Patriotism, Religion, and the Struggle Over Knowledge in Schools

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Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools by Jonathan Zimmerman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002. pp. 307.

If we were very honest with ourselves about what we know about education, one of the few things that we actually do know for certain is that there will be conflict over the curriculum. Because "official knowledge" is always a selection from a much wider universe of possible knowledge, and because such a selective tradition is often connected to deeply held social and ideological commitments, what is legitimate for one sector of society is often illegitimate for another. No matter how educational researchers and policy makers might like to find technical and procedural solutions to long-standing educational problems, it is nearly impossible to deal with the realities of educational policy and practice without situating them within the political and valuative conflicts that are at the heart of education. After all, deliberations about schooling and about what its means and ends should be are not the equivalent of conversations about the weather. They are concerned—constitutively—with what we want our society to be, about the future of our children, and about deeply held values that organize and disorganize a nation.

The political nature of education is not something new. Indeed, it lies at the very heart of any nation's history, but especially at the heart of the United States. It is best to see the United States as a continuing *experiment*. It is in continual formation, with its people and its culture in constant flux. Such

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constant transformation, the "hybrid" nature of its traditions and culture being built from peoples and forms of life from all over the world, has not always had a pleasant history. Religious, linguistic, political, and economic conflicts and compromises have been a constant part of our history, in part because of the very nature of the experiment that is the United States (Foner, 1998), but also in part because dominant economic, political, cultural, and religious groups have constantly attempted to defend their relations of economic, cultural, and social capital—and have just as consistently sought to defend their use of conversation strategies that enable them to convert one form of capital into another. Because the school is at the center of such relations of dominance and subordination, and because it is one of the most important institutions that both validates cultural capital and is used in converting cultural capital into social and economic capital (see Bourdieu, 1984), it should not surprise us that schools often have been at the very center of struggles among social groups throughout our history.

There are few recent analyses of this history that describe such conflicts as well as *Whose Culture?* Jonathan Zimmerman examines some of the most significant—and ongoing—tensions and movements in the history of education. He focuses, rightly in my opinion, on the conflicts over how U.S. history is represented on patriotism, on race and multiculturalism, and on religion, prayer, and sex education. Although there have been other important battles in educational history to be sure, Zimmerman uses these conflicts as something of a lever to pry open the ways in which social movements contest whose knowledge should be taught in schools. He does this in a style that is both engaging and informative. In the process, he also is able to illuminate the different kinds of emphases, commitments, and tactics that are embodied in important movements for educational change. Because Zimmerman's work complements some of my own, in this article I shall have to point to the relationship of a number of his points to the research that I and others have done on similar topics.

Zimmerman argues that the manner in which we have understood our ongoing "culture wars" is too limited. There has not been one kind of "war," but two. Both are intense, but they have different kinds of histories and decidedly different possibilities of resolution. One set of battles—that involving patriotism, race, and "minority" cultures and histories—has usually been a narrative of inclusion, one that by and large shares a common goal. The other, involving religion and the politics of sexuality and the body, has very different characteristics. In Zimmerman's words, there were and are important differences between the conflicts over patriotism, race, and religion:

> Despite shrill warnings by a wide range of polemicists, the inclusion of racial and ethnic minorities in textbooks did not dilute America's majestic narrative. Instead, these fresh voices were folded into the old story, echoing a century of challenge, resistance, and co-option. On the religious front, compromise proved far more elusive. Reflecting Americans' essential beliefs about God and the universe, religious principles simply could not be reconciled in an additive, come-one-come-all fashion. Conflicts over history textbooks generally occurred within a shared set of assumptions about American civic tradition. But religious disputes often lacked this common language, a lack that accounts for their vehemence as well as their persistence. (p. 6)

As he goes on to say, "our culture wars on moral and religious subjects remain much more prevalent and much more polarized than our history conflicts. More people fight over religion than over history, in short, because they have more to fight *about*" (pp. 218-219).

