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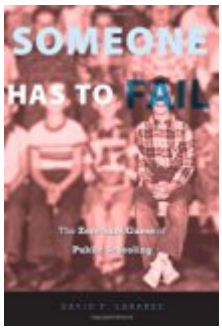
**David F. Labaree.** *Someone Has to Fail: The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. 312 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-05068-6.




**Reviewed by** John A. McCurdy

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**Commissioned by** Jonathan Anuik (University of Alberta)

On his Stanford University School of Education faculty Web site, David F. Labaree describes himself as "a sociologically oriented historian of education who seeks to explore some of the major processes and patterns that define the relationship between education and society in the United States."[1] Having just read his book, ***Someone Has to Fail***, I would describe this self-portrait as very much correct. A sociologist by training (Labaree earned both his MA and PhD from the University of Pennsylvania in that discipline in 1978 and 1983, respectively), his curriculum vitae depicts an accomplished academic career, beginning over forty years ago when Harvard College awarded him his BA in social relations. Aside many other honors, Labaree currently holds Stanford's Area Committee in Social Sciences, Humanities and Interdisciplinary Policy Studies Chair.

On his faculty Web site, Labaree describes *Someone Has to Fail* as an "essay." Here, I would go further, characterizing his book as a series of thematic, interdisciplinary, and logically sequenced mini-essays on the broad topic of educational reform in the United States. Some of these privilege historical narrative, while others different (and compatible?) sociological frameworks, and still others the author's private observations and conclusions as a long standing professor of education. As a genre, though, the essay is a curious choice for communicating scholarly knowledge or even, for that matter, simple professional insights. After all, to be successful, an essay--as any high school English language arts or social studies student attests--needs only to inform or persuade. Moreover, as far as subject and method are concerned, it awards its author great flexibility. Finally, as a primarily personal modality, it remains unencumbered by the painstaking and often stultifying rigors of traditional scholarly work.

For all of these reasons, ***Someone Has to Fail*** ought not to be regarded as a scholarly work but instead as an informed piece of persuasive writing aimed at an educated public readership. I have not read them myself but I suspect that Labaree's previous four books operate in a similar, if not identical, manner. They include ***The***

*Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838-1939* (1988); *How to Succeed in School without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (1997); *The Trouble with Ed Schools* (2004); and *Education, Markets, and the Public Good: Selected Works of David F. Labaree* (2007). In addition to these, he has authored numerous historical monographs; journal articles; book chapters; conference papers; and a variety of publicly engaged pieces, the most recent being his 2011 *Dissent* article, "Targeting Teachers," which essentially recapitulates the argument of *Someone Has to Fail* in miniature.

The book's roughly chronological structure commences in New England in 1635, the year Boston elites founded a public Latin school. In effect, Labaree notes, this was the first school, in the European sense, established in England's incipient American colonies. Being an elite school, however, it was not genuinely public and therefore, modern. Only in the aftermath of the American War of Independence would a sizable number of Americans contemplate establishing an accessible and replicable system of common public schools throughout the new Republic.

Beginning in the early nineteenth century, and continuing until at least the 1880s, the idea became and remained a reality in an increasing number of cities, towns, and villages. Explicitly political, Labaree notes, they were designed to instill republican virtues and habits of mind in the nation's children and youth. Together, he adds, they shared "the following emergent characteristics: community-wide enrollment, public control, age grading, teacher training, big government, and curriculum marginality" (p. 67).

Those overseeing the common schools, however, were not in the business of expanding beyond a certain basic level. In most cases, the schools remained single classroom affairs that capped advancement at grade eight or roughly fourteen years of age. Though pioneering, Philadelphia's comprehensive and curriculum-based high school, established in 1839, remained the exception to the rule for over four decades. Still, beginning in the 1880s, high school enrollments began a moderate but steady rise, doubling annually, Labaree reports, until 1930. By that time the common school era was over, and a new era in American education was being consolidated. It coincided with the loosely coherent Progressive Era in the United States, whose roots lay in the 1880s, and whose flower would only really bloom in the years immediately following the Second World War.

