

BOOKS

The Retransformation of the School: The Emergence of Contemporary Alternative Schools in the United States

Daniel Linden Duke. *The Retransformation of the School: The Emergence of Contemporary Alternative Schools in the United States*, Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1978.

The establishment of a large number of alternative schools in the late sixties and early seventies may be interpreted as a grass-roots expression of criticism of the public school system. As such, the phenomenon is perhaps more significant than would be deduced from the relatively small number of people directly involved. The availability of funding and support for such schools by the educational bureaucracies, on the other hand, seems at first glance to contradict this interpretation. The student-parent-teacher initiation, juxtaposed with bureaucratic support, raises a host of interesting questions about the nature of the schools. Duke's *The Retransformation of the School* is a largely unsuccessful attempt to deal with some of these questions.

The Retransformation of the School is divided into two parts: the first is a description of the characteristics of a limited group of schools which Duke defines as "contemporary alternative schools", and the second, an explanation of why they were founded in such numbers during the late sixties and early seventies. Because there is, in the U.S., such a variety of schools outside of the traditional public school system, some limitation is necessary, and Duke does have a particular limited group in mind. He defines "contemporary alternative schools" by distinguishing them from a number of other types of schools. They are not "traditional alternative schools" (such as parochial, military or prep schools) nor "Summerhillian alternative schools" (which are based on the pedagogy of A.S. Neill) nor "compensatory alternative schools" for poor and minority students. "Contemporary alternative schools" are those which "cater on a non-sectarian basis to white middle-class students of average or above average abilities", are accessible by choice, and "make a pretense, at least, of a nonconventional approach to learning." (pp. 8-9)

Having defined the subject of his investigation, Duke devotes the remainder of the first half of the book to an examination of the characteristics of the schools, in chapters on their goals, methods, administrative organization, and composition (students, parents, and teachers). The material for these chapters is based on questionnaires and visits to forty schools selected randomly from a list of 253, which "represented a major portion of the actively functioning contemporary alternative schools in the Eastern half of the United States during the 1972-1973 school year." (p. 15) Duke found that the schools espoused a diversity of goals, which he groups in categories labeled "exploratory", "preparatory", "revolutionary", "participatory", "therapeutic", "academic", and "demonstrative". In examining the methods used in the alternative schools, Duke concludes that, although there is some tendency toward more progressive teaching techniques, "it is apparent that contemporary alternative schools do not constitute pedagogical revolution." (p. 51)

Some of the most interesting conclusions in the book are set out in the chapter on the administrative organization of the schools. Having examined decision-making structures which range from all-school meetings to headmasters to appointed school board trustees, Duke concludes that:

contemporary alternative schools are not simple reactions against pedagogical aspects of conventional schooling. Contemporary alternatives constitute a direct challenge to the way schools have been organized and administered. (p. 62)

Duke notes further, that unlike the goals and methods of these schools, which had precedents earlier in the century, the new administrative and organizational structures are more likely to be highly innovative, if not unprecedented.

Though Duke set out to examine schools catering to students of average or above average capabilities, in his chapter on composition, he finds that many of these schools enrol a diversity of students, and concludes that no generalization is really appropriate to the student body. Teachers and parents (especially of elementary school age children) "reflect a discontent with conventional lifestyles", and are generally white and "middle class".

The second half of the book concerns itself with the question of the origins of the schools. To what extent did they originate in response to pressures from parents, students, or teachers, and to what extent were they the creations of people with positions in the conventional educational hierarchy, i.e. university education professors, and public school bureaucracies? To what extent were they dependent on government, foundation, and corporate grants? Duke uses primary and secondary sources to show that support for alternative schools came from a number of directions, that traditional support "from the top" was important, but that initiative from the participating parents, teachers, and students was crucial, and cannot be overlooked.

Duke's question is basically a historical one: why is it that a movement of schools such as these developed with such relative strength during the late sixties and early seventies? The several intervening years since that time have provided the distance necessary to begin to construct just such a historical understanding of the social and political events of those years. Unfortunately, for a number of reasons, Duke's treatment is inadequate to the task.

In the first section of the book, that on "Characteristics of the Contemporary Alternative Schools", each chapter contains a brief addendum on historical antecedents. Thus, in the chapter on goals, examples are given of other schools, prior to the 1960's, which embodied each of the types of goals discussed. This results in a fragmented historical treatment spread over four chapters. While these addenda are included, presumably, to shed some light on the question of the origin of the contemporary alternative schools, the organizational format results in a presentation which is anecdotal rather than analytical. A much more thorough discussion of the antecedents is to be found in Lawrence Cremin's *The Transformation of the School* (a work so much more thorough, in fact, that one feels a certain audacity in Duke's choice of a title).

