

**Book Review**

# Rethinking the History of Education: Transnational Perspectives on its Questions, Methods, and Knowledge

Thomas S. Popkewitz, editor  
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In his acknowledgements, Thomas S. Popkewitz explains that this work grew out of conversations focused on the question of “reason’ as a historical problem” (p. ix). It is clear in reading this interesting collection of essays that, with varying degrees of explicitness, the authors are collectively challenging the legacy of Enlightenment thought on the historical method. However, the body of literature dealing with the problem of the Enlightenment that finds its origins in the work of scholars of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory is a silent shadow that haunts this volume (to borrow the term used by Lynn Fendler in her excellent final chapter). I am thinking of Ludwig Fleck’s *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* (1935) as an example. Fleck offers a means to understand the way in which scientific knowledge is conditioned by society and culture. The works of scholars such as Peter Burke (2000), Helen Longino (2002), and Karl Mannheim (1985) in the sociology of knowledge remind us of the importance of exploring the relationship between an idea and its situation or context. They urge us to consider the relationship of knowledge to power because the way in which we see the world is a result of power relations that we may not be aware of on a conscious level.

*Rethinking the History of Education: Transnational Perspectives on its Questions, Methods, and Knowledge* continues in this tradition while further elaborating on related themes introduced in a previous work by Popkewitz and collaborators Barry M. Franklin and Miguel A. Pereyra in *Cultural History and Education: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Schooling* (2001), who emphasise the importance of interdisciplinary and comparative history “focused on issues of knowledge, cultural and social change” (p. xiii). This 2001 collective project is worthy of attention as it calls on historians of education but this could and should be a call to historians of all stripes to grapple deliberately with the problem of subjectivity in their research programs.

In this recent work (2013), Popkewitz points to a distinction between the work of North American and European scholars. American scholarly work, he argues, has long been archive and data-driven (at least since the 1960s), as historians sought to legitimate their field as a science. He calls on American scholars of the history of education to situate their research in a more complex theoretical framework and to break free from traditional paradigms. Such an appeal is laudable and is successfully carried out in the chapters that make up this work.

In Chapter 1, *Styles of Reason: Historicism, Historicizing, and the History of Education*, Popkewitz sets the stage for what is to come. He does this by calling on the reader “to consider

the limits of *historicism* [that he associates with American scholarly work on the history of education] with *historicizing* as an alternative to the study of the past” (p. 3, author’s emphasis). Historicizing means that the historian must reconsider, and perhaps alter, his or her research questions and methods. The objective is to understand the dynamic between individual human agency and broader social structures that influence the historical process. In articulating the problems of historicism and historicizing in scholarly literature, Popkewitz is inherently urging us to make use of the theoretical questions associated with literature based on the sociology of knowledge. The contributors to this volume effectively do so by encouraging the reader to consider important questions such as subjectivity/objectivity in historical research and writing, the problem of the archive as a repository of truth about the past, the relationship of knowledge to power, the transfer of knowledge in a transnational and comparative context, and the role of education in the modern nation-state.

Inés Dussel’s Chapter 2, *The Visual Turn in the History of Education: Four Comments for a Historiographical Discussion*, is particularly persuasive in reminding us that even the assumed objectivity of photographs as historical artifacts must be questioned as “the visual itself has a history” (p. 38). Her argument marries well with Daniel Tröhler’s Chapter 4, *Truffle Pigs, Research Questions, and Histories of Education*, as both contributors call upon the historian to recognize the inherently subjective nature of the historian’s work, as he or she chooses to focus on certain archival sources as opposed to others. Tröhler reminds us, “‘Facts of the past’ are not ‘historical facts,’ the latter are not *simply* ‘historical facts’ either, and the differences between them lie in culturally handed-down systems of values that are usually unconscious” (p. 88, author’s emphasis). At the beginning of Chapter 4, Tröhler mentions the work of E. H. Carr (1961), who similarly warned in a metaphor comparing historians to fishermen that the former were likely to catch precisely the kind of fish they wanted by using a particular kind of bait in a particular part of the ocean.

Much of the work in this edited volume draws from scholarly work influenced by post-structuralism, Michel Foucault, the linguistic turn, and “paradigmatic evolutions” (p. 161). Mention of such movements in 20th-century scholarly work can sometimes result in the reader being reduced to a state of panic. The language of such scholarly work can be ponderous and appear to deliberately obscure meaning. Occasionally, the language in this volume is unnecessarily heavy. Yet as Fendler states in the final reflective chapter (Chapter 11),

If the chapters in this book appear to lack those qualities (coherent, rational, and useful for administrators) ... it is not because they are permeated by ideology or buried in foreign and postmodern theories. It is because they are (were?) attempting to historicize everything at once. (p. 242)

This is precisely the value of this volume.

Noah W. Sobe’s concept of *entangled histories* (Chapter 5) is representative of historicizing and his call to challenge the traditional transfer paradigm introduces themes central to several subsequent chapters dealing with the mechanisms of the transfer of knowledge. His explanation of an “entangled histories” method as striving “to put phenomena of interaction at the center of analysis” (p. 99) is given flesh in Miriam Jorge Warde’s Chapter 6 on *Brazil and Turkey in the Early Twentieth Century: Intertwined and Parallel Stories of Educational History* and Rebekkah Horlacher’s (Chapter 7) reading of Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi’s influence on schooling in Prussia, France, Ireland, and Naples. Like Warde, Horlacher, explores the complex

ways in which ideas are diffused globally, retaining something of their origins and yet altering through reception. As each of the schools she studies made use of the Pestalozzi name and model in different ways, they also represented examples of what she refers to as *educationalization*, whereby states or institutions seek to use educational reform as a means to address social problems. The chapters that follow on arts education in Portugal (Chapter 9) and Mexico (Chapter 10) respectively reflect yet another important contribution that this volume makes by giving weight to the arts, the teaching of which may also be “crucial to the effort of shaping a new citizen” (p. 179).

Fendler’s final reflective chapter effectively brings together the entire volume. She begins

by considering the publication of this book as a historical event ... having been shaped by a confluence (or ‘entanglement’ per Sobe, this volume) of factors including current fashions in historiography, linguistic affinities, and the influence of Popkewitz’s editorial hand (p. 223).

She also brings us back to the centrality of Enlightenment thought. Enlightenment thinkers emphasised the application of human reason to daily life in order to uncover truth. In so doing, they introduced modern empiricism, which inherently reflects Enlightenment faith in human agency as the motor for progress.

*Rethinking the History of Education: Transnational Perspectives on its Questions, Methods, and Knowledge* contributes to a long history of literature in diverse disciplines that reconsiders human agency in relation to social and historical forces and structures whose workings may not be immediately visible to the naked eye. It is laudable that Popkewitz brings together once more a group of authors who engage in detangling the complex dynamics of knowledge and its diffusion. And, perhaps, as Popkewitz states, American scholarly work on education history has for too long adhered to the tradition of empiricism by focusing on data-driven research. If so, then these chapters offer new ways of looking at the historical method. At the same time, these new ways are not so new and have been evident in other historical fields for some time. My call in response to this edited volume would be for historians of education to further extend this worthy transnational conversation to include not only other social science disciplines but also scholars working in other fields of history.

## References

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