

To Secure the Safety and Progress of Society Curriculum and the Politics of Literacy in the Gilded Age

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A republican form of government, without intelligence in the people, must be, on a vast scale, what a mad-house, without superintendent or keepers, would be, on a small one.

Horace Mann

Abstract: During the last half of the nineteenth-century the nature and purpose of public education were redefined. "Education by the State," became in the words of one Superintendent, "simply the determination of the State to protect itself, and secure the safety and progress of society." During the 1880s social improvement provided much of the social justification for education and transformed the school curriculum. Political agitation by the "American" party and the Women's Christian Temperance Union had a discernible and lasting impact on school curriculum. State Legislatures added courses in civics, hygiene, and temperance to the approved curriculum and ordered textbooks prepared on the new subjects. By the mid 1880s increasingly universal schooling and the resulting literacy attained by native-born American children, combined with a fear of illiterate immigrant voters, generated demands for a literacy qualification for voting.

Out of the American Civil War emerged a notion of public schools as a unifying force for Union, a belief that universal common public education might have prevented secession, and that education must be universal to prevent any future rebellion and assure civil liberties. This belief took hold particularly among Northerners and Westerners. While many antebellum Southerners were highly educated, public schools were less common in the South than in other parts of the Union. Following the war, Northern promoters of universal education widely promoted the notion that the relative lack of schools contributed to Southern secession. *Harper's Weekly* a Northern publication and an ardent supporter of public education believed, "The most intelligent communities are the most patriotically loyal," and noted, "It will always be a curious and interesting inquiry whether if the school-master had been universally abroad in the late Slave States, the spirit of disaffection to the Union could have become so wide-spread and fatal." (*Harper's* 1882c) This linkage of ignorance and rebellion in the public consciousness energized the drive for universal and compulsory public education, and transformed the social justification for schooling. As near universal attendance in public school became the social norm, rising levels of literacy among native-born children, combined with increased immigration transformed the

curriculum, and led some states to impose for literacy qualifications for voting.

Before the Civil War education was a local obligation that, in Hinton Helper's words, served the purpose of acquainting children with "the duties they owe to God, to themselves, [and] to their fellow-men." (Helper 1857) Following the war, in 1869, *Overland Monthly* offered the opinion that, "Every one should be able to read, that he may become acquainted with his duties toward his government, his fellow-men, and his God." (Granger 1869) The war had reversed the priorities, before the war, duties to God came first and fellow men last, after the war, duties to the government came first. In 1880, Fred Campbell, California's Superintendent of Public Instruction wrote, "Education by the State is simply the determination of the State to protect itself, and secure the safety and progress of society." (Campbell 1880) The focus had changed, in twenty-five years, from "duties to God," to "duties toward the government," to "the determination of the State." These changes held significant implications, not only for the institution of schooling, educational policy, and curriculum, but for society as a whole, as literacy merged with the notion of citizenship.

During the closing decades of the nineteenth-century, education in America became more widely accessible, at least among native-born White children, and in much of the country more prevalent among Blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans, as well. Social notions of education also changed as the "safety and progress of society" replaced "duties to God." *Harper's Weekly* commented in 1880, "The conviction too, grows apace that the mere ability to read and write one's name is not an education." (*Harper's* 1880b) No longer did a passing familiarity with the "three R's" define learning. A county superintendent wrote, "The highest purpose of the public schools is to develop the faculties [and] train the scholars . . . to cultivate good tendencies & inculcate love of country, love of liberty & patriotism and above all to become *good citizens* to the country, state, and nation." (Godfrey 1868) *Harper's* observed, "that education to be effectual, must be carried to the degree which develops self-respect, honor, and the conservative instincts of the good citizen." (*Harper's* 1880b) By 1880, an effective system of education was one that inculcated "the

conservative instincts of the good citizen,” in other words, middle-class values and respectability. Of those rebellious elements outside the bounds of respectable society, *Harper's* stated, “Against mobs and tramps we can put the school-master.” (*Harper's* 1880b) Here then was the culmination of the transition from schooling as a local responsibility, to a vision of schooling as a state sponsored institution in which attendance was increasingly compulsory, in order to “secure the safety and progress of society.”

During the closing decades of the nineteenth-century, social improvement provided much of the social justification for education. By the early 1880s few educated people doubted that, “Our republic rests upon knowledge,” and that, “its founders proposed to make every citizen cultivated, intelligent, and fit to hold any public office.” (*Harper's* 1882a) People increasingly presumed that not only should a primary and grammar school education be universal, but that opportunities for high school education ought to be universal as well. The Farmers Alliance embraced education as a major part of their political platform recognizing that, “The brain power of any class must ultimately be the measure of its social and political power.” (Carr 1879) By the end of the decade of the 1880s the social norms surrounding literacy and citizenship merged as schooling beyond the primary level changed from a privilege of the elite to a rite of passage for many American youth.

