

The Revisionists Revived: The Libertarian Historiography of Education

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Over a decade ago Jurgen Herbst, in a retrospective review of the field of educational history, noted with considerable perturbation that educational historiography had grown tired and dull. “The revisionist surge, whether traditional or radical, has spent itself,” said Herbst, and nothing new or interesting has emerged to replace it.¹ A year later, in March of 2000, a major invitation-only conference sponsored by the Spencer Foundation was held to discuss the state of the field. Some of the conference’s conclusions were published by Ruben Donato and Marvin Lazerson, who prefaced their comments on the current state of the field with a refresher on the “Golden Era” of the late 1960s and 1970s, noting that for many, in the words of one attendee, the passion of those days “is somehow lost. We don’t know where we’re heading. We don’t know what we’re doing.”²

When I first began attending History of Education Society annual meetings as a graduate student in the 1990s, I would often listen wide-eyed to war stories of the good old days when sessions would break down into shouting matches between “radical revisionists” and their opponents. The older generation of historians, it seemed to me, missed both the drama within the field and the press garnered from those outside during the 1970s and early 1980s. Younger historians who were not privy to the fun could relive it in our coursework. Katz’s *Irony of Early School Reform*, Karier, Violas, and Spring’s *Roots of Crisis*, Bowles and Gintis’s *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and Nasaw’s *Schooled to Order* set the stage. Ravitch’s *The Revisionists Revised* introduced dramatic tension. And then Kaestle’s *Pillars of the Republic*, and Katznelson and Weir’s *Schooling for All* brought about satisfying resolution in synthetic arguments for complexity and sophistication. Revisionism’s concern with historically marginalized voices and its broadly critical outlook remained as legacies, but its ideologically driven presentism, reductive

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¹Jurgen Herbst, “The History of Education: State of the Art at the Turn of the Century in Europe and North America,” *Paedagogica Historica* 35, no. 3 (1999): 739.

²Ruben Donato and Marvin Lazerson, “New Directions in American Educational History: Problems and Prospects,” *Educational Researcher* 29, no. 8 (November 2000): 5.

use of source material, and reckless rhetoric had gone out of fashion. Revisionism, we were told, was over.³

But after Revisionism, what? The question has haunted historians of education for two decades now. While all seem to agree on educational historiography's increasingly "marginal impact" on educational policy and on the broader historical profession, there is little consensus on what to do about it. John Rury would like to see the field return to a pre-Bailyn functionalism, where "a major part" of the historical agenda "should be directed by the dynamic and expansive world of educational research." Ellen Lagemann recommends a more humanities-focused discipline. Kate Rousmaniere wants complex social history that draws on "theoretical and methodological insights from other disciplines" to contribute to the larger historical project of "deepening the questions and complicating the conclusions." Kathleen Weiler asks historians of education to take more seriously "the challenge of theory" and get beyond narrow empiricism. Others suggest that study of private schools perhaps, or maybe global or transcontinental perspectives, might get the field out of the doldrums.⁴

But what if radical revisionism is not dead after all? What if historians of education have been so focused on happenings within our own guild that we have missed a major strain of educational historiography that is still making waves in the world of educational policy? This paper will argue that the spirit of the "70s" radicals lives on in the writings of

³Paul J. Ramsey, "Histories Taking Root: The Contexts and Patterns of Educational Historiography during the Twentieth Century," *American Educational History Journal* 34 (2007): 355. Donato and Lazerson, "New Directions," 5. Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968). Clarence J. Karier, Paul C. Violas, and Joel H. Spring, *Roots of Crisis: American Education in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972). David Nasaw, *Schooled to Order: A Social History of Public Schooling in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979). Diane Ravitch, *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools* (New York: Basic Books, 1978). Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983). Ira Katznelson and Margaret Weir, *Schooling for All: Class, Race, and the Decline of the Democratic Ideal* (New York: Basic Books, 1985).

⁴Donato and Lazerson, "New Directions," 9. John L. Rury, "The Curious Status of the History of Education: A Parallel Perspective," *History of Education Quarterly* 46 (Winter 2006): 598; Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, "Does History Matter in Education Research? A Brief for the Humanities in an Age of Science," *Harvard Educational Review* 75 (Spring 2005): 9–24; Kate Rousmaniere, "Fresh Thinking: Recent Work in the History of Education—A Response to Jurgen Herbst's State of the Art Article," *Paedagogica Historica* 37 (2001): 652.; Kathleen Weiler, "The Historiography of Gender and Progressive Education in the United States," *Paedagogica Historica* 42 (February 2006): 162. See also Milton Gaither, "Globalization and History of Education: Some Comments on Jurgen Herbst's 'History of Education: State of the Art at the Turn of the Century in Europe and North America,'" *Paedagogica Historica* 37 (2001): 641–48; Marcelo Caruso, "World Systems, World Society, World Polity: Theoretical Insights for a Global History of Education," *History of Education* 37 (November 2008): 825–40.

libertarian historians of education whose work, much of it coming from scholars and presses outside of the university matrix, is largely unknown by card-carrying educational historians. Furthermore, this libertarian historiography, I will argue, is doing precisely what so many of us wish our own work would do—it is having an impact on educational policy and finding a public readership. I will begin by offering a chronological orientation to libertarian educational historiography, in the process summarizing some of its major concerns. I will conclude by reflecting on the significance of this historiographical tradition for the rest of the field.

