The Intentions of the Progressive Reformers: Good or Bad?

Take up the White Man's burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go bind your sons to exile
To serve your captives' need;
To wait in heavy harness,
On fluttered folk and wild –
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.
-*The White Man's Burden*, Rudyard Kipling, 1899

Although Kipling was referring to the American invasion of the Philippines, in many ways this poem could have been written about the reformers during the Progressive Era in education. Like Kipling poem's advocated, these upper-class, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants believed that their success and wealth obligated them to work to improve the lives of the poor immigrants who populated their cities. Also similar to *The White Man's Burden*, however, their motives are difficult to determine, and have been described as either altruistic or self-serving, or some combination of the two. Furthermore, discussion of the progressive movement is complicated by the fact that it was not actually one movement; instead it was comprised of a number of people working in different ways to change American education. There are, however, three major strands – the idea of a child-centered curriculum, following the philosophy of John Dewey, the social efficiency advocates, who pushed incorporation of manufacturing precepts into the educational world, and this third group, those who looked to change and assimilate the immigrants to the heretofore Protestant United States.

Historians have interpreted the progressive movement in two ways. The revisionists, notably Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, have used Michael Katz's argument in The Irony of Early School Reform to bolster their argument that the reforms

which were couched as aid to the working class were nothing of the sort, and were in fact a mechanism to keep that working class in its place. The anti-revisionists, Diane Ravitch and David Tyack, among others, are unwilling to take the end results as evidence of malicious intent: "Too often, the revisionists presume that proving a desire for social control is the same as proving the existence of social control."[1] This paper will first discuss each of these three strands of progressivism, and how they came together to form the Progressive movement in education. It will then discuss the differing interpretations of progressivism, as exemplified by Bowles and Gintis on the one hand and Diane Ravitch on the other.

Prior to the progressive movement, American schools were places of strict discipline and rote learning. John Dewey's new educational ideas were centered around a classroom in which children would be active participants, exploring the world around them and guided by a teacher, rather than the traditional model of schooling where they were required to unquestioningly memorize facts given by the teacher. The child mattered – it was not enough to simply dictate what students should learn; instead, the educator needed to connect the child to the school and to the curriculum. Traditional schooling was set up to teach a large group of children the same information; Dewey's ideal school would individualize instruction, wherever possible, and students would learn at their own rates. In other words, the traditional method of schooling was centered on the teacher and the textbook, whereas Dewey's method focused on the individual student.[2]

---

[1] Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000 [third edition]), p. xxxi.
[2] Martin S. Dworkin, (ed) *Dewey on education: Selections* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1959) p. 51-52.

The second prong of the progressive movement grew out of the amazing success of manufacturing in the United States at this time. Reformers wanted to make the schools more like these successful businesses, and were successful in changing the old ward-based, rural-influenced school system to a district system with a small board, elected by at-large elections or appointed by the mayor, streamlining the administrative work in school districts. Schools became graded, and reformers drew on (and modified) Dewey's ideas to create differentiated curricula, making the high school, in their opinion, truly democratic – educating each student according to his or her need.[3]

Social efficiency was often the means by which the third prong of the progressive "agenda" was felt. Using schools to inculcate American children with the appropriate behaviors and morals has a long history in the United States. Horace Mann said that schools would serve as an "antidote to crime, the defense of republicanism, and a bulwark against atheism, socialism, and alien ideologies that threatened private property and public morals."[4] The perception of need for such acculturation was only strengthened by the large number of immigrants coming first from Ireland and Germany, and later from Southern, Eastern and Central Europe – many "natives" were afraid that these diverse people would not assimilate into the dominant culture, and so schools became an important mechanism for assimilation; as an anti-Catholic minister stated in 1890, "'Children go into' the schools . . . 'English, Scottish, Irish, German, Danish, Norwegian, Italian, French, – and all come out American.'"[5] In the public schools,

[3] Herbert M. Kliebard, *The struggle for the American curriculum: 1893-1958* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 85.
[4] William J. Reese, *America's Public Schools: From the Common School to "No Child Left Behind"* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005) p. 42.
[5] Reese, *America's Public Schools*, p. 50-51.

children could learn both English and "American" customs and values, "integrating" them into the dominant culture.

In the case of the redistricting and replacement of the ward system, for example, the reformers used the tenets of efficiency to promote their social agenda: Prior to the progressive movement, urban schools were governed by a ward-based system, in which each ward would run its own school(s) and would elect one or two members to a central board. Because immigrants often lived in enclaves, each group had its own school. Progressives, mostly middle and upper class white Anglo-Saxon Protestants introduced reforms citing corruption and inefficiency in the wards (usually going to the state legislature to get them passed) that eliminated the ward-based system, creating in its stead an at-large (or in some few cases appointed by the mayor) small board which exercised control over all schools, wresting control away from the localities (and thus away from the minorities).[6]

As can be seen from the above, the three strands of progressivism intertwined, buttressing each other. Interpretations of Dewey's ideas were used to advocate for the supposedly more efficient graded schools and tracked curriculum; ideas of social efficiency were used to push the agenda of social control and integration of the Protestant "natives" who feared for the sustenance of their culture in the face of overwhelming immigration. The remainder of this paper will discuss how that progressivism impacted on American education, and, more specifically, on the two main interpretations of that impact – the revisionist in the arguments of Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, and the anti-revisionist in the writing of Diane Ravitch.

