Ways of Seeing: An Essay on the History of Compulsory Schooling

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In this essay the author describes the rise of compulsory schooling in the United States and then views this phenomenon through five different explanatory models. The first two are largely political, revealing compulsory schooling as a form of political construction and as an outgrowth of ethnocultural conflict. Noting the rise of educational bureaucracies, the author next offers an organizational interpretation as a third way of viewing compulsory schooling. The last two models are largely economic: one depicts the growth in schooling as an investment in human capital, and the other, using a Marxist approach, shows compulsory schooling to be a means of reproducing the class structure of American society. In conclusion, Professor Tyack observes that alternative ways of seeing not only draw on different kinds of evidence, but also depict different levels of social reality and so aid us in gaining a wider and more accurate perception of the past.

I should warn you that what you are about to read is not a bulletproof, airtight, unsinkable monograph. It is an essay in the root sense of the word: a trial of some ideas. Kenneth Burke wrote that “a way of seeing is always a way of not seeing.”1 In our specialized age people are taught and paid to have tunnel vision—and such specialization has many benefits. Socialization within the academic disciplines focuses inquiry: economists explain events in economic terms, sociologists in sociological ways, psychologists by their own theories. Splintering even occurs within

fields; Freidians and behaviorists, for example, see the world through quite different lenses.2

Historians tend to be eclectic more often than people in other disciplines, but they often make their reputations by developing a single line of argument. The frontier was the major shaping force in American history, Turner tells us. Status anxiety is the key to the progressive leaders, Hofstadter argues. Economic interests are the figure in the historical carpet, Beard claims. Other historians make their reputations by attacking Turner, Hofstadter, or Beard.3 And so it goes.

Historiography normally is retrospective, telling us in what diverse ways scholars have explained events like the American Civil War. What I propose to do here is a kind of prospective historiography. I am impressed with the value of explicitly stated theories of interpretation but also struck by the value of discovering anomalies which any one theory does not explain. Thus, it seems useful to entertain alternative modes of explanation as a way of avoiding the reductionism that selects evidence to fit a particular thesis. Using different lenses to view the same phenomenon may seem irresponsibly playful to a true believer in any one interpretation, but at least it offers the possibility of self-correction without undue damage to an author's self-esteem.4

The topic of compulsory schooling lends itself to sharply different valuations, as the cartoons in figures 1 and 2 suggest. Earlier students of compulsion, like Forest Ensign and Ellwood Cubberley, regarded universal attendance as necessary for social progress and portrayed the passage and implementation of compulsory laws as the product of noble leaders playing their role in a long evolution of democracy.5 Standing firmly on the structure of civilization," as in figure 1, leaders used the mechanism of schooling to raise "American Social and Economic Life." In recent years radical critics have offered a quite different view of compulsory schooling. Figure 2 visually represents some of the elements of this revised interpretation. The school offers different and unequal treatments based on the race, sex, and class of incoming students. Compartmentalized internally, it produces a segmented labor force incapable of perceiving common interest. Rather than liberating the individual, the school programs him or her so as to guarantee the profits of the invisible rulers of the system. The school is thus an imposition that

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2 Everett C. Hughes, Men and Their Work (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1968).
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FIGURE 1

Source: Edgar Mendenhall, The City School Board Member and His Task (Pittsburgh, Kans.: College Inn Books, 1929), frontispiece.

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dehumanizes the student and perpetuates social stratification. Such differing valuations as these necessarily influence explanatory frameworks and policy discussion.

In this intentionally open-ended essay, I first sketch what I take to be the phe-

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6 A sampling of radical views can be found in writings of Paul Goodman, Ivan Illich, Michael Katz, and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (the last two are discussed below in the "Marxian Analysis" section).
nomina of compulsory schooling that the theories should explain. Then I examine two sets of interpretations, political and economic, which I find initially plausible. Some of the explanations are complementary, some contradictory; some explain certain events well but not others. Although each discussion is brief, I have tried to state the theories fairly, believing it not very useful to shoot down interpretations like ducks in a shooting gallery, only to bring out the right one (mine) at the end. But naturally I have interpretive preferences. Therefore, I intend to indicate what I see as flaws in the theories and anomalies they may not explain. In my conclusion, I do not attempt to reconcile the various interpretations in any definitive way, but instead suggest what we can learn from such comparative explorations.

What Needs to Be Explained?

At this point in my reading, I see two major phases in the history of compulsory school attendance in the United States. During the first, which lasted from mid-nineteenth century to about 1890, Americans built a broad base of elementary schooling which attracted ever-growing numbers of children. Most states passed compulsory-attendance legislation during these years, but generally these laws were unenforced and probably unenforceable. The notion of compulsion appears to have aroused ideological dispute at this time, but few persons paid serious attention to the organizational apparatus necessary to compel students into classrooms. Therefore, this phase might be called the symbolic stage. The second phase, beginning shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, might be called the bureaucratic stage. During this era of American education, school systems grew in size and complexity, new techniques of bureaucratic control emerged, ideological conflict over compulsion diminished, strong laws were passed, and school officials developed sophisticated techniques to bring truants into schools. By the 1920s and 1930s increasing numbers of states were requiring youth to attend high school, and by the 1950s secondary-school attendance had become so customary that school-leavers were routinely seen as "dropouts."

Even before the common-school crusade of the mid-nineteenth century and before any compulsory laws, Americans were probably in the vanguard in literacy and mass schooling among the peoples of the world. Although methods of support and control of schools were heterogeneous in most communities before 1830, enrollment rates and literacy were very high—at least among whites. Public-school

\footnote{For a more detailed explication of this phasing, see my study \textit{The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1974).}
### TABLE 1

**Selected Educational Statistics for the United States, 1840–1890**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1840</th>
<th>1850</th>
<th>1860</th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1880</th>
<th>1890</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment rates of persons aged 5–19, in percentage (a)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of enrolled pupils attending daily (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>59</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average length of school term, in days (b)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>132</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of population 10 years and older illiterate (c)</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sources:**
- c) Folger and Nam, *Education*, pp. 113-114.

advocates persuaded Americans to translate their generalized faith in education into support of a particular institution, the common school. Between 1850 and 1890 public expenditures for schools jumped from about $7 million to $147 million. Funds spent on public schools increased from 47 percent of total educational expenditures to 79 percent during those years. Table 1 indicates both the high initial commitment to schooling and the gradual increase in attendance and decline in illiteracy.

Educational statistics and data on literacy during the nineteenth century are notoriously unreliable, but Table 1 at least suggests the magnitude of change. The aggregated national data, however, mask very important variations in attendance and literacy by region (the South lagged far behind the rest of the nation); by ethnicity (commonly forbidden to read under slavery, Blacks were about 90 percent illiterate in 1870; and foreign-born adult whites were considerably less liter-

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>1870</th>
<th>1880</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
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The changes in attendance and literacy before roughly 1890 took place with minimal coercion by the states—despite the fact that by then twenty-seven legislatures had passed compulsory-attendance laws. A survey in 1889 revealed that in all but a handful of states and individual cities the laws were dead letters. Indeed, in several cases state superintendents of education said that responsible local officials did not even know that there was such legislation. Educators were often ambivalent about enforcement of compulsory-attendance laws. Often they did not want the unwilling pupils whom coercion would bring into classrooms. In many communities, especially big cities, schools did not have enough seats even for children who wanted to go to school. And many citizens regarded compulsion as an un-American invasion of parental rights. Except in a few states like Connecticut and Massachusetts, provisions for enforcement were quite inadequate.

