



REVIEW

The Other School Reformers: Conservative Activism in American Education

by Adam Laats

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reviewed by **Andrew J Petto**

In *The Other School Reformers*, Adam Laats examines four specific examples of resistance to educational reforms in US education that provide a valuable insight into this phenomenon. As if the record of thirty years of Gallup (and other) polls on evolution acceptance were not evidence enough, Laats's analysis leads us to the obvious inference: This lack of impact can only mean that we've been doing it wrong!

That is, we have not been paying attention to the greater sociocultural context in which educational reform plays out because—to us, at least—the proper course of reform is so obvious: the curriculum should reflect the current understanding and practices within the academic disciplines from which they draw their content.

The relevance and impact of this greater societal context unite the four examples and are illustrated by the title of chapter 2: “What does Jesus have to do with phonics?” Indeed! If the reader takes nothing else from this book, it should be the definitive refutation of a popular, but misguided, reaction that resistance to educational reforms is “the sheer ignorance of a vocal fraction of our public” (Leonard 2013:611).

Laats makes it clear that the rejection of new ways of educating our children has more to do with what Eve and Harrold (1991) refer to as a “struggle for the means of cultural reproduction” and less to do with specific content in the curriculum. Laats's analysis of the social and political contexts in which this resistance occurs makes this book a must-read for anyone interested in or hoping to effect educational reform—whether in the sciences or in other disciplines.

WHAT IS SCHOOL FOR?

Both progressives and conservatives agree about the power of schooling to influence the future of society. They disagree on what that future should look like. Laats's four examples—the Scopes trial, the social studies textbooks of Harold Rugg, curriculum reforms in Pasadena, California, and textbook controversies in Kanawha County, West Virginia—reflect this fundamental disagreement about the goals of education and the role(s) schools should play in society.

Each example shows how conservative activists detected and responded to a common “threat”: in their view, progressive curricular reform threatens the traditions of good citizenship (patriotism), capitalism (and individual autonomy), and morality. As far as they

were concerned, “schooling must pass along a set of traditional values and ideas about patriotism, religion, culture, and economics” (page 13).

To these activists, there was never any question as to whose values and ideas to pass along. When progressive texts or curricula suggested that there might be room for multiple voices, some pluralism in values and ideas, alarm bells sounded in organizations as diverse as the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the National Association of Manufacturers, the Advertising Federation of America, the Ku Klux Klan, the Guardians of American Education, the National Council for American Education, the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Hoover Foundation. Each of these groups may have different specific concerns about the curriculum, but all of them call for the conservation of (or the return to) “traditional” educational practices that promote a specific cultural narrative of who we are as a nation.

THE TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

Laats makes it clear that the conservative reformers are interested in more than the specific content of the curriculum: they are concerned with the moral development of children, including both personal and communal aspects of morality. For conservatives, Haidt (2012) argues, the approach to policy issues draws on all six of the basic moral foundations he and his colleagues have identified as universal: fairness, caring, loyalty, sanctity, authority, and liberty. On the other hand, Haidt (2012) shows how progressives tend to focus almost entirely on caring (or reducing harm) and fairness.

There is a further contrast between conservative and progressive approaches. Progressive educational reformers emphasize individual moral development (children will learn to analyze issues and make rational, logical conclusions based on evidence), whereas conservative reformers tend to focus on integrating the individual into the group (children will learn that a particular resolution to an issue—that favored by their world view—is the best one) and thus recognize (and invoke) a higher power than the individual.

The implications are clear: if progressive reforms are going to succeed in public education, then progressives need to address the *real* concerns of conservative parents and activists. To be successful, reform strategies would do well to take to heart Phillip Johnson’s remarks on “intelligent design” activism in the mid-1990s: “This isn’t really, and never has been, a debate about science, ... it’s about religion and philosophy” (Belz 1996:18).

In the same way, conservative educational activists want public schooling to reinforce loyalty to the country, obedience to authority, reverence for the sacred (whether in nature or human life), and a sense of biblical proportionality that weighs effort and reward (in the style, for example, of 2 Thessalonians 3:10).

What Laats is trying to do in *The Other School Reformers* is to articulate the concerns that conservatives have about the choices that their children will make for the future and to illustrate that their activism is not fueled by “unexamined institutional habits and widespread cultural beliefs” (Tyack and Cuban 1995:88, quoted on page 244). Laats summarizes these concerns as follows:

If subversive or insidious ideas become part of the curriculum, young people will mature in unhealthy and perverted ways. They will grow into morally stunted adults,

leading the nation into ruin. ... Schools, conservatives have insisted for generations, must teach basic religious truths, or at least not denigrate religion. They must instill thoughtful patriotism, or at least not deride students' love of country. They must help students to appreciate the capitalist traditions of America, or at least not teach that free markets are evil.

... [T]eachers and schools must take responsibility to pass along the inherited wisdom of millennia of civilization. Schools must transmit truth, not merely act as facilitators for the stumbling inquiries of immature minds (page 238).

This summary is one of the clearest statements of conservative activists' concerns for "cultural reproduction" in the curriculum. Laats tells us that his goal is for readers to understand the activism of conservative reformers in the context of the general history of conservatism in the US. Conservative activism in education is part of a long and deep tradition, not a series of impromptu protests. To understand that history and the concerns that drive it, according to Laats, is to understand the state of public education in the US. And for those who hope to change things in the public schools, this is an important place to begin.

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