Origins of Libertarian Revisionism

Before chronicling the libertarian educational historiography, I should describe very briefly the larger libertarian movement within which it is situated. Though the term “libertarian” has varied usage worldwide, in the United States it has come to be associated with free market economics. With roots in nineteenth century economic liberalism and twentieth century Old Right aversion to the New Deal and to U.S. military interventions in the two World Wars, libertarianism emerged in the 1970s as a public philosophy and distinct political movement whose goal was and is “to explain, in culture, politics, economics, or the courts, why solutions that rely on free markets and free choice are apt to have better results, and be more morally correct, than solutions that rely on central control or government action.”⁵ Though libertarians often think of themselves as representatives of a timeless perspective that has always celebrated individualism and property rights, it would perhaps be better to understand the movement as an outgrowth of the general distrust of government that emerged in the wake of cold war fears and countercultural sensibilities in post-WWII America. Libertarianism’s ideological contours were limned by founding figures Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich Hayek, Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and Milton Friedman, and it has been sustained financially by converts from the business world, whose largesse has bankrolled an impressive assortment of think tanks, publishing outlets, endowed professorships, international conferences, and social experiments. Libertarians will be the first to admit that they have had very little electoral success, but at the level of ideas and policy they have been very influential, and they know it.⁶

⁵Brian Doherty, “Libertarianism: Past and Prospects” *Cato Unbound*, 7 March 2007, accessed 22 July 2009 at: <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2007/03/07/brian-doherty/libertarianism-past-and-prospects/>.

⁶Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 31–66, 8–15; Milton Gaither, *Homeschool: An American History* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 91–96, 101–4.

From its earliest years as a self-conscious movement, libertarian intellectuals have come out strongly against government run, tax-financed, compulsory education. Public education is for libertarians one of the most auspicious examples of everything that goes wrong when government monopoly prohibits market choice. Pioneer libertarian publisher Raymond Cyrus Holies, for example, believed that public schools were “the root of every other evil in our statist culture.” So long as government spends twelve years indoctrinating children, paid for by forced taxation, “how can American kids grow up to understand the true meaning of our Declaration of Independence or Constitution, whose spirits are grossly violated by public schools?”⁷

Libertarians also have a long tradition of historical revisionism, especially concerning the history of the New Deal. Libertarians have long argued, and still argue, that the New Deal was a catastrophe that not only extended the depression but created entitlement programs that have had disastrous consequences for the country ever since. Revisionist arguments about U.S. interventions in the World Wars have also long been popular, bordering occasionally on the conspiratorial. And though most contemporary libertarians are sheepish about it now, holocaust revisionism was fashionable among some libertarians for a time. Murray Rothbard, probably the most systematic of the libertarian revisionists, explained in 1976 why Libertarians were so drawn to revisionist history, “the noble task of Revisionism is to de-bamboozle, to penetrate the fog and lies and deceptions of the State and its court intellectuals, and to present to the public the true history of the motivation, the nature, and the consequences of State activity.”⁸ It is thus not surprising that the libertarian antipathy toward public education and penchant for revisionist history have frequently converged. Libertarian educational revisionism actually antedated the emergence of the canonical “radical revisionism” of Katz et al. and anticipated some of its central arguments. A pair of thinkers in the mid-1960s illustrated the tack most subsequent libertarian revisionists would take. They also illustrate the difficulty of trying to categorize libertarians into schools of thought—there is far too much maverick individualism here to reduce to order.

The first is Rousas Rushdoony, the brilliantly eccentric autodidact and founder of Christian Reconstructionism, a hyper-Calvinist political philosophy holding that over the long term it is inevitable that Christians will gain dominion of the world, governing it by Biblical law. Rushdoony understood all of history to be a battle between forces

⁷Holies quoted in Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 175.

