The truest view rested in becomes false.

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson
Journal, 1857

We are not only free organisms but parts of mankind that has historically has made itself with great inspirations and terrible conflicts. We cannot slough off the accumulation of it without becoming trivial and finally servile.

-- Paul Goodman
New Reformation, 1970

Required Reading:


Don't expect these books to tell a single, comprehensive story. But their themes overlap and, especially when read in light of one another, Cremin, Gould and the rest are indicative of what it means to think historically about the subject of education. Of course you already have views on public school reform, on testing and educational opportunity, on the social and personal expectations which shape dating behavior, or the whys and wherefores of going to college more generally. But when you think about these topics and the issues surrounding them, it's a good bet you also take the past for granted -- that your outlook, in a word, is present-minded.
Of course there's nothing wrong with present-mindedness, but it does have its limitations. ("Every way of seeing," to borrow a phrase from Kenneth Burke, "is a way of not seeing.") Because it treats the past as if it is past, as if it's over and done with, present-mindedness confers a kind of moral inevitability on the patterns we know best. As a result, the character and outline of present arrangements begin to look more secure than they are nailed down, static, necessary, if not altogether finished -- and our horizons of understanding are circumscribed accordingly. By taking change over time seriously, and, just as seriously, reckoning with some its consequences, these books dramatize certain moving tendencies in the present. They not only reveal the continuing relevance of the past, but an unfinished past at that, a past actively shaping the tasks and opportunities of our present whether we recognize it or not.

In addition to the required reading, I expect you to write a brief reaction paper (3-5 pages) on each of the books. I also ask that you complete a longer paper (15 pages or so) on some aspect of the history of education here in our own locale based on archival materials. My assumption is that you've never visited the archives before, let alone worked in one, and that's just the point. If reading books and articles can be thought of as roughly analogous to eating a meal in a restaurant, work in the archives is a way of exposing you to life in the kitchen and the back-stage challenges that go with it, allowing you some insight into how a convincing story can be fashioned from scattered and ostensibly inert materials. There will be no final exam. Your grade will be based on the caliber of your papers, as well as your participation in class.