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Source: *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Winter, 1976), pp. 381-407

Published by: Cambridge University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/367722>

Accessed: 05-01-2020 07:25 UTC

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# The Origins of Public Education: A Reassessment

MICHAEL B. KATZ

DURING the last fifteen years a modest revolution took place in the historiography of education. Historians rejected both the metaphor and the method which had characterized the record of the educational past. The method had divorced inquiry into the development of educational practices and institutions from the mainstream of historical scholarship and left it narrow, antiquated, and uninteresting. The metaphor portrayed education as a flower of democracy planted in a rich and liberating loam which its seeds continually replenished.

The contemporary rejection of metaphor and method has attempted to incorporate the study of education into current scholarship and, even more, to expand notions of social, cultural, intellectual, and political development through exploring and highlighting the role of education in modern history. The work on education at its best, however, has not been simply the reflex of social or intellectual history, plugging schooling into the framework erected by scholars in more academically established specialties, but, rather, a catalyst which itself has forced the expansion of interpretations and the re-opening of historical issues.

Too often the men and women who have worked to reshape educational history are lumped together loosely and called revisionists. Criticisms of their work too often portray their interpretations as if they had created a coherent image which distorted the educational past and maligned the educational present. That image itself comprises a more serious distortion than nearly anything these men and women have written. For it glosses over basic differences in method and sharp, sometimes fundamental distinctions in interpretation.

A good measure of the criticism directed at what has been called revisionism is implicitly political. It perceives in the interpretations it challenges a clear antagonism to existing social and educational structures and to the version of the past through which they are justified.

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That perception is accurate. For the historians labelled revisionist—despite their basic differences—do reject both the method and metaphor of educational history that preceded their work. Their critics, I would argue, want to accept the former, the critique of method, but to adopt only a muted and ultimately denatured rejection of metaphor. The analyses to which the critics object almost without exception represent critical history. To some extent all its practitioners share the view ascribed by Hayden White to the “exponents of historical realism,” namely, that “the task of the historian” is “less to remind men of their obligation to the past than to force upon them an awareness of how the past could be used to effect an ethically responsible transition from present to future.” (1) By contrast the old metaphor and its supporters serve to “remind men of their obligation to the past” rather than to attempt to liberate them for a new educational future.

Even their critics agree that historians of education of the last decade have dealt a devastating blow to the form in which the old metaphor had been cast. A simple narrative of the triumph of benevolence and democracy no longer can be offered seriously by any scholar even marginally aware of educational historiography during the last fifteen years.

Nonetheless, the extent of disagreement among the practitioners of educational history and the segmental nature of much of their work—the important concentration upon detailed case studies, for instance—has made difficult the emergence of a new and satisfying synthesis.

Here I cannot review and synthesize in detail the significant work in the field during the last fifteen years. Rather, I can offer you the outline—a sketch—of what, at this point, appears to me the most balanced and useful account in light of what our colleagues in the field have written and my own research shows.

If I were to treat the origins of public education fully, I should have to address at least three questions: why did people establish systems of public education; how did they go about that task; and what results did their efforts have? Given the limits of space, I shall confine myself, for the most part, to the first question and try to convey to you my sense of the purposes which people of the time hoped public school systems would serve.

For a variety of reasons, my own work during the last several years has focused not on the history of education but on the history of social structure and family organization during industrialization. That research has centered on a case study of the city of Hamilton, Ontario, during the last part of the nineteenth century. I have undertaken a basically quantitative reconstruction of the entire population of the city at various intervals from the manuscript census, assessment rolls, and a variety of other sources. (2) My colleagues and I currently are extend-

ing the work to include a comparison of Hamilton with Buffalo, New York, and rural Erie County in the same period.

The results of this line of research have been enormously exciting for me; for the numbers have become patterns which represent the lives of an entire population in a time of momentous social change. Indeed, my colleagues and I have been able to examine questions which hitherto have seemed unanswerable and, even more interesting, to find questions we never would have thought to ask.

Eventually, my goal is to unite this empirical work on the composition of society and families with the study of social institutions. For I believe the kind of research in which I am now engaged has profound implications for the questions about the history of education which I set out to answer more than a decade ago. (3) The interpretation which I shall offer you here draws on some of this recent work and circles backwards, trying to integrate what I believe happened to social structure and the family with the development of systems of public education.

## I

At the outset it is well to make clear exactly what I wish to explain: namely, the emergence of *systems* of public education. Here the word *systems* is crucial. For in neither Canada nor the United States were schools unusual or novel creations in the nineteenth century, and in neither place was it unusual for them to receive some sort of public support, though, as I shall mention again, in most places the line between public and private was not drawn with precision until well into the nineteenth century. Though schools existed and frequently received some public support, the haphazard arrangements of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries cannot be considered true progenitors of the school systems we know today. For by the latter part of the nineteenth century the organization, scope and role of schooling had been fundamentally transformed. In place of a few casual schools dotted about town and country there existed in most cities true educational systems: carefully articulated, age graded, hierarchically structured groupings of schools, primarily free and often compulsory, administered by full-time experts and progressively taught by specially trained staff. No longer casual adjuncts to the home or apprenticeship, schools were highly formal institutions designed to play a critical role in the socialization of the young, the maintenance of social order, and the promotion of economic development. Within the space of 40 or 50 years a new social institution had been invented, and it is this startling and momentous development that we must seek to understand. (4)

The origins of public educational systems cannot be understood apart from their context. For they formed part of four critical develop-

how has the power of teachers changed relative to other "stakeholders," since the beginning of the 20th c. in the U.S.?

ments that reshaped North American society during the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century. Those developments were: first, industrialization and urbanization; second, the assumption by the state of direct responsibility for some aspects of social welfare; third, the invention of institutionalization as a solution to social problems; and fourth, the redefinition of the family.

In the remainder of this discussion I shall comment on the relation of public educational systems to these four developments; highlight five particular problems which schools were designed to alleviate; comment briefly upon the process through which public educational systems actually emerged; and conclude with a few observations about the relation of the educational past to the educational present.