Phase two of the history of compulsory schooling, the bureaucratic stage, built on the base of achievement laid down during the symbolic stage. The basically simple structure of the common school became much more elaborate, however, and mass education came to encompass the secondary school as well, as indicated by table 2.

Public attitudes toward compulsory schooling appeared to become more positive in the years after 1890. This was true even in the South, which had previously

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enrollments rates of persons aged 5-19, in percentage (a)</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>1910</th>
<th>1920</th>
<th>1930</th>
<th>1940</th>
<th>1950</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of enrolled pupils attending daily (b)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of total enrollment in high schools (a)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School graduates as percentage of population 17 years old (b)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of population 10 years and older illiterate (c)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimates of educational attainment, in years (d)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Sources:  
4) Folger and Nam, *Education*, p. 132.

resisted such legislation. States passed new laws with provisions for effective enforcement, including requirements for censuses to determine how many children there were, attendance officers, elaborate "pupil accounting," and often state financing of schools in proportion to average daily attendance. Age limits were gradually extended upwards, especially under the impact of the labor surplus in the Depression, until by the mid-1930s youths were typically required to attend school until age sixteen.

Early in the century the great majority of teenagers in school were lumped in the upper grades of the elementary school as a result of the frequent practice of forcing children to repeat grades. In the 1920s and 1930s, however, the practice of "social promotion"—that is, keeping age groups together—took hold, and the percentage of teenagers in high schools increased sharply. The increasing numbers of children compelled to attend schools, in turn, helped to transform the
structure and curriculum of schooling. Of course, there were still many children who escaped the net of the truant officer, many who were denied equality of educational opportunity: an estimated two million children aged six to fifteen were not in any school in 1940. But during the twentieth century universal elementary and secondary schooling gradually was accepted as a common goal and approached a common reality.\(^\text{13}\)

Over the long perspective of the last century and a half, both phases of compulsory school attendance may be seen as part of significant shifts in the functions of families and the status of children and youth. Households in American industrial cities became more like units of consumption than of production. Indeed, Frank Musgrove contends that the passage of compulsory-school legislation in England "finally signalized the triumph of public over private influences as formative in social life and individual development; in particular, it tardily recognized the obsolescence of the educative family, its inadequacy in modern society in child care and training."\(^\text{14}\) Advocates of compulsory schooling often argued that families—or at least some families, like those of the poor or foreign-born—were failing to carry out their traditional functions of moral and vocational training. Immigrant children in crowded cities, reformers complained, were leading disorderly lives, schooled by the street and their peers more than by Christian nurture in the home. Much of the drive for compulsory schooling reflected an animus against parents considered incompetent to train their children. Often combining fear of social unrest with humanitarian zeal, reformers used the powers of the state to intervene in families and to create alternative institutions of socialization.

Laws compelling school attendance were only part of an elaborate and massive transformation in the legal and social rules governing children.\(^\text{15}\) Children and youth came to be seen as individuals with categorical needs: as patients requiring specialized medical care; as "delinquents" needing particular treatment in the courts; and as students deserving elaborately differentiated schooling. Specific adults came to be designated as responsible for aiding parents in the complex tasks of child care: teachers, truant officers, counselors, scout leaders, and pediatricians, for example—not to mention Captain Kangaroo. Formerly regarded as a central

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function of the family, education came finally to be regarded as synonymous with schooling. The common query "Why aren't you in school?" signified that attendance in school had become the normal career of the young.16

Political Dimensions of Compulsory Attendance

Only government can compel parents to send their children to school. In legally compelling school attendance, the democratic state not only coerces behavior but also legitimizes majority values, as Michael S. Katz has argued.17 Thus, sooner or later, any historian investigating compulsory school attendance logically needs to attend to political processes.

In recent years, however, few historians of American education have paid close attention either to the politics of control of schools or to the nature of political socialization in schools. Echoing Horace Mann's concern for social cohesion as well as social justice, R. Freeman Butts has suggested that both radical historians (stressing imposition by economic elites) and "culturist" historians (broadening the definition of education to include all "habitats of knowledge") have somewhat neglected the political functions of public schooling in both national and international contexts—what he calls civism.18 Such neglect did not characterize much of the earlier work in the history of education, which like writings in other branches of history, had a marked political and indeed nationalistic flavor. Among political sociologists, the emergence of new nations has also aroused interest in the political construction of education.

I begin, then, with an examination of a broad interpretive framework which stresses education as a means of incorporating people into a nation-state and legitimizing the status of "citizen" and "leader." After noting difficulties in relating these notions to the loosely organized political system of the United States, I proceed to a rather different form of analysis—namely, one which seeks to interpret the passage of compulsory-schooling laws as a species of ethnocultural conflict. This explanation appears to fit phase one far better than phase two. To interpret phase two I draw upon what one historian has called "the organizational synthesis," an approach that seeks to explain political and social changes during the progressive era in terms of the growing importance of large-scale bureaucratic organizations and the attempt to resolve political issues by administrative means.

The Political Construction of Education

It is natural in the Watergate era to agree with Dr. Johnson that “patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel” and to suspect that nationalistic rhetoric about schooling disguises real motives. Yet I am struck by the range of ideology and class among persons in the United States who justified compulsory public education on explicitly political grounds. If the patriots were scoundrels, there were many of them in assorted walks of life. Moreover, nationalism has been associated with compulsory attendance not in the United States alone but also in European nations during the nineteenth century and in scores of developing nations today. In 1951 UNESCO sponsored a series of monographs on compulsory education around the globe; the organization assumed that all United Nations members agreed on “the general principle of the necessity of instituting systems of compulsory, free and universal education in all countries.”

How can one construe the political construction of education? Why does schooling seem so important to the modern state? In their essay, “Education and Political Development,” John W. Meyer and Richard Rubinson have argued that modern national educational systems in effect create and legitimate citizens. New nations are commonly composed of families and individuals who identify with regions, religions, ethnic groups, tribes, or interest groups. Such persons rarely think of themselves as either participants in or subjects of the state. Indeed, the whole notion of universal citizenship might seem to them fanciful and implausible. Meyer and Rubinson argue that the central political purpose of universal education is precisely to create citizens and legitimate the state. Families in potentially divisive subgroups turn over their children to state schools to learn a common language, a national history, and an ideology that incorporates them as citizens into the broader entity called the state. The point is not that this new compulsory political socialization is actually successful in accomplishing its cognitive or affective tasks, but simply that the institutional process is designed to create a new category of personnel—citizens. Similarly, advanced education may create and legitimate elites. People who formerly ruled by hereditary right or other kinds of ascensive privilege may still wield power, but the rituals of higher state education turn them into legitimate “civil servants.” As states expand their control over new sectors of society, state schooling gives an apparently rational and modern justification for new social rules that replace the older ones based on regional, ethnic, religious, or family loyalties. By these means, education helps to institutionalize the authority of the state.


