. It is important to understand that *for some Americans, racism and democracy are not conflicting beliefs, but they are part of a general system of American values.*

In *Civic Ideals*, Rogers Smith's massive and award-winning study of U.S. citizenship, he contends that most historians neglect the importance of racist view-points in the forming of U.S. laws. As Smith demonstrates, U.S. history is characterized by a long tradition of discrimination and bigotry. After evaluating the combination of legal restrictions on voting rights, and immigration and naturalization laws, Smith concludes, "that for over 80 percent of U.S. history, American laws declared most people in the world legally ineligible to become U.S. citizens solely because of their race, original nationality, or gender. For at least two-thirds of American history, the majority of the domestic adult population was also ineligible for full citizenship for the same reasons."

Understanding how republicanism, democracy, and equality are compatible with racism and religious intolerance in some people's minds is key to understanding American violence and the often tragic history of education. However, I want to emphasize that *many Americans of European descent have fought against racism and religious bigotry.* For those believing in racial equality, those European Americans who were abolitionists and civil rights advocates are the real exemplars of democracy and equality in American history.

ECONOMIC ISSUES IN PUBLIC SCHOOL HISTORY

With the founding of common schools in the early nineteenth century, education was hailed as a means of ending poverty, providing equality of opportunity, and increasing national wealth. These grandiose claims continued into the twentieth century with a strong emphasis on schools selecting students and preparing them for different segments of the labor market. Standardized

tests, ability grouping in elementary school classrooms, and the separation of high school students into differing educational programs ranging from college preparatory to vocational training were considered key components in linking schools to the economy.

In the 1960s, many people believed that the educational components of the Federal Government's "War on Poverty" were the key to ending poverty. These War on Poverty programs included Head Start, compensatory programs in reading and math, and the television program *Sesame Street*. In the 1970s, the magical bullet for the economy was "career education." Different from vocational education, career education involved the actual study of jobs. Career education appeared in schools in the form of career education fairs, actual career education courses, career counselors, and classroom literature containing job descriptions. In the 1980s, many corporate and government leaders blamed the schools for the declining ability of the United States to compete in the world economy. During the 1980s and 1990s, a major goal of public schools became the education of workers who would increase the ability of U.S. corporations to dominate world markets.

Throughout all these periods there were debates about the purposes of these goals and whether they were attainable. Were some people arguing that schools could eliminate poverty because they did not want to change the economic system? Did the schools become a scapegoat for the continuing existence of poverty? Could, in fact, the public schools actually end poverty? Did attempts to end poverty through schooling actually ensure economic inequality? Were lower wages, increased profits, and control of workers the real reasons for politicians and corporate leaders wanting schools to educate students according to needs of the labor market? How did education for the labor market affect citizenship education? Whose values dominated citizenship education? Should students be educated to help U.S. corporations dominate world markets?

The debates had a central role in shaping the destiny of U.S. schools. Consequently, my framework for interpreting educational history includes, along with cultural domination, ideological management, and racism, a discussion of economic issues. However, the final decision about the meaning of history belongs to *you!*

Religion and Authority in Colonial Education

"Come over and help us," a Native American is depicted as saying while standing as the central figure on the Seal of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay, 1629. This figure is holding an arrow in one hand and a bow in the other with a band of leaves covering his midsection. Undoubtedly, English colonists sincerely believed they were bringing a superior civilization to a "heathen" and "uncivilized" people. This seal symbolized the feelings of cultural superiority that the English brought to the soil of North America.

To the surprise of colonists, Native Americans did not rush to accept the offer of religious and cultural conversion. Native Americans responded by offering food and aid that made it possible for Europeans to survive and expand, while Indians experienced the catastrophic effects of European-introduced diseases. For Native Americans, the primary problem presented by the European invasion was physical and cultural survival. Frequently, this meant warfare or finding a means of protecting cultural traditions while adapting to the social and economic changes brought by Europeans.

For English colonists, the cultural resistance of Native Americans was an affront to the teachings of Christ and a hindrance to colonial expansion. Motivated by sincere religious convictions and a belief in the superiority of English culture, European Americans engaged in an

educational crusade to turn "heathen" and "uncivilized" Indians into models of Protestant and English culture.