During the early and mid-nineteenth century industrialization, urbanization, and immigration reshaped the economic and social order of North America. The pace and timing of social development varied, of course, from region to region. However, everywhere a close temporal connection existed between social development and the creation of public educational systems. In the United States, for example, the date at which the first high school opened provides a rough but convenient index of educational development which, across the country, retained a strong association with social and economic complexity. (5) Our understanding of the relationships between the introduction of industrial capitalism, the transformation of the technology of production, the redistribution of the population into cities, and the creation of systems of public education remains far from precise, and I shall speculate on the connection between them later on in this discussion. At the outset, however, it is important to observe and remember the *temporal* connection between the economy, the social order, and the schools.

The development of systems of public education did not comprise the sole thrust of governments into the area of social welfare during the early and mid-nineteenth century. For in England, the United States and Canada it was in this period that governments generally began to exchange their haphazard and minimal concern with social problems for a systematic approach to questions of welfare. At the start of the period problems of poverty, public health, crime, insanity, disease, and the condition of labor remained more or less untended, subject to ancient legislation, custom, sporadic regulation, and public and private charity. By the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century each had become the subject of public debate, legislative activity, and the supervision of newly created state administrative bodies with full-time, expert staffs. It may be anachronistic to look on the first half of the nineteenth century in Britain, as one historian does, as the period of the "origins of the welfare state" because few people at the time had in mind the creation of an apparatus with the size and scope which we

know today. Still, the results of their activities created the framework within which subsequent state activity in the realm of social welfare commenced its growth; and their actions provided the first precedents for more contemporary innovations. (6)

The state did not enter into the area of public welfare without serious opposition. Its activity commenced at a time when the very distinction between public and private had not emerged with any sort of clarity, and in this situation the definition of public responsibility became an especially elusive task. In most cases voluntary activity preceded state action. Philanthropic associations, composed often primarily of women and usually associated with the spread of evangelical religion, first undertook the alleviation of social distress. In part their activity reflected the lack of any public apparatus to cope with the increased misery that people discovered in the growing cities of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; in part, too, it reflected the belief that social distress represented a temporary, if recurring, problem which charitable activity could alleviate. The activities of voluntary associations, however, usually convinced their members that problems were both far more widespread and intractable than they had believed, and they turned, consequently, to the public for assistance, first usually in the form of grants, later in the assumption of formal and permanent responsibility. (7)

No very clear models for action, however, existed, and people concerned with social policy at the time debated not only the legitimacy of public activity but its organizational form. As I have argued elsewhere in the case of education, their disagreements over the nature of public organizations reflected fundamental value conflicts and alternative visions of social development. If the shape that modern society eventually assumed appears inevitable to us today, it did not appear at all clear to the people of the time, which is an observation we must remember if we are to understand the passion aroused by debates about social institutions and policies in the nineteenth century.

In fact, in the United States four distinct models for the organization of formal education coexisted and competed in the early and mid-nineteenth century, and at the time the outcome of their conflict did not appear at all self-evident to many sane and responsible people. The alternative that triumphed might be called, as I have suggested, incipient bureaucracy. Though its advocates generally supported the extension of a competitive and laissez-faire approach to economic issues, they encouraged a strong regulatory role for the state in the area of social welfare and morality. Their model organizations were controlled by bodies responsible to legislatures, financed directly through taxation, administered by experts, and relatively large in size. They were, in short, public *institutions*, in a novel and dramatic sense. (8)

Thus, the victory of incipient bureaucracy reflected a new faith in the power of formal institutions to alleviate social and individual distress. The novelty of this commitment to institutions must be appreciated, for it represented a radical departure in social policy. Prior to the nineteenth century institutions played a far smaller and much less significant social role: the mentally ill, by and large, lived with other members of the community or in an undifferentiated poorhouse; criminals remained for relatively brief periods in jails awaiting trial and punishment by fine, whipping, or execution; the poor were given outdoor relief or, if they were a nuisance, driven from the community. By the middle or third quarter of the nineteenth century all of this had changed. In place of the few, undifferentiated almshouses, jails, and schools there now existed in most cities, states and provinces a series of new inventions: mental hospitals, penitentiaries, reformatories, and public schools. Shapers of social policy had embodied in concrete form the notion that rehabilitation, therapy, medical treatment and education should take place within large, formal, and often residential institutions. The explanation of how that idea swiftly permeated public practice comprises one of the most fascinating, frightening and significant stories in modern history. For it is the account of the origins of the institutional state which governs and regulates our lives today. (9)

Lest it should seem inevitable that modern society should be an institutional state, it is worth pointing out that responsible people at the time did see alternatives. In New York, for instance, Charles Loring Brace proposed the shipment of city urchins to the West as an alternative to their institutionalization, and elsewhere opponents and skeptics at the time critically, perceptively, and with, in retrospect, an eerily modern ring, pointed to the dangers and limitations of institutions. (10)

One of their common arguments centered on the family. Both proponents and critics of institutions agreed that the ideal family provided a paradigm for social policy. Rather than supply an alternative to the family, to their supporters institutions would become, quite literally, as Alison Prentice and Susan Houston have argued, surrogate families for the mentally ill, the criminal, the delinquent, and the schoolchild. In fact, it was precisely through their embodiment of a familial environment that new institutions, according to their sponsors, would perform their rehabilitative, therapeutic, or educational work. The difficulty, as critics astutely pointed out, was that no institution could imitate a real family. (11)

Nonetheless, in the early and mid-nineteenth century both critics and supporters of institutions shared a widespread sense that the family was in some sort of trouble, though about the exact nature of that difficulty they remained somewhat vague. In fact, they probably mistook change for deterioration because the fragments of historical

evidence about the family in this period indicate not breakdown but an important shift in domestic structure and relations.