It is a complicated argument. Let me illustrate with historical examples from American, French, and Prussian experience. After the American Revolution, numerous theorists like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Noah Webster argued that without a transformed educational system the old pre-Revolutionary attitudes and relationships would prevail in the new nation. Rush said that a new, uniform state system should turn children into "republican machines." Webster called for an "Association of American Patriots for the Formation of an American Character," strove to promote uniformity of language, and wrote a "Federal Catechism" to teach republican principles to school children. Jefferson wanted to create state primary schools to make loyal citizens of the young. In addition, many early theorists wanted a national university to prepare and legitimate elites for leadership. Similarly, French writers on education after the 1789 Revolution advocated a universal state system that would teach all French citizens to read and give them pride in their country's history and political institutions. In both cases education was regarded as an instrument deliberately used to create a new status, to turn people with diverse loyalties into citizens of a new entity—the republican state.

The use of schooling as a means of incorporating people into the nation-state was not limited to liberal regimes, however. Compulsory schooling also served militant nationalism in conservative Prussia during the nineteenth century by attaching people to the centralized and corporate state. Victor Cousin observed in his report on Prussian education that the parental duty to send children to school "is so national, so rooted in all the legal and moral habits of the country, that it is expressed by a single word, Schulpflichtigkeit [school duty, or school obligation]. It corresponds to another word, similarly formed and similarly sanctioned by public opinion, Dienstpflichtigkeit [service obligation, that is military service]."

To some degree the political construction of education I have sketched here does fit the development of compulsory schooling in the United States. As mentioned above, post-revolutionary writers on education stressed the need to use schools to transform colonials into citizens. Repeating their arguments, Horace Mann contended that common schools would imbue the rising generation with traits of character and loyalties required for self-government. Waves of immigration intensified concern over the incorporation of new groups into the polity. For a time the federal government took an active interest in schooling ex-slaves so that they,

too, might become proper citizens like their foreign-born fellow compatriots. The national government even used schooling as a way to shape people conquered in war into the predetermined mold of republican citizenship: witness the fate of Native American children torn from their parents and sent to boarding schools, the dispatch of American teachers to Puerto Rico and the Philippines after the Spanish-American war, and the attempts to democratize Germany and Japan after World War II. Even the Japanese-Americans "relocated" during World War II were subjected to deliberate resocialization in the camps' public schools.

Clearly, Americans had enormous faith in the power of schooling to transform all kinds of people—even "enemies"—into citizens. The process of entry into the status of citizenship was rather like baptism; like the sprinkling of water on the head of a child in an approved church, schooling was a ritual process that acquired political significance because people believed in it. Characteristically, Americans intensified their attempts at political socialization in schools whenever they perceived a weakening of loyalties (as in World War I), or an infusion of strangers (as in peak times of immigration), or a spreading of subversive ideas (whether by Jesuits or Wobblies or Communists). Interest in compulsory attendance seems to correlate well with such periods of concern.

There are problems, however, with applying this conception of the political construction of education to the United States. The ideas of the revolutionary theorists were not put into practice in their lifetime, for example. One could argue that early Americans learned to be citizens by participating in public life rather than by schooling and indeed, that they had in effect been American "citizens" even before the Revolution. Before the common-school crusade, educational institutions tended to reflect differences of religion, ethnicity, and social class—precisely the sorts of competing loyalties presumably detrimental to national unification. Furthermore, in the federated network of local, state, and national governments, it was by no means clear what "the state" really was. Although many advocates of compulsion turned to Prussia for evidence on how the state could incorporate...
the young into schools for the public good, opposition to centralization of state power was strong throughout the nineteenth century. The ritualized patriotism of Fourth-of-July orations and school textbooks was popular, but actual attempts to coerce parents to send their children to school were often seen as un-American and no business of the state. Prussian concepts of duty to the state sharply contrasted with nineteenth-century American beliefs in individualism and laissez-faire government. Different groups in American society tended to express different points of view about using the state to reinforce certain values and to sanction others.\textsuperscript{27} I will explore this point in the next section on ethnocultural politics.

During most of the nineteenth century, the apparatus of federal and state control of education was exceedingly weak. Although leaders from Horace Mann forward talked of the virtues of centralization and standardization in state systems, state departments of education were minuscule and had few powers. In 1890 the median size of state departments of education, including the superintendent, was two persons. At that time there was one state education official in the United States for every one hundred thousand pupils. One pedagogical czar with effective sanctions and rewards might have controlled such masses, but state departments of education prior to the turn of the twentieth century rarely had strong or even clear-cut powers.\textsuperscript{28} Federal control was even weaker, although some reformers dreamed of massive federal aid and extended powers for the Office of Education. In effect, the United States Commissioner of Education was a glorified collector of statistics—and often ineffectual even in that role. An individual like Henry Barnard or William T. Harris might lend intellectual authority to the position, but the Office itself probably had trivial influence on American schools.\textsuperscript{29} De facto, most control of schools lay with local school boards.

So the theory of the political construction of education is powerfully suggestive, but the American historical experience raises certain anomalies. Most Americans during the early national period apparently felt no need to legitimize citizenship through formal state schooling, although that idea began to take hold by mid-nineteenth century. Until the end of the century there was considerable opposition to centralized state power, both in theory and in practice. Thus it is difficult to envisage \textit{the state} during either period as legitimizing individuals as citizens through education or effectively extending its jurisdiction into other parts of society like the family.

Much of this changed in the era beginning roughly in 1890, as the notion of the

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state as an agency of social and economic reform and control took hold and an "organizational revolution" began. Thus it seems useful to supplement the broad theory of the political construction of education with two other interpretations that give a more focused perspective on the two phases of compulsion.

Ethnocultural Politics in Compulsory-School Legislation during the Nineteenth Century

During the nineteenth century Americans differed significantly in their views of citizenship and the legitimate domain of state action, including compulsory-attendance legislation. A number of interpreters of the political contests of the period have argued that these cleavages followed ethnic and religious lines. In a perceptive essay on this ethnocultural school of interpretation, James Wright notes that these historians dissent from both the economic class-conflict model of Charles Beard and the consensus model that emerged after World War II. The ethnocultural historians, he says, do not argue

... a simplistic model in which ward heeler appeal to ethnic, religious, or racial prejudices and loyalties in order to divert attention from "real" economic issues.

Rather, the real issues of politics have been those most significant relative to life style and values: prohibition, public funding or control of sectarian schools, sabbatarian laws, woman suffrage, and efforts to hasten or retard ethnic assimilation.30

Richard Jensen points out that religious congregations, often divided along ethnic lines, were very important in shaping political attitudes and behavior in the Midwest. Such sectarian groups provided not only contrasting world views but also face-to-face communities that reinforced them. Like Paul Kleppner, Jensen has identified two primary religious persuasions that directly influenced political expression. One was represented by the pietistic sects—groups like the Baptists and Methodists that had experienced great growth as a result of the evangelical awakenings of the century—which tended to reject church hierarchy and ritual and insist that right belief should result in upright behavior. Seeing sin in the world, as represented by breaking the Sabbath or drinking alcohol, for example, the pietists sought to change society and thereby, as Kleppner explains, "to conserve their value system and to restore the norms it preserved." The liturgicals, by contrast, believed that salvation came from right belief and from the preservation of the particular orthodoxies represented in the creeds and sacraments of the church. Liturgicals like Roman Catholics and Lutherans of certain synods tended to see morality as the preserve not of the state but of the church, the family, and the

parochial school. According to both Kleppner and Jensen, the Republican Party tended to attract the pietists, the Democratic Party the liturgicals. By and large, the Republicans supported a "crusading moralism" for a single standard of behavior, while the Democrats spoke for a "counter-crusading pluralism."  

