

Educational Reconstruction

“By the Dawn’s Early Light”: Violent Political Conflict and American Overseas Education Reform

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Using a historical approach, Sobe examines the myths and ideals that have underlain U.S. educational initiatives in postconflict nations abroad. Building on its tradition of modern schooling designed to advance civic and social order, America has sought to extend its political and cultural values overseas through educational reforms in postconflict countries. Sobe tracks the development of these reform efforts, highlighting their significance as symbols of American forms of government and civic life and a belief in social transformation through education. Sobe draws upon this history to caution that educational reforms alone rarely accomplish social transformation, and that future U.S. initiatives must honor local and shared cultural values above American ideals.

Looking back over several centuries, it is apparent that violent political conflict has been deeply intertwined with the development of the modern school. From the European religious wars of the seventeenth century, across the conflagrations of the twentieth century, to the present global “war on terror,” conflict—and particularly the opportunities and imperatives that emerge in its aftermath—has helped shape both institutions of schooling and educational objectives. In this essay, I focus on the historical development of American perspectives toward education in war-torn nations.

The American approach to educational reconstruction in postconflict settings has unique features that are patterned by U.S. national myths and imaginaries. These include the notion of American exceptionalism, a sense of “mission” or “historical destiny” that has been remarkably durable across several centuries, and concepts of freedom and democracy. Americans have regularly

viewed overseas education reform as a key means to “waging peace.” While socially ameliorative intentions are deeply embedded in U.S.-led postconflict reconstruction projects, these initiatives have also served to advance America’s global prominence. The central argument of this piece is that American postconflict educational reform all too often serves as a platform for the symbolic expression of ideals rather than as a practical means for accomplishing what is in fact spelled out in these ideals.

The U.S. national anthem, alluded to in the title of this essay, provides a good illustration of the American tendency to view the cessation of military conflict with exuberant optimism and an almost overweening confidence. When the anthem’s author, Francis Scott Key, an American lawyer and amateur poet, contemplated the early light on the morning of September 4, 1814, he was aboard a British prisoner-of-war ship observing the attempted British invasion of Baltimore. In one sense, Key’s verses make a strange choice for a national anthem. The first stanzas feature a series of hesitant questions—“Can you see?” “Does that star-spangled banner yet wave?”—not a rousing, self-affirming hymn. However, the uncertainty that shrouds these lines is resolved in the rarely sung second stanza, when the light of dawn shows that the American flag is in fact still flying (“Now it catches the gleam of the morning’s first beam / In full glory reflected now shines in the stream”).

The spread of light is, of course, *the* central Enlightenment metaphor, and in the republican experiment that was the early United States, the struggle between order and chaos took on practical urgency. Public schooling was proposed as one measure which could ensure that reason and reasonableness would be widely distributed across the population, thus helping to guarantee the success of a political order based on self-determination. While publicly organized schooling may have served other social purposes as well, even in the colonial period, the argument linking the school and American democracy has proven extremely durable. Time and again this argument has been endorsed with boundless confidence, even as its proponents simultaneously have been haunted by a consuming anxiety about its effectiveness and practical implementation (Stevick & Levinson, 2008). The U.S. national anthem exhibits a similar anxiety—again, not over what to do or which principles to uphold but over whether Americans will succeed in their efforts (Ferguson, 1997). Accordingly, the moment when the smoke of battle clears and the first rays of the new day illuminate the landscape proves to be supercharged and revelatory. By the dawn’s early light, all is renewed and all is possible.

Violent Conflict, Government, and the Subjects of Schooling

It is a core precept of much educational scholarship that the politics of education unfold in a public sphere within which numerous interests compete. However, historically speaking, modern schooling has been very much a state-centered enterprise—of government and for government. The emergence

of national school systems in the West can be linked to the political reconfigurations that followed in the wake of the European religious wars of the seventeenth century. The idea of monarchal "rule by divine right" as well as the practice of rulers being able to determine the authorized local religious denomination, under which Europe had seen such extraordinary carnage and civil disorder, were eclipsed as political thought began to center on the security and survival of the state itself (Koselleck, 1985). The state, it was suggested, was the leviathan that could end religious slaughter and impose civil peace. Modern school systems emerged in this postconflict setting as a key means by which governments could administer and enhance that most precious state resource: the population (Hunter, 1994). Education for state loyalty and social citizenship was intended to quash violent sectarian schisms; similarly, the educational objectives of tolerance, self-responsibility, and self-control served the governmental interest in bolstering civic order and social stability.