Commonly, social theorists have believed that the nuclear replaced the extended family during industrialization. The work of Peter Laslett and other historians has shown quite conclusively that, as it is usually argued, this proposition is clearly wrong for British, American or Canadian Society, and probably for Western Society in general. The majority of families—or, in Laslett's terminology, co-resident domestic groups—at any point in time appears to have been nuclear in structure. That is not to say, however, that their role and other aspects of their organization did not change, for they did. And it is these more subtle, but real and consequential alterations that historians are just beginning to appreciate. (12)

The most dramatic change that occurred during industrialization has been pointed out frequently. It is, of course, the separation of home and workplace. Not only within rural but also within urban areas this gradual division of place of residence and place of work fundamentally altered the day-to-day pattern of family existence, the relationships between family members and (sociologists would argue) the very influence of the family itself. (13)

The separation of home and workplace formed one part of the process by which the boundaries between the family and community became more sharply drawn. As part of the increasing specialization of institutions, the family shed its productive function as well as its role in the treatment of deviance. Rather than diminish in importance, however, the family gained stature through its heightened role in the socialization of its children, which earlier had been shared more widely with the community. This tightening and emotional intensification of the family fundamentally reshaped the process of growing up.

My argument here is tenuous, and you should realize that it rests on speculation made on the basis of data from my study of Hamilton and the bits of evidence I have been able to assemble from other studies. If I am right, for centuries it had been customary for parents of various social ranks to send their children away from home to live as surrogate members of another household for a number of years between puberty and marriage. Young people in this stage of their lives, which I call semi-autonomy, exchanged the complete control of their parents for a supervised yet relatively more autonomous situation in another household. It would take me too far from my topic here to elaborate upon the evidence for this stage or upon its meaning. Rather, I wish simply to point to semi-autonomy as a phase in the life cycle that virtually disappeared during the development of modern capitalist society. By the mid-nineteenth century, or shortly thereafter, depending upon the pace of economic development, young people began to remain within

their parents' home after they had found work, staying there roughly until marriage, far longer than ever had been the case before. At the same time, many remained in school for prolonged periods of time, and young men began to enter their fathers' occupations far less frequently. Certainly, I am deliberately foreshortening a complex process in order to provide support for the main point I wish to make about the family: namely, that it acquired an increasingly important and specialized role in the socialization of its children as part of a general tightening of the boundaries between social institutions and between the family and community. (14)

The heightened attention that people gave to their children is at least suggested by trends in fertility. In the United States marital fertility among native whites fell during the first half of the nineteenth century. In Ontario, it decreased sharply after 1870. At some point between the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century, it appears, very substantial numbers of people began to make a conscious decision to limit the size of their families. The reason is unclear. As some scholars have argued, the decision could reflect the decline in infant and childhood mortality. Women needed to bear fewer children to assure that a reasonable number would survive. At the same time decreased early childhood mortality provided parents with a heightened incentive to invest emotionally in each of their offspring. On the other hand, it is possible to point to the difficulty that parents had providing for their children. As it became necessary to keep children at home and in school, a large family may well have become an intolerable economic burden to people of middling means. Whatever the exact explanation for the decline in fertility, and it remains one of the most hotly argued and contentious issues in historical demography, it does point, again, to a sharpened concern with shaping and controlling the family, and it does imply an intensification of the emotional bonds between parent and child. (15)

Popular ideas about domesticity and the role of women reflected the redefinition of the family. The "cult of true womanhood," as it has been called, urged women to create within the home a haven against the harsh world of commerce and a nest in which children could be reared with attention and affection. From one perspective the ideal of domesticity has justified a not especially subtle attempt to keep women within the home subservient to their husbands. However, it also elevated the importance of women as the moral guardians and spiritual saviours of an increasingly corrupt and irreligious society. Despite this tension in its meaning, popular ideology reinforced the structural changes within the family. In both social thought and reality, the family—and I suspect in time the working as well as the middle class family—

became an increasingly private, intense, and sharply defined agency for the nurture of the young. (16)

One aspect of the history of women illustrates especially clearly the complex interconnections between educational change and the ideological, demographic, institutional, and technological factors that we have observed. I refer to the feminization of teaching, which occurred with remarkable swiftness around the middle of the nineteenth century in the eastern United States and a bit later in Canada. In both places, by and large, women took over from men the education of young children in primary schools. As the ideology of domesticity to which I have referred would lead us to expect, the moral and spiritual role assigned to women not only justified but made imperative their entrance into classrooms as surrogate mothers. If the school, like other mid-nineteenth-century institutions, was to resemble a home, it should be presided over by a wise and loving mother. In this sense the shift from men to women in the schoolroom paralleled the shift in primary moral responsibility from husbands to wives in the ideal middle-class home. As men increasingly left home to work, they left the schoolroom as well. (17)

However, cultural imperatives did not comprise the only forces at work in the feminization of teaching. As the state assumed increasing responsibility for the public provision of schools, it became necessary for communities to expand the proportion of school places available. At the same time urbanization and, especially, massive immigration enlarged the absolute number of eligible school children enormously. Obviously, the combination of a desire to expand schooling and a substantial population increase placed a severe strain upon local financial resources. In this situation, women provided a ready solution to a potential problem. For they were paid but half as much as men, who, in an era of expanding commercial and industrial opportunity, increasingly had before them job prospects more attractive than teaching. Thus, through the feminization of its teaching force a town could find a sufficient number of teachers to double its school places while holding its expenditures for salary roughly constant.

Although the payment of women a wage half that given to men was exploitative, it obviously did not deter women at the time from entering teaching. Wherever I have found accounts of hiring, many women applicants always competed for every job. The reason is not hard to understand. In the period when teaching opened to them women had essentially only four other occupational alternatives: domestic service, dressmaking, work in a mill, or prostitution. To many young women at the time, teaching, despite its low wages, must have appeared a welcome and genteel opportunity. (18)

Thus, we are left with an intricate problem: what caused the femini-

zation of teaching? Rather than attempt to weave together the strands, I should like, simply, to leave the feminization of teaching with you as at once a problem to ponder and, even more, as an illustration of the way in which the contextual elements I have isolated intertwined with the origins of systems of public education in the nineteenth century.