These politically important religious distinctions cut across ethnic lines. Although old-stock Americans tended to be pietistic and Republican, the Irish Catholics to be liturgical and Democratic, for example, other ethnic groups, like the Germans, split into different camps. The immigrant vote was a fiction based on nativistic fear; canny politicians knew better. Furthermore, this kind of status-group politics needs to be distinguished from the theory of the politics of status anxiety or status discrepancy that was advanced by political scientists and by Richard Hofstadter in the 1950s. Status groups asserting themselves through the political process during the nineteenth century rarely saw themselves on the skins socially. Rather than regarding ethnocultural politics as in some sense pathological, it is quite as accurate to describe it as the positive assertion of groups that believed in their own values and life styles and sought to extend their group boundaries and influence. 

The politics of "crusading moralism" and "counter-crusading pluralism" often focused on issues like temperance or Sabbath observance and frequently resulted in blue laws, which, like dead-letter compulsory-attendance legislation, were often more symbolic assertions than implementable decisions. Republican politicians often winked at breaches of the laws where it was politically astute to do so. It was one thing to enforce prohibition in a town where the only public drinker was the town Democrat, and quite another to do so in German wards of Milwaukee. Laws which stamped the pietistic foot and said "Be like me" might satisfy symbolically without alienating dissenters by active enforcement. 

Were nineteenth-century compulsory-school-attendance laws of that character largely passed by Republican pietists? I don’t know, but the hypothesis seems worth testing by evidence: perhaps by the political composition of the state legislatures that passed such laws and by values expressed in textbooks. For now, the interpretation seems plausible. Evangelical ministers were at the forefront of the common-school crusade as the frontier moved westward, and ministers like Josiah Strong saw the school as a bulwark of the evangelical campaign to save the cities.


33 Jensen, p. 122.
Public schooling was widely publicized as the creation of “our Puritan, New England forefathers.” Pietists saw themselves not as an interest group but as representatives of true American values. People who wanted compulsory-attendance laws were presumably already sending their children to school; by branding the nonconforming parent as illegal or deviant, they thereby strengthened the norms of their own group (the explanation follows what can be called the tongue-clicking theory of the function of crime).  

Much of the rhetoric of compulsory schooling lends itself to this ethnocolural interpretation and further refines the theory of the political construction of education. In 1891 superintendents in the National Education Association (NEA) passed a resolution favoring compulsory education. The resolution’s preamble stated that “in our free Republic the State is merely the expression of the people’s will, and not an external governmental force.” The NEA statement sounds quite different than the notion of a strong central state creating citizens through schooling, as in the view explored above. Why then, did the state have to compel citizens to send their children to school? Because compulsion created liberty.  

The assumptions behind this Orwellian paradox become more clear when one reads accounts of the discussions of compulsion which took place that year in the National Council of Education, the prestigious think tank of the NEA. A committee had just reported to the Council that the idle and vicious were filling the jails of the nation, corrupt men were getting the ballot, and “foreign influence has begun a system of colonization with a purpose of preserving foreign languages and traditions and proportionately of destroying distinctive Americanism. It has made alliance with religion...” The committee was really saying that there were two classes of citizens, us and them. Said an educator in the audience: “The report assumes that when the people established this government they had a certain standard of intelligence and morality; and that an intelligent and moral people will conform to the requirements of good citizenship.” Things have changed, he observed: “People have come here who are not entitled to freedom in the same sense as those who established this government.” The question was whether to raise these inferior newcomers to the standards of the Anglo-Saxon forefathers or to “lower this idea of intelligence and morality to the standard of that class” of new immigrants from southern and eastern Europe. Republican liberty depended on a homogeneity of virtue and knowledge that only compulsion could create in
the new generation. Almost without exception native-born and Protestant, NEA leaders in the nineteenth century took naturally to the notion that real citizens were those who fit the pietist mold.\textsuperscript{36}

In 1871, in a speech on the “New Departure of the Republican Party,” Republican Senator Henry Wilson linked compulsory schooling to nativist and Protestant principles. Pointing out that the Fifteenth Amendment had expanded suffrage to include Blacks and that unrestricted immigration was flooding the nation with millions “from Europe with all the disqualifications of their early training,” he argued for an educational system that would transform “the emigrant, the freedman, and the operative” into proper citizens in accord with the “desirable traits of New England and the American character.”\textsuperscript{37} An editorial in the Catholic World promptly attacked Wilson for wanting compulsory schooling to mold all “into one homogeneous people, after what may be called the New England Evangelical type. Neither his politics nor his philanthropy can tolerate any diversity of ranks, conditions, race, belief, or worship.”\textsuperscript{38}

Evidence of ethnic and religious bias abounds in the arguments about compulsory schooling throughout the nineteenth century. In the 1920s bias surfaced again in Oregon when the Ku Klux Klan and its allies passed a law that sought to outlaw private schooling. Two compulsory-schooling laws in Illinois and in Wisconsin in 1889 aroused fierce opposition from liturgical groups, especially German Catholics and Lutherans, because of their provisions that private schools teach in the English language and that they be approved by boards of public education. In both states Democrats derided the laws as instances of Republican paternalism and hostility to pluralism; defeated Republicans learned to disavow spokesmen who believed that extremism in defense of virtue is no vice. After the disastrous votes in 1892, one Republican wrote to a friend that “defeat was inevitable. The school law did it—a silly, sentimental and damned useless abstraction, foisted upon us by a self-righteous demagogue.”\textsuperscript{39} Both Kleppner and Jensen see these contests over compulsory instruction in English as classic examples of ethnocultural politics.\textsuperscript{40}

These Illinois and Wisconsin conflicts may, however, be exceptional cases; other states passed similar laws requiring English-language instruction and state ac-

\textsuperscript{39} Jensen, pp. 122, 129.
\textsuperscript{40} Kleppner, pp. 169–70.
creditation without such contests erupting. It is possible that there was bipartisan support for the ineffectual state laws passed before 1890 and that widespread belief in public education made consensus politics the wisest course. The South, which lagged in compulsory legislation, had few immigrants and few Catholics; its population was native-born and evangelical with a vengeance. How well does an ethnicultural hypothesis fit the South? Is the educational politics of race substantially different from white ethnicultural politics? Only careful state-by-state analysis can test the theory that ethnicultural politics was a key factor in compulsory-attendance legislation during the nineteenth century. But where there is the smoke of ethnicultural rhetoric it is plausible to seek political fires.41

In any case, the high point of ethnicultural politics of compulsory education was probably the nineteenth century. The assumption persisted into the twentieth century that there were real citizens—those with the right heredity and principles—who needed to shape others to their own image. But at the turn of the century attention shifted to efficient organizational means for compelling school attendance.

