Review: The View of Progress in Lawrence Cremin's The Transformation of the School

Reviewed Work(s): The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957 by Lawrence Cremin

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BOOK REVIEWS AND COMMENTARY

The View of Progress in Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the School*

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The publication of Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the School,* which is subtitled *Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957,*[1] was a noteworthy occasion for students of American culture in general and of American education in particular. This volume marked the conclusion of the first thoroughgoing attempt to study progressivism in American education. Such an attempt is welcomed by those who have long hoped to see a work which considers progressive education as a significant contribution to American thought and character, rather than as an anti-intellectual and irresponsible hocus-pocus, as many of its detractors and caricaturists would have us believe. For those who would read history instead of the over-simplified and often downright irresponsible caricatures and detractions of progressive education, there is in Cremin's study ample evidence to demonstrate that "the word *progressive* provides the clue to what it was: the educational phase of American Progressivism writ large."[2]

However, in attempting to understand Cremin's interpretation of progress, I find that he stops short of making meaningful one theory of progress (to be identified below) that still remains a source of inspiration for those who believe in its possibilities. I believe that this theory still holds promise for the future of American education. I find that Cremin has made this theory of progress seem less significant than it deserves. While doing so, he foreshortens its possibilities. In this manner, Cremin's interpretation of progressivism in education lends support to the very "conventional wisdom" that stands opposed to any theory of progress which holds that intelligence makes a difference in things.

It is not my intention, then, to review this work, or to analyze at length the details of its contents. Rather I want to set forth the ideas which have emerged in my attempt to understand its underlying view of history and progress. It is hoped that exploring these ideas will support my contention that there is a conception of progress which is still meaningful today, despite Cremin's claim that the progressive movement has collapsed. I shall mention briefly the ideas which have come to mind as a result of examining *The Transformation of the School.* I shall turn then to an elaboration at greater length of the meanings which these ideas suggest.

First, Cremin has engaged in what appears to be a quite ambitious and thorough attempt to point out many meanings of progressivism, and to discuss

its many-sided character in such manner that it is seen as pluralistic and frequently contradictory. While doing so, however, Cremin's analysis tends to de-emphasize the one conception of progress which seems to me to be that one which affords the most intelligent faith in the possibilities of any education deserving the modifier "progressive."

And, second, in exploring possible explanations for this tendency, I shall entertain the hypothesis that Cremin has implicitly a view of history which, if understood, can serve to account for the way in which certain ideas are treated in his study. A corollary of this view of history would be a view of progress itself. Put differently, I am scouting the possibility that Cremin's view of history, and consequently, his view of progress itself, has influenced his writing so that certain distinctions in meaning are blunted, are "talked away" (or at least, talked "down") in such a way that very important ideas are foreshortened. In doing so, Cremin has not carried an exploration of some of their meanings far enough to see a fuller range of their possibilities.

Now, let us turn to some of the observations which have led to the above-stated conclusion that Cremin has tended to de-emphasize the possible meanings of one conception of progress. This is not to say that Cremin fails to discuss many meanings of progress, or even that he fails to mention the one in question. It is not that he fails to mention it, but that his way of treating it fails to do justice to its possibilities.

Near the very outset he writes,

> In effect, progressive education began as Progressivism in education: a many-sided effort to use the schools to improve the lives of individuals. In the minds of Progressives this meant several things.
>
> First, it meant broadening the program and function of the school to include direct concern for health, vocation, and the quality of family and community life.
>
> Second, it meant applying in the classroom the pedagogical principles derived from new scientific research in psychology and the social sciences.
>
> Third, it meant tailoring instruction more and more to the different kinds and classes of children who were being brought within the purview of the school. . . .
>
> Finally, Progressivism implied the radical faith that culture could be democratized without being vulgarized, the faith that everyone could share not only in the benefits of the new sciences but in the pursuit of the arts as well.[3]