Whose Culture? is particularly valuable in showing the manner in which both these kinds of conflicts are related to strongly held positions about the kind of society it is that we have and want. It also goes beyond other treatments of similar issues in its attention to internal conflicts within groups whom one might expect would be homogeneous in their political and ideological messages. For example, most people with an interest in the ways in which curricula become battlegrounds are aware of the intense controversy that the Rugg textbooks generated in the late 1930s and early 1940s. Conservative groups attacked Rugg mercilessly. Yet, as Zimmerman shows, there was no unanimity among such groups. Indeed, within, say, the American Legion and the business community, there were considerable numbers of people who refused to participate in such attacks and who believed that the school curriculum should be given a good deal of autonomy. Not only does this paint a much more nuanced picture of an important period in educational history, but it also leads to a question about the current situation surrounding the politicized nature of both the curriculum and teaching. Are there similar significant differences within the conservative groups who are now so intent on challenging what should be taught in schools today? Does the leadership of such groups represent all of the people who are under these organizational umbrellas? This is not only an interesting academic question, it also speaks to whether, for example, the rightist political tendencies that seem to be so angry at what schools are and are not doing are more varied internally than they seem from the outside. If so, this may mean that there are spaces and possibilities in which schools can have a bit more freedom of action than might otherwise seem likely. I am not sanguine about this, but the question is definitely worth asking.

Even if there is not such variety in ideological positions under what from the outside seem to be uniformly conservative umbrellas currently, this too raises a significant question. How did such uniformity get *built*, although it was not necessarily there originally? In my mind, studying how people get pulled under the leadership of conservative organizations and how such movements create the conditions of agreement that might not have been total before is of great significance, especially in a time when what I have elsewhere called "conservative modernization" has become the dominant ideological tendency surrounding education and the larger society (Apple, 2001, 2003). The volume documents how the New Right appropriated liberal "rights talk" and in the process was able to employ it to bring together various social tendencies. As I show elsewhere (Apple, 2001), such a politics of reappropriation is crucial for building hegemonic movements. Although Zimmerman does not go into this in as much detail as he might have, his book allows us to see important elements in how this happened. When this is coupled with his description of the internal debates within the organizations that attacked the Rugg textbooks, it certainly helps to increase the visibility of such issues.

Zimmerman also clearly portrays the history of the controversy over school prayer. He goes further than other analysts of this contentious issue by connecting the debate over prayer with that of race. Many of the same groups who were fighting for the maintenance of segregated schools became deeply involved in the fight for prayer in schools. Of course, this decidedly does not mean that conservative religious commitments either come from or lead to racism; but it does show that in the South, for example, there was a clear tendency of connecting the two together. Zimmerman's discussion of how this happened is nicely done.

The author is wise to focus a good deal of his attention on textbooks. These materials are not simply books. They represent in crystallized form all of the economic, political, and cultural processes that go into making anything legitimate knowledge for schools. Thus, textbooks are simultaneously (a) economic commodities that are sold on a market, (b) political objects that are regulated by the state, and (c) the results of what are often an intense series of cultural and ideological clashes and compromises over what and whose knowledge should be passed on to future generations. Although all too much of the research on textbooks is arid, conceptually vacuous, and largely amounts to simplistic word counting, this need not be the case. *Whose Culture?* is a fine example of how one can take these materials seriously without degenerating into slogans or "dust-bowl empiricism" and at the same time having a serious conceptual, political, and historical agenda.

Although I am very positive about this book's contributions, there are areas where Zimmerman might have gone further. For example, he does not sufficiently connect his interesting discussion of textbook wars with the extensive material on the political economy of textbooks, with mobility patterns and pressures within the publishing industry, and on the ways decisions are actually made within state adoption policies (see, e.g., Apple, 1988). Nor does he note the ways in which such adoption policies were the historical results of fully contradictory forces that were simultaneously progressive and retrogressive. Race, class, religion, and region all intersected and created dynamics that led to the creation of an activist state with a constitutive interest in policing "official knowledge" and, hence, also led to the formation and use of textbook adoption policies (Apple, 2000). Grounding his discussion in this history and these dynamics would have enabled him to gain a more nuanced perspective on the history and complexities of the conflicts over knowledge in the United States.