From Politics to Administration:
An Organizational Interpretation

Despite some notable exceptions, open ethnicultural strife in school politics appears to have subsided during phase two of compulsory attendance. Many of the decisions that once had been made in the give-and-take of pluralistic politics now shifted to administrators within the public education. At the turn of the century a powerful and largely successful movement centralized control of city schools in small boards of education elected at large rather than by ward. Furthermore, state departments of education grew in size and influence and led in the consolidation of rural schools and the enforcement of uniform educational standards. Advocates of these new forms of governance argued that education should be taken out of politics and that most decisions were best made by experts. Government by administrative experts was, of course, a form of politics under another name: decisions about who got what in the public allocation of scarce resources were simply shifted to a new arena. The line between public and private organizations became blurred as proponents of centralization urged that school systems adopt the corporate model of governance. As decision-making power shifted to superintendents and their staffs, the number of specialists and administrators ballooned. School systems grew in size, added tiers of officials, and became segmented into functional divisions:

41 Horace Mann Bond has given us a brilliant analysis of how the politics of race mixed with the politics of competing economic groups in his Negro Education in Alabama: A Study in Cotton and Steel (Washington, D.C.: Associated Pub., 1939).
elementary, junior high, and high schools; vocational programs of several kinds; classes for the handicapped; counseling services; research and testing bureaus; and many other departments.\textsuperscript{42}

The new provisions for compulsory schooling reflected these bureaucratic technologies. In city schools, in particular, large attendance departments were divided into supervisors, field workers, and clerks. Attendance experts developed the school census, elaborate forms for reporting attendance, manuals on “child accounting,” and civil-service requirements for employment. By 1911 attendance officers were numerous and self-conscious enough to start their own national professional organization. Schools developed not only new ways of finding children and getting them into school, but also new institutions or programs to cope with the unwilling students whom truant officers brought to their doors: parental schools, day-long truant schools, disciplinary classes, ungraded classes, and a host of specialized curricular tracks. Local officials gathered data by the file full to aid in planning a rational expansion and functional specialization of the schools. Doctoral dissertations and other “scientific” studies analyzed existing patterns of attendance and promoted the new methods.\textsuperscript{43}

Surely one can find examples of these new techniques and institutional adaptations prior to phase two, but what I find striking is the very rapid increase in the machinery of compulsion and the structural differentiation of the schools in the years after 1890. A new method of inquiry called “educational science” helped educators to gather and process information so that they could not only describe quantitatively what was going on in schools, but also forecast and plan. In national organizations these new functional specialists shared ideas and strategies of change. Older local perspectives gradually gave way to more cosmopolitan ways of thinking. The new hierarchical, differentiated bureaucracies seemed so many to be a superb instrument for continuous adaptation of the schools to diverse social conditions and needs. Theoretically at least, issues of religion or ethnicity were irrelevant to decision making in such bureaucracies, as were parochial tastes or local prejudices.\textsuperscript{44}

Samuel Hays sees the rise of large-scale organizations and functional groups as characteristic of many sectors of American society during the twentieth century. He points out that the new technical systems defined what were problems and used


\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{43} Frank V. Bermejo, \textit{The School Attendance Service in American Cities} (Menasha, Wis.: George Banta Pub., 1924).}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{44} Tyack, \textit{One Best System}, part 4.}
particular means for solving them. "Reason, science, and technology are not inert processes by which men discover, communicate, and apply facts disinterestedly and without passion, but means through which, through systems, some men organize and control the lives of other men according to their particular conceptions as to what is preferable." He argues that the rapid growth of empirical inquiry—normally called "science"—has enabled people in organizations to plan future courses of action. This differentiates these new technical systems from earlier bureaucracies. Not only did these new methods change decision making within organizations, but functional specialists like educators, engineers, or doctors banded together in organizations to influence the larger environment collectively as interest groups.

How does this vision of organizational change help explain the enactment and implementation of compulsory schooling? John Higham has observed that "the distinctive feature of the period from 1898 to 1918 is not the preeminence of democratic ideals or of bureaucratic techniques, but rather a fertile amalgamation of the two. An extraordinary quickening of ideology occurred in the very midst of a dazzling elaboration of technical systems." 46 Robert Wiebe, likewise, sees the essence of progressivism as "the ambition of the new middle class to fulfill its destiny through bureaucratic means." 47 Thus one might interpret the passage of child-labor legislation and effective compulsory-attendance laws as the work of functional groups and national reform associations that combined ideological commitment with bureaucratic sophistication. These groups knew how to create enforcement systems that would actually work, and they followed up on their results. Active in this way were such groups as educators (who increasingly came to the forefront in compulsory-schooling campaigns), labor unions, the National Child Labor Committee, and elite educational associations (like the Philadelphia Public Education Association) with cosmopolitan connections and outlooks. 48

In his essay, "The Emerging Organizational Synthesis in Modern American History," Louis Galambos says that historians of this persuasion believe

... that some of the most (if not the single most) important changes which have taken place in modern America have centered about a shift from small-scale, informal, locally or regionally oriented groups to large-scale, national, formal or-

organizations . . . characterized by a bureaucratic structure of authority. This shift in organization cuts across the traditional boundaries of political, economic, and social history.49

This interpretation has called attention to the fact that large-scale organizations deeply influence the lives of most Americans, and to a degree it has explained how. There is somewhat less agreement among historians as to why this shift has taken place or how to assess the human consequences. Most historians would agree that the rise of complex organizations relates in some fashion to new technology, new forms of empirical inquiry, and institutional innovations designed to cope with size and scope of functions. Economic historians like Thomas Cochran, Alfred Chandler, and Fritz Redlich have described how business firms changed from small, local enterprises (often owned and run by a single family) to vast and diversified multi-tier bureaucracies in order to cope with problems of growth of markets, complexity of production, and widening spans of control.50 Raymond Callahan and others have shown how educational administrators consciously emulated these new business corporations.51

Although the new organizational approach in history may provide a useful focus for the study of compulsory attendance, especially in the years after 1890, the interpretation is not without flaws. It may not be sound to generalize urban experience to the educational system as a whole; bureaucratization was probably neither rapid nor systemic throughout American schools, but gradual and spreading from certain centers like drops of gas on water. The conceptualization of an organizational revolution is also somewhat rudimentary at this point, leading to the same dangers of misplaced concreteness one finds in the use of concepts like “modernization” and “urbanization.” It is very important not to portray this kind of organizational change as an inevitable process. Some people helped to plan the changes and benefited from them, others did not; some results were intended, others were not. Schools are rarely so politically neutral as they portray themselves. One virtue of the economic interpretations to which we now turn is that they provide models of behavior that help to explain the interests or motivations of people who acted collectively in organizations.52

51 Raymond E. Callahan, Education and the Cult of Efficiency (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1962).
52 For some of these criticisms of the “organizational synthesis” I am indebted to Wayne Hobson’s unpublished manuscript, “Social Change and the Organizational Society,” Stanford Univ., Palo Alto, Calif., 1975.
Two Economic Interpretations of School Attendance

It is misleading, of course, to attempt to separate economic interpretations too sharply from political ones. In the three variants of political models sketched above, issues of economic class are present even where, as in ethnocultural conflict, they may not be salient. Both of the economic interpretations I examine also involve political action. Not surprisingly, however, economic historians tend to focus on economic variables, and it is useful to see how far this kind of analysis carries us in interpreting school attendance.

Two contrasting views seem most relevant: human-capital theory and a Marxist model. Both have precursors in nineteenth-century educational thought, but both have received closest scholarly attention during the last generation. Both are related to political interpretations in the broad sense in which Thomas Cochran says that the economic order shaped the political order: "On the fundamental level the goals and values of a business-oriented culture established the rules of the game: how men were expected to act, what they strove for, and what qualities or achievements were rewarded."\(^{50}\) Naturally, economic interpretations may differ in what they take to be the basic driving forces in historical events, and such is the case in the two models I explore.