However, though educational development can be viewed as part of a larger series of changes in North American society, it must become the focus of our attention in its own right. For school promoters argued that the introduction of public educational systems would alleviate a number of specific and substantial problems within contemporary society.

## II

For the most part, in the remainder of this discussion I shall outline briefly the connection people of the time perceived between the origins of public educational systems and the alleviation of a number of critical problems. However, my emphasis to some extent minimizes the most interesting and complex task. For when it stops you should have a sense of the broader developments of which public educational systems formed a part and the specific tasks they were to undertake. You will have, however, only a glimmer of the coherent explanation, for which the simple listing of factors cannot substitute. What you will require, even if you do not disagree seriously with the main propositions in this analysis, is an explanation which shows exactly how the developments and problems listed here interacted with each other to produce systems of public education. That explanation is an important and subtle task, drawing as it must not only on historical events but on a theory of social development and on a sociology of knowledge and motivation. Though I cannot undertake that task in any adequate way in a brief discussion, I should indicate at least the general shape which the explanation, in my view, should assume.

Most interpretations of the relationship between institutional development and social change in the nineteenth century remain unsatisfying because they reflect the inadequate conceptual framework through which early North American history usually is viewed. Most histories of the period from Colonial times to, roughly, 1875 rest on a simple two-stage paradigm: a shift from a pre-industrial to an industrial society, or from a rural to an urban one. (19) This paradigm makes difficult the systematic relation between institutions and social change. For, though the transformation of economic structures and the creation of institutions did take place at roughly the same period, the chronological fit between industrialism and institutions is imperfect, and attempts to

construct causal models or to develop tight and coherent explanations usually appear too mechanistic or vague.

When a three stage paradigm replaces the two-stage one, the fit between social change and institutional creation becomes tighter. In the three stage paradigm, North America shifted from a peculiar variety of a mercantile-peasant economy to a mercantile capitalist to an industrial capitalist society. Though the pace of change varied from region to region and stages overlapped each other, the most important aspect of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was not industrialization or urbanization but, rather, the spread of capitalism, defined, in Dobb's words, as "not simply a system of production for the market . . . but a system under which labour-power had 'itself become a commodity' and was bought and sold on the market like any other object of exchange." Theoretically, in this point of view capitalism is the necessary, though conceptually distinct, antecedent of industrialization. (20)

Consider the chronology of institutional development. In New York State dissatisfaction with the existing system of poor relief led to the passage of a law creating specialized county poorhouses in 1825; the first special institution for juvenile vagrants and delinquents opened in 1827; the New York Public School Society emerged out of the Free School Society in 1824. In Massachusetts the first state hospital for the mentally ill opened in 1833; poor relief underwent fundamental shifts in the 1820s; agitation for educational reform really began in the same decade. The point of these examples is to show that the drive towards institutional innovation *preceded* the industrial take-off in the Northeast. (21)

On the other hand, the similarity in the timing of movements toward innovation in public policy did not happen by accident. The policies that created institutions arose in response to shifting social conditions: most directly from pressures felt within cities and regions experiencing a shift to a capitalist mode of production.

The most characteristic and important feature of capitalism for the development of institutions, including public school systems, was its utilization of wage-labor and the consequent need for a mobile, unbound labor force. The shift in the nature of social organization consequent upon the emergence of a class of wage-laborers, rather than industrialization or urbanization, fueled the development of public institutions.

This interpretation must remain partly speculative because we lack hard data on a variety of critical, specific issues, especially the proportion of the work-force engaged in wage-labor at various points in time. However, enough clues do exist to make the three-stage paradigm at least plausible—consistent with social reality, that is, as well as with social theory. For instance, the most striking change in New York

City's occupational structure between 1796 and 1855, using Carl Kaestle's figures, was the increase in the proportion of men who listed themselves simply as laborers, a rise from 5.5% to 27.4%. We know, too, that apprenticeship, whose emphasis on bound labor is incompatible with capitalism, had ceased to function with anything like its traditional character well before industrialization. From a different point of view, one historian recently has pointed to an unmistakable increase in the wandering of the poor from place to place in late eighteenth-century Massachusetts. Of course, the expansion of commerce in this period has been documented extensively, and we already have observed the abandonment of mercantilist economic regulations by the state in the same period. (22)

Capitalism as a concept assists in the interpretation of institutional development for two reasons: first, institutions reflected the drive toward order, rationality, discipline, and specialization inherent in capitalism. There is a parallel between the way in which a capitalist society processes its business and its problems. The problems themselves communities had coped with disaster, distress, and deviance.

Consider these circumstances: The seasonality and irregularity of work in early capitalist society posed problems as great as the meagre subsistence wages paid to laborers. At the same time that chronic underemployment became a permanent situation, the creation of a mobile labor force and increasing transiency sundered the ties of individuals to communities. In crises or periods of difficulty, people decreasingly found themselves within a community of familiar neighbors and kin to whom they could turn for help. In this situation, state and local authorities had to innovate in order to cope with the dislocation, distress, and destitution of landless, wage workers. (23)

Early and mid-nineteenth century school promoters argued that public educational systems could attack five major problems, which, with hindsight, appear products of early capitalist development. Although observers at the time were more definite about symptoms than causes, they surely would agree with the identity and urgency of this list: (1) urban crime and poverty; (2) increased cultural heterogeneity; (3) the necessity to train and discipline an urban and industrial workforce; (4) the crisis of youth in the nineteenth-century city; and (5) the anxiety among the middle classes about their adolescent children.