Committed to fundamental reform, and hugely influential in their time, American Progressives presented neither a unified front nor a precisely articulated agenda. Consequently, it makes the most sense to describe Progressivism as a contest over the reengineering of society's principal institutions. In the realm of educational reform, this revolved around three broad objectives: "democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility" (p. 16). Taken together, they signaled acceptance of an expanding social mission for public education. On one side stood the developmental Progressives, exemplified by John Dewey, characterized by Labaree as romantics. They located the child and his or her teacher at the center of education, imagining schools, among other things, as potential democratic laboratories. On the other side stood the administrative Progressives led by men like Edward Thorndike. Pragmatic in their approach, Labaree notes, they "emphasized utilitarianism, governance, administration, and scientific curriculum development and implementation" (p. 93). They longed for a coherent, testable, and replicable public education system that could successfully prepare adolescents for new roles in the industrial economy.

By the early 1950s, Labaree argues, the developmental Progressives had successfully transformed the rhetoric of American education while the administrative Progressives had transformed

the substance of the same at every level other than the classroom. In particular, the latter succeeded in institutionalizing the comprehensive high school throughout the United States. By and large, the administrative Progressives achieved more concrete and lasting changes, Labaree speculates, because it was easier to market utilitarian as opposed to idealistic reforms. The classroom remained an autonomous domain under the Progressives, however, because the public school system remained too large, too complex, and too loosely governed. Consequently, direct control over actual teaching practices and student learning remained elusive, though few likely cared at the time, as schooling, for at least the administrative Progressives, had less to do with learning subjects and much more to do with learning school or with socialization.

American educational reform took a major turn in 1954 when African American supporters of the civil rights movement brought the case of ***Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*** to the Supreme Court of the United States. Chief Justice Earl Warren's now famous decision in the case effectively initiated the individual or consumer rights revolution in American education. As Labaree writes, it "was a watershed moment in American history, sweeping away the longstanding legal principle that had declared racial segregation constitutional as long as the separate schools were equal" (p. 180). By the 1970s, Labaree adds, the essence of ***Brown*** had been adapted to advocate for the equal rights of persons with disabilities.

In practice though, few American public schools went on to achieve racial integration. Instead, fully 70 percent of black students in the United States today continue to attend schools where blacks constitute a majority. This state of affairs persists primarily because school attendance continues to be shaped by population settlement patterns. It also remains true because attempts to institute mass bussing to move students across boundaries were mostly rejected by whites and resisted by black community leaders. The latter, in particular, perceived integration both as a threat to the integrity of existing African American communities and as a mode of capitulation to white hegemony.

Since the civil rights movement, Labaree argues, there have been two subsequent reform initiatives in American education, both of which may be mere variations on the desegregation movement's individualist and consumerist ethos. The so-called standards movement, characterized by high stakes standardized testing and the advent of performance-based teacher evaluations, was the first to emerge. Inaugurated in 1983 by the Reagan administration after the study ***A Nation at Risk*** was released, it aimed to achieve measurable reform of teaching and learning at the classroom level, picking up essentially where the Progressive movement stalled. Defining the educated person as capable of increasing the national wealth for the purposes of global competition, the movement reoriented curricula around the so-called five core subjects: English, math, science, social studies, and computer science. However, the story of the standards movement has yet to play out fully. Yet Labaree remains skeptical that its particular agenda enhances student learning or improves on the basic culture of the typical public school classroom.

Finally, the most recent wave of educational reform in the United States has come under the banner of school choice, whose deep roots lie in the neoliberal economics of Milton Friedman. Briefly, school choice is based on the view that public schooling constitutes a monopoly venture that ought to be subjected to market forces for the sake of efficiency. However, as Labaree notes, efficiency on its own has proved a hard sell for the movement. As a result, it now makes a dual appeal to both efficiency and equity, on the premise that school choice expands the range of options for differentiated student learning.