**Human-Capital Theory and School Attendance**

Mary Jean Bowman has described the notion of investment in human beings as "something of a revolution in economic thought." The notion of investigating the connection between resources spent on increasing the competence of workers and increased productivity and earnings was not entirely new, of course, but experience after World War II showed that "physical capital worked its miracles only in lands where there were many qualified men who knew how to use it (the Marshall Plan countries and Japan)." Economists interested in economic growth then began to analyze the effects of "human capital" on development and discovered that education appeared to have considerable explanatory power.\(^{54}\)

Work on investment in human beings moved from general studies of the contribution of schooling to economic growth in whole societies to analyses of the rates of return of formal education to individuals. Economists treated the micro-decision making of individuals or families about schooling as a form of rational cost-benefit analysis. They developed increasingly sophisticated ways to estimate rates of return on investment in education by including not only the direct costs of schooling

\(^{50}\) Cochran, p. 304.

but also the value of foregone earnings and the costs of maintaining students as dependents. Albert Fishlow, for example, has calculated that during the nineteenth century the "opportunity costs" paid by parents about equalled the sums paid by the public to support all levels of the educational system. Despite disagreements over specific rates of return, most economists agree that schooling does have significant impact on growth and earnings.\textsuperscript{55}

Although economists have only recently honed the theory of human investment, similar notions have been current in educational circles for a long time. An idea circulating among educators for over a century has been that schooling created economic benefits for the society as a whole through greater productivity and for individuals through greater earnings. The first influential advocate of this view in the United States was Horace Mann, Secretary of the Board of Education of Massachusetts, who devoted his \textit{Fifth Annual Report} in 1842 chiefly to this theme. In his report Mann presented an economic justification for greater investment in schooling, but his arguments were soon picked up as justification for compulsory school attendance. As Maris Vinovskis has observed, Mann actually preferred to advocate education by noneconomic arguments—the role of schools in moral or civic development, for example. But in his fifth year as Secretary, when his work was under political attack in the legislature and when a depression was forcing government to retrench, Mann decided that the time had come to show thrifty Yankees that education was a good investment. He argued that education not only produced good character and multiplied knowledge "but that it is also the most prolific parent of material riches." As proof he adduced the replies of businessmen to his questionnaire asking about the differences between educated and uneducated workers. What his study lacked in objectivity and scientific rigor it made up in evangelical enthusiasm; Mann concluded that money spent on primary schooling gave an aggregate rate of return to society of about 50 percent. He claimed that education enabled people to become rational decision makers by "comprehending the connections of a long train of events and seeing the end from the beginning." In addition to instilling this orientation toward the future—perhaps of most benefit to entrepreneurs—schooling made workers punctual, industrious, frugal, and too rational to cause trouble for their employers.\textsuperscript{56}

Although Mann's evidence was largely impressionistic, his questionnaire highly biased, and his conclusions suspect for those reasons, his report was welcome ammunition to school reformers across the country. The New York legislature printed


and distributed eighteen thousand copies; Boston businessmen applauded him for proving that the common school was not only "a nursery of souls, but a mine of riches"; and a leading educator said in 1863 that Mann's report probably did "more than all other publications written within the past twenty-five years to convince capitalists of the value of elementary instruction as a means of increasing the value of labor." In 1870 the United States Commissioner of Education surveyed employers and workingmen and reported results similar to those of Mann. A committee of the United States Senate which took testimony on "the relations between labor and capital" in the mid-1880s found that businessmen and employees across the nation tended to agree that schooling increases the productivity and predictability of workers. So fixed had this view become by the twentieth century—reflecting dozens of rate-of-return studies at the turn of the century—that a high school debaters' manual on compulsory schooling listed these as standard arguments for the affirmative:

Education is the only guarantee of the prosperity of every individual in the State. Education will pay in dollars and cents.

The education of the State and the wealth of the State bear a constant ratio, one increasing with the other.

As human-capital theory has developed in recent years, economists have applied models of decision theory to the development of compulsory schooling in the nineteenth century. Generally they have focused upon individuals or their families and assumed that they make rational calculations of their presumed future benefits. For example, in their essay "Compulsory Schooling Legislation: An Economic Analysis of Law and Social Change in the Nineteenth Century," William Landes and Lewis Solmon adopted as their "theory of the determinants of schooling levels" the model that an individual "would maximize his wealth by investing in schooling until the marginal rate of return equaled marginal cost (expressed as an interest rate)." They found that in 1880 there was a higher investment in schooling in states that had compulsory-attendance laws than in those that did not.

57 Vinovskis, p. 570.
But by also examining levels of schooling in 1870, when only two states had laws, they discovered that the states which passed laws during the 1870s had already achieved high levels of investment in public education prior to enactment of compulsory legislation. They concluded that compulsory-education laws did not much influence the supply and demand curves and were

... not the cause of the higher schooling levels observed in 1880 in states with laws. Instead, these laws appear merely to have formalized what was already an observed fact; namely, that the vast majority of school-age persons had already been obtaining a level of schooling equal to or greater than what was to be later specified by statute.  

In other words, the legislation merely applauded the decisions of families who had concluded that schooling paid off for their children. But this does not explain why parents had to be forced by law to send children to school. In another article, Solmon admits that variation in state support for schooling "might reflect politics rather than individual market decisions, but even these are worked out in the 'political market place' and presumably reflect the tastes of the 'typical' individual."  

Why, then, pass the laws? Landes and Solmon argue that on the demand side, educators wanted "legislation that compels persons to purchase their product" (the laws did appear to increase the number of days the schools were open); and law may have had external benefits "to members of the community since it is a way of giving formal recognition to the community's achievement in committing more resources to schooling."  

With regard to supply, since schooling was already widely available and most parents were sending their children anyway, the cost of passing the laws was minimal in light of the presumed gains. 

Albert Fishlow reaches similar conclusions in his study of investment in education during the nineteenth century. He notes a rapid rise of spending on human capital in the industrialized nations of the United States, England, France, and Germany. But in contrast with the key role of the central state in Europe, Fishlow says, American investment arose from a local consensus on the value of education: "Under such circumstances, the educational commitment was a matter of course from parents to children rather than from community to schools."  

Most parents, he argues, made the calculation that education was worth the price, both in public outlays and in private opportunity costs. But there were some families that did

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62 Landes and Solmon, 77-78.  
64 Landes and Solmon, pp. 87-88.  
not make this decision, and Fishlow argues that “the entire history of compulsory-schooling legislation and of child-labor legislation is usefully viewed as social intervention to prevent present opportunity costs from having weight in the educational decision.”

The actual opportunity costs differed sharply between rural and urban communities and between richer and poorer families. Schools in farm areas could adjust the academic calendar to match the need for child labor in agriculture, thus nearly eliminating the need to forego the earnings of children. In cities, by contrast, work opportunities were generally not seasonal, and compulsory attendance effectively barred children from adding substantially to family income. In addition, the poor did not have the same opportunity to invest in their children as did middle- and upper-income families, since they could not generally borrow capital against their children’s presumed higher future income. Thus the very large private contribution to schooling through the opportunity costs was a source of major educational inequality—one recognized, incidentally, by truant officers, judges, and other officials who confronted the problems of compulsory attendance firsthand.