According to nineteenth-century social commentators, a massive increase in both crime and poverty accompanied the growth of cities and the development of modern industry. Though the actual dimensions of the problem remain unclear—that is, whether crime and poverty increased disproportionately or merely kept pace with population growth—what matters for our purposes is the widespread belief among the “respectable” classes in an epidemic of lawlessness and pauperism

threatening the foundations of morality and the maintenance of social order. In the formulations of the time, it is important to observe, crime and poverty did not comprise two distinct problems. Rather, the terms criminal and pauper overlapped and merged into synonyms for deviant and anti-social behaviour that stemmed from individual, moral failure. (24)

The process or causal mechanism through which urbanization worked its mischief remained vague in mid-nineteenth-century social commentaries. Nonetheless, neither crime nor poverty appeared, as they once had been, the accidental results of misfortune or deviance among an otherwise stable and reliable population. To the contrary, the emergence of fundamentally new classes of people, it was argued, had accompanied social transformation. Criminals and paupers were not merely individuals but representatives of the criminal and pauper class, and it was the implications of the iceberg rather than its tip that frightened respectable people.

Although people concerned with the explanation of crime and poverty often relied on environmental rather than genetic explanations, their arguments still reflected the lack of any very deep understanding of the relationship between social structure and social deviance. For in the last analysis blame fell upon the lower classes. Crime and poverty became moral problems, which arose because the lower-class urban family failed to implant earnestness and restraint within the character of its children. Raised in an atmosphere of intemperance, indulgence, and neglect, the lower-class urban child began life predisposed to criminality and unprepared for honest work. By definition, in this argument, the lower-class family became the breeding place of paupers and criminals.

Given these premises, schooling held an obvious attraction. Exposure to public education, it was widely believed, would provide the lower-class child with an alternative environment and a superior set of adult models. Through its effect upon the still pliable and emergent personalities of its clientele, a school system would prove a cheap and superior substitute for the jail and the poorhouse. As some of the more acute commentators at the time observed, the school was to become a form of police. Thus, though expenditures on public schooling might seem high, they would in fact ultimately lessen the burden imposed upon society by adult crime and poverty.

Mid-nineteenth-century social policy blurred more than the distinction between poverty and criminality; it equated cultural diversity with immorality and deviance as well. Thus, the ethnic composition of expanding cities became a source of special anxiety. At first it was the massive immigration into North America of the famine Irish that made the problem acute. To the "respectable classes" of North America

poor Irish Catholics appeared alien, uncouth, and menacing. Once again we must confront the relationship between reality and the perception of people at the time. For most contemporary research indicates that the Irish were not intemperate, shiftless, and ignorant as the nativists portrayed them. To the contrary: the immigrants, it now is reasonable to suppose, may have represented a select, especially highly motivated, and unusually literate portion of Irish society. And whatever instability their lives in North America might have revealed probably stemmed—as Theodore Hershberg and his associates have discovered in the case of ex-slaves—from the harsh and discriminatory urban social structure which they encountered rather than from any moral slackness within their culture. (25)

Nonetheless, as in the case of crime and poverty, social commentators proved unable or unwilling to connect the problem they thought they saw around them with its structural basis, and they consequently, once again, retreated to an explanation which traced the source of a social problem to a moral weakness, in this case embedded in a set of foreign and inferior cultural traditions. As with most cases of nativist behavior the shrill exaggeration with which observers dwelled on the subversive potential of the immigrants' alleged sensual indulgence reveals more about the critics themselves than about the objects of their attack. It is tempting to argue that nativists projected onto the Irish the sensuality that they consciously repressed within their own lives and hated them for acting out the fantasies which they denied themselves. Certainly, the key phrases in contemporary prescriptions of the good life were restraint and the substitution of higher for lower pleasures, attributes precisely the opposite of those which many thought they saw in the lives of the Irish immigrant poor. (26) Whatever the truth of this speculation may be, it is quite clear that the brittle and hostile response to Irish immigrants revealed an underlying fear and distrust of cultural diversity.

Once more the implications of a widespread social problem for the role of schooling are transparent. Although the cultural predisposition of adult immigrants might prove intractable, the impending rot of Anglo-American civilization could be averted through a concerted effort to shape the still pliable characters of their children into a native mold. This massive task of assimilation required weakening the connection between the immigrant child and its family, which in turn, required the capture of the child by an outpost of native culture. In short, the anxiety about cultural heterogeneity propelled the establishment of systems of public education; from the very beginning public schools became agents of cultural standardization.

The need to discipline an urban workforce interacted with the fear

of crime and poverty and the anxiety about cultural diversity to hasten the establishment of public educational systems. Although the problem still persists in developing societies today, it perhaps first arose in its modern form during the early industrialization of Britain, as E. P. Thompson has eloquently described. The difficulty emerged from the incongruity between customary rhythms of life and the requirements of urban and industrial work settings. In contrast to the punctuality, regularity, docility, and deferral of gratification demanded in a modern workforce, populations, both peasant and urban, usually had governed their activities more by the sun than by the clock, more by the season and customary festivities than by an externally set production schedule, more by the relationships established within small work groups than by the regimentation of the factory. (27)

At the same time, rewards had been distributed more on the basis of ascribed than achieved qualities. Social position devolved upon successive generations mainly as a result of heredity, and it would be considered not corrupt but correct to favor a kinsman over a more qualified stranger in the award of jobs or favors. The contrast in this respect between traditional and modern custom certainly remains less than absolute in practice. Nonetheless, the ideal that governs behavior has nearly reversed itself. For democratic ideology, with its emphasis upon merit and concepts such as equality of educational opportunity, advocates the substitution of achievement for ascription as the ideal basis for the distribution of rewards in contemporary society.

Their promoters expected public school systems to bring about precisely this substitution of achievement for ascription combined with the inculcation of modern habits of punctuality, regularity, docility, and the postponement of gratification. It is no accident that the mass production of clocks and watches began at about the same time as the mass production of public schools. (28)

These disciplinary goals became especially obvious in the reports of local school committees across the continent. Everywhere the major obsessions—and difficulties—were punctuality and regularity of attendance, while the villains were parents uneducated to the importance of schooling who allowed or encouraged their children to remain at home for what, to school promoters, appeared whimsical reasons or who took the side of their child against the teacher. At a higher level, state and provincial authorities continually complained about the refusal of local school committees to introduce universalistic criteria into the hiring of teachers who, too often, were simply kin or friends. In this way the school system as a whole became an object lesson in the organization of modern society, a force, as its promoters were fond of pointing out, which would radiate its influence outward through entire communities.