⁸Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 680, 337–39. This should be the reference for the Rothbard quote. Please address.

that acknowledge the sovereignty of God and those that seek the “divinization, Roman style, of the state.”⁹ His economic platform was thus solidly libertarian, opposed in every possible way to the authority of secular government. While most libertarians do not know what to make of Rushdoony’s “bizarre political program of no interference with economic activity combined with dutiful stoning of adulterers and homosexuals,” he did have a significant impact on many libertarians in the 1960s, especially those associated with the Volker Fund, the primary financial backer of early libertarian initiatives.¹⁰ Even libertarians leery of Rushdoony’s Theomistic politics found his revisionist account of the history of public schooling revelatory. His book *The Messianic Character of American Education*, published in 1963, was a truly original work, offering a synthetic and critical interpretation of the writings of key education reformers richly grounded in primary sources and written with a tone of erudite omniscience.¹¹

In Rushdoony’s telling, common schools were the result of a rebellion against the traditionalist Calvinism of the colonial period by Unitarians and their sympathizers who redefined Christianity as a religion of human liberation from convention rather than a faith requiring obedience to revealed authority. Since many, especially rural, Americans held to the more traditional understanding of Christianity, Horace Mann and his allies turned to compulsory education to bring the country up to date. Mann’s efforts were abetted significantly by the merchant classes, who were “not of the colonial aristocracy and hence were ready to see the old order challenged. Without their readiness to tax themselves, the state support of education would have failed.” Anti-Catholic sentiment helped as well, as Protestants eagerly embraced the idea of compulsory Protestant schooling “paid for by the Catholics.” Though Mann’s rhetoric made it sound like the choice was between supporting public schools or having no education at all, in fact “the issue was between state-controlled education and community-controlled education.” Mann’s two goals were “to secularize education” and “to make it the province of the state rather than the community and parents.” His campaign was so successful that his views “have become the American educational creed, and his concept of state education has supplanted the community education of his day.”¹²

⁹“Interview with R. J. Rushdoony,” *Contra Mundum* (Fall 1994). Accessed 23 July 2009 at: <http://kevincraig.info/rushdoony-cm.htm>;

¹⁰Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 294.

¹¹Rousas J. Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education: Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Education* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1963).

¹²Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Messianic Character of American Education: Studies in the History of the Philosophy of Education* (Nutley, NJ: Craig Press, 1963), 37, 45, 27, 31.

Rushdoony's book exerted a profound impact on the nascent Christian right of the 1960s and 1970s, the decades when conservative Protestants began to jettison their historic support of public schools and see them instead as incubators of secular humanism, socialism, and libertinism. His analysis, concluding that the problem was not that secularists had taken over the Protestant public schools but that Protestants were wrong to look to the state for educational support in the first place, played a major role in the growth of independent Christian day schools and homeschooling. But Rushdoony's text was written with such intellectual firepower and depth that it found a readership outside of Christian circles. Secular libertarians selectively appropriated some of Rushdoony's historical arguments. Rushdoony stressed, for example, the Prussian origin of American common school ideology and offered a compelling account of how commitment to statist education led inevitably to a bloated and expensive bureaucracy impervious to true reform. His book convinced many that the problems with public education did not begin with John Dewey but were intrinsic to the very nature of compulsory schooling. Finally, Rushdoony's appeal to the local community and the family offered many libertarians a positive alternative vision. Rushdoony himself did not unpack this alternative tradition, but many subsequent libertarian historians would.¹³

The second "founder," if you will, of libertarian revisionism was British economist E. G. West. In 1965, West published *Education and the State*, which proved to be a seminal book on British education. His book both uncovered an ignored tradition of dissent against statist education and offered a point-by-point economic analysis and refutation of common claims made by nineteenth century education reformers about the economic and social benefits of government schooling. West found that government schools have not reduced crime, increased equality of educational opportunity, inculcated common democratic values, or promoted economic growth. In 1967, West replicated his argument on the other side of the Atlantic in a remarkable article in the *Journal of Law and Economics* titled "The Political Economy of American Public School Legislation." No other piece of libertarian educational historiography has been so oft cited by libertarians.¹⁴

¹³Ibid., 43–48, 108–9. On Rushdoony's impact on Christian day schools and homeschooling see Gaither, *Homeschool*, 134–40, 158–62. The best example of the libertarian appropriation of Rushdoonian themes is probably Susan Alder, "Education in America," in *Public Education and Indoctrination*, ed., Hans F. Sennholz (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: Foundation for Economic Education, 1993), 20–34.

¹⁴E. G. West, "The Political Economy of American Public Schools," *Journal of Law and Economics* 10 (October 1967): 101–28. On West's influence see James Tooley, *E. G. West: Economic Liberalism and the Role of Government in Education* (London: Continuum, 2008).

