

REVIEW ESSAY

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History of Education in the 1980's: A Research Agenda

Best, John Hardin (ed.). *Historical Inquiry in Education: A Research Agenda*. Washington: American Educational Research Association, 1983. 311 pp. \$20.00(U.S.)

Historical writing inevitably mirrors the concerns of the present, but historiography serves a slightly different function.

The historiographer... conserves the scholarship of the past that seems currently relevant. He directs attention to convergent aspects of current scholarship, helping individual historians discover the relation of their own interests to larger currents of thought. Historiography has also a less routine but more dangerous appeal: it is a critical weapon. Since it blends historical explanation with critical appraisal, it provides a vehicle of emancipation from ideas and interpretations one wishes to supercede. Accordingly it flourishes in response to conflict and revision in historical thought.²

Ideally, the book under review as a piece of historiography in the field of educational history would successfully appraise the state of the field as of this date and serve as a barometer regarding the immediate future as promised in the sub-title, "A Research Agenda". Indeed, the editor promises us "fresh thinking on a range of topics" (p. 3).

Unfortunately the book is disappointing in several respects. Some chapters seem unwarranted in or unsuited for such a volume, such as "Philosophy of History" by Henry C. Johnson, Jr. and "Politics and Policy Study" by Donald Warren. Several of the contributions rehearse the familiar to the point of seeming very dated: biography (Clifford), quantitative history (Angus), education and the city (Sanders), ethnic and minority study (Reese). The new and exciting articles are very few indeed with the most outstanding being Sol Cohen on intellectual history, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann on women's history and Ray Hiner on history of childhood and family. Michael Katz and David Hogan cover a lot of familiar ground in "Schools, Work and Family Life" but in so doing they offer a clear, comprehensive and superbly written introduction to the subject. This is the sort of article that will prove very instructive to anyone not all that familiar with methodologies and perspectives of the sub-field of schooling and work. It offers both "state-of-the-art" and research agenda, something the editor, John Best, promises his readers in his Introduction but most of his authors fail to deliver.

One looks in vain in this collection for the substance and excitement of collections in the general field of history such as Michael Kammen (ed.), *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States* (1980) or even the special tenth anniversary issue of *Reviews in American History* (December, 1982) entitled *The Promise of American History* both of which cover exhaustively topics and methodologies currently fashionable in American history. The article by Laurence Veysey in the latter collection on the history of education is a model of what one might have hoped for in the book under review. In terms of stimulating my thoughts about the issues involved in writing educational history (research agenda?) I would have to rate more highly than Best, Harold Silver's *Education as History: Interpreting Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Education* (1983). Even some of his older contributions therein such as "Aspects of Neglect: the Strange Case of Victorian Popular Education" (1977) have lessons for contemporary educational historians on both sides of the Atlantic.

This brings me to another point, the blatant parochialism in *Historical Inquiry in Education*. The only non-American contributor is Silver himself whose article also forms chapter 11 of his own book. Is there no one else doing interesting work in the field in Britain, Europe or, heaven forbid, Canada? Fascinating Canadian-U.S. parallels come to mind: Neil Sutherland, Patricia Rooke and R.L. Schnell matched with Ray Hiner on the history of childhood; Alison Prentice and Ellen Lagemann on women's history; George Tomkins and Herbert Kliebard on history of curriculum; and Robert Gidney and W.P.J. Millar up against Irving Hendrick on rural education.

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The Canadian names are probably not that well known in the United States, but I am confident an objective observer would concede that the contributions of the Canadians in their respective sub-fields of interest would easily match, if not exceed, their American counterparts. I will resist prolonging comparisons to the U.K. and Europe. One might begin by consulting Brian Simon, "The History of Education in the 1980's," *British Journal of Educational Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1 (February, 1982). In the circumstances a more accurate title for the book under review would have been *Historical Inquiry in American Education*.

We have not passed through the stage of radical revisionism of the late sixties and early seventies. As Carl Berger once said, Clío has "an alarming habit of devouring" her followers.² The bitter debates of a decade ago among educational historians in the United States were essentially over who would control the interpretation of that country's educational past. "Though enormously influential," Sol Cohen notes, "the radical . . . revisionists have not been able to dictate the terms of discussion nor establish the norms by which the history of American education is to be measured."³ Where does that leave us now then? What are the new directions in American educational history? That is what we might expect this book to tell us. Although most articles in this collection are not very helpful in this regard a few are, and I propose therefore to devote the remainder of this review to a discussion of those which I found most thought-provoking, namely Cohen, Lagemann, Hiner, and Katz and Hogan.

