

The Making of “We, the People...”

Steven L. Jones Ph.D.

This paper examines the difficulties inherent in using public education as the primary institutional means for producing citizens. It is widely acknowledged that the schools have a significant role to play in terms of promoting national unity and civic literacy, but the pluralism indicative of 21st century American life makes this a controversial issue both on the levels of political integration and civic literacy. Recent evidence about the schools’ failure to teach basic knowledge about American political life is also examined.

In early 2012 a grainy, incomplete cell phone video became an internet sensation when a North Carolina social studies teacher was caught silencing a student for criticizing President Barack Obama. In the “dialogue” that ensued, the teacher told the student (incorrectly) that he could be arrested for slandering an incumbent president, and more specifically, that no one could disrespect President Obama in her classroom. First Amendment issues aside for the moment, other students reported that this particular teacher was known for pushing a liberal agenda and for her intolerance of opposing perspectives. In another case, a Virginia teacher was roundly criticized for assigning his students the responsibility of digging up “dirt” on various candidates for the Republican nomination and then having them outline strategies for how their research could undermine the respective campaigns. Stories like these flare up for a brief moment every election cycle; and though they do not last too long, they do point to a regular feature of our educational landscape: We want our schools, especially our open-to-all public institutions, to be free from political strife. But is this really desirable?

For all the posturing about politically neutral schools, a quick look at how they are organized and managed shows that, indeed, our educational institutions are also very much political institutions. The school boards that determine policy and even content are democratically elected, with both the Democratic and Republican parties working at the

county level to put their candidates in office. As with other government expenditures, it is tax dollars that supply most of the funding for America's public schools, thus subjecting them to the political pinball game that is government funding. Would-be presidents often campaign on promises to make the schools better by undoing whatever their predecessor did, and yet Americans expect to have non-partisan education. No wonder some observers have charged Americans with willfully maintaining what they call the "myth" of separation between our schools and our politics.¹ Our rhetoric often chords them off from one another, but in reality we know that part of the health of our body politic depends on the connections between politics and schooling. As Lawrence Cremin, the dean of America's educational historians aptly recognized, education is unavoidably political because it has ramifications for the future character of the state.²

Knowing that our schools serve political purposes and readily acknowledging that on a day-to-day basis are two different things. Phi Delta Kappa, the international professional organization for educators, conducts an annual survey of American attitudes toward public education and routinely includes questions about the purposes and goals of public schools. When the question is open ended (that is, no answers are provided by the questionnaire), Americans usually cite preparation for the job market as the most important goal for public schools. When given options to pick from, however, Americans often cite preparation for citizenship as the most important goal. That is, Americans embrace the broad political dimensions of public education, but they have to be reminded

¹ Frederick M. Wirt and Michael W. Kirst, *The Politics of Education: Schools in Conflict* (Berkeley: McCutchan, 1982).

² Lawrence Cremin, *Popular Education and its Discontents* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990).

of those dimensions to rank them ahead of other issues.³ Even being confronted with the civic dimensions of schooling, though, is no guarantee that Americans will recognize their importance. In the 2000 survey “preparing people for responsible citizenship” was ranked the least important from among the choices offered.⁴

Preparing students for responsible citizenship can take many forms, some more direct than others. This paper will take up two related efforts, but these are by no means exhaustive of the connections between politics and schooling. First, the schools are concerned with the production of a certain type of person. All social orders need their members to have a set of ideals and practices that fit them for life in the society. These range from simple dispositions, such as preferring honesty over deception, to more challenging practices like accepting autonomy as a social good, even when people behave in ways one might find objectionable. Education is the primary institutional means for cultivating these socially desirable traits in the population. Second, citizens need to understand the basic rights and responsibilities of membership in a given political order. This can include an appreciation of a society’s founding myths as well as a sense for where they fit in the machinery of the government so they are equipped to participate in public affairs. This is particularly true in representative democracies that base

³ There are other means of characterizing the ways in which widespread, state-run schooling affects the social order. For analysis on the schools as agents of social control, see Michael Katz, *A History of Compulsory Attendance Laws* (Bloomington, Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation, 1976). For analysis on education and social mobility, see Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*, (New York: Academic, 1979); Christopher Jencks, *Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America* (New York: Basic, 1972); Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (London: Sage, 1977).

⁴ Examining almost 40 years of this survey leads one to the conclusion that how the question is asked may be the most important determinant of what answers are received. Comparing responses from 1996 to 2000 shows considerable variation in terms of the importance attached to civic literacy as a goal for public schools, more than would be expected in so short a time period. Survey reports are available from Phi Delta Kappa’s Web site at <http://www.pdkintl.org/>.

governmental legitimacy on the consent of the governed. In practice these are often not distinct from one another, and *both can be controversial*.