West begins his article by noting how strange it is that economists, who usually are quick to point out the self-interested fiduciary motives of political agents, have given crafters and backers of public school legislation a free pass. The first part of his article describes the rich assortment of private, charity, and government schools that were doing a fine job of educating all but the most rural of New Yorkers before 1812. Despite this record of success, government interests pushed for uniform common schools, which they eventually secured. Even these were paid for by a combination of taxes and the rate bill through the 1840s, but educational reformers argued incessantly for the abolition of rate bills and the establishment of free education. As he had in the British context, West looks at the various economic arguments made by these reformers in light of subsequent history and finds that all of them turned out to be false. But it did not matter, for policy here was being driven not by empirical evidence but by baser concerns: "Whilst conventional history portrays [public school advocates and teachers] as distinguished champions in the cause of children's welfare and benevolent participants in a political struggle, it is suggested here that the facts are equally consistent with the hypothesis of self-interest behavior."¹⁵

Public school advocates objected to rate bills because they made competition from private schools more threatening. So long as parents had to pay even a little for public schools, they would be discriminating consumers. After the 1867 Free School Act, government was more successful at shutting down the private school competition, for how could private schools compete with a product that was "free," especially when parents had already paid for it with their taxes? The next logical step in the march to monopoly was compulsory attendance, which had been accomplished by 1890. "Compulsory payment and compulsory consumption had become mutually strengthening monopoly bonds and the pattern of schooling for the next century had been firmly set."¹⁶

The basic arguments that would come to characterize all libertarian educational historiography were thus in place before there even was a libertarian political party (and before publication of Katz's famous book on Beverly, MA). The noble tradition of free market, community and family based education that characterized colonial and early nineteenth century America was abrogated by self-interested reformers who used State authority to exert social control over the diverse American population by replacing the local and particular with uniform schooling, paid for by compulsory taxation and enforced by compulsory attendance.

¹⁵ West, "The Political Economy of American Public Schools," 115.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 127.

Maturation of Libertarian Revisionism

In the ensuing four decades libertarian educational historiography has developed along two main lines. One group of scholars has continued to delve deeply into primary source data and relevant secondary literature to produce high-caliber works of original scholarship. A second group of studies are more popular and summative in tone, tending to recapitulate the increasingly familiar arguments made by libertarian historians as prolegomena to public policy recommendations. The boundaries between these two types of studies are rather fluid, largely because *all* libertarian historiography is policy driven, or, to use a more pejorative term, presentist. In what follows, I will not summarize every publication that has emanated from every libertarian think tank or publishing house but will instead focus on select works that have broken new historiographical ground.

In the 1970s many of the most influential libertarians believed their movement would have most success by winning new adherents from the disgruntled left. Overtures were made to Marxist and other left-of-center activists, and the rhetoric of movement leaders often sounded like Popular Front agitation. Educational revisionism partook of this trend, as illustrated by the work of anarchist educational historian Joel H. Spring. Joel Spring is, without question, the best known of the libertarian educational historians to professional educational historians. Though his more recent writings reflect very different political leanings and priorities, Spring's *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State*, published in 1972, is a radical revisionist classic, with its powerful critique of progressivist educational ideology as major contributor to the military industrial complex. But Spring's landmark work differed from those of the other canonical revisionists in its celebration of the individual. Spring was concerned less with class analysis (though he did strike that note as well) than with the way the massive edifice of progressive reforms, including education, replaced historic American individualism with the "corporate view of society." His goal was not to make schools more equal or democratic. For the Joel Spring of the 1970s, the "only possible solution" to overcoming the social control of the corporate state "is ending the power of the school."¹⁷

Spring's politics are not completely clear in *Corporate State*, and his frequent use of Marxist scholarship and highlighting of historic leftist dissent from corporate progressivism make it easy to mistake him for a socialist. But subsequent publications made Spring's true political allegiance clearer. In November of 1972, Spring participated in a

¹⁷Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism*, 337–39, 355–59, 411–13. Joel H. Spring, *Education and the Rise of the Corporate State* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 11, 154.

symposium co-sponsored by the Institute for Humane Studies and the Center for Independent Education, both libertarian organizations, that brought together some of the best libertarian minds to discuss all aspects of public education. The symposium's papers were published in 1974 under the title *The Twelve Year Sentence*. The first paper in this collection, Murray Rothbard's "Historical Origins," traced the roots of compulsory schooling to Magisterial Protestantism's need to suppress dissent from Lutheran or Calvinist orthodoxy. New England Puritans tried unsuccessfully to do the same, and the Revolutionary generation advocated compulsory education to teach the people to respect authority. Nineteenth century common school reformers again turned to compulsory education, this time "to tame, mould, and assimilate the troubling influx of immigrants." Twentieth century nativists made the same move, as the KKK's sponsorship of the Oregon law that was ultimately declared unconstitutional in *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* illustrates. Provocatively summarizing the libertarian historical argument, Rothbard's essay concludes, "either *Pierce* and liberty or Horace Mann and the Ku Klux Klan."¹⁸

The other historical paper delivered at the conference came from Joel Spring. In it he describes how established money interests used school boards to perpetuate their influence and maintain the social status quo in public schools. The article is largely a précis of one of his chapters in *Corporate State*. But his participation at the conference and his essay's inclusion in this libertarian collection was suggestive of where his political loyalties lay.

