
1 *Schooling and the Culture of Positivism: Notes on the Death of History**

There is no neutral material of history. History is not a spectacle for us because it is our own living, our own violence and our own beliefs.¹

One of the more fundamental questions raised by educators in recent years focuses on how public school classroom teachers might develop an orientation to curriculum development and implementation which acknowledges the important underlying ethical and normative dimensions that structure classroom decisions and experiences. The absence of such an orientation has been well noted.² For example, in different ways both phenomenological and neo-Marxist perspectives on educational thought and practice have pointed to the atheoretical, ahistorical, and unproblematic view of pedagogy that presently characterizes curriculum development particularly in the social sciences.

Some phenomenological critics have charged that teaching practices are often rooted in 'common sense' assumptions that go relatively unchallenged by both teachers and students and serve to mask the social construction of different forms of knowledge. In this view the focus of criticism is on the classroom teacher who appears insensitive to the complex transmission of socially based definitions and expectations that function to reproduce and legitimize the dominant culture at the level of classroom instruction.³ Teachers and other educational workers, in this case, often ignore questions concerning how they perceive their classrooms, how students make sense of what they are presented, and how knowledge is mediated between teachers (themselves) and students.

On the other hand, some neo-Marxist critics have attempted to explain how the politics of the dominant society are linked to the political character of the classroom social encounter. In this perspective the focus shifts from an exclusive concern with how teachers and students construct knowledge to the ways in which the social order is legitimated and reproduced through the production and distribution of 'acceptable' knowledge and classroom social processes.⁴ Thus, neo-Marxist educators are not simply concerned with how teachers and students view knowledge; they are also concerned with the mechanisms of social control and how

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these mechanisms function to legitimate the beliefs and values underlying wider societal institutional arrangements.

Both views have led to a greater appreciation of the hermeneutic and political nature of public school pedagogy. Unfortunately, neither view has provided a thorough understanding of how the wider 'culture of positivism', with its limited focus on objectivity, efficiency, and technique, is both embedded and reproduced in the form and content of public school curricula. While it is true that some phenomenologists have focussed on the relationship between the social construction of classroom knowledge and the major tenets of positivism, they have generally ignored the forms and social practices involved in its transmission. On the other hand, while neo-Marxist critiques have emphasized the ideological underpinnings of classroom social practices, they have done so at the cost of providing an in-depth analysis of how specific forms of knowledge are produced, distributed, and legitimated in schools.⁵

While it is clear that the hermeneutic and political interests expressed by both groups must be used in a complementary fashion to analyze the interlocking beliefs and mechanisms that mediate between the wider culture of positivism and public school pedagogy, the conceptual foundation and distinct focus for such an analysis need to be further developed. This paper attempts to contribute to that development by examining the culture of positivism and its relationship to classroom teaching through the lens of a recently focussed social and educational problem, the alleged 'loss of interest in history' among American students and the larger public. This issue provides a unique vehicle for such an analysis, because it presents a common denominator through which the connection between schools and the larger society might be clarified.

Within the last decade a developing chorus of voices has admitted to the public's growing sense of the 'irrelevance' of history. Some social critics have decried the trend while others have supported it. For instance, the historian, David Donald believes that the 'death of history' is related to the end of the 'age of abundance'. History, in Donald's view, can no longer provide an insightful perspective for the future. Voicing the despair of a dying age, Donald resigns himself to a universe that appears unmanageable, a socio-political universe that has nothing to learn from history. Thus, he writes:

The 'lessons' taught by the American past are today not merely irrelevant but dangerous . . . Perhaps my most useful function would be to disenfranchise [students] from the spell of history, to help them see the irrelevance of the past, . . . [to] remind them to what a limited extent humans control their own destiny.⁶

Other critics, less pessimistic and more thoughtful, view the 'death of history' as a crisis in historical consciousness itself, a crisis in the ability of the American people to remember those 'lessons' of the past that illuminate the developmental preconditions of individual liberty and social freedom. These critics view the

'crisis' in historical consciousness as a deplorable social phenomenon that buttresses the existing spiritual crisis of the seventies and points to a visionless and politically reactionary future. In their analyses the 'irrelevance of history' argument contains conservative implications, implications which obscure the political nature of the problem: the notion that history has not become irrelevant, but rather that historical consciousness is being suppressed. To put it another way, history has been stripped of its critical and transcendent content and can no longer provide society with the historical insights necessary for the development of a collective critical consciousness. In this view the critical sense is inextricably rooted in the historical sense. In other words, modes of reasoning and interpretation develop a sharp critical sense to the degree that they pay attention to the flow of history. When lacking a sense of historical development, criticism is often blinded by the rule of social necessity which parades under the banner of alleged 'natural laws'. The assault on historical sensibility is no small matter. Marcuse claims that one consequence is a form of false consciousness, 'the repression of society in the formation of concepts . . . a confinement of experience, a restriction of meaning'.⁷ In one sense, then, the call to ignore history represents an assault on thinking itself.