There is a disturbing lack of conceptual clarity and terminological precision throughout the book. For example, in his discussion of "revolutionary" goals, Duke tells us,

Some of the most common features of "revolutionary" schools are their efforts to provide learning materials that are free of racial, sexist, and class biases. (p. 28)

Many of the arguments depend on hazy generalizations from the secondary literature. In the explanation of parents' involvement in alternative schools, we are treated to a potpourri of Theodore Roszak, Jonathon Kozol, Philip Slater, and Kenneth Keniston. Karl Marx, we learn,

also wrote about alienation and related problems, but these were working class maladies to him. In the sixties, middle-class persons were introduced to the possibility that a high standard of living was not the sine qua non of happiness. (p. 121)

Did Marx consider alienation a "malady"? How can Duke locate Marx's commentary on alienation when his own definition of class runs like this:

Middle class status is based on one or both parents having college education and being employed in a skilled position. Working class status I based on a lesser degree of education (high school or lower) and employment in a blue-collar, semi-skilled or menial position. (p. 79)

More serious still, is the circular reasoning employed in asking questions about the students in the chapter on composition of the schools. Having *defined* his subject, in Chapter One, as schools which "cater to. . . white middle class students of average or above average abilities", Duke confuses himself enough to be able to ask in Chapter Five, "Are these schools, in fact, populated primarily by such students?" (p. 74) If "these schools" are not, then *which* schools are we talking about? In chapter one, by his definition, he excludes the "compensatory alternative schools" which enrol poor, minority, or educationally less able students.

The stylistic vagueness which pervades the book seems to be an attempt at quasi-social scientific neutrality:

The parents of alternative schools (*sic*), though few in number, do reflect some of the psycho-social characteristics considered to be on the increase among middle-class Americans. (p. 133)

Sometimes the style becomes embarrassing:

These people renounced such values - ones which were perceived to support racism together with conspicuous consumption, imperialism, and other acts of dubious morality. . . Their impatience led to various forms of action - protests, social isolation, alternative organizations and lifestyles. (pp. 125-126)

What an odd turn of phrase, to call "imperialism" an "act of dubious morality"!

Many of the explanations of the second half of the book rely on impressionistic generalizations such as the above, laced with quotes from secondary sources, some of which are themselves, pop-sociological works (e.g. "Alvin Toffler argues that 'the basic organization of the present schools system parallels that of the factory'", p. 124)

It is unfortunate that this book is as weak as it is, for there is a need for historical analysis of the phenomenon of the alternative schools of the late sixties and early seventies. Since the time of the appearance of Cremin's *The Transformation of the School*, there have been numerous breakthroughs in reconceptualizing educational history. Although Duke is familiar with some of the revisionist educational historians, he is unable to integrate their critical methodology into his treatment of the subject of alternative schools. For instance, one of the important insights of the revisionists is that the publicly stated goals of educational reformers should not be taken at face value without examining the political-economic situation out of which they arose. Yet Duke, in concluding his chapter on the goals of the contemporary alternative schools, states:

The absence of any one predominant goal seems to suggest that no single factor can account for the development of recent alternatives or those in earlier years. (p. 36)

He has confused the stated goals of the schools, with the historical, causal factors in their development.

Another of the concerns of the revisionist educational historians has been the relationship between the social relations of schooling and the social relations of production. Thus a reform measure (e.g. the introduction of vocational education into the high schools) is no longer accepted simply as the democratic expansion of opportunity to new groups of previously unschooled young people, but scrutinized for its relationship to the changing demands of a developing capitalist economy, and for its implications for the later lives of the students involved. This kind of question needs to be asked of the recent reforms embodied in alternative schools.

Duke does not examine *why* conventional educational bureaucracies, foundations, etc. joined with students, parents, and dissident teachers, in support of alternative schools. Because of his muddled conception of class, and the fuzzy definition of the schools being examined, Duke could not begin to tackle the hard questions of class interest, ideological hegemony, and the role of the state in mediating class conflict, all of which have been raised in recent educational historiography and which suggest themselves in a study on the origins of alternative schools.

Duke has not defined his topic clearly, nor carried out rigorous research, nor written an elucidating synthesis of the secondary literature. Further, the research and secondary literature on which the book is based, date, for the most part, from 1973 or earlier. Thus, the volume represents a minimal contribution at best, to our understanding of the place of alternative schools in the larger educational picture, much less within the overall social and historical context.

Peter Seixas
University of British Columbia