It is important to note that these meanings of progressive education are painted in very broad strokes. This is to say that finding what it *means* to broaden the function of the school can become an objective for conservative, as well as for progressive minds; that "applying in the classroom the pedagogical principles derived from new scientific research" can become an interest of those who want to indoctrinate certain findings as well as those who want to free human intelligence; that "tailoring instruction to the different kinds and classes of children" can mean that different kinds and classes will be directed into narrow, confining channels rather than be given an opportunity to find the means by

which they could choose whatever channel hopefully would add meaning to their lives; and that what constitutes both the arts and the sciences can be determined by some status quo rather than by those who seek to understand what it is to develop arts and sciences which have growing meanings in peoples' lives.

Lest we anticipate our author's own findings, let us leap far ahead to the concluding chapter of his work, where we find that the conservative side of our coin seems to have taken over the meanings in the minds of the early progressives. In Chapter Nine, "The Crisis in Popular Education," we find that by the 1950's, the "conventional wisdom" (a phrase which Cremin borrows from John Kenneth Galbraith) had captured progressive education, or to use Cremin's words, "progressivism had come to be that conventional wisdom."[4] In other words, phrases such as "the whole child," "creative self-expression," and "real life experiences," had become so safe that they were acceptable to the rank and file of educators. Cremin means to say, I take it, that such terms lost whatever meanings they once had to progressive educators and came to stand for whatever the "conventional wisdom" thought acceptable. This, in turn, would indicate that by having been accepted as "good" education, "progressive" education ceased to exist *as progressive*.

A further observation which needs to be made is that, in a certain sense, one is not surprised to find that once-progressive ideas ceased being progressive when they became part of the conventional wisdom. For even at the outset, as we have seen, progressivism in education had so many meanings for Cremin (or, put differently, his way of expressing its meanings left opportunities for quite varied and different interpretations of his stated meanings) that there is very little place left for surprise in the work which follows. Indeed, the widely different meanings of progressivism discussed in the main body of the work testify to what Cremin calls the "pluralistic, frequently contradictory" character of the progressive movement. The Preface readies us for such a variety of different meanings and the author does not disappoint us. He has found evidence which exemplifies his original meanings. He *has* the evidence, but in presenting it, by what kind of *valuing* does he present it? Is there not the possibility that by insisting that progressivism in education is characterized by such variation, Cremin really tells us too little that is distinctive of certain of its ideas? Is it not possible that he has, by the very way in which he treated such a wide range of variations, failed to work toward fuller explication of certain meanings? Or, put differently, may not the unsuspecting reader think he is reading a sheer description of progressivism in education, when what he is reading is rather a description from a point of view which either fails to see, or refuses to consider as a genuine possibility, one meaning of progress which holds to the fundamental hypothesis that ideas might come to be used in a method of intelligence as working hypotheses for hopefully influencing the nature of progress itself?

It is precisely one effect of what Cremin calls the conventional wisdom to dull our capacity for surprise, to convince us that there is a wisdom which *knows* and which need not consider *ideas* seriously. It is to insist that prophets and others who anticipate the future may enable us better to *find our places* in the march of events, but they see almost no hope for the place of intelligence in *shaping the very course of events*. As Cremin views it, the conventional wisdom need not work seriously at finding meanings; it believes it *has* the funda-

mental ones. It tones down genuine differences so as to claim that there *are* no genuine differences—none in the sense that ideas as plans for action can bring about differences in the very conditions in which events take their course.

