Globalization and History of Education: Some Comments on Herbst’s State of the Art

Milton Gaither

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I have two points to make concerning Jurgen Herbst’s provocative piece, one responding to his view of our discipline’s past and the other outlining an alternative view of a viable future. In Herbst’s account of the past, which, I should add, is shared by most everyone who has much knowledge at all of the topic, the historiography of education was until the 1960s entirely moribund, swaddled by a narrow focus on national, formal school systems. But a glorious deliverance was provided by the great scholar Bailyn Cremin, who in 1960 and thereafter freed educational historians from their functionalist, school shackles and set them on the firm path of real academic history. There ensued a golden age of fruitful research, novel methodologies, spirited debate, and influential publications. But by the 1980s the sun was beginning to set and now we are in the twilight of an era wondering if there will ever be another dawn.

This account in my view is mistaken on three grounds. First, it, following Bailyn and Cremin themselves, fails to properly understand pre-1960 educational historiography. Elsewhere I have tried to show how writing about educational history from colonial times to the mid 1950s is held together by a profound continuity such that we might justifiably speak of a historiographical tradition. This tradition had its roots in Puritan millennialism and colonialist propaganda and was watered by Civic Republicanism and Enlightenment Liberalism to sprout in the 19th century as the much-maligned but seldom understood
“Whig interpretation of history.” By mid century this interpretation had become ubiquitous, and we must understand that it delivers no narrow nationalism. The Whig view is an all-encompassing metanarrative, as Henry Barnard let us know in 1860:

The education of a people bears a constant and most pre-eminently influential relation to its attainments and excellences—physical, mental, and moral. The national education is at once a cause and an effect of the national character; and, accordingly, the history of education affords the only ready and perfect key to the history of the human race, and of each nation in it,—an unfailing standard for estimating its advance or retreat upon the line of human progress.¹

19th century educational historians focussed on national systems only because they felt these systems to be the best measure of evaluating where a particular people stood on the line of universal human progress. This view was adopted and rendered scientific by 20th century educators like Paul Monroe and Ellwood Cubberley, and it lasted into the 1950s in the works of men like Freeman Butts and Thomas Woody. None of these scholars focussed narrowly on school systems--quite to the contrary. For them schools were valuable only because they provided a key with which to chart the progress of the human race as a whole. Only when the idea of a universal criterion of world progress was called into question did their historiography begin to seem antiquated and embarrassing.

My point, then, and it is rather interesting I think, is that if you’re looking for a trans-national history of education you will find it in abundance in the work of nearly all of the educational historians of the 19th and early 20th century. You will not find it after 1960 because, as Heinz-Elmar Tenorth can tell you, no all-encompassing theory of world

history has arisen to replace the dead thesis of world progress via social and political institution-building.

Secondly, Herbst follows everyone else in misinterpreting Bailyn and Cremin, largely because Cremin himself misunderstood what Bailyn was trying to do. Bailyn was trying to bring the facts of educational history “into relation with a general understanding of the course of American development.” And Bailyn’s particular understanding of that development was simply a variation on Ferdinand Tönnies’ *Gemeinschaft Und Gessellschaft* (not translated to English until 1955 and first published in the U.S. in 1957). For Bailyn, the history of education is one component of the large-scale shift from colonial folk-ways to rationalized formal systems of social organization made necessary by the wilderness’ fragmentation of inherited traditions.²

For Cremin, on the other hand, Bailyn becomes simply the *locus originis* of his preoccupation with making sure we understand education to be more than formal schooling. When it comes to interpretation, Cremin’s hunt for an American *paideia* has more in common with his whig predecessors than with Bailyn’s emphasis on the fundamental difference between the past and the present. Bailyn saw the school as replacing informal, unrationaled folkways. Cremin saw a kaleidoscope of shifting institutional configurations all contributing to the American Character.

Finally, I find the contention that the golden years of the 70s have given way to the impoverishment of the present worth investigating. This view of our recent history has been cropping up quite a bit lately, and one can find examples of nostalgia for the glory days of the late 60s and 70s many places, from Lawrence Veysey’s comment in

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1988 that Michael Katz is a survivor of “earlier and better” times to last year’s AERA discussion titled “Reflections on the ‘Golden Era’ in History of Education research.”

What’s going on here? I think the explanation has a lot more to do with large-scale demographic and intellectual trends than with the presumed materialism and intellectual anemia of today’s graduate students. Just as our population at large is graying and beginning to retire, so are historians of education. It only seems fitting that battle-weary elder statesmen should take time to reflect back on the glory days. This is a deeply human phenomenon that ought not be scorned or mocked. We all need to remember.

But something greater than nostalgia is at work as well, and I don’t think Herbst’s reflections quite capture it. Here are the titles of some influential books, all published in the last ten years: *The End of History and the Last Man, The Death of Character, From Dawn to Decadence, The End of Work, The End of Education, The Death of Literature, The End of Science, The Death of Outrage*. There are probably very few issues on which you could get Jeremy Rifkin, William Bennett, and Alvin Kernan to agree, but they and the other authors of these books all seem to feel with Herbst that we are facing at the present moment some sort of cultural and intellectual deflation and stagnation. But the analysis in most of these books focuses less on the attributes of today’s young people than on long-developing trends in our civilization. “We have no more beginnings,” announces George Steiner in his latest book *Grammars of Creation*. Ours is a time characterized by “core-tiredness….The contracts with time which so largely determine our consciousness, point to late afternoon in ways that are ontological.” We are

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witnessing “the eclipse of the messianic,” both in the apocalyptic form of traditional
Christianity and in the immanent form of Marxist revolution. Why? In short, because of
the murderous monstrosity that was the twentieth century. “We have not begun to gauge
the damage to man—as a species, as one entitling himself sapiens—inflicted by events
since 1914.”