Any lingering doubts as to Spring's political outlook in the 1970s were laid to rest for good upon publication of his 1975 book *A Primer on Libertarian Education*. Spring begins by rehabilitating a forgotten tradition of antischooling critique, beginning with William Goodwin in 1783 and extending to nineteenth century critics like Francisco Ferrer and twentieth century dissenters like Ivan Illich. After chronicling the opposition to compulsory education, Spring lays out a positive platform of child liberation, not only from schooling but from the family as well. Libertarians have always disagreed amongst themselves about just how much liberty is necessary. Most libertarians acknowledge the need for at least a modicum of law and order, particularly when it comes to defense of private property. But the most extreme libertarians (they would say most consistent) advocate full-throttled anarchy. That is

¹⁸Murray N Rothbard, "Historical Origins," in *The Twelve Year Sentence*, ed., William F. Rickenbacker (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974), 20, 29.

Spring's position in this book. Spring would liberate the individual from all restrictions, even those of the family.¹⁹

Such were the heady days of 1970s libertarianism. In the 1980s, libertarian political strategy shifted, as it seemed to many that the most likely converts to libertarianism were now antigovernment Reaganites. Not surprisingly then, libertarian historians tended to downplay the radical individualism of Spring and to focus on the family instead. In the 1980s *The Freeman*, the hallmark publication of the Foundation of Economic Education, the nation's oldest libertarian organization, published a series of education related articles, many of them on historical themes. Many of these articles were later compiled and published under the title *Public Education and Indoctrination*.²⁰ Of the many articles *The Freeman* published on educational history, probably the most important is Robert Peterson's "Education in Colonial America." It builds on the argument of E. G. West, surveying the wide range of educational options available to colonial Americans prior to their usurpation by public schooling, drawing on both primary documents and an impressive array of mainstream historiography. Peterson discusses in Creminesque fashion homes, private schools, colleges, sermons, libraries, newspapers, and philosophical societies, concluding that "the experience of colonial America clearly supports the idea that the market, if allowed to operate freely, could meet the educational needs of modern-day America."²¹

Another influential book of the 1980s was Samuel Blumenfeld's *Is Public Education Necessary?* Blumenfeld was, like Rushdoony, a Christian Reconstructionist, frequently writing for Rushdoony's *Chalcedon Report*. But he also enjoyed wide readership among secular libertarians for his relentless attacks on public education. *Is Public Education Necessary?*, first published in 1981, was financed in large measure by the Institute for Humane Studies. Subsequent editions carried endorsements by many prominent free market advocates, including Rushdoony and E. G. West. In the book, Blumenfeld continued the now standard argument that a cabal of socialist-leaning civic leaders successfully replaced the vibrant private education marketplace with compulsory public schools, but he did so with a much fuller cast of characters than had been offered before. Blumenfeld placed much stress on the conflict between Calvinism and Unitarianism, describing how the Unitarian elite of the early nineteenth century that captured Harvard articulated the ideals upon which Horace

¹⁹Joel H. Spring, *A Primer of Libertarian Education* (New York: Free Life Editions, 1975).

²⁰*Public Education and Indoctrination* (Irvington-on-Hudson, NY: Foundation for Economic Education, 1993).

²¹Robert A. Peterson, "Education in Colonial America," *The Freeman* (September 1983). Accessed 22 July 2009 at: <http://www.thefreemanonline.org/columns/education-in-colonial-america/>.

Mann and other reformers would later build the common schools. Blumenfeld traced the roots of socialist public education to Robert Owen and the Working Men's Party, Josiah Holbrook and the Lyceum movement, and the Prussian influence on nineteenth century college men. According to Blumenfeld, all of these influences came to a head in the work of Horace Mann, whose:

unique contribution was in changing American education from its libertarian, free-market course to an irreversible statist one. Indeed, if anyone can claim credit for changing America's social, academic and—ultimately—political direction from a libertarian to a statist one, it would be Horace Mann.²²

By the 1990s, the libertarian historical case had been made with enough clarity and precision that summative surveys appeared frequently as introductions to policy papers advocating school choice, private schools, and/or homeschooling. Occasional book-length treatments were issued as well, but for about a decade very little innovative historical work on education was done by libertarians. That changed in 1999, when the first of two recent and highly original histories of education from a libertarian perspective were published.²³

The first, Andrew J. Coulson's *Market Education: The Unknown History*, anachronistically extends the libertarian dichotomy between private and government education back in time to produce one of the only sweeping civilization-spanning histories of education to be published in decades. At the dawning of the discipline's professional history it was quite common to write the history of education as part of the broader history of civilization. Educational histories often began in the ancient world (Sumer perhaps, or Egypt, or maybe Greece) and proceeded systematically through the great civilizations of world history up to the modern age. But such grand narratives became increasingly unpopular in the twentieth century such that by the time the critiques of Bailyn and Cremin were leveled at the discipline in the 1960s the only place one could find such an approach was in a few foundations textbooks, where they lived on vestigially. Though his interpretation is almost the exact opposite of these grand civilizational narratives, Coulson's approach in *Market Education* hearkens back to these

²² Samuel L. Blumenfeld, *Is Public Education Necessary?* (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin-Adair, 1981), 184.