It is my hypothesis that the educational crusade for the religious and cultural conversion of Native Americans contributed to the nineteenth-century vision of the public school as the primary means for ending crime, poverty, and social and political conflict. As I will argue in later chapters, there was little difference in the minds of nineteenth-century Protestant public school advocates between "savage" Indians, unrepentant criminals, the rebellious poor, and the "heathen" Irish-Catholic immigrants. In fact, the English and Protestant sense of cultural and moral superiority originally developed during the twelfth-century English invasion of Ireland. Many English colonialists likened the "savage" Indian to the "savage" Irish.

The 1629 Seal of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay also symbolizes to many historians the colonial dedication to education and the establishment of schools. Traditionally, the educational policies of the Massachusetts Bay Colony are considered the precursors to the development of public schooling in the United States and to the belief that public schools could end crime, eliminate poverty, provide equality of opportunity, improve the economy, train workers, and create social and political stability. This belief in the power of schooling set the agenda for educational discussions through the twentieth century.

Therefore, I am beginning the story of the American school by focusing on the educational policies of the New England colonies. This discussion will provide a necessary background for understanding the development of public schools in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN COLONIAL SOCIETY

Colonial education illustrates some important social functions of education. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, education in colonial New England was used to maintain the authority of the government and religion. People were taught to read and write so that they could obey the laws of God and the state. In addition, education in Puritan New England, with its emphasis on individual conduct, bore the seeds for the nineteenth and twentieth-century view of education as a panacea for society. This view can be traced to the Protestant Reformation, one result of which was an emphasis on individual instruction for the development of piety with the goal of creating "the good society." Whether or not education can create the good society continues to be an important question.

In addition, education in the colonies helped to maintain social distinctions. For many, the learning of Latin and Greek in grammar schools or with tutors and attendance at a college were a means of maintaining or gaining elite status. For others, attendance at an academy was the key to social mobility. From the seventeenth century to present times, there has been a continuous debate over the role of the school in creating social classes and providing for social mobility.

Also, education was increasingly considered a means of improving the material prosperity of society. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some colonialists and Europeans believed that scientific research would improve the quality of life for all people. They believed that the key to scientific research was freedom of thought and the freedom to pursue any form of inquiry. In England, the quest for intellectual freedom resulted in the establishment of academies which, eventually, were transplanted to the American colonies.

The concern about the advancement of science and intellectual freedom raised issues regarding the control of education. As I will discuss in this chapter, some people argued that intellectual freedom could be achieved only by separating schools from religious organizations

that were supported by governments. It was argued that government-supported church schools primarily taught obedience to God and the state and, consequently, limited freedom of thought. Others argued that any control by government over education would result in despotism over the mind and a limitation of free inquiry because government officials would always use education to support their own power. The concern about freedom of thought sparked debates about whether or not education should be secular and controlled by government. Similar debates about the role of education in providing material benefits to society and the control of schools continue to present times.

Colonial education also illustrates the relationship between education and concepts of the child and family. Throughout the history of education, concepts of childhood and youth have played important roles in determining methods of instruction. A child who is thought of as being born good is treated quite differently from one who is considered to be born evil. The authoritarian quality of colonial education reflects an authoritarian family structure and a belief that the inherent evil of childhood needed to be controlled.

In summary, these themes in colonial education continue to the present.

- Education is still considered, by some, a means of preparing children to obey the authority of the government.
- People still think that education can function as a social panacea by eliminating crime, immorality, and poverty.
- Education is still considered, by some, a means of maintaining social class differences.
- Many people still believe in the power of schools to provide social mobility. Debates continue about the potential of government-operated schools to inhibit intellectual freedom.
- And, finally, throughout the twentieth century, public schools adapted to the changing needs of the family.

NOTES

My views on multicultural history were influenced by the work of Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1993) and the research I did for my book *The Cultural Transformation of a Native American Family and Its Tribe 1763-1995: A Basket of Apples* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1996). Ira Shore, *Cultural Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration 1969-1984* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).

As an example of this debate see Catherine Cornbleth and Dexter Waugh's *The Great Speckled Bird: Multicultural Politics and Education Policymaking* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 1995).

Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 15.