

Equality, History and an End to Whiteness

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Research in education, but notably also in history (as James suggests here), is much better conceived and practiced as a kind of conversation than as a scheme for *outing the facts*. Of course, some colleagues (particularly in education) think otherwise! But when it comes to something that *means* something—a connective structure of facts and ideas and commitments, for instance—any final determination of fact is premature. Interpretations of this sort (“research”) need reason (and reasons) and voices (and voice). Giving voice in this way—articulating facts, ideas, and commitments—is tremendously difficult: an acquired taste perhaps; but one that anyone might acquire.

Thus our engagement is (once again: see Howley, Howley, & Yahn, 2014) splitting into three separate voices. Each of us harbors views of these matters that take up different aspects of a common imaginary about a good, or decent, or (even) true education.

Craig

Democratic education does not seem an appropriate response to neoliberalism simply because American free-trade democracy (“liberal” democracy) is equated *only* with freedom. The educational problem is that *equality* is the prior condition of solidarity, and *solidarity* is the prior condition of *freedom* (liberty). It’s a true scale, and possibly a testable proposition. In the meantime, it seems that schools—including rural ones—have for generations mostly taught Americans that they are *already* what they cannot be (free). Schooling helps them confound their unfreedom with trade that *is* free. To hell with equality and

solidarity: that’s communism! Honestly, one has learned that lesson in school and, if lucky, unlearns it later on.

The alternative to this miseducation is not an attempt to retrieve something that never was (free-trade democracy) via “democratic education.” Instead, quite simply, more people need to read, converse, write, analyze, and question everything that really matters. And that’s the province of education. To my mind, this sort of endeavor is neither left nor right, but it does seem to lead more toward generosity, empathy, appreciation, understanding, and facility—qualities that have much to do with solidarity. One might call it freethinking, and in America it’s found dangerous.

One *can* become a thoughtful conservative along this path, and clearly this country needs more such—and far fewer ranting. Freethinking of this sort isn’t elitist, but it isn’t dogmatic either. People need to develop, defend, and abandon views and positions with some hope of reason and good sense. It doesn’t require 20 years of schooling, either. Wendell Berry and others have nonetheless imagined and even demonstrated the possibility of thoughtful equality and solidarity in rural places. Much better schooling could help.

Perhaps this opinion represents an unfounded faith in the power of cultivated intellect (one might call it *education*) to sponsor empathy, generosity, and justice. Maybe so, but it seems a far better faith than the one in blood-and-guts patriotism that so dominates the mass schooling of free-trade nation states.

There’s cause for concern, and that’s an understatement. The decline of equality as a cultural value in America, the growing American dogmatism (religion, politics, economics), and a reactivated racist agenda: each argues for mayhem. And all this in a well-armed America.

It’s bad, but there is, of course, still more. The worst of it: (1) the irretrievable existence of nuclear weaponry and (2) the irreversible degradation of planetary climate. The mayhem of both is actually *guaranteed*, even if the timing cannot be precisely specified. The great Jane Jacobs warned: *Dark Age Ahead*.

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Catastrophes are worse for a schooling that frustrates thinking among the young, instead of scaffolding and stewarding it. And public-school teachers now find themselves asked to carry *guns* to class? With the blessing of a Secretary of Education? It would be laughable as a fantasy. But this is all reality in contemporary America. Is Syria, or Lebanon, the pattern of the American future?

James

Cervone writes that a “true understanding of history” will help “produce active rural citizens in a rural democracy.” He contrasts this to the model of history education where “bad information ... is being learned,” a model that produces students who “lack the ability to question” the “simplistic listing of events leading to the conclusion that America is fundamentally good and on a righteous path.” At least part of Cervone’s solution to our problems is in fostering the former and eradicating the latter.

This seemingly presents a dichotomy between the (wrong) hegemonic narrative and the (right) critical version that considers marginalized perspectives. Restoring marginalized perspectives is a necessary endeavor. But I struggle with the implied binary in Cervone’s characterization of a “true understanding of history.” Perhaps I’m making too much of an offhand remark, but it does at least provide an opportunity to explore the practice of history.

Such a binary suggests that there is a correct narrative and an incorrect narrative, that bad history is the teleological justification of American exceptionalism and good history is an understanding of the deleterious effects of American policy. No doubt, some accounts *are* wrong or incomplete, while others offer a more holistic understanding. But this way of thinking about history replaces one set narrative with another corrected (but still set) version. Even the most progressive history curriculum—when presented as a singular narrative—is static, stripped of its emancipatory power.

It’s of course far better to teach a more complete narrative, one that restores marginalized perspectives. But this is still teaching *a* (that is, a singular) narrative. There is not one history of America, but many histories. Historians don’t agree on a monolithic interpretation of events, but rather disagree and contest each other’s analyses. History (as practiced) is dynamic. Historians engage multiple interpretations; it is the aggregate, the evaluation of multiple histories (historiography) that imbues history with its critical potential. History education should not teach “the story,” but rather that there are multiple histories, divergent perspectives. Teaching students to evaluate competing narratives and synthesize conflicting historical accounts, by weighing the available evidence, is what shapes critical thinking.

There is no “true understanding of history” because history is contested, constantly changing. If my response to Cervone is anything, let it be a provocation for this dynamic view of history.

Aimee

Any expression of an abstract idea can only be an analogy. By an odd fate, the very metaphysicians who think to escape the world of appearances are constrained to live perpetually in allegory. A sorry lot of poets, they dim the colors of the ancient fables, and are themselves but gatherers of fables. They produce white mythology. (Derrida, 1974, p. 1)

Certainly democracy (and also equality, solidarity, and freedom) is an abstract idea. Derrida would see it as white and, by extension, as colorless. For me, the increasingly more colorful present of the United States (even its rural places) is its hope. Diversity on this reading neutralizes dogma. Or, in Derrida’s words, efforts to conceptualize ideas that result in the “multiplication of conflicting metaphors ... neutralize or control [the] effect [of one dominant or domineering metaphor]” (p. 12). If white mythology is that domineering metaphor, then the diverse life of diverse organisms in diverse places may be a compelling counternarrative.

In this regard, the rural has a lot going for it. It offers particularities and dailiness. That mythologies (in the form of fundamentalisms) so readily coopt these sources of freedom suggests that, as rural educators, we haven’t done enough to connect the particularities of the rural lifeworld to the avenues through which diverse people derive diverse meanings. Reading, writing, speculating, and debunking are part of the picture. But particularities and dailiness are another indispensable part.

Schooling is not about either—talk about colorless. It’s become the handmaiden to domineering whiteness (as realized in industry and politics and religion). And the coin of its realm is the one true whatever—history or literature or science or what happened yesterday. Truth is up for grabs these days as a political rather than a social process. A better home for it is in the life of the earth, the life of the community, the life of the family, and the life of the mind—rural possibilities, all of them.

At the same time, there’s nothing like an actual joining of genes to bring diversity home. Intersectionality is a poor substitute for bilingual family life and multiracial nieces and nephews.

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