While it is true that both radicals and conservatives have often drawn upon history to sustain their respective points of view, this should not obscure the potentially subversive nature of history. Nor should it obscure the changing historical forces that sometimes rely upon 'history' to legitimate existing power structures. Historical consciousness is acceptable to the prevailing dominant interest when it can be used to buttress existing social order. It becomes dangerous when its truth content highlights contradictions in the given society. As one philosopher writes, 'Remembrance of the past might give rise to dangerous insights, and the established society seems to be apprehensive of the subversive content of memory'.⁸

The suppression of history has been accurately labelled by Russell Jacoby as a form of 'social amnesia'. 'Social amnesia is a society's repression of its own past . . . memory driven out of mind by the social and economic dynamic of this society'.⁹ Jacoby's analysis is important because it situates the crisis in history in a specific socio-historical context. If Jacoby is right, and I think he is, then the 'crisis' in historical consciousness, at least its underlying ideological dimensions, can be explained in historical and political terms. This perspective can be put into sharper focus if we begin with an explanation of the changing nature of the mechanisms of social control over the last sixty years in the United States. To do this, we will have to turn briefly to the work of the late Italian theorist, Antonio Gramsci.

Gramsci was deeply concerned about what he saw as the changing modes of domination in the advanced industrial societies of the West. He claimed that with the rise of modern science and technology, social control was exercised less through the use of physical force (army, police, etc.) than through the distribution of an elaborate system of norms and imperatives. The latter were used to lend institutional authority a degree of unity and certainty and provide it with an apparent universality and legitimation. Gramsci called this form of control

'ideological hegemony', a form of control which not only manipulated consciousness but also saturated and constituted the daily experiences that shaped one's behavior.¹⁰ Hence, ideological hegemony referred to those systems of practices, meanings, and values which provided legitimacy to the dominant society's institutional arrangements and interests.

Gramsci's analysis is crucial to understanding how cultural hegemony is used by ruling elites to reproduce their economic and political power. It helps us to focus on the myths and social processes that characterize a specific form of ideological hegemony, particularly as it is distributed through different agencies of socialization such as schools, families, trade unions, work places and other ideological state apparatuses.¹¹ Thus, the concept of cultural hegemony provides a theoretical foundation for examining the dialectical relationship between economic production and social and cultural reproduction.¹² At the core of this perspective is the recognition that advanced industrial societies such as the United States inequitously distribute not only economic goods and services but also certain forms of cultural capital, i.e., 'that system of meanings, abilities, language forms, and tastes that are directly and indirectly defined by dominant groups as socially legitimate'.¹³ This should not suggest that primary agencies of socialization in the United States simply mirror the dominant mode of economic production and function to process passive human beings into future occupational roles. This over-determined view of socialization and human nature is both vulgar and mystifying. What is suggested is that the assumptions, beliefs, and social processes which occur in the primary agencies of socialization neither 'mirror' wider societal interests nor are they autonomous from them. In other words, the correspondences and contradictions that mediate between institutions like schools and the larger society exist in dialectical tension with each other and vary under specific historical conditions.¹⁴

It is within the parameters of the historically changing dialectical relationship between power and ideology that the social basis for the existing crisis in historical consciousness can be located. Moreover, it is also within this relationship that the role schooling plays in reproducing this crisis can be examined. Underlying the suppression of historical consciousness in the social sphere and the loss of interest in history in the sphere of schooling in the United States at the present time are the rise of science and technology and the subsequent growth of the culture of positivism. It is this historical development that will be briefly traced and analyzed before the role that public school pedagogy plays in reproducing the crisis in historical consciousness is examined.