Interestingly enough, the idea of progress which the conventional wisdom rejects (precisely because acting on it would threaten that alleged wisdom), is the very conception of progress of which Cremin tends to fall short in making very meaningful. It is the one had in mind by John Dewey when he wrote, "Unless progress is a present reconstructing, it is nothing; if it cannot be told by qualities belonging to the movement of transition it can never be judged."[5]

If Cremin's story of progressivism in education brings us to a present in which the conventional wisdom has given meanings to "the whole child," "creative self-expression," "real life experiences," *et al*, and even to "progress" itself, such that genuine progress by the method of intelligence is denied in the very giving of the meanings, then what may men do? To admit that there has been a kind of achievement in which words that formerly conveyed progressive meanings have been seized by nonprogressive and unprogressive minds and put to their use, is one thing. It is another thing to close a study of progressivism in American education by writing,

> . . . the *authentic progressive vision* remained strangely pertinent to the problems of mid-century America. Perhaps it only awaited the reformulation and resuscitation that would ultimately derive from a larger resurgence of reform in American life and thought.[6]

What are we to believe *is* the "authentic progressive vision"? Is Cremin suggesting, after 353 pages in which he took great pains to point out the undefinable and pluralistic character of progressivism, that, after all, there is such a vision? If so, the concluding paragraphs of sweeping rhetoric can hardly convince us when the main thrust of the work had been to convince us otherwise.

How does progress come about? Is it by waiting, on the strength of a vision? Or is it by taking ideas as plans for action? If it is by waiting, we have a limited view of progress, according to which men await coming events, and are destined to be taken up by them. This is the fundamental way to view progress, according to Cremin. However, it ignores Dewey's suggestion that "Till men give up the search for a general formula of progress they will not know where to look for it."[7] According to Dewey, if progress is to come about, men must seek to take action toward finding their places, and in an even more fundamental sense, making places in which they can find themselves. In Dewey's view of progress, the operation of human intelligence makes a difference in things.

There are those, such as Dewey, whose conception of progress has held that

> Every important satisfaction of an old want creates a new one; and this new one has to enter upon an experimental adventure to find its satisfaction. From the side of what has gone before achievement settles something. From the side of what comes after, it complicates, introducing new problems, unsettling factors.[8]

This is so whether or not the achievement has been a "progressive" one. This is to say that whatever the present holds, it is to become otherwise willy-nilly. If

one wants it to become otherwise in an intelligently progressive sense, he makes use of the present by imagining new ends and seeking new meanings to realize them.

If one *awaits* the march of events, "progress" comes to pass only in the sense in which we wait until some later present, and then say to ourselves, "Look, this or that has come to pass. There is another conventional wisdom. Certain prophecies have been fulfilled. Certain things which have been destined have arrived at their destinations." And so on, until another history reports on man's hapless and inconsequential ideas which have become swallowed up in the stream of events. In this manner, lacking a sense of the possibilities of progress which Dewey saw in the very logic of scientific inquiry, an historian will view present obstacles as impediments destined continually and inexorably to frustrate ideas of men, rather than as conditions to be met if one is to find meanings for one's ideas.

It is no mere play on words suggesting that *means* to ends become the *meanings* which life holds. This is no less true with respect to possible meanings of the idea of progress than with other ideas. What an idea as idea means is that its very meanings lie in the seeking of means to bring foreseen ends into a new present. To the extent that present ends (seen as finalities by some version of the conventional wisdom) dictate future means, there is little progress. For progress means the seeking to bring ends-not-yet-realized into existence in some future that will one day be a present. This conception of progress neither professes a "vision," nor is it content merely to await the march of events.

I think there is a principle of organization behind Cremin's thinking more fundamental than the four meanings in the Preface. It is more fundamental than what is suggested by the titles of either the two main parts of his book or by the titles of the chapters. In a significant sense, as Dewey has pointed out, data are not *given* to the inquiry; to be more nearly accurate, they are *taken*.[9] Cremin has *taken* according to some notion of history; he has *valued* according to some view of the possibilities of men taking thought and bringing out its meanings in practice. These meanings have become the data used in writing his history. In short, he has a view of history by which he has taken facts and by which he has presented them. This view of history is not explicitly stated by Cremin. Nevertheless, the form which his presentation takes can not be understood adequately until the underlying view of history, which I assume to be the basic principle of his organization, is itself understood.