Fitting Citizens for the Social Order

The great French sociologist Emile Durkheim, always concerned with the origins of social order in complex societies, held that social coherence is made possible in part by social homogeneity. The task for any advanced society is to produce common ground in the midst of the dissimilarities inherent in differentiation and specialization. For Durkheim “education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the mind, from the beginning, the essential similarities that social life demands.”⁵ These “essential similarities” were the product of a people’s experience and social evolution. They were the commanding truths that bound members of a given society together and served as the common ground that linked individuals and groups to the larger collective. The schools created and maintained by a given society passed on these experiences and truths to succeeding generations, thus ensuring some measure of consistency across generations.

Durkheim was far from the first to recognize this. Plato and Aristotle both knew that any education has to be oriented towards some conception of the good life. There can be no education that does not teach students to value certain ends over others, or particular means to achieve those ends. Again, Durkheim is instructive: “For us too the principal object of education is not to provide the child with a greater or lesser degree of items of knowledge, but to create within him a deep lying disposition...of the soul which orients him in a definite direction...”.⁶ As Anne Michaels Edwards has written, “The

⁵ Emile Durkheim, “The Development of Educational Systems,” in *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, ed. Anthony Giddens, 203 (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972).

⁶ Durkheim, “Educational Systems,” 207-8.

starting point for any educational theory must be some view of the ideal citizen in the ideal state, which influences what kind of person is the ideal person, and thus, what kind of education we use to produce that person.”⁷

Some of the most influential educational theorists and practitioners in American history have helped shape public education along just these insights. John Dewey, for instance, made the connection between the political life of the society and its educational practices the cornerstone of his approach. For Dewey and many of his contemporaries, education was essentially the transmission of a culture. It made no sense to formulate the content of education, or even to think of education in general, until a clear picture of the desired society was firmly in hand. Why? Because schools serve as controlled environments in which children gain experience into the preferred way of life for their society. Education should secure “direction and development in the immature through their participation in the life of the group to which they belong.”⁸ Thus, the sort of society we envision will shape the sort of schools we build, thus making a clear vision of the social order a necessary precursor to any sort of educational system.

The transmission of culture happens with or without conscious effort in human society, but it is not at all unregulated and it is certainly not neutral. Most people in the modern West are educated in large, bureaucratic institutions run by the state. Historically, this was certainly not the case. Institutions such as the family, the guild, or the church were responsible for the socialization of children into the life of the society. While each of these institutions continues to provide for the education of children, the dominant form of education in the modern world is publicly run, state-authorized

⁷ Anne Michaels Edwards, *Educational Theory as Political Theory* (Brookfield, VT: Avebury, 1996), 1.

⁸ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1916), 81.

schooling. It is here that the impossibility of politically neutral education is most manifest. The state, as the organizing institution that manages the school, has economic and political interests of its own. Literacy, for instance, increases worker productivity, thereby increasing the economic might of the state; patriotism makes recruiting for the military easier, increasing the state's potential military power, etc. The fact that individuals may benefit from state-run education is, in this perspective, secondary to the advancement of the state's own interests.⁹

Using the schools to promote a common set of skills and values can also combat excessive group particularism, or even individualism, that might threaten the social order.¹⁰ It does so by orienting students separated by social boundaries, such as class or creed, in a similar direction and by instilling something of a commitment to the public good in all students. The mid-to-late 19th-century rise of public education was, in fact, a decisive break with what had come before, precisely because it did not reinforce small group particularities the way private education did. Instead it stressed large group, usually national, interests. This process of breaking down group loyalty and realigning individuals to the state is called political integration, and is one of the most striking features of American public education. Overcoming social divisions like those in Europe was one of the major motivations for the common school movement of the 19th century. One can view this as a benevolent attempt to bring people into the American mainstream, or more suspiciously, as an attempt to disintegrate sub-national cohesive social systems

⁹ See Andy Green, *Education and State Formation: The Rise of Education Systems in England, France, and the USA* (New York: St. Martins, 1990).