The schisms and conflicts unleashed in the revolutionary period contributed to anxiety about the fragility of America's republican experiment. Key figures such as Noah Webster saw government-organized schooling as critical for reliably producing allegiance to the nation over other affiliations. When Horace Mann advocated for common schools in the 1830s and 1840s, he argued that these institutions would ease tensions between the rich and the poor. Americans famously expect their schools to be a panacea for ills both individual and collective, yet these two examples show the ways in which "governmental" concerns are at the core of these expectations: An education system is to support the state and civic peace.

Although the development of modern schooling reflects state concerns about peaceful coexistence, this has generally been for intranational rather than international peace. Cultivating loyalty to the "homeland" also produces a willingness—at times an imperative—to use violent means against those who are perceived as a threat. In the American case, as is suggested in the Bush (2006) administration rhetoric that the war on terror is a battle against "those who hate freedom," it is most frequently values and a "way of life" that are being contested. Notions of exceptionalism and city-on-a-hill imagery are regularly recycled in American political discourse, generating messianic conviction and Americanizing conversion missions. These ideals are well encapsulated in the proposal "as Christ died to make men holy, let us die to make men free," set forth in the "Battle Hymn of the Republic," an abolitionist song dating to the Civil War that has subsequently come to represent the "liberational" dimension of much U.S. overseas activity. The American imperial stance has long been one of "democratic tutelage" where Americans assume the role of teacher to remake the world in their own image. This pretension has permeated most U.S. involvement in overseas armed conflicts, even when the roots of conflict may well lie primarily in geostrategic calculations and access to markets or natural resources. This pretension also powerfully informs U.S. post-conflict reconstruction projects overseas—with the antecedent violent political

conflict both (1) providing a warrant for the introduction of school reforms that will bring "proper" forms of government to peoples whose civic life has heretofore not been appropriately organized and (2) providing, in theory if not in practice, the clean slate that is needed for a fresh start and for reengineering a society by remaking its citizens.

Postconflict Reconstruction in "the American Century"

Across the twentieth century, the aftermath of violent political conflict has provided an opportune setting for spreading American cultural ideals and expanding U.S. influence through education. For the most part, the territories acquired by the United States after the Spanish-American War of 1898 were not devastated; war-torn areas, yet American educational initiatives were predicated on the idea that these societies that had been "liberated" were degraded and in desperate need of reconstruction. In the Philippines, despite the fact that American soldiers, to their great surprise, regularly discovered Spanish schools already in existence, school expansion and reconstitution was held to be key to "civilizing" the Filipino (Justice, 2009). At the end of July 1901, a group of more than five hundred young Americans, many from elite colleges, steamed toward Manila aboard a converted military transport ship, the U.S.S. *Thomas*, to work there as teachers (Zimmerman, 2006). U.S. Bureau of Education exhibits on the Philippines at the 1904 and 1915 World's Fairs presented the educational reforms that Americans were initiating to spread peace, prosperity, and progress to "formerly" colonized peoples around the world. U.S.-based philanthropic and religious organizations also played a key role in this educational movement; in Cuba in the early decades of the twentieth century, for example, American Protestant missions established schools complementary to the U.S. government-run schools. Evangelization within a space freed from Spain's Catholic influence was one priority, but these educational initiatives took on a life of their own, and the spread of "American ideals" to future Cuban leaders became an important objective (Yaremko, 2000).

Though American soldiers entered World War I three years into the fighting, from the outset Americans had been involved in a range of humanitarian initiatives that also had an Americanizing dimension. The centuries-old projections of America as "new" world and Europe as "old" were very much in play as Americans came to Europe's "rescue." In terms of discursive positioning, one might say that by the early twentieth century America had achieved enough "maturity" (or enough confidence in its parvenu status) to now civilize the "old" Europe, which had traditionally claimed global preeminence as the privileged locus of "civilization" and modernity. Victoria de Grazia (2005) insightfully argues that it was the European validation of American authority for norms-making that prompted the shift from Europe to America as the locus of modernity and advancement. World War I and its aftermath thus pro-

vided a key opportunity to demonstrate America's modern superiority in the areas of child welfare, social welfare generally, and education.

