Our life is an apprenticeship to the truth that around every circle another can be drawn.....

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson
"Circles"

Required Reading:


David Nasaw, SCHOoled TO ORDER: A SOCIAL HISTORY OF PUBLIC SCHOOLING IN THE UNITED STATES (Oxford University Press, 1979).


I think of the history of education as a literary genre, as academic writing of a particular kind whose revelations of the past enable distinctive ways of coping with the present. This course, as far as I'm concerned, is an introduction to that genre. Cremin, Nasaw and Kliebard are by no means the last word on the history of education in the U.S., but as first words, it seems to me, they are indispensable. They give us a place to go from and return to; they give us a direction and a place to reach.

THE TRANSFORMATION OF THE SCHOOL makes an ideal curtain-raiser. Published in 1961, before the postwar liberal consensus split apart over Vietnam and Civil Rights, Cremin's prize-winning book commanded wide respect from an equally wide readership and helped to launch the historiography as we know it today. As you'll come
to appreciate soon enough, Progressive-era school reform in Cremin's hands proved to be genuinely progressivism. For all of the false starts, blind alleys and misfires which plagued the movement, especially in the decades after World War I, school reform remained, on his telling, a means to social reform, a genuine instrument of democratic purpose.

We take up Nasaw and Kliebard next because they offer two interacting (and conflicting) versions of the same story Cremin tells. The mood in SCHOoled TO ORDER is indicative of a whole body of work published during the late '60's and early '70's bent on rewriting Cremin's democratic consensus as class conflict. In Nasaw's view, as for so many other historians, prolonged schooling did not help to fulfill America's democratic promise, nor was it meant to. Rather than diminishing social inequality, he argues, the school only served to rationalize and perpetuate social inequality. In THE STRUGGLE FOR THE AMERICAN CURRICULUM, on the other hand, Cremin's consensus history is still the target -- there's no doubt about that -- but so is the brand of radical revisionism practiced by Nasaw. Although the emphasis on conflict remains, it's played out in the details of curricular reform, a much smaller arena than Cremin or Nasaw imagine for us. Moreover, Kliebard dismisses the very idea of "progressivism" as an incoherent distraction. What needs to be understood, he argues, is not the rise and fall of a single movement for school reform called "progressive education," but the push and shove that was underway as early as the 1890's among four competing "interest groups." This move has important consequences, as you'll see, not the least of which is that it makes current school reform initiatives like KERA look far more ambiguous in their implications than we might imagine if were taking our bearings from Nasaw or Cremin alone.

In sum, these three books are what are they are in light of one another, and they are meant to be read in light of one another. They do not "cover" the subject -- at least I hope they don't -- but when taken together they are enormously serviceable for uncovering the subject, for putting you in touch with some of the interpretive vitality and relevance which has animated the proceedings in this small neighborhood of academe for the last 35 years or so. What about Brodhead's book, or those chapters from Bushman and Kett? They are indicative in more ways than one of some promising new directions in our thinking about education historically. By shifting the figure/ground relationship which is taken for granted in Cremin, Nasaw and Kliebard, these materials make it possible for us to imagine a 19th century culture of learning that was not identified primarily with schools or colleges, but with the parlor, with voluntary associations, and the institutions of the city. Why this open-air and domestic culture of learning collapsed, a culture which emphasized personal development and cultivation rather than school attendance is just one of the provocative questions these materials permit us to ask.
In addition to the reading, I'd like you to write a short paper on each of the books (and I do mean short -- three pages or so) and do a small-scale archival project. We will discuss the details of these assignments when we meet. There will be no final exam. I hope you enjoy the course.