²³ For examples of summative studies see Jack High and Jerome Ellig, "The Private Supply of Education: Some Historical Evidence," in *The Theory of Market Failure: A Critical Examination*, ed., Tyler Cowen (Fairfax, VA: George Mason University Press, 1988), 361–82; and Sheldon L. Richman, *Separating School and State: How to Liberate America's Families* (Fairfax, VA: Future of Freedom Foundation, 1994).

early works in its scope and penchant for comparative, cross-cultural history.²⁴

Coulson's history begins in ancient Greece, where we find the free market Athenians contrasted to the statist Spartans. Rome, unfortunately, followed Sparta's lead and destroyed its early republic with oversized government and taxation. The Islamic empire did the same thing, allowing its successful and vibrant tradition of private and religious education to be swamped by government bureaucracy and the decline that came in its wake. The story repeats itself in late medieval Germany, where private education was derailed by Martin Luther's need to create uniformity of belief. And then there is colonial America with its classical academies and venture schools, its district schools paid for by a combination of public funds and rate bills standing alongside its free schools for the poor, its abundant tutoring and finishing schools, its denominational schools and apprenticeships. This rollicking market diversity, so praised by European visitors like Tocqueville and Grund, was discarded in the nineteenth century by advocates of the same uniformity that had killed progress in Greece, the Islamic world, and Germany, this time due to Anglo-American fears of the new immigrants. The new public schools, "controlled by the native Anglo and Saxon Protestant majority" became "an extension of popular bigotry." Coulson devotes more attention than previous libertarian historians to the baleful effects of segregated, racist compulsory education on the nation's minorities, drawing on many of the best-known works of professional educational historians to make his case. He concludes that public schools, far from uniting people of diverse backgrounds and bringing literacy and learning to more people than ever before, "have been used to beat down minorities of every color and creed . . . Far from promoting social harmony, government schools in the U.S. undermined it."²⁵

Once established, public schools have become the mechanism all sorts of interest groups have sought to use to impose their own values on other people's children. Both progressives and traditionalists have shared a commitment to universal, compulsory education, disagreeing only about the specifics children should be compelled to learn. The dreadful social history of twentieth century public education could have been avoided had we never created public schools in the first place but rather allowed each interest group to do its own schooling apart from government interference. We would have been spared progressive

²⁴On the civilization thesis and early professional education historiography see Milton Gaither, *American Educational History Revisited: A Critique of Progress* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2003), 58–88.

²⁵Andrew J. Coulson, *Market Education: The Unknown History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1999), 105.

experiments in faddish curriculum and life adjustment, conservative battles to impose creationism and prayer on the nation's children, and the erasure of the noble tradition of independent black schooling. So long as the nation continues its commitment to universal compulsory schooling by forced taxation, the prejudices of the majority or the powerful will continue to be foisted on everyone else. As recent history has shown, no amount of tinkering will change anything. Only "phasing out state schools in favor of a for-profit educational market" can improve American education.²⁶

Coulson's book was the first libertarian product in years to be taken seriously by academia. It was widely reviewed and generally was judged negatively. Many reviewers faulted its selective use of historical examples, interpreted through an anachronistic set of economic categories. Perhaps the most biting review it received came in the *History of Education Quarterly*, written by Catherine Lugg. Most other reviewers found something redeeming in Coulson's book.²⁷ Not Lugg. For her, Coulson's book was nothing more than a "quasi-scholarly piece designed to justify the author's pet policy proposal," full of presentism and grounded in an odd mix of credible and incredible sources. Worst of all, the book is "very readable," giving it an influence far beyond what it deserves.²⁸

The most recent and by far most remarkable piece of libertarian educational historiography ever written is neither very readable nor has it been noticed by the academic world. It comes from the pen of John Taylor Gatto, who became well known on the educational scene when he won the New York State Teacher of the Year award in 1991 for his work with eighth graders at Booker T. Washington in Spanish Harlem. After winning the award he promptly quit teaching, explaining his reasons for doing so in a widely discussed *Wall Street Journal* article. Since that time Gatto has been on the lecture circuit and writing books, all of them variations on the themes articulated in his best selling 1992 book *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*.²⁹

Dumbing Us Down's case against government schooling did incorporate some historical material, but it was not developed systematically.

²⁶Coulson, *Market Education*, 105.

²⁷For an example of a mixed review see Kathryn McDermott and Jennifer L. Hochschild, *Journal of Policy Analysis* 19 (Summer 2000): 509–13.

²⁸Catherine A. Lugg, *History of Education Quarterly* 39 (Winter 1999): 493–94.