American educational initiatives in Europe after World War I were largely ad hoc projects organized in the philanthropic sector, often as an offshoot of emergency food, health, or war orphan work. Particularly in the newly created, fledgling democracies of Central and Eastern Europe, these projects tended to focus on repairing school buildings and supporting manual and vocational training—curricular reforms that were viewed as necessary to reconstruct European societies as less elitist and more democratic. Such impulses even underlay infrastructure projects in that frequently some degree of local decisionmaking and financial contribution was required by American organizations (Sobe, 2009).

Early-twentieth-century American texts connected with educational rebuilding consistently assert the idea that Americans exert initiative and take control of situations. In contrast, Europeans and others were characterized as passive and needing to learn a "can-do" spirit. As violent political conflict seemingly created conditions ripe for new beginnings, America launched projects that helped transmit a culturally specific vision of a civil society sector that was made vibrant through charitable works and civic initiative. In this vein, it bears noting that American models, or "best practices," spread in part because they were ostensibly offered out of charitable concern and in a manner that professed to be noncoercive (de Grazia, 2005).

After World War II, Americans continued to use educational reconstruction projects to remake the dispositions and behaviors of individuals as part of a broader effort to remake societies abroad. At least in the initial years of U.S. military administration in Germany, Italy, and Japan, school reform was seen as pivotal for extirpating fascism and the authoritarian habits of mind viewed as partly responsible for the war. Famed Winnetka, Illinois, progressive educator Carleton Washburne was named director of the Education Subcommittee of the Allied Control Commission in Italy, and he introduced curricular reforms designed to encourage students' self-direction, self-expression, and self-governance (White, 1991). In U.S.-occupied Japan, State Shintoism was a particular target of reform. The traditional moral education course (*sushin*), initially replaced by American-style social studies, was ultimately replaced by an ethics course (*doutoku*) configured along the lines of developmental psychology. To this day, the Japanese ethics curriculum sets out to educate children as problem-solvers, active learners, and constructive members of society and in this manner exhibits American influences that have had a deep and persistent impact on Japanese society (Shibata & Ohkura, 2009). Despite U.S. success in purging postwar Germany of Nazi teachers and curricula, American plans to create democratic citizens by changing pedagogical methods and shifting secondary education toward a less tracked, comprehensive model did not, at least initially, result in extensive institutional changes. Harold Zink (1957), formerly a high-ranking official in the U.S. High Commission for Germany,

argued that the American educational reform initiatives came to naught, but more recently scholars have argued that when American reconstruction efforts are viewed from a long-term perspective, an impact in the democratization of school governance and teaching methods can be discerned (Dorn & Puaca, 2009).

World War II fully installed education reform as a regular feature of Pax Americana. Thus, it is no surprise that in post-1989 central and Eastern Europe and Russia, schools were targeted as a key site for social and civic transformation. While the U.S.-Soviet conflict involved ample instances of armed conflict waged by proxies, the cold war never spilled out into direct, armed conflict between the two superpowers. Nonetheless, this "ideological" battle bears mentioning here because legions of American educational consultants were dispatched to formerly Communist countries in the 1990s (Perry, 2005), demonstrating that Americans felt justified in pushing their "victorious" ideals and models on others in the aftermath of this conflict as well.

American Postconflict Reconstruction and the Turn of the Twenty-First Century

Since the cold war, several important themes have emerged in American postconflict educational initiatives. Notions of partnership and community figure more prominently as peace-making reconstruction projects appear to be increasingly designed with multiple parties and networks of stakeholders in mind (Sobe, 2007). Overseas education reforms continue to place a premium on rectifying "improper" forms of government and civic life, even if there are some notable new contours to what is deemed to constitute good governance and social order. By and large, however, American postconflict reconstruction projects have continued to operate on a symbolic level; making ideals manifest and introducing them into new settings is, in effect, the primary "function" of educational reform.