How convincing is the human-investment paradigm in explaining the history of school attendance? On the surface it appears to require quite a stretch of the imagination to envisage families actually making the complex calculations of future benefit embodied in some of the models of economists. But, as Mary Jean Bowman writes, “the economist is not concerned, as is the psychologist, with explaining individual behavior per se. If people behave as if they were economically rational, that is quite enough, provided we are dealing with multiple decision units.” The decision-making model is of course a conscious simplification, omitting factors of public welfare or intrinsic pleasure that probably do affect choice. If one defines as voluntary that school attendance which is unconstrained by law (in the absence of law, or beyond legally required years, or in communities where laws were unpublicized or unenforced), it does appear that voluntary attendance was influenced in part by the prospect of future economic advantage, for families always had competing demands on their incomes. And the evidence is quite convincing that compulsory laws were passed in states where most citizens were already investing in schooling up to the point required by law. A powerful recurring argument for compulsion was that taxpayers could realize the full return on their large investment only if free schooling reached all the children; the presumption was that children who were out of school needed education the most and would

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66 Fishlow, p. 427.
67 Fishlow, p. 426; Solmon, 68–72.
68 Bowman, p. 120.
become an economic burden to the community if left uneducated. Hence there was a social benefit in investing in all children as human capital. Thus far the human-capital theory seems fruitful.

The kind of decision making assumed by this theory requires, I believe, at least some awareness of the economic benefits of education. Did nineteenth-century Americans, in fact, link schooling with economic success? In this century we have become accustomed to thinking of schools as sorters, as institutions that help to determine the occupational destiny of students. Increasingly, not only the professions but many other jobs as well have come to require educational credentials or prescribed levels of schooling even for entry-level positions.  

Not only is this screening function of schools embodied in specific institutional arrangements, like high-school counseling programs, but it has also become common knowledge in the population at large. In 1973, 76 percent of respondents in a Gallup poll said they thought education was "extremely important" to "one's future success."  

There is little evidence, however, that citizens in the nineteenth century thought this way about schooling. Rhetoric about the purposes of education emphasized socialization for civic responsibility and moral character far more than as an investment in personal economic advancement. Indeed, there is some counter-evidence that businessmen, for one group, were actually hostile to the notion of education beyond the confines of the common school. The arguments of Horace Mann and his early successors stressed not so much individual earnings as aggregate productivity and the workmanlike traits such as reliability and punctuality. The most influential spokesmen for nineteenth-century educators—people like William T. Harris—did stress a general socialization for work, but they tended to see success as the result of later behavior in the marketplace. Harris estimated that as late as 1898, the average person attended school for only five years. Out of one hundred students in all levels of education, ninety-five were in elementary, four were in secondary, and only one was in higher education. Furthermore, family incomes were much lower in the nineteenth century than in mid-twentieth, and the structure of the labor force was far different. The percentage of the population engaged in agriculture dropped from 37.5 in 1900 to 6.3 in 1960, while the

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percentage in white-collar occupations rose from 17.6 to 49.3 in those years. It is likely, then, that motives other than future rate of return on educational investments in individuals were more significant during the nineteenth century than in the twentieth. The micro-decision-making paradigm of human capital better explains our more recent history, when disposable family income has substantially risen, when parents are better educated and more capable of calculating future benefits, and when schooling has become far more important in sorting people into occupational niches.

A Marxian Analysis

“We are led to reject the individual choice model as the basis for a theory of the supply of educational services,” Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis have written.

The model is not wrong—individuals and families do make choices, and may even make educational choices roughly as described by the human capital theorists. We reject the individual choice framework because it is so superficial as to be virtually irrelevant to the task of understanding why we have the kinds of schools and the amount of schooling that we do.

Why superficial? Because the individual choice model provides only a partial interpretation of production, treats the firm “as a black box,” and offers no useful insight into the basic question of how the capitalist class structure has been reproduced. The perpetuation of great inequalities of wealth and income over the past century and the development of schools as social institutions have not resulted simply from an aggregation of individual choices, Bowles and Gintis argue; rather, schooling has served to perpetuate the hierarchical social relations of capitalist production. In their view, society is not a marketplace of individuals maximizing their advantages but a class structure in which power is unequally divided. It may appear that the American educational system has developed in accord with “the relatively uncoordinated ‘investment’ decisions of individuals and groups as mediated by local school boards,” but in actuality these “pluralistic” accommodations have taken place in response to changes in production “governed by the pursuit

of profit and privilege by those elements of the capitalist class which dominate the dynamic sectors of the economy." By setting boundaries of decision—establishing the rules of the game—the capitalist class determines the range of acceptable choice in a manner that strengthens and legitimizes its position.76

Bowles and Gintis are primarily interested in the consequences of the system of schooling rather than in the conscious motives of elites or school leaders. The important question is whether the outcomes of formal education have supported capitalism—for example, through differential training of workers and employers in ways that maintain the social division of labor. From this point of view, if Mann were a saint and yet his system of education perpetuated injustice because it supported exploitative relations of production, then the case for radical change would be all the stronger.

In developing their model of economic and educational change, Gintis and Bowles do not treat compulsory attendance in detail, but one can easily extrapolate an interpretation of compulsion from their theory. Their explanation has two major components. First, they account for educational reform periods, which shaped ideology and structure, as accommodations to contradictions engendered by capital accumulation and the incorporation of new groups into the wage-labor force. Second, they seek to demonstrate how the educational system has served capitalist objectives of achieving technical efficiency, control, and legitimacy.

"The capitalist economy and bicycle riding have this in common," they argue: "forward motion is essential to stability." As capital accumulates and new workers are drawn into expanded enterprises, potential conflict arises. Bowles and Gintis say that the contradictions inherent in this process gave rise to the common-school movement during the mid-nineteenth century, a time of labor militancy as the wage-labor force expanded and inequality increased. Such contradictions, they believe, also gave rise to the progressive movement at the turn of the twentieth century—a period of conflict between big business and big labor. Social discord stemmed from the integration of immigrant and rural labor into the industrial system. During these times, they argue, workers demanded more education, and "progressive elements in the capitalist class" acceded to the demands only insofar as they could adapt the school to their own purposes. Bowles and Gintis see educational development, then, "as an outcome of class conflict, not class domination." Workers won schooling for their children, but by controlling decision making in education and "suppressing anti-capitalist alternatives," the ruling class maintained the social relations of production while ameliorating conditions and dampening conflict. In this view, schooling has been a crucial tool for perpetuat-

76 Bowles and Gintis, p. 75.
class which dominate the process of decision—establishing the range of acceptable options.  

The influences of the system of school leaders. The impact of education have supported the needs of workers and employers from a different point of view, if Mann considered justice because it supported their radical change would have been.

With social change, Gintis and Bowles argue, one can easily extrapolate the present. The explanation has two parts. At the reform periods, which are based on the raddictions engendered by short-term strategic shifts into the wage-labor system, the educational system has served to legitimize and maintain the status quo.