Is there then no future for our civilization, and, by extension, the profession of
educational history? Herbst seems to think that we could revive the profession by
focussing on non-public schools. His argument is catchy: the Bailyn/Cremin thesis of
non-school education is no good, but neither is the antithesis of exclusive revisionist
focus on public schooling. What we need is a middle way that keeps the focus on schools
but avoids the obsession with public education endemic to our profession. Hence private
schools. While I believe that more studies on non-public schools and other phenomena
like homeschooling would be most welcome, I’m not sure they are the panacea for a
core-tired profession. At best such a movement could ignite another
presentist/contextualist debate, with one side finding market forces, parental choice, and
privatization at the heart of the American educational experience and the other
responding with incredulity toward the anachronisms and political agenda of the first.
Such has indeed already happened with the publication of and response to Andrew
Coulson’s Market Education: The Unknown History.

I’d like to offer here an alternative future for the profession, one that is at once
consistent with the historiography of the past and relevant to current discussions. We all

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5 Andrew J. Coulson, Market Education: The Unknown History (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1999).
know that the works of the revisionist scholars of the 1970s were discussed so widely not so much for their value as history as for their politics. What happened was that a group of historians were able to sing the notes of the past in the key of their generation’s concerns. Well, what are the concerns of the present generation? Herbst has struck near the mark by mentioning private education, but I think we’d hit even closer to the center if we look at educational history through the lens of economic globalization. Clearly here is an issue that is at once trans-national in ways that the old Western Civ ed history never was. It is also the locus of the most intense ideological warfare and radical protest one can find on the political front today.

Many recent thinkers have seen in the globalization of Western politics, economics, entertainment, technology, and morality a new unifying concept. Perhaps the most influential such account has been Francis Fukuyama’s *End of History* which suggested that the end of the Cold War and the universalization of Western liberal democracy may mark the end of great ideological struggles, leaving us with a peaceful but rather mundane future where all that’s left to do is manage the global economy and maintain the pace of technical progress. We are said to be entering an age of “universal civilization,” a “global culture,” or as Benjamin Barber wryly puts it, “McWorld.”

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Yet others criticize this view. Samuel Huntington, in his widely discussed *Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* holds it as fundamental that “The Cold War division of humanity [into communism and democracy] is over. The more fundamental divisions of humanity in terms of ethnicity, religions, and civilizations remain and spawn new conflicts.” Unlike the 19th century doctrine of civilization, faith in globalization is nowhere near universal in the west. Many and sophisticated are its critics. Some grant the phenomenon and deplore it. Others deny the phenomenon altogether. Such questions have rarely been taken up by educational historians, but they are begging to be addressed.

Interestingly, the idea of globalization shares much with models used by educational historians in the past. In the sixties and seventies many educational historians unwilling to renounce their progressive roots were attracted to Modernization theory. This theory holds that the process by which the West was transformed from premodern to modern industrial, urban, literate, socially mobile society will be more or less repeated by other peoples as they undergo the same changes. The later writings of Freeman Butts, Thomas Woody, and other contributors to the *History of Education Journal* ascribe to this view. Though discredited today, modernization theory is in many ways similar to the globalization thesis, and it would not surprise me if a certain sort of educational historian, the type who still believes in the project of universal government

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9 Huntington, p. 67.
schooling as an agent of enlightenment and progress, were to draw on globalization arguments to resurrect an international and comparative educational history.

Secondly, globalization theory would perhaps appeal to historians adept at applying models drawn from business and organizational management to their topics. Just as for some the theme of economic and political history is the rise of the IMF, the World Bank, and trans-national corporations, educational historians might recover an international history by finding parallels between international economic organizational patterns and international educational trends.¹⁰

Finally, globalization theory represents perhaps the one remaining option for a historiography of consensus. Popular writers like Robert Wright are arguing that something like a pan-human global civilization is, if not inevitable, the logical result of biological evolution. Others claim to see a religious convergence leading us “toward a Global Civilization.”¹¹ Globalization assumes a peaceful consensus as to ends, as Robert D. Kaplan has argued, and it suggests the possibility of a trans-national history of education that would tell a tale of the gradual victory of cosmopolitan sensabilities and institutions over traditional, “fundamentalist” ones.¹²

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¹⁰ For an example of the business-driven nature of globalization theory see the three part video series Globalisation: with Kenichi Ohmae, prod. and dir. Brian Davies, 162 min., Films for the Humanities, 1997, videocassette.


Many writers have already applied the globalization paradigm to contemporary education, though it has not yet received much attention by historians. I tend to think that a rigorous discussion over the implications of globalization for the history of education would be just the thing to revive the profession internally and to get it some press outside the field.¹³

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