

# H-Net Reviews

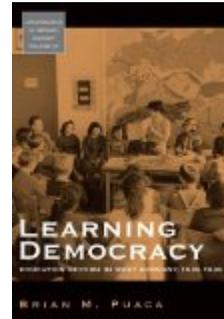
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian M. Puaca. *Learning Democracy: Education Reform in West Germany, 1945-1965*. New York: Berghahn Books, 2009. 221 S. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-84545-568-2.

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## An Evolution, Not a Revolution

Among the many challenges facing Allied officials and German civilians in 1945 was the task of reinventing education. Not only did material shortages and crumbling school buildings make life difficult for teachers and students but also elusive questions emerged from the ruins of the Third Reich. What pedagogical and curricular practices would thwart the return of Nazi ideology? What fate awaited schoolteachers given that almost one-third of the profession belonged to the Nazi Party in addition to the compulsory National Socialist Teachers League? How would textbooks cultivate democracy in the classroom and history lessons contend with the recent past? Examining the search for solutions in the schools of West Berlin and Hesse—two areas under American influence after 1945—Brian M. Puaca tells a German success story that historians have missed.

*Learning Democracy* belongs to a growing body of scholarly work that analyzes Germany's emergence from National Socialism and subsequent democratic evolution. It begins with a puzzle: How did the primary and secondary schools of the Federal Republic achieve democratic reform in an educational system that remained unchanged in the two decades following defeat? To the chagrin of officials in the Office of Military Government (U.S.) for Germany (OMGUS), the school system maintained "authoritarian" features after the Second World War, dividing young Germans along three educational tracks according to social and economic status (p. 43). The *Gymnasium* remained the highest and most selective track for the university-bound, above the *Realschule* (or

*Mittelschule*), and the *Volksschule*, which directed pupils to the world of work. Not only the structures but also the culture of the schools elicited concern. Demanding total obedience in the classroom, the system subordinated individuals to teachers who served as powerful representatives of the state. This model prepared Germans for two world wars, according to officials from the United States, by turning schools into agents of social control that taught blind deference to authority. Instilling in a new generation of Germans "democracy as a way of life" required reconstituting the system according to American educational ideals (p. 3). The heirs of the Third Reich were to put into practice the Deweyan vision of the school as a democratic community.

Puaca makes a compelling case that German resistance to American prescriptions did not preclude democratic change. After an initial stabilization period, Puaca explains, Germans devised their own approaches, beginning as early as 1948 with the introduction of "significant, if subtle pedagogical reforms" (p. 47). While OMGUS officials set the tone for developments in West Berlin and Hesse, a new generation of German teachers—young, reform minded, and increasingly female—transformed the primary and secondary schools in ways that shaped the democratic future of the Federal Republic. *Learning Democracy* turns the reader's attention away from the much mythologized events of 1968 to an earlier "silent revolution" in the schools (p. 2). The staid 1950s appear not as a restoration in Puaca's account, ushered in by the failures of American democratization, but a time of in-

novation that raised the profile of education and made possible the seismic shifts of the following decade.

Puaca begins by tracing the rise of student government, a popular program that provided “first-hand experience with the processes of democracy at the everyday level” (p. 61). In West Berlin, the U.S.-sponsored radio station RIAS founded the citywide Student Parliament in January 1948, engaging students in a variety of educational and political matters. Requiring active involvement and adherence to democratic methods and values, student government redefined the political process for a new generation of Germans. Pupils participated in elections, raised money for charitable organizations, assisted in the creation of school schedules and teaching plans, passed legislation, discussed educational affairs in East Berlin, and collaborated with student associations west of the Elbe River. The strength of Puaca’s book lies in the use of student voices, culled from essays, reports, and memoirs, to capture the meanings of these programs for youth in West Berlin and Hesse. Sharing new rights and responsibilities at school, German pupils described student government as an education in democracy.

Next in Puaca’s story comes reform initiated in Washington DC. Educational exchange programs launched by the State Department enabled thousands of teachers and students to cross the Atlantic “to glimpse life in a democracy for the first time” (p. 70). The Smith-Mundt Act, passed in 1948, set aside tax dollars for international exchange, five years before Fulbright grants allowed for U.S.-West German transfers. One successful initiative, the “German Teacher Trainee Program,” inaugurated in 1950, brought young educators to study the U.S. school system and participate in the local life of a community. Again, Puaca allows his actors to speak for themselves, drawing on essays and letters to explore the changing views of educators. Discussing the positive and negative features of the U.S. system, German teachers proposed new pedagogical practices at home. As for students—such as participants in the 1951-52 “German Teenagers in Michigan Program”—life abroad fostered personal ties and changing attitudes about Germany’s place in the world, helping bring the fledgling Republic out of international isolation.