"TheJobs common," they argue: with old-craftsmen and new workers (to be continuous. Bowles and Gintis argue, that except for the common-school system, the new labor militancy is the result of the contradictions, they say, at the end of the twentieth century of industrial labor. Social discord and its resolution into the industrial process required more education, and sometimes the class demands only insofar as the bourgeoisie and Gintis see education. "For the strict, not class domination, the socializing decision making are dominating," the ruling class besides the creating conditions and the educational tool for perpetuat-
relations between labor and capital.\textsuperscript{79} Half a century later, in the midst of the Great Depression, Rex David wrote a Marxist pamphlet on \textit{Schools and the Crisis}.\textsuperscript{80} Both strongly urged the creation of free and compulsory education for all young people; both stressed the opposition of capitalists to expanded educational opportunity; both saw teachers and other intellectual workers mostly as servants of vested interests but believed that educators could become an important means of spreading the light for socialism. For them as for a number of progressive labor historians, the working class was normally the dominant part of the coalition pushing for equality, and the ruling class was frequently hostile.

The interpretation of these earlier Marxists differs in emphasis from but does not directly contradict the Bowles-Gintis theory of educational change. Bowles and Gintis develop a more explicit model of how an apparently liberal educational system played a crucial part in reproducing unequal distribution of wealth and hierarchical relations of production. They further argue that owners and employers were not part of an undifferentiated group of capitalists but that the schooling reforms were engineered by those who controlled the leading sectors of the economy—exemplified by the corporate leaders at the turn of the century who sought to stabilize and rationalize the economy and supporting social institutions.\textsuperscript{81}

Bowles and Gintis offer a general model of capitalist education rather than a specific interpretation of compulsory attendance. Thus what follows is my own extrapolation from their writing. Since they say that the “impetus for educational reform and expansion was provided by the growing class consciousness and political militancy of working people,” presumably worker groups were advocates of universal attendance, perhaps aided by “progressive elements in the capitalist class.” According to the theory that entry of new groups into the wage-labor force prompted demands for education, one might predict that the compulsory-education laws would appear first where the wage-labor force was growing most rapidly. At the same time, the ineffectiveness of these laws during the nineteenth century might be interpreted in part as a sign of ambivalence toward universal education among capitalists themselves (some might have preferred cheap child labor to the labor of schooled youth or adults, for example). On the other hand, phase two, the period of effective laws and increasing bureaucratization, might reflect growing capitalist consensus on the value of differentiated schooling in producing a segmented labor force for increasingly complex social relations of production. Indeed, the correspondence of the structure and processes of the schools with those

\textsuperscript{79} Douai’s testimony is in United States Senate, \textit{Report on Labor and Capital}, ii, 702–43.
\textsuperscript{81} Bowles and Gintis, “Contradictions.”
of the workplace is precisely the point of the analysis; changes in the latter drive the former.

The Marxian model sketched here is to a degree congruent with both the general theory of the political construction of education and the organizational synthesis. It suggests, however, that the capitalist class, as the ruling class, defines the production of citizens through education according to its own interests in the political economy. It adds to the organizational synthesis an explanation of why the large organization became dominant: capitalists had concentrated their ownership and power. It does not deny the choice model of human-capital theory, but it declares that the choices have been set within a capitalist zone of tolerance; further, it adds the notions of class conflict and reproduction of social structure.

The Bowles-Gintis analysis addresses important questions and poses a clear, explicit model. In my view, however, this kind of class analysis does not sufficiently explain the motive force of religious and ethnic differences in political and social life, especially within the working class. It tends to downplay important variations among employers' attitudes toward child labor and the different forms of education. The older Marxist view here has some substance; as Thomas Cochran and others have documented, many businessmen were opposed to extension of educational opportunity. The wage-labor hypothesis does not help us to understand widespread provision of schooling and numerous compulsory-schooling laws in communities and states in which the family farm was the predominant mode of production. As class analysis becomes further refined, however, it promises to add much to our understanding of both the continuities in social structure and the dynamics of economic and educational change.

Conclusion

So what does one learn from exploring alternative ways of seeing compulsory schooling? Should one simply add them all together, like the observations of the blind men feeling an elephant, and say that the reality is in fact accessible only through multiple modes of analysis, that each mode is helpful but partial? Do some explanations fit only a particular time or place? To what degree are the interpretations mutually exclusive, and to what degree do they overlap? How might

83 On ethnic and religious dimensions to school politics see Troen, chs. 2-4; Diane Ravitch, The Great School Wars, New York City, 1805-1973: A History of the Public Schools as Battlefield of Social Change (New York: Basic Books, 1974), chs. 3-7. As Solomon and Fishlow indicate (see references in footnote 67 above), enrollments in rural schools in many parts of the nation were higher than in industrialized areas; almost two-thirds of the states that passed compulsory-schooling legislation prior to 1890 were overwhelmingly rural in the distribution of population.
one test the assumptions and assertions of each by empirical investigation? Would any kind of factual testing be likely to change the mind of a person committed to a particular way of seeing or to a particular purpose?

The different kinds of interpretations do call attention to different actors, motives, and evidence, and in this sense one could say that the historian interested in all the phenomena of compulsory schooling might simply add together the various sets of observations. Those arguing for the political construction of education emphasize the role of the state and stress the importance of incorporating a heterogeneous populace into a unified state citizenry. The ethnocultural interpretation posits religious-ethnic differences as a motive force in political actions. The organizational synthesis stresses the role of the new middle class in changing the nature of American life through the creation of large organizations that dominate political and economic activities. Human-capital theorists focus on the family as a decision unit in calculating the costs and benefits of schooling. Finally, the Marxists see class struggle as the source of the dialectic that produces historical change. Each interpretation, in turn, directs attention to certain kinds of evidence which can confirm or disprove its assertions of causation: growth of new state rules and apparatus, religious differences expressed in political conflict, the rise of large organizations and related ideologies, the individual and social rates of return on schooling, and changes in the social relations of production and of schooling.⁸⁴

There are problems with simple additive eclecticism, however. Some interpretations do fit certain times and places better than others, as we have seen. More fundamentally, the models deal with social reality on quite different levels: the individual or the family, the ethnocultural group, the large organization, and the structure of political or economic power in the society as a whole. Scholars advancing such interpretations often have quite different conceptions of what drives social change and hence quite different notions of appropriate policy. Some may concentrate on changing the individual, others on improving the functioning of organizations, and still others on radically restructuring the society. Ultimately, one is likely to adopt a framework of interpretation that matches one’s perception of reality and purpose in writing, and thus simple eclecticism may lead to blurring of vision and confusion of purpose.

To argue that one should not mix interpretations promiscuously does not mean that it is unwise to confront alternative conceptualizations or to attempt to integrate them into a more complex understanding of social reality. This, in turn, may make historians more conscious of the ways in which theories and empirical re-

search interact with one another, so that an anomalous piece of evidence may call a theory into question and a new mode of explanation may be generated.86 One of my purposes in this essay has been to extend the boundaries of discussion about the history of American education. I have become convinced that much of the recent work in the field—my own included—has used causal models too implicitly. It has also tended to confine the range of value judgments. Was schooling "imposed" by elites on an unwilling working class, for example, or was John Dewey a servant of corporate capitalism? Entertaining explicit alternative models and probing their value assumptions may help historians to gain a more complex and accurate perception of the past and a greater awareness of the ambiguous relationship between outcome and intent—both of the actors in history and of the historians who attempt to recreate their lives.86