¹⁰ Amy Gutmann, an influential political theorist who is now the president of an Ivy League university, believes that educational institutions in the modern West can and should reject neutrality because some perspectives may be heard in the classroom that are antithetical to the society's goals. See Amy Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987).

that threaten the social order; but that this effort was a major impetus for public schooling in America cannot be denied.¹¹

This political integration can occur both vertically and horizontally. Vertical integration attempts to cross the rich-poor gap and allow students at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder the opportunity to fully participate in economic opportunities that would be denied them without education. Although held up as an ideal for American public schools, successful vertical integration through schooling often remains elusive. Horizontal integration is that which provides the common elements of social identity, thus producing something of a *culture generale*.¹²

The state's interest in developing a common culture is magnified in complex societies precisely because familial socialization is too limited. A more differentiated polity requires common, and therefore non-familial, socialization, one of the tasks of which is to provide children with group membership and affiliation. In fact, redefining the web of membership, and therefore loyalty, is one of the primary ways states develop their authority. They break down the activities and identities of specific groups and reconstruct them as public, meaning collective, activities and identities. Education is an institutional means for this process: "A state-authorized educational system, by structurally and symbolically removing actors from their constituent groups and relating

¹¹ Horace Mann, the architect of American public schooling, was quite clear about this in his reports to the Massachusetts Board of Education. He was concerned that the pluralism present in 19th-century American life threatened America's very existence. See Horace Mann, *The Republic and the School: The Education of Free Men*, ed. Lawrence Cremin (New York: Teachers College Press, 1957).

¹² James Coleman, "Introduction: Education and Political Development," in *Education and Political Development*, ed. James Coleman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965).

them directly to the corporate structure, confers on its graduates the political identity of corporate agents as legitimate members of the state.”¹³

All of this can be viewed as either a benevolent attempt by the state to promote social order for the good of all, or as a more threatening attempt to ensure its own power and deter opposition to its rule. For example, Amy Gutmann, writing about education in Western liberal democracies, presents public education as a means of extending the full benefits of citizenship to previously disempowered segments of society. For her, a benevolent social order that gives citizens the best opportunity for fulfillment is clearly in the best interests of all involved. Accordingly, an education that enrolls citizens into the social order is a legitimate state prerogative.

Other theorists, working with similar concepts, have developed a different vocabulary, and in doing so, have presented a different picture. Edward Shils used his influential center-periphery distinction to make the point that enrolling the individual in the state as the source of his or her primary identity can threaten the very existence of a sub-national community. The center, in promoting adherence to the central value system it depends on as the source of common ground in the society, has greater influence in modern mass societies than it ever has in the past, precisely because it controls schooling.

¹³ John Meyer and Richard Rubinson, “Education and Political Development,” *Review of Research in Education*, ed. Fred Kerlinger (Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock, 1975), 154. Political economists have also written about the work of education in stabilizing the social order in general, and democratic social order in particular. Milton Friedman argued that democratic stability depends upon widespread literacy and “acceptance of some common set of values. Education can contribute to both.” Normally, economists make these arguments in their discussions of public financing of education. Since social cohesion is a common good, and a product of education, it follows that public funds should subsidize, if not sponsor, mass education. See Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

Indeed, he argued that in modern mass societies, the government has more influence over the population because of near universal public education than ever before.¹⁴

Civic Literacy

Citizenship education also provides an introduction into the political life of the society. Essentially, schools teach the how's and why's of political participation in their society. This includes legitimation of the political system, meaning that one often learns that structure under which he or she lives is the greatest of all political systems, worthy of respect and even self-sacrificial devotion if needed. It also includes the *modus operandi* by which one is able to participate meaningfully at the level allowed by the particular system.

In keeping with the earlier analysis on how education breaks down competing allegiances and stresses a new, usually national, identity, schools do impart a certain “we/they” dichotomy to students, with “they” being defined as those outside the political community. Studies also show children learn early on that there is an authority outside the family that demands their support and respect, although they tend to concretize this conception with particular people, like members of the police department rather than the general office of an official of the state. As early as twelve or thirteen years of age, children have some understanding of the responsibilities of citizenship, which includes participation in the political process as an important element of being a good citizen along with interest in public affairs and obedience to the law.¹⁵

¹⁴ Edward Shils, *The Constitution of Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

¹⁵ See Philo Washburn, “The Public School as an Agent of Political Socialization,” *Quarterly Journal of Ideology* 10 (1986): 24-35.