Unknowingly, Katz and Hogan set the theme around which these last-named historians frame their essays by stating "educational change should be understood as the result of compromises between different, often contending, interests" (p. 300). And further, while asserting that people must choose among "limited options available," Katz and Hogan "prefer to assume that ordinary people usually assess their circumstances intelligently and act reasonably" (p. 286). This is some distance from the social control hypothesis of the radical revisionists. Katz and Hogan lay stress on the importance of analyzing family strategies respecting work and education. They conclude: "it seems that the extent and nature of job opportunities, more than anything else, governed the length of school attendance and shaped the transition to adulthood" (p. 298). For Canada Chad Gaffield suggests that changes in employment opportunities are not sufficient to account for the decline in the number of older teenagers attending school in the late nineteenth century. As he comments, "attenders became non-attenders under the impact of new classroom organization. Thus, inspectors who lamented low attendance rates were, at least for older teenagers, reaping the fruit of their own education cultivation."⁴ This sort of broad analysis is typical of the work currently being done in educational history. Instead of the former narrow confines of the field marked by almost exclusive focus on the public school, educational historians now normally place their discussion of education in the context of work, school and family with concomitant attention to the school's client, the child and adolescent. In the process of extending their purview, many scholars in the field are no longer strictly speaking education historians.

Sol Cohen in "The School and Personality Development" provides an exemplary article on the import of intellectual history for educational history. Quoting Lawrence Cremin, Cohen reiterates that ideas are not "disembodied notions" but "moving forces that compete for attention and that profoundly influence what people believe is possible and desirable in the realm of education." (p. 127). He continues, in another article: "In spite of a large and rich outpouring of books and articles on ideology and reform movements in [American] education, historians of education have not concerned themselves with the problem of how and in what form ideas become influential and of how to estimate their influence."⁵ The thrust of his article in this collection is to show, by example, the deep and pervasive influence on the theory and practice of education in the last half century of the mental health movement, the "social arm of psychiatry." Cohen documents how by 1930 the mental health movement had succeeded in altering the nature of the school in the direction of a therapeutic model, a notion discussed at length and popularized by Christopher Lasch in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979). The school becomes a clinic, the child a patient or "problem", the teacher a therapist, the teacher-student relationship that of therapist-patient, and the general ambience of the classroom that of a therapeutic session. The objective of this arrangement is the personality development of the student. Thus, attention on personality development in the early twentieth century replaces the mid-nineteenth century concentration on eradication of illiteracy as a social panacea. "The well-adjusted personality was happy, efficient, productive, and above all, 'social'" (p. 123). Cohen's article is full of insights and stimulates the reader towards new research directions.

Similarly, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann's "Looking at Gender" is another strong and suggestive article. Her chief message is to urge historians "to develop the kinds of theoretical constructs that can make the study of differences between women and men not an incidental or isolated historical problem but an integral element of all historical work" (p. 252). At the same time gender research cannot simply dichotomize the experience of the two sexes, for sex interacted with other social variables such as class, race, ethnicity, occupation, political expression, and religion, all of which gave meaning to people's lives. As David Tyack has pointed out, "women

often shared more values and interests with men of their own class than with women of a distant class." The writing of women's history has progressed, Tyack suggest, through four stages: "a *contributionist* stage that laments the omission of the group in standard accounts; second, a *victimization* paradigm that details oppressive relations between the superordinate and subordinate groups; third, a demand that scholars focus on the internal experience of the group; and fourth, a *structural* analysis of how the group fares in institutions and in the larger society."⁶ Like Tyack, Lagemann accepts gender as a legitimate variable in history. Thus, when both men and women are considered as separate variables interacting with each other then traditional periodization, traditional concepts of progress and decline, come under serious review and reconsideration.

In the history of women and education questions will still focus on schools, colleges and universities, but Lagemann stress they should not be confined to formal education. So questions such as the following will still be important: Why did girls outnumber boys as graduates of public high schools about three to two? Why did scientists change their conception of female mental abilities? Were public schools in fact more egalitarian with regard to gender than other major institutions? How have the connections between family, school, and work differed for males and females? But other sorts of educational questions must also be considered. Lagemann cautions, for example, against overlooking, when discussing the matter of female suffrage, "the educational significance for women of participation in politics within public realms." for "female exclusion [formerly] from public politics was also exclusion from 'public education'." (p. 258). In the twentieth century women's "interests and aspirations sometimes have encouraged them to search out, design, create, and use opportunities for learning that could not be found in formal institutions of schooling." (p. 260). This point has been abundantly borne out by Gillian Weiss in a recent study on Vancouver clubwomen in the first quarter of this century.⁷

In "Domestic Cycles: History of Childhood and Family," N. Ray Hiner does for this topic what Lagemann did for women's history. He offers an excellent bibliographic summary of the most significant work done in the United States in the past decade. He leaves no doubt about the methodological and interpretive advances that have been made since Bernard Bailyn's and Philippe Aries' studies of a generation ago. He also underlines the importance of the topic by quoting Lawrence Stone's admonition that "there is scarcely any major problem in our lives, or any major dispute about the nature of change in the past, upon which family history does not somehow impinge." (p. 265). He makes a plea, however, for avoiding "the conceptual and methodological narrowness that has too often weakened new areas of inquiry and reduced their influence." (p. 275). The future, Hiner argues, lies in forging links between sub-fields of social history, not hiding ourselves off in discrete sub-disciplines. Such "beneficial exchanges" between the history of childhood and the family and the history of education mark the path of progress in the future. Two recent efforts of this sort in Canadian historiography jump to mind: Neil Sutherland's *Children in English-Canadian Society* (1976) and Patricia Rooke and R.L. Schnell's *Discarding the Asylum: From Child Rescue to the Welfare State in English Canada, 1800-1950* (1983).