²⁹For Gatto's career see David Ruenzel, "The World According to Gatto," *Teacher Magazine* 12, no. 6 (March 2001): 26–32. John Taylor Gatto, "I May Be a Teacher, But I'm Not an Educator," *Wall Street Journal*, 25 July 1991, sec. A8. John Taylor Gatto, *Dumbing Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling* (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1992).

Over “the better part of a decade” Gatto investigated in more detail where “the school project came from, why it took the shape it took, and why every attempt to change it has ended in abysmal failure.” The results of his investigation were published in 2006 as *The Underground History of American Education*. It is one of the most provocative, most insightful, most absurd mixes of erudition, reductivism, research, and wild conspiracy ever published on the topic of educational history. Though he claims to have consulted “somewhat more than three thousand” documents, Gatto provides very few notes or citations for his sources. He does not care about that sort of thing. “No doubt I’ve made some factual mistakes,” he says, but he is about “locating truth, not assembling facts . . . We live together, you and I, in a dark time when all official history is propaganda. If you want truth you have to struggle for it. This is my struggle.”³⁰

Gatto’s story begins, as do so many libertarian histories, with “the way it used to be,” a nostalgic look at the good old days of the premodern American village. At first, “America struggled down the libertarian road of Locke for awhile while her three grandfather nations, England, Germany, and France, followed Hobbes and established Leviathan states.” There are no Native Americans or African slaves in Gatto’s early America. There was “no grinding poverty, no dangerous national enemies, no indigenous tradition beyond a general spirit of exuberant optimism.”³¹ There was just pure democracy. But European political and educational developments were about to be imported to these shores by a cabal of intellectuals and businessmen that would change everything.

Gatto’s description of the mechanisms of change from libertarian to statist education is the most complete by far of any libertarian writer. He at least touches on and in many cases delves deeply into many themes no other libertarian revisionist mentions. In his discussion of common school reform, for example, he pays careful attention to the work of Joseph Lancaster, Andrew Bell, and the use of Lancasterianism to keep the masses dependent. He hones in on Orestes Brownson’s account of a “covert national apparatus . . . already in place in the decade after the war of 1812, one whose stated purpose was to ‘Germanize’ America.” But Gatto is not really interested in the pre-Civil War period. The great bulk of his massive project is concerned with divulging the machinations of the “Education Trust” of captains of industry like Carnegie and Rockefeller, along with the progressivist lackeys they bankrolled.³²

³⁰John Taylor Gatto, *The Underground History of American Education: A Schoolteacher’s Intimate Investigation Into the Prison of Modern Schooling* (New York: Oxford Village Press, 2006), xxxi–xxxii.

³¹Ibid., 4.

³²Ibid., 17–21, 134.

Gatto begins his discussion of Gilded Age reform with an eccentric and at places brilliant discussion of what Marxist historians tend to call late capitalism:

It took seven years of reading and reflection to finally figure out that mass schooling of the young by force was a creation of the four great coal powers of the nineteenth century. . . . Forced schooling arose from the new logic of the Industrial Age—the logic imposed on flesh and blood by fossil fuel and high-speed machinery.³³

Gatto's emphasis on the philanthropic and political initiatives of the titans of industry sets his work apart from that of other libertarian historians, most of whom, as we have seen, blame public education on self-serving government interests and Prussianized intellectuals. For Gatto, the chief architects of compulsory education were well-meaning money interests. From the beginning, the purpose behind forced schooling "was forged out of what a highly centralized corporate economy and system of finance bent on internationalizing itself was thought to need; that, and what a strong, centralized political state needed, too." Capitalism and Socialism turn out to be one and the same, both dreaming of "an orderly scientific society, one controlled by the best people, now freed from the obsolete straitjacket of democratic traditions and historic American libertarian attitudes."³⁴ Quoting Cumberley, Gatto notes how for these leaders, "overproduction" had to be curtailed for the sake of economic stability. Thus, childhood was extended as forced schooling created the docile, dumb workers the factory system required.

Gatto spends considerable time uncovering the many ways industrialists and financiers exerted their influence to build a mass system of compulsory education, bypassing the democratic process to do so. Their private charitable foundations "subsidized university chairs, university researchers, and school administrators, spent more money on forced schooling than the government itself did." Carnegie, for instance, "used his own considerable influence" to keep William Torrey Harris U.S. Commissioner of Education for sixteen years, "long enough to set the stage for an era of 'scientific management.'" Rockefeller did the same for William Rainey Harper. His Chautauqua was one of the most successful means of homogenizing American opinions by exposing everyone to the same "experts," whose most persistent message was "*to listen* to national leaders and get out of the way of progress." Business leaders showed their true colors in such documents as an 1872 U.S.

³³Ibid., 37.

³⁴Ibid., 38.