Basic knowledge about American history would also be a component of political socialization, as students from varied backgrounds learn something of the heroes and villains of America's past. The social conditions under which the Founding Fathers drafted the Declaration of Independence, or how the Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation are part of this effort. Americans have a deep sense of pride in their democratic history, but it is easy to document their lack of competence in these matters. Only about one-third of Americans can name the three branches of government established by the Constitution. Nearly four in ten are not sure if the United States Supreme Court decisions are final, and more than 30% think they can be appealed to some other body. More than 60% of American teenagers cannot identify the first three words of the Constitution. Polls show that up to one third of Americans cannot name the current Vice President of the United States, to say nothing of their governors, senators, and congressional representatives. Though there is some disagreement about how significant the decline in basic civic literacy may be (would previous generations have known these things?), no one doubts that many Americans are ignorant of the origins and functions of their government. The concern here is about more than incorrect responses and blank stares. Lack of knowledge about how our democracy works further disempowers citizens if they are unable to move the levers of government to bring about change or shape policy. It can also breed distrust and cynicism that corrode democratic foundations, sapping our society of the social capital that has long been such a part of America's unique experiment with self-government.¹⁶

¹⁶ For a review of the survey data see Sheila Kennedy, "Civic Literacy: Charting the Dimensions and Consequences of a Civic Deficit," Sheila Kennedy Weblog, entry posted June 2011, www.sheilakennedy.net/2011/06/civic-literacy-charting-the-dimensions-and-consequences-of-a-civic-deficit/ (accessed July 20, 2012).

More evidence comes from the United States Department of Education in their annual National Report Card. These reports are based on student mastery of various subjects and are issued under the auspices of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Student competency is measured by what percentage of those tested score in one of three categories, Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. Proficient scores indicate “solid academic performance” and represent what NAEP thinks students should aspire to achieve.¹⁷ In 2010 the exam focused on civics and showed a decline among twelfth grade students scoring at or above “proficient” since the 2006 exam, the last time students were tested on civics, with only 24% achieving at least a “proficient” score.¹⁸

The exam tests more than rote memorization. For example, one of the questions contains the following quote from the United States Supreme Court’s 1919 decision in *Schenck v. The United States*:

We admit that in...ordinary times the defendants...would have been within their constitutional rights. But the character of every act depends upon the circumstances in which it is done. The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic....The question in every case is whether the words used are in such circumstances and are of such a nature as to create a clear and present danger that they will bring about the evils that Congress has a right to prevent.

Students were then asked what argument the Court was making, and were given four choices: A) that Congress can limit free speech as it sees fit; B) that the right to free speech can never be limited by government; C) that rights are not absolute and may, in some circumstances, be limited; D) that the judiciary cannot overturn laws like the Espionage Act (which the defendants in this case were accused of violating). It is

¹⁷ See The Nation’s Report Card, *Civics 2010*, National Center for Education Statistics Web site at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2011466>. The NAEP makes it clear that the decline, in most cases, was not statistically significant. Accordingly, they cannot be sure that 2010 students actually know less than those that took the exam in 2006.

probably unrealistic to expect high school seniors to know the details of a given Supreme Court case, with a few exceptions, but this question asks them to read the Court's opinion and figure out how it applies to them. The details of *Schenck* are not the point. Rather, reading comprehension and an understanding of the Court's role is necessary to correctly answer the question. Still, 4 in 10 failed to recognize that the Court was saying that rights are not absolute and may be limited by the government in some circumstances.

It should be noted, however, that high school students in America outscore many of their peers in international comparisons when tested about civic knowledge in their own countries. The 1999 Civic Education Study, conducted by the International Education Association, ranked American students among the most knowledgeable in terms of civic content (understanding the basic principles of democracy and the organization of their national government). Furthermore, Americans outscored every other nation in the study when tested on civic skills, meaning the ability of the students to read and understand newspaper articles and other sources that sought to inform public opinion. The study also found that although most American students reported studying civics every day in the classroom, they had substantially less homework in these classes than in others. Relatively few students claimed to have engaged the political process as part of their education. For instance, very few reported having been challenged to attend a public forum or to write a letter supporting a particular policy. It is interesting to note that other studies have shown that privately schooled and homeschooled students outscore their publicly schooled counterparts on these and other measures of civic engagement.

¹⁸ This decline was not consistent across all groups of students, with Hispanic students showing an increase in scores from 2006 to 2010.

They vote more often, lobby more often, and generally score higher when asked about current events.¹⁹

Some observers have expressed concern that a failure to understand or appreciate America's political institutions and the historical struggles that made them possible may lead to a decrease in the sense of responsibility citizens feel toward the body politic.²⁰ For example, one may demand trial by jury whether or not one has ever served on a jury. Even those that do everything they can to "get out" of jury duty are still guaranteed a jury trial should they find themselves in the uncomfortable role of defendant. Likewise, a citizen's right to vote in an election is guaranteed whether or not they have taken the time to study the candidates and issues up for decision.²¹

While many Americans bemoan the state of citizenship education, it is also clear that they cannot agree on what to do about it. One recent attempt to shore up civic literacy in the public schools itself became the subject of considerable controversy, vividly illustrating just how thorny a problem this is. In the 1990s the National Endowment for the Humanities, led at that time by Lynn Cheney, charged various groups

¹⁹ See Christian Smith and David Sikkink, "Is Private School Privatizing?" *First Things* (April, 1999): 16-20.