Through the establishment, organization, and correct operation of school systems the habits of a population would be transformed to match the emerging and radically new social and economic order. (29)

Among their litany of complaints about urban populations, social commentators repeatedly included a denunciation of the masses of idle and vagrant youth roaming city streets. Once I was tempted to treat their observations on this score as middle-class moralizing. Now, though they are moralistic to be sure, the evidence points to their firm anchor in social reality, for school promoters saw about them a very real crisis of youth in the nineteenth-century city. In pre-capitalist Western society long-standing customs defined the expectations and duties of people throughout their life cycle with reasonable precision. Young people left home, perhaps around the age of 14, to work as servants or apprentices, almost always dwelling in another household. During no span of years was it unclear where young people should live or how they should spend their time. Thus idleness, on any large scale, was an unimaginable social problem. (30)

However, during the rapid growth of cities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the population of young people increased enormously while apprenticeship gradually decayed as an effective social institution. Indeed, the demise of a prolonged, highly regulated apprenticeship accompanied the first phase of capitalist development and preceded industrialization by some decades. And the practice of keeping male servants apparently had declined well before apprenticeship. Whether young women found fewer opportunities for work as domestic servants remains unclear; however, there is evidence that large numbers of young women were neither in school nor employed outside their family. (31)

Traditional practices declined not only prior to industrialization but also before the creation of any network of institutions to contain and manage young people. Young people who once would have worked as apprentices or servants now had literally almost nothing to do, for in a pre-industrial urban economy, contrary to what is often believed, there existed little work for young men. Their labour, in fact, was scarcely more necessary than that of adolescents today. Without schools or jobs, large numbers of youths undoubtedly remained in an unwilling state of idleness until, in the case of young men, they became old enough to find work or, in the case of young women, until they married. The existence of these idle young people is the situation which I call the crisis of youth in the nineteenth-century city.

In Hamilton, for example, during the decade that population growth made the problem of youth most acute, about half of the young people over the age of 13 or 14 were neither in work nor at school and exactly how they spent their time remains a puzzle. Not a puzzle, though, is the

timing of the creation of a school system, which took place, precisely, in the decade following the sudden appearance of large numbers of idle youth on the city's streets. The establishment of a school system with special provisions for young people over the age of 11 or 12 almost immediately and dramatically reduced the proportion of idle youth. However, it is apparent that many young people entered school simply because they could not find work, for when jobs in factories first became available during the next decade, large numbers of working-class young men left the schools while their more affluent contemporaries—and young women—remained behind. (32)

Affluent parents had promoted the establishment of school systems partly on account of their own problems, which might be called middle-class anxiety. I use the term middle class with trepidation. If nothing else, my study of social structure during the last several years has taught me the elusiveness and ambiguity of class labels. By middle class I mean not only professionals, entrepreneurs, and others in non-manual occupations but also the more prosperous and independent artisans. For the greatest dividing line in the nineteenth-century commercial city did not separate white and blue collar in our modern sense. Indeed, the independent artisan was at once a proprietor and a producer. Rather, the great gulf divided the skilled from the unskilled workman. Paid badly, working irregularly, the unskilled formed what might be called a laboring class. My point is not that laborers cared less about their families but, simply, that they could not share one of the two fundamental concerns that made the others anxious. For one of those concerns was downward social mobility, and the laboring class already had hit the bottom.

The anxiety about slipping down the social ladder which permeates both nineteenth-century social commentary and fiction relates in a complex manner to actual experience. Nineteenth-century cities revealed at once a curious combination of rigidity and fluidity. Within them sharply entrenched patterns of inequality persisted, while the experience of individual people and the very identity of the population itself changed with dazzling rapidity. Nineteenth-century cities can perhaps best be thought of as railroad stations with waiting rooms for different classes. Although the population of the station constantly changed, those who departed were replaced by people with remarkably similar characteristics. And, though their populations constantly increased, the proportions in the various waiting rooms remained about the same. Studies of individual social mobility within nineteenth-century cities reveal this combination of stability and transience. On the one hand they show a high rate of status transmission from father to son; the popular image of a continent of opportunity wide open to talent simply cannot be sustained, though many men made modest

gains that undoubtedly appeared critical to their lives. Few laborers, that is, replicated the rags to riches version of success, but many managed eventually to buy a small house. At the same time, entrepreneurs failed in business with extraordinary frequency. Indeed, entrepreneurial activity entailed enormous risks, which made the threat of catastrophe ever present. For example, almost half of one small sample of entrepreneurs whose histories I followed around the middle of the century failed in their businesses. (33)

For different reasons, the position of artisans became increasingly insecure as technological development eroded the association of skill and reward that had been the hallmark of many crafts. In the 1850's, for instance, the introduction of the sewing machine suddenly brought about a deterioration in the position of shoemakers and tailors as manufacturers flooded the market with cheap goods. In this situation, artisans no longer could assure the comfort and prosperity of their sons through passing on to them their skills. Indeed, it is poignant to observe the extent to which sons of shoemakers ceased to follow their fathers' crafts within the course of one decade. In practical terms, in order for the artisan to assure his son a position commensurate to his own he had to assist his entry into different occupations, particularly commerce or the expanding public bureaucracies. (34)

A generalized uneasiness about adolescence itself accompanied this widespread anxiety about the transmission of status. This was particularly evident in the controversies between the proponents of high schools and private academies. That debate revealed a growing reluctance to send youths away from home. The complementary arguments that no school could replicate a family and that actual residence within the family for a prolonged period had become a critical aspect of socialization reflected the shift in the life cycle that I observed earlier: young people increasingly spent more of the years between puberty and marriage in the home of their parents. (35)

The source of the heightened anxiety about post-pubescent young people in the nineteenth century reflected, at least partially, their newly ambiguous and uneasy position in the family and community. Partially, too, uncertainty about their economic prospects formed one strand of the anxiety. The *intensity* with which people began to worry about what we since have come to call adolescence, however, is what I wish to highlight for the moment because one of its outcomes, quite naturally, was a search for a form of schooling that would allow young people to live at home while they acquired the education necessary to retain their parents' status in an uncertain and shifting economic order. Despite a good deal of egalitarian rhetoric to the contrary, I suspect that the anxiety of the middle-classes about their children formed the driving force behind the establishment of public secondary schools

and, in fact, solidified the commitment of the middle-classes to public education itself.