Bureau of Education *Circular of Information* which advocated against “inculcating knowledge” to the masses because this would allow workers to be able to “perceive and calculate their grievances” thus making them “more redoubtable foes” in labor struggles. Such leaders found the cure for the “overproduction of minds by American libertarian schooling” in the progressivism of the Cardinal Principles report, Kilpatrick’s Project Method, Dewey’s antiacademic child centeredness, scientific racism, whole language readers, and all the other anti-intellectual fads and frills of the period.³⁵

The utopian project of using compulsory schools to order and manage people into a stable and homogeneous society has not worked, and for Gatto its failure is the cause of much of the pain and suffering among the United States’ poor and minority populations. Though Gatto has never articulated his positive vision with anything like the detail and rhetorical gusto he gives his critique, it is clear that for him only a return to the rugged individualism of the frontier will work: “Only the fresh air from millions upon millions of freely made choices will create the educational climate we need to realize a better destiny.” When Gatto was teaching in Harlem he did all sorts of things to subvert the system and restore agency to his students, from abolishing grades, to sneaking his students out of school so they could wander the streets and write about their experiences, to giving class credit for independent study or apprenticeships. Lately, he has become a celebrity champion of homeschooling. There is no systemic solution for Gatto; only a return to libertarian agency and independent thought will work.³⁶

The Meaning of Libertarian Revisionism

It is probably obvious from this review that much of the educational historiography produced by libertarians would not be highly regarded by most professional historians of education. Yet, I believe this tradition does have something to offer us in our continual quest for self-definition and mission. I would like to close this survey by briefly mentioning three strengths of this libertarian literature.

First, Libertarian writing has a point of view. In many domains, from talk radio to TV preaching to the histrionics of the ladies of *The View*, unabashed partisanship tends to win one an audience and foster, if not enlightened debate, at least buzz. Even in academia it has become much more acceptable in recent decades to acknowledge and even to celebrate one’s positionality. Libertarian historiography does

³⁵Ibid., 45, 107, 112, 152, 155.

³⁶Ibid., 384. Ruenzel, “The World According to Gatto,” 26–32.

this honestly and unashamedly. Having a point of view also makes it easier to tell a coherent narrative. The libertarian narrative may be wrong-headed, naïve, full of anachronisms, reductivist, etc., but the reader goes away from a well-crafted libertarian article or book with a clear sense of what the point was. Of how many of our own publications can that be said? The coherence and clarity of the libertarian grand narrative, if false, challenges us who would see ourselves as more adept and nuanced historians to respond with our own clear and compelling narratives.³⁷

Second, Libertarian writing is interesting to read. Most of the libertarian writers are very effective communicators. Since they have a partisan point of view their work is infused with a rhetorical edge that keeps the reader, sympathetic or not, engaged with the text. The “so what?” question never needs to be posed to this body of scholarship. Sometimes this interest and accessibility comes at the expense of careful documentation. Sometimes it is due to hyperbole or reductive analysis. But I cannot help but wish that the work of our own guild had at least some of the rhetorical sparkle and emotional pop that these writers display. These works are written with conviction, as if the future of the nation hangs in the balance and it is up to the libertarian scholar to convince the reader to choose the way that leads to life. That may sound like melodrama, but melodrama *works* as a rhetorical device.

Finally, and here we get to the heart of our longest standing internal discussion about the purpose of educational historiography, the libertarians’ work is informed to a very great extent by current political debate. This is the fundamental continuity libertarian revisionism shares with the radical revisionism of the 1970s, and it is also the underlying reason why these works are interesting to read and are in fact read by many politically minded citizens. In the classic debate between historiographical functionalism and liberalism, the libertarians are clearly on the side of functionalism. Their political commitments are the exact opposite of those of the functionalists of the 1950s against whom Bernard Bailyn was reacting, but for both camps history is prolegomena to policy recommendations. As with the educational functionalists of the early twentieth century, Libertarian historians are often very naïve about their own assumptions. Their understanding of “free market” ideology is every bit as uncritical and ahistorical as were the progressive schoolmen’s celebrations of nonsectarian public schooling. Libertarian unmasking of hidden agendas and assumptions is never turned on

³⁷For a thoughtful reflection on positionality in educational historiography from an African American perspective see Derrick P. Alridge, “The Dilemmas, Challenges, and Duality of an African-American Educational Historian,” *Educational Researcher* 32 (December 2003): 25–34.

itself. And yet here the libertarians are, crafting a historical narrative that has had tremendous impact on public debates about school choice and government monopoly. Though my own academic background and personal affections are with those who would hold out for the integrity of history as its own end, the libertarians are convincing me that if we want anybody to read our work we will need to be more deliberate about our own points of view, more compelling in our rhetoric and narrative structure, and more clear about what our historical scholarship means for school and society today.³⁸

³⁸On the debates between functionalists and liberals, see Lawrence Cremin, "Recent Development of the History of Education as a Field of Study in the United States," *History of Education Journal* 7 (Fall 1955): 1–35; and Sol Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies: Toward a New Cultural History of Education* (New York: Peter Lang: 1999), 9–19.

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