

BOOK REVIEWS

Popkewitz, T.S., Franklin, B.M., & Pereyra, M.A. (Eds.). (2001). *Cultural History and Education: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Schooling*. New York, NY: Routledge Falmer, (softcover), 369 pages.

A diverse collection of readings by scholars from three continents, this book develops a "cultural history" of education, the term being used to denote a Foucauldian, postmodernist analysis of educational phenomena as cultural practices. Unlike traditional history which studies the past to understand the present, cultural history (of this kind) studies the present, trying to explain the way things are in terms of language, knowledge, and, ultimately, power.

The book's 13 chapters exhibit considerable variation in the ways and extent to which its program is pursued. Some – notably Hamilton's account of the origins of schooling – read like a traditional history of education. Most – Dussel's study of school uniforms is an example – address an educational topic from a cultural history perspective. In a few, educational content is over-shadowed by the program – for instance, Varela's explication of the genealogy of education. Since its approach to cultural history is the book's *raison d'être*, it is the focus of this review.

Reflecting the influence of Foucault, Derrida, and others, many of the book's chapters are marred by hyper-abstract, jargon-laden prose. Terms like "decentering of the subject," (p. 20), "governmentality" (p. 52), "problematization" (p. 212), "political technology" (p. 295), "social imaginary" (p. 319), and "alchemy of pedagogy" (p. 328) abound, as do sentences such as: "Bodies become the engravings and maps of the social conquests, of the 'docilization' of transgression, of the perforation of autonomy" (p. 211). Or this: "The locus of change is the inscription of the actor who enacts cultural interests and produces a collective authority in the plotting of time and change" (p. 12). There may be meaning in this mayhem, but many readers will conclude that these ideas are poorly conceived and expressed.

Several papers discuss the methods, mostly genealogical, employed by cultural history. After noting that traditional historical analysis "can result in discursive abstractions where texts have no meanings beyond those of the writer," Heyning touts the Foucauldian

method of "archeological investigation where the text was examined as an *artifact*" (p. 291). She implies, unpersuasively, that Foucault's method is not subject to the same pitfalls. Indeed, there is little evidence herein of anything historians or social scientists would regard as method.

What there is instead is interpretation. Sanctioned by postmodernist claims that there is no truth, only interpretation (p. 31), these cultural histories consist essentially of ways of seeing X as Y. Student uniforms can be seen as technologies of power (p. 208); archival minutes and memos as persuasive technologies (p. 294); program review/examination as a ritual of surveillance (p. 302); contemporary pedagogical practices as "governing the soul" (p. 324). One can always find facts to support favored interpretations, ignoring the many others that are inconsistent. However, most of these authors seem less concerned with documenting interpretations than with finding something interesting to say, making the familiar strange, illuminating a taken-for-granted educational practice. Few achieve their goal.

Cultural history of education, as presented in this book, pursues the Foucauldian project of explaining why things are the way they are. The authors reject prevailing explanations – historicist, neo-Marxist, among others – as simplistic. They argue the need to understand educational practices as shaped by language. Knowledge is viewed as a regulating and governing practice (p. 19), something that cuts us off from other possibilities. As such, it is an expression of power, the ultimate explanation of why things are the way they are.

This account has serious problems, owing largely to its nebulous conceptualization of power. Rather than being wielded by individuals or social classes, power is viewed as having no agent. It is a ubiquitous force, almost like gravity, that serves to perpetuate the status quo. Arguably, such a notion of power is conceptually incoherent. Other problems arise because the authors treat power as the universal explanation of everything. As with fate or the "will of God," that which explains everything explains nothing. It is too easy to conceive any phenomenon whatsoever as resulting from this unmotivated, miasmatic power. The book would have been more persuasive if some educational practices were explained in terms of, say, natural necessity – school desks need at least three legs to be stable – or social necessity – schools can not exist if students are allowed to kill each other – or better still, human goal-directed action. Educational constructivism, discussed by Popkewitz, can be interpreted in these terms, as can the State of Wisconsin's school reform activities, analyzed by Heyning.

The bottom line for research of this kind, its "cash value," lies in its implications for practice, how it purports to help us achieve our goals. Here again, the book falls short. Foucault is cited to suggest that such analyses create "new forms of subjectivity," (p. 309); the authors claim that their strategy "makes visible the principles that intern and enclose consciousness, thus opening up different possibilities and alternatives" (p. 32). But the book offers no specific proposals for educational reform, nor are there examples of new "possibilities and alternatives" that have supposedly been opened up.

Every culture has a language, ways of thinking, forms of knowledge, and educational and other practices. It can always be said that these are limiting since they represent but a few of an infinite set of possibilities. Knowledge orders or disciplines our behavior as an intrinsic part of helping us achieve our goals; unguided by knowledge, action is free but ineffective. Language shapes our thinking, but does so in ways that a linguistic community has, over hundreds of years, found useful in achieving its goals. It goes without saying that the educational practices characteristic of Western culture could be different. Scholarly work which argued persuasively that practices from other cultures are better suited to our needs, or that developed hitherto unimagined alternatives having demonstrable value, would contribute to human betterment. It is unlikely, however, that such a contribution will ever be made by this program of "cultural history."

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Grant, T. & Littlejohn, G. (Eds.). (2001). *Greening School Grounds: Creating Habitats for Learning*. Toronto: Green Teacher Magazine, (softcover), 136 pages.

Greening School Grounds: Creating Habitats for Learning, edited by two experienced school teachers, Tim Grant and Gail Littlejohn, is a resource book on transforming a school ground into an environment that supports meaningful learning in all subjects. It includes chapters by more than 40 authors; many of them are North American pioneers in schoolyard greening. The book also involved 75 reviewers from