My hypothesis is that Cremin's presentation of the history of progressivism in education stands on the notion that men's ideas have made very little difference in the march of events. And what is more, from the standpoint of a view of history, I do not find evidence in the volume to support a conception of history according to which men's ideas might, *in the future*, make a difference. Cremin provides us with very little by which one might suppose that men's prospects are likely to be fundamentally different from what he has found, in retrospect, to have been their lot in the march of events.

Will the future be like the past? Evidently Cremin supposes not, at least in the sense that he believes the present conventional wisdom is in danger of

obsolescence by the march of events.[10] But evidently Cremin supposes so in another sense, that to me is basic to his view of history, viz. his belief that men do not direct, in any significant way, the course of events by taking ideas as hypotheses and working toward finding their meanings, i.e. working to direct (rather than being merely directed by) some course that even in the present is coming into being.

Let me now restate my ideas. The first is that Cremin has presented, in such manner as to foreshorten its genuine possibilities, the idea according to which men have a hand in making their progress by taking thought and turning it into action where new meanings are meant, new ends are foreseen as possible consequences of inquiry. The second idea is that, at bottom, Cremin's view of history holds that the march of events more than the ideas of men is the fundamental way of change. What is interesting here is that these ideas are corollarial —i.e., the first is a consequence of holding the second. This is to say that if one holds the march of events to be more fundamental to change than are the ideas of men, then a conception of progress which looks to the possibilities of change through taking action on men's ideas is likely to be of minor significance. A history written to tell a story of progressivism in American education *could* tend to de-emphasize or point to an alleged lack of clarity in any idea of progress which holds forth such conceptions and possibilities. In that case, as I believe to be true of Cremin's study, the two ideas which have emerged will influence each other. And any evidence for one supports the possibility of evidence for the other. What remains then is to support these contentions by citing evidence from Cremin's work.

Cremin tends to fluctuate between an enthusiasm for certain ideas expressed at a given time, and a caution which draws the reader up short just at the point when the idea might have been going some place. It is almost as if he is cautioning the reader to beware *lest* he find genuine distinctions in meanings, which if acted upon *might* get him somewhere. It is interesting and noteworthy that this fluctuation occurs very noticeably whenever the subject matter at hand is a discussion in which reference is made to conceptions of progress holding that ideas *do* have possibilities for influencing the course of events.

Take as a case in point Cremin's discussion of John Dewey's Laboratory School.[11] This discussion stands as a brief but insightful presentation of the hypotheses which were to be tested in the work of the school. Cremin points out that the initial hypothesis of the school involved the notion that schooling "can be a beneficial influence on the course of social progress,"[12] and that "Dewey saw the main line of a curriculum that was scientific in its view of the child and progressive in its effect on society."[13] With these notions in mind, he might well have seized an opportunity to develop Dewey's idea of progress at greater length, and to spell out the possibilities of such an idea for affecting the course of events. But Cremin did not see *this* opportunity. Instead, he writes, "Convinced that his [Dewey's] own innovations were far from final, he saw the continuing quest for further improvement as the central task of a science of education. *He was destined for disappointment*; and a quarter-century later he pronounced progressive education a failure. . . ."[14]

To claim that Dewey was disappointed is one thing; to claim that he was *destined* for disappointment is another. The latter claim is hardly warranted even if it can be demonstrated that Dewey was, in fact, disappointed. And Dewey's discussion twenty-five years later, no matter how critically it viewed progressive education, does not entail by necessity a *pronouncement* of failure. If Dewey were appointed to a post from which he made pronouncements, this seems to be an appointment by Cremin, not one necessarily found in the evidence of history. One concerned with criticism does not necessarily pronounce; one concerned with destiny *looks* for wise men and prophets who can then be seen as qualified to issue pronouncements.

In a passage already referred to, Cremin holds that "the ultimate enemy of the conventional wisdom is not so much ideas as the march of events."[15] That this remark is of greater consequence than a momentary observation becomes clear when one sees it as a clue for interpreting Cremin's frequent use of terms such as "destiny" and "prophecy."