Having provided roughly the above outline of the history of educational reform in the United States in the first part, Labaree devotes the second part to explicating the limits that American culture and public schooling impose on reform and on teaching and learning in the classroom. These include the fundamental complexity of the teaching profession and the fundamentally conflicted status of students, who are forced to participate in schooling, even as they are expected to develop independent motivation to succeed. Typically, Labaree concludes, most students merely "pretend to learn" by going "through the outward motions." The result, he adds, "is a compromise in which students acknowledge the teacher's control and the teacher uses this control lightly, making only modest demands on the students as learners" (p. 139). Indeed, even student-centered learning ultimately transpires under conditions of compulsion.

A related and important argument Labaree makes is that American schools fail to enhance social mobility, a key expectation long since imposed on the education system. This is so, he insists, because the system of American schooling betrays an unrelenting tendency and, until recently, a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for expansion. New tiers of educational attainment and certification are constantly being added to the system. This has the effect of preserving largely middle-class privileges in society, as it ensures the continuance of the culture's credentialing hierarchy. Education may be broadly accessible in the United States, but access alone is likely to never equalize citizens, economically or culturally, because one group is often always one or more steps ahead of the rest. This, in short, is what Labaree means when he describes public schooling as a zero-sum game. "Social reform can only have a chance to equalize social differences if it can reduce the educational gap between middle-class students and working-class students," he concludes. Meanwhile, any significant reduction in this gap is only to be achieved by "restricting the ability of the middle class to pursue more and better education for their children," a limitation fundamentally incompatible with the practice of liberal democracy (p. 171).

Labaree also claims that schools fail to contribute to another central goal of twentieth-century American education reform: social efficiency. In a notable reversal, for instance, he argues that education levels in the United States increased during the first half of the twentieth century not because they contributed to economic growth but rather because economic growth made culture-wide investment in education possible. Indeed, public education expanded in the United States less because it produced better workers and more because school doors were always open and overall classroom standards low. Moreover, Labaree adds, the average American views education as a consumer good that enhances his or her capacity to compete in the marketplace with his or her fellow Americans. Self-interest, therefore, and not the national interest, shapes individual decision making around education in America. In short, Labaree concludes, American schools excel at producing hustlers rather than scholars: "graduates who are self-directed, entrepreneurial, and creative" (p. 219).

Lastly, Labaree argues, schools on their own never create conditions for greater democratic equality. Even so, educational reformers continue to hold that schools can and should serve as the nation's principal vehicle for effecting social change. Labaree describes this ingrained belief as a "syndrome" and elsewhere as "educationalization"--essentially, the individualization of social problems. American schools, he declares, are likely to only experience transformative change once Americans resolve to change their "culture and society in an equally fundamental way." This, he admits, is unlikely, as it "would mean backing away from our commitment to liberal democracy, individualism, utilitarianism, and social optimism" (p. 224). Ultimately, Labaree concludes,

Americans choose "to provide social *opportunity* by constructing an elaborate *school system*," while Europeans "choose to promote social *equality* by constructing an elaborate *welfare system*" (p. 7, emphases in the original).

Earlier, I argue that *Someone Has to Fail*, in its capacity as an essay, is best understood as an informative piece of persuasive writing, aimed at the educated public reader. As should be clear from the above outline, Labaree's book is informative (if not at times unnecessarily repetitive). This is particularly so for novice history of education readers. Meanwhile, its contents are of unquestionable import to the public interest. Whether Labaree's book is also persuasive, it seems to me, is another question, one I may not be fully qualified to answer. Nevertheless, something substantial needs to be said regarding the book's undeniable weaknesses and limitations. I include my thoughts on these because, at the end of the day, an educated public--as much as an academician--requires a certain critical rigor in a writer (or, in this case, quite possibly, in the book's editor or publisher).

I begin with several points relating to the book's most obvious weakness: its title. Firstly, it implies that Labaree's essay focuses on the use of game theory to show how public schools uphold and perpetuate social inequality in contemporary societies. The problem here is that little more than one-third of the contents of *Someone Has to Fail* are directly concerned with game theory or with its direct application as a cognitive tool. As previously noted, Labaree's book adopts a varied, flexible, and interdisciplinary approach. To imply, therefore, that the book is primarily concerned with game theory applications, which are normally utilized as a rigorous and discrete modality and methodology, is to do both the reader and the writer a disservice. At most, game theory provides Labaree with a loose and familiar framework for exploring some of the basic social, economic, political, and culture limitations of public schooling.