²⁰ In large part, the modern conception of citizenship focuses on the rights of political membership in a given society. T.H. Marshall, for instance, explained citizenship as the legitimate claim to a growing body of rights guaranteed by governing authority. This body of rights included: civil rights, understood as equal protection under the law; political rights, which guaranteed participation in the body-politic; and social rights, which provided a minimum standard of social and economic security. See T.H. Marshall, *Citizenship and Social Class*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1950, 1977). Though Marshall also included discussions of the responsibilities of citizenship, it is the rights of citizenship that usually motivate political and social action. Any discussion of citizen responsibilities is generally left to scholars and theorists, and even then the trend in political philosophy and in the practice of politics has been to focus on rights, relegating any discussion of responsibility to the footnotes. See Morris Janowitz, *The Reconstruction of Patriotism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

²¹ This breakdown between exercising rights and accepting obligations is similar to the free rider problem in social and political theory. To use a famous illustration, if a city provides bus service to all its inhabitants (a type of right), asking only a voluntary donation (a type of responsibility), then the most rational thing a citizen could do is to ride the bus without contributing. As long as most people make a donation, the bus service will continue whether a given individual, who may ride the bus every day, ever financially supports the service.

of academics with developing new standards for different fields of study. For American history, the NEH teamed with the U.S. Department of Education and the National Center for History in the Schools (NCHS) to produce a set of objectives that would inspire school children to embrace America's political heritage.

Just before the standards were released, Cheney, who had by then moved on from her tenure at the NEH, depreciated the very product she had commissioned. The standards, she argued, exalted political correctness and multiculturalism at the expense of "traditional" history. Her essay, published in the *Wall Street Journal*, brought public attention to what might have otherwise passed without much comment. Instead, it prompted a battle in the culture wars, the discussion of which generated more heat than light. The conflict presented an opportunity for talking about the purposes of learning history, but instead the debate focused on what should be included in the bullet points of a given lecture. It reinforced the idea that history is a list of names, dates, and locations to be memorized and stored away: Columbus sailed in 1492; George Washington was the first president. These statements are true enough, but surely they are not the whole story. Columbus did, indeed, sail in 1492, but does saying he "discovered" America do a disservice to the native people groups who were already here? Does American history begin with Columbus' voyage, or thousands of years before with the first people to inhabit the "New" World?

In America's past, advocates of what became known as traditional history see a sometimes sputtering but still coherent narrative moving in the direction of liberty. That movement has stalled, at times, but the overall trajectory is clear. America is the land of the free, and our history is the gradual unfolding of that basic premise. The heroes of this

story are those individuals, usually men, who risked their own wellbeing in pursuit of a polity that could reflect and promote that ideal. Names like Washington, Jefferson, and Adams loom large in traditional history. Revisionist historians do not doubt the importance of these men, but they do widen the historical lens to include the experiences and contributions of women, minorities, and other disenfranchised groups. The revisionist project can be understood as the attempt to recover not only the history of marginalized groups, but also the role of marginalization itself in America's past. The grand narrative, they point out, focuses on a select few, and interprets history from their vantage point. In short, scholars and educators could barely manage to generate a list of what we should know and what our history tells us about ourselves. The very possibility of citizenship education is challenged by conflicts such as this, and certainly it points to the difficulty of what Americans say they want, namely, a non-partisan education.²²

Conclusion

It has been observed that citizens, unlike subjects, are made, not born. In our contemporary political lexicon, citizens are also empowered. Accordingly, the production of the citizen is an important process, all the more so in a society that exercises considerable influence in the world. The primary institutional means for producing citizens in America is the public school, but in this arena Americans profess to want what they cannot have—a politically neutral education. All education is political in so far as it impacts the character of the society. Thus, more effective citizenship education is

²² For an account of the whole affair from the perspective of those on the panel, see Gary Nash, Charlotte Crabtree and Ross Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998). See also "Symposium," in *Society* 34, 2 (January/February 1997); Lynn Cheney, "The End of History," *Wall Street Journal*, (October 20, 1994). For a summary and analysis of these events, see Mark Noll "Some Recent Battles," *Books and Culture* 5, 3 (May/June 1999): 30-34.

dependent upon a clearer vision of what we want for our future. That question is well beyond the scope of this paper, but Americans would do well to ponder it once again.