You will observe that my discussion of the purposes of public schooling has omitted one area of concern: the transmission of cognitive skills. Very simply, the cultivation of skills and intellectual abilities as ends in themselves did not have nearly as much importance in the view of early school promoters as the problems which I have outlined. Public school systems existed to shape behavior and attitudes, alleviate social problems, and reinforce a social structure under stress. In this context, the character of pupils remained of far greater concern than their minds.

### III

The process through which school promoters translated their aspirations into institutions forms a topic of nearly equal importance to the purposes which they hoped to achieve, though one which I can only mention today. For the style of educational development, as I have argued elsewhere, had lasting consequences for the relationship between school systems and the communities which they served and for the nature of the educational experience itself. Though the documents are there, historians have been slow to examine the question of process systematically. From one point of view, we need more studies which try to account for the way in which institutions embodying a passionate commitment to social reform turned relatively quickly into large, rigid, and unresponsive bureaucracies. From another perspective, we should encourage more of the kind of work David Tyack has done on the way in which ethnicity, class, and politics intertwined in the processes through which school systems were fashioned and refashioned. Finally, historians must confront head-on the question which I raised some years ago about the class relationships represented by the style of educational promotion in the mid-nineteenth century. To what extent can public educational systems be said to have been imposed upon the poor? The answer to that question, I think, must involve considerably more sophisticated models of class and class relations than historians of education hitherto have brought to bear upon the problem. It is, moreover, a question of considerable importance because its answer, I suspect, will enable us to understand the vexing issue of why the ideology of public education came to be an axiom of popular belief accepted throughout the social structure. For the results of public education have remained quite at variance with its promise, especially to the poor and to minorities.

The resolution of that puzzle requires an analysis that extends far beyond the scope of this discussion. However, it may be useful to point

to one direction which its exploration should take. To begin, a distinction in the use of the concept of imposition must underlie the discussion. In Antonio Gramsci's terms, "the apparatus of state coercive power which 'legally' enforces discipline on those groups who do not 'consent' either actively or passively. . . ." must be contrasted with "the 'spontaneous' consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group." (36)

In the case of public educational systems we at best marginally confront imposition in the first sense. Education became compulsory only after attendance had become nearly universal. The initial popular reaction to public educational systems sometimes reflected apathy, resentment, or hostility but, given its radical intrusion into the life-cycle and the relations between parents and children, the ease with which public education entered social life stands out as truly remarkable. Most people, by and large, did not need to be coerced to send their children to school. (37)

Thus, the question becomes spontaneous consent. The introduction of public educational systems, initiated, sponsored, and governed by well-to-do and locally powerful people, represented, to repeat Gramsci's phrase, a "direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group." Imposition, in this sense, it is critical to understand, does not imply conspiracy or malevolence. The relationship between ideologically sustained imposition and group consciousness is immensely complex. This complexity—and the underlying distinction between individual motivation and ideology—has been expressed especially clearly by David Brion Davis in his discussion of the ideology of anti-slavery. "Ideological hegemony," writes Davis, "is not the product of conscious choice and seldom involves insincerity or deliberate deception. . . . Ideology is a mode of consciousness, rooted in but not reducible to the needs of a social group. . . . At issue, then, are not conscious intentions but the social functions of ideology; not individual motives but shifting patterns of thought and value which focused attention on new problems, which camouflaged others, and which defined new conceptions of social reality." (38)

Note that Davis speaks of "ideological hegemony." By this he means the second use of imposition, "the predominance, obtained by consent rather than force, of one class or group over other classes," or "the 'spontaneous' loyalty that any dominant social group obtains from the masses by virtue of its social and intellectual prestige and its supposedly superior function in the world of production." The popular acceptance of public education represented ideological hegemony: the unselfconscious and willing acceptance of a direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group. (39)

The question is why? It is easiest to understand the social functions of the ideology of public education for the dominant fundamental group; I have dealt at some length with them in this discussion. However, the popular acceptance of an institution whose results from the start differed sharply from its ideological justification requires a more complex explanation.

Public education received popular assent at least partly because it did not differ from the dominant ideology of democratic capitalism in nineteenth-century North America. Public educational systems crystallized key components of social ideology into an institutional form and assured its transmission. The school system became a miniature version of the social order. Within both school and society, according to the ideal which underlay their organization, universalistic and individualistic criteria replaced the handicaps of birth, and achievement became available on the basis of ability. Within the public schools, as within society at large, the able should rise simply by virtue of their own talents. As Stephan Thernstrom has written:

The function of the ideology of mobility was to supply the citizens of nineteenth century America with a scheme for comprehending and accommodating themselves to a new social and economic order. According to this doctrine, a distinctively open social system had appeared in the United States. The defining characteristic of this open society was its perfect competitiveness, which guaranteed a complete correspondence between social status and merit. (40)

In time the connection between achievement in school and achievement within the social order made even more intimate the ties between schooling and life.

The underside of the meritocracy, of course, is failure. It is an axiom of the same ideological theorem that failure, within democratic capitalism and its schools does not reflect artificial barriers. By definition, all vestiges of unfairness have disappeared. Failure, therefore, reflects individual responsibility, a lack of energy or ability. The distribution of inequality thus mirrors the distribution of talents in a system which meters rewards in terms of the achievement of public tasks.