Secondly, whereas the book deals exclusively with American education, its subtitle, *The Zero-Sum Game of Public Schooling*, implies that *Someone Has to Fail* has something authoritative--even quasi-scientific--to say about global public schooling. While it may be true that the United States has contributed more than any other nation to the increasingly global emergence of universal public education (though scholars of French, German, or even Islamic education may beg to differ), it is surely dubious and a little arrogant to suggest that the history and dynamics of education in the United States can somehow stand in for the same everywhere else. In this regard, Labaree's book is at least partly infected by that peculiar species of performative American rhetoric that seeks, consciously or otherwise, to conflate global culture with American culture.

Lest one object here that the book's subtitle represents little more than a misguided attempt at global marketing, consider also the manner in which *Someone Has to Fail* makes frequent use of the unqualified collective "we." In the process, this practice silences rival and especially radical voices of dissent, as far as American public schooling is concerned. Indeed, Labaree largely avoids entering into any kind of serious dialogue with the historiography of educational reform in the United States in the over 250 pages of his book.

Further, despite frequent lip service to the same, *Someone Has to Fail* fails to legitimately confront or assess the overwhelming complexity that is and ever has been public education in the United States. Put differently, Labaree's book can be held to account for presenting a largely ahistorical history of American educational reform. This is largely so, it seems to me, because the book's thematic and logical structure undercuts its capacity for reconstructing patterns of historical causation and development over time. Otherwise, social scientific theories of institutional and

societal change may have been given more weight than they merit.

To begin with the ahistorical nature of Labaree's text, however, I find that it proffers no more than half a dozen significant but otherwise isolated regional, district, or individual school case studies. Despite this fact, Labaree claims to successfully reconstruct the history of public schooling in the United States. Though he does not put this fact at the forefront, this reconstruction is limited to what might be called the national level. The problem is that Labaree never clearly defines the scope or limits of this nexus of American culture and society. Consequently, it remains unclear, for instance, to what extent Labaree's national scene corresponds with what might be understood as America's federal scene.

Further to this point, ***Someone Has to Fail*** has astonishingly little to say about the negotiation of educational reform at the state or district levels. This omission is doubly strange, given Labaree's repeated insistence that public education is determined less by reformers and more by consumer preferences and local classroom "ecologies" (pp. 157-158). Moreover, in the few cases where he does examine the practice of American education reform at regional, district, or individual school levels, he betrays an alarming willingness to generalize from these particulars. This shortcoming is most obvious in his brief look at rates of implementation of developmental Progressivism in New York City classrooms during and shortly after the Second World War. Indeed, with the exception of reading his unduly brief reconstruction of the civil rights movement, the reader of Labaree's book finds that he or she often has to infer the conditions under which nonwhite students and non-male students studied and learned in America. Perhaps this is as it should be, as ***Someone Has to Fail*** concerns itself primarily with issues of social class. In particular, it details how schooling expanded in the United States, up to at least the close of the twentieth century, to accommodate the perceived training and learning needs of the working and middle classes.

Nevertheless, certain of Labaree's readers may feel his instructive analysis of social class comes at the expense of illuminating the experience of other identities. Among these would be the experiences of girls and women, visible minorities, gays and lesbians, persons with disabilities, Aboriginal peoples, and young or new teachers. With respect to persons with disabilities, the absence of any significant discussion of technology's role in educational reform is a notable contemporary oversight. With respect to young or new teachers, ***Someone Has to Fail*** ignores the ever widening gulf that exists between the experience of newer and more established teachers. While both parties have suffered from the unconscionable attrition rates in the profession, new or young teachers have carried the added burdens of largely unsustainable levels of personal debt coupled with the increasing casualization of teaching work. Finally, something ought to have been said about the experiences of Aboriginal peoples in the context of American educational reform.