Examining a third area of pedagogical reform, Puaca turns to the classroom, where new textbooks began to appear as soon as supplies became available in 1947. Until then, primary and secondary school students read from old editions containing blacked-out passages that obscured the lessons of earlier eras. The new genera-

tion of schoolbooks featured changes in form and content and “represented a departure from the militarism and xenophobia of the Third Reich, as well as a moderation of the fervent nationalism of the Weimar Republic” (p. 80). These editions encouraged classroom discussion and stimulated student interest, by proposing group activities and incorporating visual content. Perhaps more important, the texts presented a historical narrative that celebrated the Federal Republic as the culmination of a long and difficult struggle for democracy. The revolutions of 1848 assumed a central place in these accounts, while National Socialism appeared as a radical break with the German political traditions. Puaca credits not only American authorities who viewed textbook reform as a crucial component of democratization but also German educators who authored new editions. In 1946, OMGUS officials established Curriculum and Textbook Centers throughout the American Zone of Occupation, providing authors with supplies and warm rooms in which to work. German educators responded by carefully crafting new texts that satisfied the scrutiny of American authorities, who continued to review textbooks until the end of the occupation. While critical of the Third Reich, these editions still had a long way to go, Puaca makes clear, in confronting German complicity in the crimes of National Socialism. But the author’s qualification strengthens the central tenet of *Learning Democracy*: change came early, if gradually to the schools, preparing young Germans for the future in subtle ways.

Puaca then focuses on teacher training, a source of concern for American authorities and German educators in the aftermath of the Second World War, when emergency programs provided minimal preparation for the profession. OMGUS officials called for the elimination of educational tracking and the democratization of the classroom, by restructuring a convoluted teacher training system and redefining the rigid relationships of the past. For American critics of German schools, “the newly trained teacher was the proverbial glue that held the entire educational reform program together.” Although OMGUS proposals to replace Germany’s “caste system” with universal teacher training failed to materialize, “important changes ... took place beneath the surface” of a system that retained its old structures (p. 89). And while Hesse and West Berlin developed their own approaches, since teacher training fell to state governments and Berlin’s quadripartite status—divided between the four main Allied powers—presented particular problems, aspiring educators across the country adopted meaningful reform.

OMGUS authorities began to transform teacher training by promoting three initiatives that German educators would enthusiastically embrace over the course of the 1950s. First, the post-World War II curriculum emphasized educational theory, pedagogy, and child psychology while minimizing religious instruction. Second, prospective teachers studied new methods to encourage student debate and group work. Pupils were to think critically about readings, openly express their views, and learn to respect the opinions of others. Third, the introduction of social studies brought civics and contemporary politics into the classroom, especially in the city-island of West Berlin. In Hesse, where officials added social studies to the curriculum in 1946, the subject evolved slowly and unevenly, Puaca explains, securing a place in the curriculum in the 1950s. Americans initiated these reforms, but it was up to German educators to adopt and expand new approaches. As teachers slowly modified the curriculum, the institutionalization of social studies marked a definitive break with the past, according to Puaca. Whereas Weimar-era civics instructed pupils to recite facts about republican institutions, social studies taught democracy as an active, participatory way of life. Reinforcing these lessons, continuing education programs brought together teachers young and old to discuss new priorities in the classroom.

The fifth and final reform that appears in Puaca's story is political education, a controversial program that included student government, school newspapers, and *Zeitgeschichte*, the study of recent history and current events. American authorities promoted the subject as early as 1946, but until 1960, political education failed to emerge as a discipline. Challenges came from below, Puaca informs, citing student disinterest and a skeptical public that questioned the role of politics in education after the Third Reich. While the author acknowledges the difficulty of measuring results, he highlights important changes that occurred at the state and school levels as educators and officials began to link political education to the future of German democracy. Government leaders in West Berlin and Hesse responded to outbursts of neo-

Nazism in the late 1950s by expanding political education in the schools. Newly trained teachers employed innovative approaches to win approval and stimulate student interest. While some older teachers found ways to circumvent the new program, most West German pupils took part in new activities and lessons that began to touch the "hot iron" of the recent past (p. 137). Puaca contrasts images of students collaborating on projects, participating in debates and contests, and listening to radio programs in the classroom with definitions of the 1950s as a "decade of conservative dominance in the Federal Republic" and "pedagogical stagnation, with reform stifled by politicians, administrators, and educational elites" (p. 111). Efforts to expand political education intensified in the early 1960s, as teachers sought to refine the subject, and the public began to take notice. Schools entered the public spotlight and remained there for years to come.

*Learning Democracy* offers a new framework for the post-World War II period. The end of occupation and the founding of the Federal Republic in 1949—decisive moments by most accounts—had little effect on educational life, the author shows, since reform was already underway. But more important, the standard narrative, in which reform emerges in the late 1960s as an assault on the conservatism of the previous decade, gives way to a nuanced story that locates change "beneath the surface of the restorative structure of the postwar schools" (p. 147). The subtle shifts that inform Puaca's study do not produce quantifiable evidence, and the absence of demonstrable results may leave doubts in the minds of some readers. The voices of teachers and students—not the introduction of new laws or the restructuring of the schools—convey changing attitudes about German political life. Puaca's silent revolution drew to a close in 1965, as new policies expanded the political education program and began to respond to events outside the schools, but it prepared Germans for the social and structural transformations that followed. As an educator in West Berlin put it, "It was not a revolution, rather an evolution" (p. 98).

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