Popular acceptance of the ideology of public education reflected popular acceptance of the ideology of democratic capitalism. Schools reflected, legitimized, and sustained the social order. Consequently, any attempt to explain the successful imposition—in the definition used here—of public education must be part of a larger inquiry into the hegemony of democratic capitalism in North America.

The exposition of the mechanisms of hegemony could provide work enough for a generation of scholars. Here I only want to make three observations about that task: first, it may be a bridge between the advocates of consensus and conflict as keys to the American past. The

consensus version of American history did have a point: the assent of the people to the institutional order and its ideological justification has been a remarkable feature of American history. Yet, as proponents of a conflict version rightly have pointed out, an emphasis on consensus can both mask the glaring inequality that has been a steady feature of North American society and miss the continued undercurrent of opposition. Perhaps, however, episodes of opposition, in the understandable search for a dissenting tradition, sometimes appear more significant than they actually were. They may reveal not a radical or revolutionary strain in North American history but, rather, the initial, generally ineffective resistance to innovations that occurred at the moments of transition when, albeit momentarily, policy options did appear open, or they may signify periodic outbursts of frustration, eruptions of a pervasive, long standing but relatively diffuse malaise, among people who generally have accepted the legitimacy of the social order that generates the inequalities which scar their lives. (41)

The second point about the mechanisms of hegemony takes its lead from the work of the British historian John Foster who describes the role of small scale success systems in accommodating people to a larger structure of inequality in which access to real power or wealth remains largely blocked. Capitalism, in this conception, works through subdividing the population into distinct groups within which small but visible ladders of success exist. The role of occupational specialization and the creation of limited careers within manual working-class jobs stand out as particularly important in this respect as, for white collar workers, does the creation of graded if limited ladders of advancement within bureaucracies. In a similar way, the realistic and widespread aspiration to homeownership, even among men who remained laborers, undoubtedly, as Stephan Thernstrom contends, served an analogous purpose. The grouping of the population into ethnic communities which, in their internal structure, are vertically ordered, can serve the same end. Clearly, historians are just beginning to unravel the nature and meaning of small-scale success systems in North America, and their elucidation forms a major topic to which research should be directed. (42)

The third observation I wish to make about hegemony concerns education. Whatever its initial source, school systems became key agents in its perpetuation and transmission. As Robert Dreeben has shown, with even their internal organization a reflection of social ideology, schools have taught the legitimacy of the social order. Insofar as most people spontaneously have accepted the structure of inequality which circumscribes their lives, schooling in North America has been a magnificent success. (43)

Measured against the ideology of their early promoters, on the other hand, school systems have not succeeded very well. Of course, historical

research is still far too primitive to enable us to assess the consequences of schooling for various social groups in anything like the manner attempted by Christopher Jencks' *Inequality*. Nonetheless, it does appear clear from the record that school systems have reflected social class differences from their inception. Statistics of school attendance show marked social class differences in the mid-nineteenth century. At first the differences existed throughout the school system; children of the poor simply went to school much less than children of the affluent, and early secondary schools were very largely middle-class institutions. During the course of the last century, as lower levels of schooling became universal, more affluent young people have stayed at school for increasingly long periods. In this way, despite an overall rise in school attendance, the class differential in educational attainment has been preserved. Thus, despite the argument of early school promoters that education would reduce inequality, it is most likely that public school systems have reflected and reinforced existing social structures. (44)

In light of their early purposes, of course, schools have failed most vividly as agencies of social reform. They have not eradicated crime, poverty, and immorality. And they could not realistically have been expected to do so. Indeed, the imposition upon schools of the burden of ameliorating social disease has been an evasion for which we all have paid dearly.

The relationship—or more accurately lack of relationship—between the schools and social reform brings me at last to the moral of educational history. Of course, history has no moral in any straightforward sense. At best it provides a coherent and reliable set of evidence about which people may legitimately draw various conclusions. Thus, you must realize that what I see clearly as four lessons of the story represent only my judgements upon the record which I have sketched for you.

First, we should at long last stop relying on the schools for social reform. Crime, poverty, inequality, alienation, and other social problems are rooted in social and economic structure. They will be solved, if solved at all, through an attack on their origins, which will mean a redistribution of power and resources. They will not be eliminated, or seriously alleviated, in the schools, which cannot be expected to do more than reflect the social structure in which they exist.

Second, we should ponder the implication of the fact that public schools always have been more concerned with morals than with minds. In reality, moral and intellectual outcomes never can be severed. Still, it would constitute a minor educational revolution if the emphasis, or primary goal, of public schooling shifted from the development of character to the cultivation of intellect.

Third, we must remember that institutions are a modern invention.

None of the large social institutions which dominate our lives today existed in anything more than embryonic form one hundred and fifty years ago, and at the time of their creation sane, intelligent people believed in alternatives. Those who cannot see beyond the asylum or the bureaucracy have a foreshortened view of history. The timidity of our efforts at reform reflects the narrowness of our imagination, not the limits of the possible.

Fourth, young people grew up differently in times past. Adolescence, as we know it, did not always exist. The prolonged institutionalized dependency to which we subject the young today is neither a product of their biology nor their psychology; it is a product of culture and of history. Yet we reform schools as if the life cycle were immutable. We question the setting in which prolonged, institutionalized dependency takes place; we do not question nearly often enough our definition of adolescence itself. Perhaps if we could decide how to alter the experience of growing up in North America, we would find how to fix the schools along the way.

#### Notes

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  11. Houston, "Impetus"; Alison Prentice, "Education and the Metaphor of the Family: The Upper Canadian Example," *History of Education Quarterly*, 12 (Fall 1972): 281-303.
  12. Peter Laslett, ed., *Household and Family in Past Time* (Cambridge, Eng., 1972), pp. 1-148; Katz, *People of Hamilton*, ch. 5.
  13. Robert Dreeben, *On What is Learned in Schools* (Reading, Mass., 1968).
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