One example of this new form of postconflict educational reform occurred in the mid-1990s in the aftermath of interethnic violence in the Balkans. As part of its emphasis on civic capacity building, the U.S. Agency for International Development funded a project to introduce American-style parent-teacher associations (PTAs) to Bosnian schools. In its effort to enhance initiative and self-responsibility, the project echoed priorities of earlier periods but included an emphasis on community involvement and the introduction of the concept of social capital—a favorite object of American political scientists (Burde, 2006). Substantial interethnic cooperation and reconciliation may not have been achieved through this particular project, though it stands as emblematic of the "will to community" that increasingly pervades education reform around the globe (Sobe, 2007). The value placed on the associational lives of citizens in community-based education reforms is quite attractive. Yet it is important not to forget that what is at play is a political ratio-

nality that specifies what is proper for both individuals and the state (Rose, 2000). Community-based reforms, though founded on principles of diversity and pluralism, ironically also advance a moral code of normalized values and behaviors.

American educational reconstruction projects currently under way in Iraq and Afghanistan are influenced by political trends that are often identified as "neoliberal." Despite the fact that neither country can be truly considered "postconflict," U.S. policy seems to proceed under the assumption that the removal from power of Saddam Hussein and the Taliban has created the conditions necessary for a fresh start—the kind of liberation that will prompt a wholesale social reengineering. Privatization and corporatization of schooling are features of the neoliberalism that can be seen in American overseas post-conflict education reforms, most flagrantly in the 2003 awarding of a no-bid contract to a for-profit corporation (Creative Associates International Inc.) for work on Iraqi educational reform (Saltman, 2006). In addition, neoliberal ideologies can be found in the frequent American idealization of decentralized decisionmaking, devolved state authority, and governing that avoids intimate involvement in the day-to-day lives of citizens (Franklin, Bloch, & Popkewitz, 2003). However, as responsibility and risk management are passed on, individuals in their day-to-day lives seem increasingly expected to comport themselves with "governmental" concerns first and foremost in mind.

Although today there may be more multilateral features and linkages to international organizations than in the past, overseas education reform projects continue to serve as an important vehicle for Americans to disseminate ideals and practices. Violent conflict can create the conditions and warrant for these double-edged reconstruction initiatives. This essay has argued that in the American imaginary, the dawn of a postconflict era is often construed as a moment of opportunity—for emancipation from the past, for wide-scale social reengineering, and for laying the foundations of a stable, peaceful postconflict order. However, while schools and education reform are excellent vehicles for expressing social ideals, there is little historical evidence that they are, in the end, actually effective mechanisms for carrying out the social transformations promised by these ideals.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, it is becoming increasingly clear that in the short run educational reconstruction can do little to repair social strife and temper sectarian schisms. Yet this very mission has historically been among the core objectives of educational institutions. In today's fast-paced world, the mobility of people and the rapid dissemination of news and ideas undermine the state's ability to manage reliably the conduct of its citizens. This partly explains the failure of schools to achieve the goals that are so often thrust on them. Yet there is also a deeper historical pattern at work: Schooling is part of a larger "cultural confidence game," which maintains that the principles and norms embedded in educational institutions are destined to be eventually realized in daily life and changes to social structures.¹ The practical implications to be

deduced from this can vary greatly depending on the political convictions and social perspectives with which one starts. Looking at the historical development of American perspectives toward education in war-torn nations, we are reminded to be cautious about what we task schools with and what we promise that education can accomplish.

In postconflict settings, where instability mingles with the hopeful promise of new beginnings, we must be wary of the victor's desire to demonstrate that the battle was worthwhile, that fighting really was in the name of high principles and not driven by other interests or, worse, by tragic miscalculations. This calls for extreme caution toward the prospect of investing other nations' educational institutions with American ideals and American visions of better futures. If the U.S. continues to play a leading role in the global arena, change and improvements in overseas education systems should certainly continue to be a feature of U.S. peace-making efforts, though with the realistic expectation that schooling plays at best a contributing role in social transformation. A long-term commitment to engagement and exchange—while recognizing the reality of cultural differences and taking a nonproprietary approach to democratic practices—stands as the best strategy for capitalizing on the hope and possibility that the dawn of a postconflict era brings.

Note

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