Zimmerman's discussion of the roots of conservative evangelicalism is insightful as well. Yet, here too he might have gone into more depth about the cultural, ideological, and religious tendencies that underpin its varied tendencies. It is impossible to fully understand why, say, sex education becomes such an important issue in their criticism of schooling unless this is situated within the intricate connections among conservative evangelicalism's understanding of the family and god-given gender roles, on authority and the state, on morality and the nature of evil, and on the limited role that particular kinds of "reason" can and should play in the world. Perhaps because I have paid particular attention to the growing power of "authoritarian populist" religious movements in the struggles over education in my own most recent work (Apple, 1996, 2001), this seemed a particular area where Zimmerman could have enabled the reader to go further in understanding both what is at stake in recent controversies over school knowledge and whether some sort of compromise might be reached.

An example might be useful here. Zimmerman notes the importance of women in the controversies over morality and religion in education. This is not surprising given the crucial role that women have constantly played in such movements. For example, as Blee (1991) has demonstrated in her insightful history of women in the Ku Klux Klan, such movements may have been murderous in many ways, but they also provided space for women's activism in societies that were deeply patriarchal (see also Blee, 2002). Heyrman (1997) and others' work on the ways in which women have consistently employed the spaces for activism within conservative religious movements also captures the history of this dynamic. At the same time as the authoritarian populism of most evangelicals revivified patriarchal authority,

historically these churches themselves provided a space for women to assert themselves as authoritative *in public*. This paradox actually represented in the past and still represents in the present a major achievement on the part of religiously conservative women. In a family structure in which "God has willed" that the man is the head and in which women are to be submissive and/or helpmates, the evangelical churches provided a public arena for women to exercise intelligence, judgment, fortitude, and power. Historically, for women of the South, for example—a region that had long had a culture steeped in misogyny "against which women had become schooled, as their best defense, in habits of submission" (Heyrman, 1997, p. 177)—the creation of such a public arena was partly a liberating force, no matter what its ideological content (Apple, 2001). The absence of a discussion of this works to weaken what is otherwise a very thoughtful discussion of such tendencies within *Whose America?* More attention to gender dynamics would have helped.

An issue that I mentioned earlier, that of compromise, leads me to Zimmerman's own suggestions for a possible "solution" to the impasse currently being faced between conservative religious activists and secular educators. Zimmerman sees such activists as moving toward a position of simply wanting to be "included" in the definitions of legitimate knowledge. Thus, for him they are moving toward a discourse that has a very long history in United States schooling. In my mind, this is somewhat overstated and homogenizes the varied fractions of the authoritarian populist religious movements, some of which may indeed simply want a seat at the table but a large number of which are less interested in inclusion than in winning the entire terrain of the public sphere over to their particular vision of God. Again, because I have spent a good deal of time on this topic myself (Apple, 2001), I may be more attuned to this issue than the general reader. However, because a large portion of Zimmerman's otherwise very thoughtful suggestions for a rapprochement rests on his understanding of the tendencies within such conservative religious movements, I think that he needed to go further here.

My criticisms and suggestions are not meant to dissuade you from reading this book. They are actually a statement about the accomplishment that the book represents. The very fact that I was stimulated to raise issues about it, and that these issues involved wanting Zimmerman to have gone farther in some areas, documents that I was pleased with what he has done and that he allowed me to make connections between his own significant efforts and

those in which I and others had been engaged over the past decade. The fact that the book led to an internal dialogue between Zimmerman and myself points to how engaging *Whose Culture?* is in both its content and its style. I definitely recommend it.

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