At this point, I turn to a final cluster of concerns. Taken together, they are probably best understood as the ideology and political economy of educational reform in the United States. Initially, I return to the fact that only a portion of the contents of ***Someone Has to Fail*** are directly related to game theory; in fact, in the book's second half, Labaree mostly drops references to game theory. Presumably, this is because such scenarios strike him as mere symptoms of a broader syndrome, which he eventually describes, as previously noted, as the individualizing of social problems or educationalization. Since schools normally deal with individuals as opposed to collectivities, and since learning is primarily framed as a personal as opposed to a social process, social change becomes something persons undertake privately as consumers of educational products and services. This point is in keeping with the ever expanding social

mission of schools across the history of American education, particularly since the Progressive Era. It is also directly related to the book's central warning: neither education nor schools have ever resolved major American social problems on their own.

The question this raises, of course, is why so many Americans repeatedly seek to burden their school system with the task of social transformation. Labaree's answer constitutes his book's central, if undeveloped, insight. The phenomenon of educationalization, he admits, is itself a symptom of a still greater dynamic: the rigid adherence to liberal democracy practice, which blocks access to direct political or economic reforms. The result is that most Americans chronically seek to solve social problems by indirect and therefore, ineffective means. Chief among them is American schools, as education seems to so many to be a genuinely malleable and legitimately contestable domain.

So ***Someone Has to Fail*** turns out, in the end, to be a book less about public schooling and more about the political, economic, social, and cultural limitations of American liberalism. Reading between the lines, I detect in Labaree either a suffocating socialist or at least a frustrated social democrat. On several occasions, he invokes the model of the European welfare state as a viable alternative to American liberalism, suggesting in each case that the impulse toward educational reform would have meaning in Europe because it could be matched with direct political and economic reform. Still, for a book ostensibly concerned with the limitations of liberal democracy, ***Someone Has to Fail*** has virtually nothing to say in any systematic way about the nature of socialism or social democracy. Admittedly, this is because Labaree has no evident reason to believe that American culture is ever to achieve socialist or social democratic reforms. In this regard, he is doubly pessimistic: educational reform cannot work without political or economic reform, which, itself, is impossible in America. In this sense, Labaree's book refuses to lie to its reader about what America is and about what it could be. This may anger some and depress others, but it is obviously an honest assessment of the situation.

Yet something more is at work here, for elsewhere in his book Labaree succumbs to the neoliberal distortion that America already spends too much on education as a nation. In fact, it spends modestly on health care, education, and social programs, when one considers the astronomical amounts of money it throws at the military, banks and corporations, and the wealthy elites in the form of tax cuts. All of this is not to suggest that America should go on expanding the scope of education indefinitely. It suggests, though, that the funds are certainly there, in theory, to run a first-rate system of public schools. Furthermore, there are other ways in which ***Someone Has to Fail*** suggests that its author is politically conflicted. At times, for instance, he slips into the unmistakable voice of the bureaucrat. In this, however, Labaree is far from alone, as traditional political moorings have come undone.

To conclude, I would like to refer to Labaree's construction of liberal democracy in ***Someone Has to Fail***. In it I detect an unexamined reproduction of the longstanding conception of American liberalism as an infinitely self-correcting system. In today's world, though, there is increasingly less reason to believe American culture continues to self-correct, if ever it did. Clear and widely confirmed signs of probably irreversible decline are evident at all levels of American society. One need only point to the diminishing hopes of the American working and middle classes, following on the economic crash of 2008. Indeed, I question whether the United States remains, in actual fact, a liberal democracy. I, for one, perceive the United States as having long since transitioned into a new condition as a nation, one perhaps incipient from its founding, and which is best described as corporatocracy. If this is so--and I would challenge any

honest observer to conclude otherwise--the fundamental premise of Labaree's *Someone Has to Fail* needs revision. It is one thing to define the limits liberalism imposes on educational reform; it is quite another to determine what educational reform can mean in a corporatocracy.

Note

[1]. Stanford University School of Education, http://www.stanford.edu/~dlabaree/ (accessed February 5, 2010).

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