Lest one think that Cremin's use of "destined" is a manner of speaking held merely to indicate what *did* happen, rather than some sense of "bound for a certain end," it is well to point to other instances in which some connotation of "destiny" looms. There is Cremin's mention of Marietta Johnson's "theoretical unclarities destined to take on incalculable significance."[16] Also, he writes that Dewey was adopted as a major prophet by the teaching profession.[17] Whether the nature of this adoption was that of the teaching profession or whether the appointment was made by Cremin we are not told. We are expected to believe the former, while the latter is a definite possibility. As another example, Cremin writes, in reference to the diversity of pedagogical experiments in the early Progressive period, "It was a diversity destined to leave its ineradicable mark on the progressive education movement."[18] That a mark *in fact was left*, and that one *was destined to be left* are two different claims. In referring to Boyd Bode's critique of certain elements of progressive education in *Progressive Education at the Crossroads*, and to the inability of the movement to respond, Cremin writes that "Bode's words proved prophetic indeed. . . . It took less than two decades for the tide to recede and for Bode's bitter prophecy to be fulfilled."[19] Again, whether the alleged agreement between Bode's warning of what he thought might happen and what later in fact did happen, warrants erecting Bode, in retrospect, to the status of a prophet, stands as an unexamined assumption.

Let us then turn, keeping in mind Cremin's underlying assumption of destiny, to another instance of his refusal to pursue Dewey's conception of progress to a point where it might appear strong enough to venture to stand in the face of destiny's march of events. In a discussion of Dewey's conception of the school in society, Cremin appears to come close to spelling out Dewey's argument for the possibilities of ideas in experience.[20] At one point, Cremin says "Dewey's passage really provides the key to what was progressive about progressive education . . . the educator is inevitably cast in the struggle for social reform."[21] And such remarks by Cremin as "Once again the classical idea of education as cultural aspiration is called to mind, though in the formulation of his ideal Dewey transformed the meaning of culture,"[22] urges the reader on to the warranted expectation that in Dewey's thought there is ground for hope in the face of destiny. In

continued expectation the reader is asked to "Hearken back to Dewey's 1899 vision of a new society 'more worthy, lovely, and harmonious,' and it is democracy incarnate."[23] And further on, "Only such a philosophy could serve the interests of an 'intentionally progressive' society."[24] Having thus gained momentum, the reader, eager for encouragement that Dewey's conception of growth does offer some possibilities, *if only they be taken,* presses on. But once again, Cremin draws back. Having taken Dewey's ideas to the very teeth of destiny, Cremin takes them no further. Finding that they don't *take him* far enough (or perhaps they have taken him *too far* for his own comfort), he refuses *to take them* any further, to seek further meanings. As he puts it, "Whether Dewey really resolves the problem of priorities [to be used in planning curricula for a universal education] remains, of course, an open question, for his criterion is so vague as to be of little aid in judging curricular proposals."[25] Cremin even turns, as if in need of a reason for not finding Dewey's criterion finally complete, to the reviewer of Dewey who claimed that Dewey's "moral ideal is really that of the good mixer."[26] What this comment can add at such a point in the discussion, unless it be obscurity, is not clear from the context.

If one reads Dewey, or any other writer, to find if he "really resolves the problem of priorities," and, finding that he has not completely and finally done so, then is one not bound to be disappointed? That is, will not Cremin remain disillusioned with any writer, so long as there are open questions? For what open questions suggest is that the answers are not in, and that perhaps even the right questions have not been asked. Dewey's notion of progress demands open questions; if it does not have them it seeks them out. Cremin retreats once again at the very moment when he *seems* to be recognizing the possible value in such a view of progress. But his pages of praise and apparently hopeful rhetoric ring quite hollowly when, instead of facing the possibility that genuine thought *demands* ideas whose consequences cannot be "judged" as long as open questions remain, he turns away from such ideas. Put otherwise, when a conception of progress admits that genuine distinctions of meaning can be found by seeking further distinctions of meaning, Cremin turns instead to await the march of events.

