

BOOK REVIEWS

Cody Dodge Ewert. *Making Schools American: Nationalism and the Origin of Modern Educational Politics*

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For decades, educational historians have written extensively on the role of public education in assimilating immigrant students into American society during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While some scholars have extolled this history, most analyses critique public schools for stripping students of their cultural heritage. By requiring students to speak English only, celebrate Christian holidays, study whitewashed American history, enact nationalistic pageants, and salute the flag while reciting the Pledge of Allegiance, public education compelled young immigrants to turn away from, if not plainly reject, their ethnic traditions and cultural values.

Why did public schools enthusiastically adopt an assimilationist function? The answer most historians give is typically located in the profound social, economic, and political changes occurring in the United States at the time. Industrialization, urbanization, and a massive expansion of commercialization destabilized the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century. Add to this the largest wave of immigration into the nation since its founding, with many newcomers arriving from southern and eastern rather than northern and western Europe, and the result was a widespread feeling of insecurity—if not outright fear—on the part of resident white citizens. Schools, especially in urban areas, reacted to these dramatic changes by becoming assimilationist.

This well-established history is exactly what makes Cody Dodge Ewert's book, *Making Schools American: Nationalism and the Origin of Modern Educational Politics*, so interesting. Ewert does not seek to rewrite this history; indeed, he relies on previous studies to ground his research. Instead, he offers a significantly different interpretation for why schools responded as they did to the social, economic, and political upheaval that characterized the Progressive Era. Taking a long view, Ewert notes that common school crusaders had effectively used the rhetoric of national unity to bolster support for early reforms. Yet as much as Horace Mann and others had accomplished, the state of public schooling following Reconstruction—and public support for it—remained minimal. As Ewert notes of the period, "Countless Americans still viewed

formal schooling as optional or even irrelevant” (p. 3). Consequently, a new generation of school reformers sought justifications for increased investments in public education to build “bigger, more powerful schools” (p. 11). They discovered their most energizing argument in the role schools could play in resolving the “immigrant crisis.” Reformers, Ewert observes, came to understand that “American public schools could provide the nation’s institutional backbone while disseminating a shared vision of patriotism far and wide” (p. 5). This was no mere reaction on the part of insecure middle-class whites, according to Ewert. It was a proactive effort to strategically build support for the dramatic expansion and centralized control of a system of public education throughout the United States—and it was wildly successful.

Ewert’s evidence comes from three states: New York, Utah, and Texas. Here, again, Ewert makes a constructive contribution to the historiography. Previous scholarship has typically focused on major cities—New York and Chicago, especially. Ewert, instead, employs a state-level analysis of three carefully chosen—very different—case studies, offering a historical examination that is simultaneously in-depth and geographically expansive. Rather than focusing solely on New York City, for instance, Ewert dedicates two chapters to capturing developments throughout much of the Empire State, including the schooling of New York’s Native American students, a group frequently excluded from that state’s educational history.

Ewert then turns to Utah and Texas to provide persuasive examples of how school reformers used assimilation and patriotic citizenship to build systems of public education in states that, for the most part, had none. Utah’s case is especially compelling. The territory was not yet a state when reformers began advocating for a system of public schools that would inculcate Americanism. Moreover, the territory’s reputation as home to the controversial Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints put its populace in the position of having to prove their loyalty if Utah wanted to achieve statehood. Ewert deftly navigates the political and cultural complexities that made the situation in Utah so fascinating, even to observers at the time. As Ewert quotes a writer in the *Journal of Education* in 1892: “The most interesting public school development in America today is Utah. There has never before been such an experience in the birth of a public school system” (p. 77).

Scholarship on public schooling’s assimilationist role during the Progressive Era has typically gone by titles such as “Making *Students* American.” Ewert, however, smartly titles his book “Making *Schools* American,” because the story he tells is one of how reformers actively positioned assimilation and Americanization at the core of public education’s institutional purpose. Their efforts succeeded in bringing to fruition the establishment of a nationwide system of public education and redefining the role of schooling in American society. Tying “mass education” to “national glory” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was “hardly novel,” as Ewert notes, “but the consequences were far reaching” (p. 3).

Ewert concludes by locating the “origin of modern educational politics” in the transformation of public schooling during the Progressive Era. In Ewert’s telling, “educational matters” were “an afterthought” for most Americans in the nineteenth century (p. 164). Reformers, however, “cast mass education as an alternative to politics as usual, a path to national prosperity requiring only that citizens support and patronize their local schools” (p. 164). Subsequently, according to Ewert, schools adopted a “starring


role in modern politics,” eventually becoming lightning rods for all sorts of battles in the culture wars (p. 164).

Ewert’s line of argument here seems reasonable. Yet, because he only briefly pursues it in the book’s epilogue, it is not as convincing as his examination of the history that leads him to it. It is quite difficult, for instance, to connect the dots between the early twentieth-century “Conference for Education in Texas” and the 1994 debate over the National Standards for U.S. History. Given how intriguing Ewert’s claim is (and that it makes an appearance in the book’s subtitle), a fully developed chapter on connections between the history Ewert investigates and political battles over public education later in the century was undoubtedly justified. Nevertheless, this is a minor weakness in what is otherwise a well-researched, tightly written book that provides a new and important interpretation of how schools became American.

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Michael Hines. *A Worthy Piece of Work: The Untold Story of Madeline Morgan and the Fight for Black History in Schools*

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Thanks to new scholarship, we know much more about how Carter G. Woodson created the first “Negro history” curriculum and how this fit into a long tradition of fugitive pedagogy that helped Black teachers realize the emancipatory potential of public education. But until now, we’ve known very little in terms of how, when, and why Black teachers, especially women, played a crucial role in this process. In *A Worthy Piece of Work: The Untold Story of Madeline Morgan and the Fight for Black History in Schools*, Michael Hines offers an intimate educational biography of one Black teacher’s remarkable efforts to implement a Black history curriculum in wartime Chicago. He argues that Black teachers like Madeline Morgan played a central role in bringing Black history to US schools, including majority-White ones, and that to date historians have largely missed the significance of Black women as architects of the alternative Black curriculum.

It was not uncommon for Black teachers to teach “Negro history” in the 1940s, nor was it unusual for teachers to teach racial and ethnic tolerance during World War II. What is extraordinary about this story was the scale and influence of Morgan’s work, which extended far beyond the Chicago public schools. Morgan accomplished what prominent academics like Woodson and W. E. B. Du Bois could not: she translated