With the development of science and new technology in the United States in the early part of the twentieth century, both the pattern of culture and the existing concept of progress changed considerably. Both of these changes set the foundation for the suppression of historical consciousness. As popular culture became more standardized in its attempt to reproduce not only goods but also the needs to consume those goods, 'industrialized' culture reached into new forms of communication to spread its message. Realms of popular culture, formerly limited to dance and dime store novels, were now expanded by almost all of the media of

artistic expression.¹⁵ The consolidation of culture by new technologies of mass communication, coupled with newly found social science disciplines such as social psychology and sociology, ushered in powerful, new modes of administration in the public sphere.¹⁶

Twentieth century capitalism gave rise to mass advertising and its attendant gospel of unending consumerism. All spheres of social existence were now informed, though far from entirely controlled, by the newly charged rationality of advanced industrial capitalism. Mass marketing, for example, drastically changed the realms of work and leisure and, as Stuart Ewen has pointed out, set the stage for the contestation and control over daily life:

During the 1920s the stage was set by which the expanding diversity of corporate organization might do cultural battle with a population which was in need of, and demanding, social change. The stage was in the theatre of daily life, and it was within the intimacies of that reality – productive, cultural, social, psychological – that a corporate *pièce-de-théâtre* was being scripted.¹⁷

While industrialized culture was radically transforming daily life, scientific management was altering traditional patterns of work. For instance, the integration of skill and imagination that had once characterized craft production gave way to a fragmented work process in which conception was separated from both the execution and experience of work. One result was a fragmented work process that reduced labor to a series of preordained and lifeless gestures.¹⁸

Accompanying changes in the workplace and the realm of leisure was a form of technocratic legitimation based on a positivist view of science and technology. This form of rationality defined itself through the alleged unalterable and productive effects of the developing forces of technology and science were having on the foundations of twentieth century progress. Whereas progress in the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was linked to the development of moral self-improvement and self-discipline in the interest of building a better society, progress in the twentieth century was stripped of its concern with ameliorating the human condition and became applicable only to the realm of material and technical growth.¹⁹ What was once considered humanly possible, a question involving values and human ends, was now reduced to the issue of what was technically possible. The application of scientific methodology to new forms of technology appeared as a social force generated by its own laws, laws governed by a rationality that appeared to exist above and beyond human control.²⁰

Inherent in this notion of progress and its underlying technocratic rationality is the source of logic that denies the importance of historical consciousness. Moreover, this form of rationality serves to buttress the *status quo* by undermining the dialectic of human potential and will. As a mode of legitimation, this form of rationality has become the prevailing cultural hegemony. As the prevailing consciousness, it celebrates the continued enlargement of the comforts of life and the productivity of labor through increasing submission of the public to laws that govern the technical mastery of both human beings and nature. The price for

increased productivity is the continued refinement and administration of not simply the forces of production but the constitutive nature of consciousness itself. For example, in spite of its own claims, positivist rationality contains a philosophy of history that 'robs' history of its critical possibilities. Thomas McCarthy writes that this philosophy of history 'is based on the questionable thesis that human beings control their destinies to the degree to which social techniques are applied, and that human destiny is capable of being rationally guided to the extent of cybernetic control and the application of these techniques'.²¹ If critical consciousness, in part, represents an ability to think about the process as well as the genesis of various stages of reflection, then this notion of history contains few possibilities for its development as a critical and emancipatory force.

This form of rationality now represents an integral part of the social and political system of the United States and, as noted previously, can be defined as the culture of positivism. If we are to understand its role in suppressing historical consciousness, the culture of positivism must be viewed through its wider function as a dominant ideology, powerfully communicated through various social agencies. The term 'positivism' has gone through so many changes since it was first used by Saint-Simon and Comte that it is virtually impossible to narrow its meaning to a specific school of thought or a well-defined perspective. Thus, any discussion of positivism will be necessarily broad and devoid of clear-cut boundaries. However, we can speak of the culture of positivism as the legacy of positivistic thought, a legacy which includes those convictions, attitudes, techniques, and concepts that still exercise a powerful and pervasive influence on modern thought.²²

'Culture of positivism', in this context, is used to make a distinction between a specific philosophic movement and a *form* of cultural hegemony. The distinction is important because it shifts the focus of debate about the tenets of positivism from the terrain of philosophy to the field of ideology. For our purposes it will be useful to indicate some of the main elements of 'positivism'. This will be followed by a short analysis of how the culture of positivism undermines any viable notion of critical historical consciousness.

The major assumptions that underlie the culture of positivism are drawn from the logic and method of inquiry associated with the natural sciences.²³ Based upon the logic of scientific methodology with its interest in explanation, prediction, and technical control, the principle of rationality in the natural sciences was seen as vastly superior to the hermeneutic principles underlying the speculative social sciences. Modes of rationality that relied upon or supported interpretative procedures rated little scientific status from those defending the assumptions and methods of the natural sciences. For instance, Theodore Abel echoed a sentiment about hermeneutic understanding that still retains its original force among many supporters of the culture of positivism:

Primarily the operation of *Verstehen* (understanding human behavior) does two things: It relieves us of a sense of apprehension in connection with behavior that is unfamiliar or unexpected and it is a source of