It is as if Cremin looks harder for evidence to support the notion that the conventional wisdom has gained the day, than for evidence which might support the contention that genuine expression of progressive ideas still goes on. In the closing chapter, reasons for the collapse of the progressive education movement are spelled out at some length; the capture of once-progressive ideas and their translation into safe jargon by the conventional wisdom is described as well-nigh complete; and the damaging critics of progressive education are allowed to cavort for many pages. But what of the ideas of those who have either restated or attempted to offer plans for reconstructing progressive education? Has the idea of progress which affirms a faith in the possibilities of intelligence become so completely absent at mid-century that there are no statements worthy of consideration? Or is it that Cremin does not see fit to include their writings in such manner that they are allowed to speak for American education? It is not that Cremin is unaware of such statements, for in fact he mentions three authors of them. It is noteworthy, however, that these authors (John Childs, I.B. Berkson, and Theodore Brameld) get only a bare mention in a footnote reference.[27] If

Cremin were seriously looking for evidence that ideas of progress other than the blunted ones of the conventional wisdom are even now being expressed, why did he stop short of discussing those writings attempting to keep alive the idea of progress in an age dominated by the conventional wisdom? Is the explanation to be found, as in the case of his refusal to explore Dewey's thought in depth, in Cremin's view of history, a view which has little faith in conceptions of progress akin to that of Dewey? To admit that one may still entertain live ideas with possibilities not yet realized would have made less complete the "collapse" of progressive education in Cremin's history.

The constructing of a history involves a valuing of whatever is taken. It is not made simply by being given whatever is presented, or whatever material is available, from which certain conclusions follow by a logic of necessity. Any history is, in an important sense, hypothetical. This hypothetical quality lies, not so much in the material used (as material per se is not history but stands as a possibility to be taken and used in writing history) as in the meaning given that material by the writer.

Cremin's view of history, then, is hypothetical as all views are hypothetical, as it brings forth certain meanings which have become the very meanings they are in the light of his particular view. I am not arguing that it should be otherwise. If it were, then the place of imagination would be lacking in men's lives, in the writing of history, and in the place of their lives in history. It is not the point here that Cremin lacks imagination. It is rather that he has not told us explicitly how it was working in his study of progressivism in American education. Its working has yielded one view of history. There is a view, quite different from Cremin's, which holds an idea of progress that imagines and works toward realizing possibilities, that asks men to play an intelligent part in constructing their own worlds and not to serve merely as prophets powerless in the face of destiny.

NOTES

1. (New York, 1961).
2. *Ibid.*, Preface, viii.
3. *Ibid.*, viii-ix.
4. *Ibid.*, 328.
5. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York, 1930), 282.
6. Lawrence Cremin, *The Transformation of the School,* 353, Italics mine.
7. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct,* 283.
8. *Ibid.*, 285.
9. John Dewey, *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (New York, 1938), 124.
10. See *Transformation of the School,* 350-51, where Cremin writes, "The ultimate enemy of the conventional wisdom, Galbraith points out, is not so much ideas as the march of events."
11. *Ibid.*, 141.
12. *Ibid.*, 135-142.
13. *Ibid.*, 136.
14. *Ibid.*, 142, Italics mine.
15. *Ibid.*, 350-51.

16. *Ibid.*, 152-53.
17. *Ibid.*, 239.
18. *Ibid.*, 128.
19. *Ibid.*, 327.
20. *Ibid.*, 115-126.
21. *Ibid.*, 118.
22. *Ibid.*, 119.
23. *Ibid.*, 120.
24. *Ibid.*, 123.
25. *Ibid.*, 125.
26. *Ibid.*, 126.
27. *Ibid.*, 133, note 5.