

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT HISTORY: IDEOLOGICAL MANAGEMENT, CULTURE WARS, AND CONSUMERISM

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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 instead of passively receiving 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 about motives. 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 raise issues that are 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, the attitudes and feelings about public schools of a person who concludes that public schools were established to protect the political and economic rights of citizens will be quite different from the attitudes of a person who concludes that public schools were established to protect the political and economic power of an elite. Or if a person concludes that the establishment of public schools was necessary for the education of all children, then that person’s attitudes regarding privatization of schools will be quite different from those of someone who concludes the opposite.

Thinking about history involves 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 foster 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 decisions* 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 personally offensive. I think that would be a good reaction because it would result in critical thinking about history and schools.

THEMATIC TIME LINES

In order to focus on particular sets of related events in educational history, I have written thematic chapters rather than a purely sequential account. Because many of the chapters are thematic and cover similar periods of time, at various intervals in the book I provide time lines to help the reader understand the sequencing of events.

MY PERSPECTIVE ON EDUCATIONAL HISTORY

This book contains a variety of historical interpretations, but it is dominated by what *I* consider to be important historical themes. These themes are my interpretative perspective. Just as you evaluate other perspectives referred to in the book, *you must decide* whether my interpretative framework is correct.

My interpretative framework includes these themes:

- 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 in educational history.
- Economic issues are an important factor in understanding the evolution of U.S. schools.
- Currently, consumerism and environmental education are pressing issues in the evolution of human society.

In the remainder of this chapter I will elaborate on each of these elements of 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.¹ 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.

“Culture wars”—the term originated in the work of Ira Shor—are a distinguishing characteristic of American history.² English colonists declared their superiority over Native American cultures and attempted to impose their culture on Native Americans. Finding English culture to be exploitative and repressive, Native Americans 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 both in major misunderstandings and in 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.³ 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 twenty-first century, the media are 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.

In the book's conclusion, I discuss the importance of ideological management and cultural values. In the framework of ideological management, the current question is: What should be the culture or cultures of the public school curriculum? Should the population of the United States be united by a single culture, or should the United States be composed of distinct cultural traditions? What would North America be like today if English colonists had adopted the cultural values of Native Americans?

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, another strand dating from the first arrival of English settlers 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 who died as a result of 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
- Riots and killings over the 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 have been part of the beliefs in republicanism, democracy, and equality held by *some*—I emphasize the word *some*—Americans of European descent. This intertwining of what on the surface appear to be contradictory beliefs had 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 are part of a general system of American values.*

Rogers Smith contends in *Civic Ideals*, his massive and award-winning study of U.S. citizenship, that most historians neglect the importance of racist viewpoints 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% 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.”⁴

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, the 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 so-called 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 why politicians and corporate leaders wanted schools to educate students to meet the 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?

These debates have 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!*

CONSUMERISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

In the 1970s, the consumerist ideology that dominated American education in the twentieth century began to be criticized because of the environmental damage it was causing. Consumerism, an economic philosophy born in the 1890s, assumes that the ideal economic system is one that continually grows and develops new products. In this framework, the key to economic growth is the endless consumption of new industrial products. Late-nineteenth-century economists worried that industrial efficiency would reduce the time people spent working and that the result would be social decay as people searched for ways of utilizing greater leisure time. The antidote to the potentially decadent world of leisure time was the idea that people should be spurred to work harder to consume more goods. Home economics instruction in public schools played a major role in introducing women to the ideology of a consumer society. In addition, children and particularly high school students were considered an important consumer market. The word *teenager* was created to define these new adolescent consumers.

Environmental educators have called for a shift from an “industrial-consumer” paradigm to a biospheric paradigm. The biospheric paradigm considers the earth and all species of animals and plants as an interrelated and dependent system. Sustainable development and sustainable consumption are now the goals of many environmental educators as they try to limit the damage caused by the consumerist ideology. In schools in the twenty-first century there is a struggle between commercial interests that continue to promote consumerism and environmental educators and students who are thinking within the biospheric paradigm.⁵

NOTES

1. My views on multicultural history were influenced by Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 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, 1996).
2. Ira Shore, *Cultural Wars: School and Society in the Conservative Restoration, 1969–1984* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986).
3. As an example of this debate see Catherine Combleth and Dexter Waugh's *The Great Speckled Bird: Multicultural Politics and Education Policymaking* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995).
4. Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 15.
5. See Joel Spring, *Educating the Consumer-Citizen: A History of the Marriage of Schools, Advertising, and Media* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003).