[6] Jeffrey Mirel, Educ 741 class lecture, October 1, 2007.

Bowles and Gintis use Katz's study, The Irony of Early School Reform,[7] to support their claim that the changes the progressives advocated for education were made with the intent to keep the working class in its place, saying that "The popular objectives, slogans and perspectives of reform movements have often imparted to the educational system an enduring veneer of egalitarian and humanistic ideology, while the highly selective implementation of reforms has tended to preserve the role of schooling in the perpetuation of economic order."[8] Bowles and Gintis, then, take a very cynical look at progressivism. Although I am not sure that I disagree with their conclusions about the negative impact of progressivism on education, I do not find their arguments particularly compelling. First, they seem to take Michael Katz's analysis as absolute truth, leading to fallacies in the logic of their conclusions, if one is to believe the accuracy of Maris Vinovskis' re-analysis over that of Katz. Moreover, they seem to be quick to impute intent from action, without presenting evidence for such claims. For example, in a discussion about the founding of the common schools, Bowles and Gintis say that:

> Sensing its productive potential, he [Mann] embraced the new capitalist order and sought through social amelioration and structural change to adjust the social institutions and the people of Massachusetts to its needs. At the same time, Mann's reforms had the intent (and most likely the effect as well) of forestalling the development of class consciousness among the working people of the state and preserving the legal and economic foundations of the society in which he had been raised.[9]

As stated earlier, Mann, in his own words, felt that education would expand the economy, including the working class expansion without harm to the rich. Bowles and Gintis, however, seem to be claiming the opposite – that Mann knew that schooling would

[7] See previous journal for information on this study and Maris Vinovskis' reanalysis.
[8] Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 152.
[9] Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, p. 173.

actually preserve the current social order. Regardless of the ultimate success or failure of common schools, I am not sure I see where Bowles and Gintis found their evidence for their claim that Mann saw his reforms, and education itself, as anything other than the great equalizer he envisioned.

I find Diane Ravitch's interpretation of events much more conducive to my way of thinking. At the time in which she originally wrote The Great School Wars, she saw the schools as the "battlefield of social change," a place where the question of educational control was fought.[10] In other words, who – the state or the parents – should make decisions about how children should be educated? In her quest to explain how that question has been argued, but not really resolved, at three different time points in the history of New York's schools, Ravitch sees a much more complex picture than do Bowles and Gintis. In her analysis of the battles over Catholic schools in New York City, for example, she presents both the Protestant and the Catholic sides of the debate with what seems to be a good degree of objectivity. Where Bowles and Gintis would most likely have seen the Protestant opposition as intended to keep the Catholics in their place, and to indoctrinate them to the majority view, Ravitch presents a different picture which shows the Protestants' inability to understand the Catholic view of what they felt was non-sectarian education. In fact, she presents the Protestants as having good intentions:

> Their [the Free School Society's] aims, on the one hand, were conservative, because of their clear desire to preserve and stabilize society; yet at the same time the benevolent founders of the Society sought to better the lot of the poor by eliminating the cause of their poverty. The trustees did not view poverty as endemic or the result of innate inferiority, as did many patricians of their generation, but viewed it rather as the consequence of ignorance, which was remediable. Given the customary public indifference to the squalor and illiteracy of the poor, the Society's

[10] Ravitch, *The Great School Wars*, p. xvii.

> concern for them, whatever the motive, represented an ameliorative impulse.[11]

Unlike Bowles and Gintis, therefore, Ravitch does not have good guys nor bad guys – her descriptions include both. Moreover, in a section describing the reform movement that began in New York in the 1880's, she notes that "For some reformers, the motive was fear, fear of the spread of anarchism and discontent, fear for their own comfortable way of life. For many others, the motive for reform was compassion, the compassion born of a deep commitment to religious principles and ideals of social justice."[12] This is not to say that she unequivocally agrees with all that has been done in the New York City schools. But she presents many more shades of gray than do Bowles and Gintis, enabling the reader to see both the good and the bad in each person.

In the end, however, the true intentions of the progressives are unknown. According to Katz, and Bowles and Gintis, they were nefarious, designed to suppress the working class and keep them there, and although education might enable the occasional individual to climb out of the lower class, that slight chance of success would only strengthen the hold that education had on the masses. Ravitch's progressives, however, sound more like those whom Kipling was addressing – the knowledgeable, cultured ones (as they saw themselves) whose mission was to provide the lower classes with the tools and knowledge to better themselves, opening the world of the majority for the poor and immigrant families who populated the urban centers at the beginning of the century. From this end of history, the progressives – and Kipling – can be described as racist and elitist, and I agree that they are. But it seems the worst form of presentism to assume bad intentions – their words and at least some of their actions indicate that they were acting,

[11] *Ibid., p.* 10-11.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 109.

in their (very) limited viewpoint, in the best way that they knew how to help these immigrants.