Unlike many of the authors in this collection, Hiner is very explicit about a research agenda in his field. He advocates specific attention be focused on rural children and families, the religious experience of children and families (a particularly overlooked topic in Canadian history), the influence of ethnicity and gender on the educational experience of children⁸, the development of youth culture, and the history of play. Child-birth and child-rearing practices, particularly from the standpoint of how they affected children, are also high on Hiner's research agenda.⁹

In a recent, sadly neglected article on "The Institutionalized Society" and its implications for childhood, family and schooling, R.L. Schnell and Patricia Rooke deplore the unfortunate effect of the scholarly emphasis placed on the establishment and extension of common schooling. Such a focus, they claim, has obscured the social transformation of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Instead they propose a consideration of three issues, all of which would I suspect elicit Hiner's support:

- (1) the central concepts of "education" and "socialization", and the place of *intention* in understanding how generations are inducted into their societies;
- (2) the network of institutions from 1600 to 1800, whose transformation by shifts in sentiment, social conditions, and state interests, brought about new notions of purpose, organization, and management;
- (3) the need to understand common schooling as part of concurrent institutional and theoretical development.¹⁰

All of this has important implications for doing history of education. Instead of approaching it from the perspective of school promoters and bureaucrats one would assume the perspective of family, parental strategies and choices of children and youth.¹¹

In a curious way, the generally unknown compilation of the proceedings of the founding conference of the Canadian History of Education Association entitled *Approaches to Educational History* (ed. D.C. Jones et. al.,

1981) is a more stimulating collection of articles, "pound-for-pound," than the book under review. But like the latter it reveals one of the major failings of the study of the history of education, namely the absence of a clear-cut intellectual focus. Comparisons with other sub-fields of social history, such as women's history and working class history, disclose a less vital area of study. The excitement and controversy of a decade ago are no more. In their place we sense an inward-looking self-satisfaction with everyone going about his own business often slipping off into related sub-fields such as history of childhood, social policy, ethnic history. Nevertheless, one very hopeful sign is that professors in Arts Faculty history departments are showing more interest in educational history as a field of study. At a recent conference on educational history in Vancouver exactly half the forty papers were given by scholars located outside Education Faculties. Such a situation would have been unheard of a decade ago in Canada. Moreover, the crossovers to rural history, women's history and the like are promising, giving evidence of a final rupture of the former isolation of educational historians a generation ago. Such a development is both significant and fortuitous, for educational history should properly draw upon economic and social history, social anthropology, urban and rural history, demography and studies of literacy, linguistics, folklore, literature and the press. Likewise, another encouraging sign is the number of thesis topics pertaining to educational history listed in the annual *Register of Post-Graduate Dissertations in Progress in History*. I counted approximately 100 in the 1982 Register. Unfortunately most of these graduates will never gain admission to the professoriate thus infusing fresh blood into the field, but that problem is a more general one for the historical profession in Canada.

NOTES

- ¹ Sol Cohen, "The History of Education in the United States: Historians of Education and Their Discontents," in David A. Reeder (ed.), *Urban Education in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1977), p. 115.
- ² Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 264.
- ³ Sol Cohen, "Historians of Education and Their Discontents," p. 129.
- ⁴ Chad Gaffield, "Demography, Social Structures and the History of Schooling," in D.C. Jones, et al., *Approaches to Educational History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1981), p. 95. See also his "Schooling, the Economy, and Rural Society in Nineteenth Century Ontario," in Joy Parr (ed.), *Childhood and Family in Canadian History* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982), pp. 69-83.
- ⁵ Sol Cohen, "The Mental Hygiene Movement, the Development of Personality and the School: The Medicalization of American Education," *History of Education Quarterly*, vol. 23, no. 2 (Summer, 1983), p. 123.
- ⁶ David Tyack, "Reflections on the Study of Gender in the History of American Education," paper delivered to the Conference on the History of Education (CHEA/HES), Vancouver, October, 1983, pp. 18, 2.
- ⁷ Gillian Weiss, "'As Women and as Citizens': Clubwomen in Vancouver, 1910-1928" (Ph.D. Thesis, University of British Columbia, 1983).
- ⁸ J. Donald Wilson, "'The Picture of Social Randomness': Making Sense of Ethnic History and Educational History," in D.C. Jones, et al., *Approaches*, pp. 25-37.
- ⁹ Juliet Pollard, "Growing Up Métis: Fur Traders' Children in the Pacific Northwest," in J. Donald Wilson (ed.), forthcoming book on Canadian educational history (as yet untitled) (Vancouver: U.B.C. Curriculum Centre, forthcoming 1984).
- ¹⁰ R.L. Schnell and Patricia T. Rooke, "The Institutional Society: Childhood, Family and Schooling," in D.C. Jones, et al., *Approaches*, pp. 130, 114.
- ¹¹ See, for example, J. Donald Wilson, "From Social Control to Family Strategies: Some Observations on Recent Trends in Canadian Educational History," *History of Education Review* (Australia), vol. 13, no. 1 (Spring, 1984).