



The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies

Volume 70
Number 2 *Volume 70 No. 2 (2009)*


Article 3

June 2009

Review of "Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School"

Mary Lopez
Schaumburg High School

Follow this and additional works at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor

 Part of the Curriculum and Instruction Commons, Educational Methods Commons, Elementary Education Commons, Elementary Education and Teaching Commons, Junior High, Intermediate, Middle School Education and Teaching Commons, and the Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons

Illinois Council of Social Studies

Recommended Citation

Lopez, Mary (2009) "Review of "Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School"," *The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies*: Vol. 70: No. 2, Article 3.
Available at: https://thekeep.eiu.edu/the_councilor/vol70/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at The Keep. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Councilor: A Journal of the Social Studies by an authorized editor of The Keep. For more information, please contact tabruns@eiu.edu.

Illinois Council of Social Studies

The Councilor

Review of Andrew Hartman's *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, ISBN-13: 9780230600102, 264 pages.

American schools have long served as major battlefields for the culture wars. Whether over religion, American identity, or political ideology, these battles have included skirmishes regarding the proper pedagogical approach to educate children. In *Education and the Cold War*, Andrew Hartman traces the many changes, criticisms, and conflicts that beset the American public education system through much of the twentieth century. Tracing the many incarnations of progressive education as pioneered by John Dewey after World War One and implemented by generations of educators through the 1960s, he concludes that Dewey's system unfortunately failed to sufficiently inspire American society to overthrow its existing social system. Hartman argues that the Cold War, and its unique set of cultural pressures, exacerbated existing pedagogical conflicts. Using a Marxist perspective on intellectual history, Hartman concludes that progressive education, despite its promising rhetoric, failed to achieve the transformational social change necessary to achieve social justice.

Despite his title, Hartman begins not with the emergence of the Cold War, but rather with the development of progressive education decades earlier. Designed to prepare children for a rapidly changing world following World War One, progressive education sought to transcend the traditional educational focus on pure academic knowledge to deeply broaden the roles of the school system. Working in concert with the Progressive reform movement, Dewey's system, developed shortly after World War One, sought to educate children for and within their own worlds. Through its child-centered nature, progressive education embraced both social efficiency and social justice. (p.9) Conservative critics pilloried Dewey's educational theory as collectivist—and therefore un-American, while scholars criticized the anti-intellectual strain of progressive education that frequently appeared when Dewey's theories were misapplied. In addition, by vastly expanding the mission of public education, critics charged that overt politicization was enveloping the public schools. Hartman spends his first chapter explaining the development and key components of progressive education, one of the most significant strengths of his work.

The twin traumas of the Great Depression and World War Two led to a dizzying series of ideological turns throughout American culture. As the catastrophic systemic failure of the Great Depression inspired many Americans to seek alternatives, the Popular Front achieved its pinnacle of influence in 1930s American education. "Radicalized progressive educators" sought to remake American society through translating Popular Front communist ideals into American classrooms. (p.30) These "frontier thinkers" were able to gain control both of the Teachers' Union in New York City and Teachers' College at Columbia University, amplifying their influence within the

educational community. Aiming to “reconstruct U.S. society” through the schools, these educators ultimately fell victim to internal generational conflict and the negative pall cast on Communism by the Soviet-Nazi alliance in Europe. As the fear of Soviet influence, the purging of Communists from education commenced, thanks to the efforts of the government, the Catholic Church, and even the American Federation of Teachers. The impulse extended to the ban on books by frontier thinkers, notably the successful campaign to ban the widely used textbooks authored by Harold Rugg due to the skepticism of anything perceived as morally relativist.

As the United States exited World War Two, the uncertainty of the new post-war reality drove Americans in an increasingly conservative direction. In this supposedly post-ideological age, Americans began to view their current existence as the ideal of democracy; they altered education accordingly. The life adjustment movement emerged as an effort to encourage the maturation of American youth in preparation for fighting the “wily Communists” in the global Cold War struggle. Although envisioned as an anticommunist measure, this extension of progressive education encountered a backlash from liberal intellectuals dismayed at the move away from academic content as well as conservatives infuriated by the reliance upon relativism and collectivist bias they envisioned in the system. Many urged the firing of Communist educators and the mandatory imposition of loyalty oaths to purge the system of Communist influence. Some in academia resisted such tactics, notably University of Chicago President Robert Hutchins, with the argument that an academically open education was the most effective tool to fight Communist influence. Throughout these chapters – which comprise the bulk of the book – Hartman at times delves so deeply into all sides of every argument that he obscures the narrative of his argument. While he admirably attempts to fairly tell a complete story, his frequent movement between concurrent events and multiple levels of the educational system distracts from his message. Anti-Communism was corralled to legitimize other forms of bias as well, including anti-black racism and anti-Semitism. Although desegregation advocates argued for racial justice as a means to support US moral superiority in Cold War foreign relations, episodic victories such as the *Brown v Board of Education* decision and the desegregation of Little Rock Central High School failed to translate into systemic change. White supremacists successfully equated social upheaval with Communism, limiting educational change.

Hartman’s work provides an impressive chronicling of the many strains of educational theory and conflict that have shaped American education through much of the twentieth century. He does not shy away from the complexity of the theories or their more controversial implications for systemic change. Students seeking to enter the teaching profession would benefit from Hartman’s detailed account of these theories. Perhaps more mixed is Hartman’s success in supporting some of his contentions. While he makes no attempt to hide his personal beliefs—nor should he—he unfortunately limits his own conclusions with arguments that appear self-

contradictory. For example, he argues at length throughout the book that Communist educators were unfairly hunted and dismissed due simply to paranoia, yet he also states, "they rightly believed that the schools were an appropriate location for their political struggles." (p. 87) While Hartman might have justified this argument on the basis of free speech, he uses a more difficult justification: that their mission of social reconstruction *should* have been the function of American schools. He celebrates Marxist educator Theodore Brameld as an educational genius and laments the failure of Americans to embrace Brameld's ideals, despite the fact they did not reflect any large-scale public opinion, but rather his own "audacious and cosmic vision" of a new America. Brameld sought to inspire teachers to renounce any national allegiance in order to form a classless, worker-controlled global order, governed by the United Nations and devoid of any national ties. Brameld rejected "academic freedom, open inquiry, and tolerance" because they allowed individuals to avoid embracing a Marxist worldview. (p. 148) Yet Hartman implies that these same qualities should have protected Communist educators. Likewise, Hartman's argument would have benefited from greater support for his claim that the Truman Administration fanned anti-Communism sentiment among the American people solely to justify an imperialist foreign policy in Europe.

Ultimately, *Education and the Cold War* provides a thought-provoking and substantial look at the many incarnations of American educational theory, and the book should prove useful to understanding the political implications of the American public school.

Mary Lopez

Schaumburg Social Studies Department

Schaumburg High School