

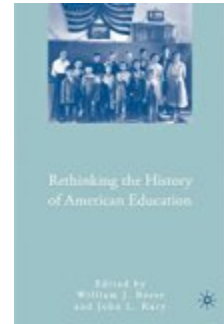
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William J. Reese, John L. Rury, eds. *Rethinking the History of American Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. xii + 292 pp. \$79.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-60009-6.

Reviewed by William W. Cutler (III, Departments of History and Educational Policies Studies, Temple University)

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Revising the Revisionists: A Reprise

In 1977 the historian Diane Ravitch published *The Revisionists Revised: A Critique of the Radical Attack on the Schools*. It took dead aim at the work of a new generation of educational historians, the so-called radical revisionists. Shaped by the politics of the 1960s, they had sought to correct the impression left by their predecessors that public education was the cornerstone of the republic. As told by Ellwood P. Cubberley, Lawrence A. Cremin, and his mentor R. Freeman Butts, the history of schooling was a story of democracy, opportunity, and ineluctable progress. As told by Michael Katz, Clarence Karier, Joel Spring, and Colin Greer, it was story of inequality, discrimination, and irreconcilable conflict. No common ground here! Taking sides, Ravitch argued that the radical revisionists overstated their case, finding demons where none existed. They politicized the past, she said, making their work anachronistic.

Was this difference simply a case of generational conflict? I don't think so. Herself a young scholar, Ravitch threw a wet blanket over only some of her peers. Carl F. Kaestle was among those she spared. A student of Bernard Bailyn, himself a pioneering critic of the historiography of American education, Kaestle broke through in 1973 with a book on the origins of public education in New York City and from there went on to a distinguished career as a historian of literacy and early American education. Because he trained them, the editors of the book under review here, William J. Reese and John L. Rury, have dedicated it to him. It is a fitting tribute because the book attempts to show where the field has gone since the

heyday of the radical revisionists.

According to Reese and Rury, *Rethinking the History of American Education* focuses on a body of work they refer to as "post-revisionist." This work, they say, demonstrates "a new maturity in the field, a willingness to embrace the complexity of education as a social and political process of change, entailing struggle but also growth and the hope of progress" (p. 7). Put another way, they see the historiography of American education since 1980 as building on, not rejecting its past. It represents the thinking of both traditionalists and revisionists.

The book features ten original essays. Each deals with a specific topic or time period in the history of American education. Most are historiographical; but two are case studies, in whole or in part, and two might be described as syntheses. The result is rather uneven, a book whose historiographical coverage is diminished and whose value as a class text is probably less than it could have been if the editors had insisted that all its chapters be conceptually consistent. This might have taken some doing to achieve because its contributors vary in age and experience. Six—Barry Franklin, N. Ray Hiner, Jacqueline Jones, Gerald Moran, Michael Olneck, and Maris Vinovskis—entered the profession in the 1970s or earlier; the rest (including the editors) came of age as scholars after the era of the radical revisionists. Aside from being evidence of the health of the field, this mix gives the book a somewhat greater prospect for longevity because many of its contributors will still be working in fifteen or even twenty

years. Most likely, they will carry on the kind of work discussed here.

What kind of work is that? In what ways might it be of interest to those who study the history of childhood and adolescence? The editors say that their book reveals the breadth of coverage that the history of education has now achieved. But their claim is inflated because their book is mostly about the history of schooling. To be sure, they define schooling broadly to include different institutional types and multiple constituencies, and there is one chapter that is not about schooling. Written by N. Ray Hiner, it discusses themes in the history of childhood that should be very familiar to those in this field and argues for closer collaboration between those who study children and those who study schools. But Hiner says next to nothing about how to facilitate such collaboration. The other contributors to this volume do not even raise the question. It would be unfair to fault them for this omission because the primary audience for this book is historians of education. By the same token, the book's editors and contributors deserve to be criticized for marginalizing one of the giants in their field, the prolific Lawrence Cremin, much of whose work made (and remade) the point that education is far more than schooling. Published between 1970 and 1988, his trilogy to this end now seems all but forgotten.

None of what I have said so far should be taken to mean that I believe historians of childhood and adolescence should overlook *Rethinking the History of American Education*. Read selectively and with modest expectations, it could certainly be useful, at least as a reference work. Its range of topics is significant and its documentation impressive. There is something here for those interested in blacks, Latinos, Asians, and women. Place and space get their due in chapters dealing with the South and suburbanization. In her chapter about the politics of black education in the South after the Civil War Jacqueline Jones argues that simple explanations—what she calls the “black-white narrative”—are inadequate. No doubt, she is right, but her chapter left me thinking that she has not yet decided what should replace it. Jack Dougherty observes that historians of education have not researched the suburbs. Unlike their counterparts in urban history, they have yet to go metropolitan. On the whole, his point

is well taken, but he exaggerates, overlooking some comparative work on city and suburban schools such as my own.

Historians of childhood and adolescence may not be tempted by the chapters in this book on the history of higher education or the role of federal policy in American schools. That would be a shame because the historiography of each is rich and the chapters that treat them serve as a good introduction to it. For example, the history of American higher education is no longer the narrow field that once relied mainly upon institutional histories and concentrated on the rise of great universities. Its best practitioners have studied such topics as campus design, student life, and the relationship between social mobility and a college education. This body of work should interest at least those who study the history of adolescence. The chapter on the role of the federal government in American education also deserves attention. Since 1945 Congress and the federal courts have taken an ever more active role in the lives of America's young. Whether the issue is sexuality, poverty, inequality, or opportunity, politicians and judges have often gained access to the young through the school—the one institution that reaches almost all Americans between the ages of six and eighteen.

The history of education and the history of childhood have much in common. I discovered this for myself in the early 1970s when I took a course in the history of American education that I had been assigned to teach and made it into a course about growing up in America. In those days the historiography of American education was far more robust than the historiography of childhood and adolescence. That is no longer the case. The course, which I am still teaching, is a far cry from what it was when I created it. Students majoring in history, American Studies, and education take it. They are blissfully unaware of the structural barriers that separate scholars in different disciplines from one another in academe. These barriers even extend to the listservs they read. It is possible to cross these barriers—especially in our thinking. This is why I would urge those who subscribe to H-Childhood to take a look at *Rethinking the History of American Education*. It may not merit close examination, but it deserves at least to be on their radar screens.

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