

Lawrence Cremin, *American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876* [New York: Harper and Row, 1980, p. xii, 607. \$29.95 (U.S.)].

In a series of elegant works, beginning with the publication of *The American Common School: An Historic Conception* in 1951, Lawrence Cremin has broadened educational history's focus away from a narrow, institutional concentration on public schooling to include other educative experiences and institutions, challenged the uncritical Cubberleyian celebration of the triumph of the school as the engine of American democracy without rejecting the school's accomplishments, and set educational history firmly within the context of broad economic, political and cultural movements.

His most important contribution to educational historiography, in my opinion, is his notion of educational configurations. Because Cremin defines education as the "deliberate, systematic, and sustained effort to transmit, evoke or acquire knowledge, attitudes, values, skills or sensibilities, as well as any outcomes of that effort," he can ask educational questions of any historic event (Sadat's assassination) and any institution (family, church, juvenile court, newspapers, workplace, agricultural fairs) or event (playing Monopoly) can be seen as potentially educative. The school does not educate in isolation. Cremin invites us to view education as the transmission of ideology through an interdependent, yet hierarchically structured, configuration.

Barbara Finkelstein has called his approach an "educational theory of motivation". His histories, she states, "are written as though consciousness and action were informed primarily by the presence and availability of educational materials or utterances of one sort or another. Hence he focuses his analyses on what is taught and intended, rather than what is learned and unintended, making almost no explicit effort to explore relationships between the transmission of culture and the acquisition of identity".¹

This is a compelling critique. In the first volume of his intended trilogy, *American Education: The Colonial Experience 1607-1783* (1970) Cremin brilliantly traced the origins of American education to the European Renaissance: how the colonists transplanted old world educational configurations and modified them under novel social and economic circumstances. *The Colonial Experience* was a *tour de force* intellectual history; Cremin thus rarely got beneath writings about child-rearing practices, for instance, to examine the actual ways that colonial men and women reared their children. The work was overbalanced towards the realm of ideas. Nevertheless, his emphasis on the "initial importance" of the family as chief pedagogical unit in the new world and the relative unimportance of formal schooling well into the late 17th and 18th centuries has changed our way of seeing colonial education. The family and church, supported to a lesser extent by school, college and newspapers, worked in tandem to nurture the Puritan ideal of Christian piety and civility.

American Education: The National Experience 1783-1876, for which Cremin won a Pulitzer prize for literature, continues his analysis of educational configurations during the first century of national life. There is a subtle difference, however. While Cremin continues to maintain that "on balance the American educational system has contributed significantly to the advancement of liberty, equality and fraternity..."² *The National Experience* is more sensitive to the educational experiences of society's outcasts (those living on plantations, reservations or in urban ghettos) than is reflected in his 1977 work *Traditions of American Education*. It appears as well that Cremin has learned from the critiques of his radical, if unmannerly, colleagues by creatively synthesizing the Marxian-influenced work of social, labour and feminist historians such as Dawley, Dublin, Faler, Gutman, Lerner and Sklar. To dismiss *The National Experience* as a mere sophisticated apology for a liberal, gradualist conception of history one must assume that Cremin is a crafty ideologue (darling of the New York liberal elite) and not an open-minded historian.

In fact, *The National Experience* is the kind of work, if we use a little imagination, that Antonio Gramsci might have written if he were asked to study the dominant ideology in American society from 1782 to 1876. Gramsci, one recalls, believed that the dominant class maintained its hold on a society not primarily through control of the coercive state apparatus, but through the diffusion of its world-view throughout civil society - including a whole range of structures and activities like trade unions, schools, churches and the family - of an entire system of values, attitudes, beliefs, morality that is in one way or another supportive of the established order and the class interests that dominate it.³

The National Experience tells the story of how the dominant ideology (what Cremin terms "popular paideia"), comprised of "evangelical pieties, democratic hopes, and utilitarian striving" (p. 14), originated and was transmitted through a myriad of institutions and activities to most Americans. All institutions were to contribute to the formation of the new American man who would not merely seek his own self-interest, who would participate actively in the public life of the republic and who would pursue schooling as a practical instrument for personal advancement and as a useful tool for bettering society.

Although the family, church, school, college and newspaper remain the primary educative components of the configuration during the first century of national life, Cremin explains to us, three significant components were added: (i) institutions of organized work - mill, factory, mine, shop and office, (ii) institutions for the diffusion of special kinds of knowledge - libraries, lyceums, fairs and museums, and (iii) custodial institutions - the house of refuge, orphan asylums, and penitentiaries. During the first century of national life the educative influence of the school and newspaper probably grew in relation to that of the household and the church. But the educative influence of the external place of work increasingly mediated the influence of all other education during the years of adult employment. Thus, with the development of the factory in the 19th century the values and attitudes traditionally associated with Poor Richard (inner discipline, hard work, punctuality, frugality, sobriety, orderliness, prudence) were taught with *renewed vigour* and *growing intensity* by churches, schools and voluntary associations as well as by the factory. Cremin's genius, like

Tocqueville's, lies in his ability to see unity in the breathtaking multiplicity of cultural, political and religious institutions and in his intellectual agility which enables him to see the significance of the evangelical voluntary associations' contribution to the forming of the "popular paideia".

In an extended discussion of the Gramscian notions of ideology, hegemony and culture British cultural historian Raymond Williams has observed that "no mode of production and therefore no dominant social order and therefore no dominant culture ever in reality includes or exhausts all human practice, human energy, and human intention".⁴ Alternative and, at times, oppositional cultural values and practices exist within the framework of the established, but never totally incorporative, hegemony. Cremin recognizes this: in a chapter simply entitled "Outcasts" he introduces the notion of a "discordant education" - "an education in which at least two conflicting configurations of education sought to inculcate in the same individuals quite different attitudes via quite different pedagogies" (p. 243).

Drawing on the controversial revisionist histories of black Americans (Genovese, Gutman), Cremin argues that the "whip and the Bible" were the primary pedagogical instruments in instructing blacks in the white version of their place in the world. But a secondary pedagogy transmitted an alternative culture through family and clandestine religious assembly, enabling the slaves to survive as a people and maintain a sense of identity as black human beings. The dynamics of a "discordant education," Cremin says, were also present among native Indians and among numerous sub-communities such as Irish-Catholic families in New York City.

Yet, in spite of Cremin's receptivity to the radical critiques of American society and the brilliance of his analysis of the formation and diffusion of a dominant ideology, *The National Experience* remains encapsulated within an essentially liberal outlook. The established order and the class interests that dominate society are present, but in the background. Rather than underscoring the conflictual nature of ideological formation and diffusion and the disjunction between American society's ideals and its brutal realities, Cremin has fallen in love with the seductive beauty of the dream of a new citizen for an industrializing age. Unlike some of his colleagues, Cremin cannot quite bring himself to see in "discordant education" the key to understanding America's national experience.

Notes

- ¹ Barbara Finkelstein, "Adding Psychological Dimension to the History of American Education," paper presented to the American Educational Studies Association, Cincinnati, Ohio, October 26, 1979, pp. 3, 4.
- ² Lawrence Cremin, *Traditions of American Education* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 127.
- ³ Carl Boggs, *Gramsci's Marxism* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), p. 39.
- ⁴ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 125.

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