There were dissenters, however. Opponents of free public schools believed that providing more than a basic education encouraged pupils to abandon the mechanical trades in favor of the professions. The *San Bernardino Weekly Times*, on March 13, 1886, asked, “Why should the people be taxed to teach music, drawing, the higher mathematics, and kindred fancy branches which,” the editor believed, “are of no earthly use.” The editor of the *Times* went on to argue that advanced education could be positively harmful to the majority of pupils, “through being stuffed with more than they can handle” the children “are spoiled for everything” in later life. The *Times* opined that, “With a smattering of the higher branches, which they can never comprehend or use, many young men leave school with the idea that they are too wise for the common pursuits of life, and must find some high-toned employment fitted to their genius and education!” The *Weekly Times* went on to criticize the use of taxpayer's money to attempt to “make a tin whistle out of a pigs tail” or “a Daniel Webster or a John Stuart Mill out of a born hod carrier or mule driver,” and argued, “good mechanics and farmers are ruined by receiving an education.” Of doubters, such as the *Weekly Times*, John Eaton, the Commissioner of Education, said, “Those who entertain these prejudices against a general system of taxation for the education of the masses are comparatively few in numbers and comprise only a class of fossil theorists, living in the

past, willfully refusing to recognize the living issues of the present or receive instruction from the lessons taught by the ‘logic of events.’” (Eaton 1874) When Eaton referred to the “lessons taught by the logic of events,” he meant the outcome of the Civil War then known in the North as the “War of the Rebellion.”

As matriculation expanded during the 1880s, the curriculum offered in the schools changed dramatically to accommodate these new students. Eugene Lawrence, a correspondent for *Harper's Weekly*, commented on the increased opportunities for education in rural areas, particularly in the American South. In 1865, *Harper's Weekly* reported that in the Southern States, “Boys and girls by thousands, destitute both of employment and the means of education, grow up to ignorance and poverty, and, too many of them, to vice and crime,” implying to Northern readers that the widespread ignorance prevalent in the Southern states posed a continuing danger to society. (*Harper's* 1865) Lawrence noted, in 1886, “Education has made some progress in the Southern States . . . It advances slowly . . . Yet, the desire for knowledge has already sprung up among the laboring classes.” (*Harper's* 1886) Lawrence went on to observe, “Education in the Northern and Western States is generally diffused . . . Schools are brought near to everyone. Reading and writing are not neglected; almost every citizen can add and subtract, or tell the time of day. They can count their gains and calculate their wages.” (*Harper's* 1886)

However, to secure the safety of society, another group of students needed schooling, as well. Lawrence noted, “Our illiterates are chiefly foreigners, or the children of foreigners; they soon learn enough, at least, by example, to teach them how to buy and sell. But one lesson they seem never to learn. At the common schools, children are taught the elements of cleanliness, good order, and a sense of propriety. In these things our foreign population are wholly unlearned.” (*Harper's* 1886) Here then was the new curriculum for the common school. No longer would the purpose of schooling be to teach upper-class children their duties to God, government, and fellow men, but instead to teach immigrant children hygiene, civics, and “a sense of propriety,” in other words, middle-class respectability.

In late nineteenth century America, middle-class attitudinal and behavioral norms of propriety defined the moral tenor of the country. (Rogers 1979, 15-16) Popular publications such as *Harper's*, and *Overland Monthly* codified and upheld a middle-class pan-Protestant morality. *Harper's* also vigorously opposed any overt ecclesiastical “hold upon the education of the middle-classes.” (*Harper's*, 1880a) The newspaper press, too, saw itself, “as the right arm of popular education, . . . a guardian of the morals of the community.” (*Weekly Times* 1876) Daniel Rogers called these writers and editors, “The ‘moralists,’

keepers of their countrymen's moral conscience." (Rogers 1979, 16) Many of these middle-class opinion leaders firmly believed that only with an educated citizenry could the Republic survive, and therefore a universal system of compulsory public education was essential for the common good. To achieve these goals, states enacted compulsory attendance laws during the 1870s.

Supporters of compulsory education enthused that, "Education the great leveller (sic) has been enthroned by law." (*Harper's* 1882b) Many local school officials, however, complained that the compulsory attendance law, "Having never been a popular one with the people, has remained a dead letter upon the statute book." (Carr 1879) The Los Angeles County superintendent insisted that compulsory schooling was a necessity, since in his district some children had "not attended any school." He continued, "With this lamentable fact staring us in the face it seems to me that . . . If nothing is done by the legislature these . . . children will grow up in ignorance, and will be unable to compete successfully with intelligent labor, and the State will be compelled, in the end, to take care of them as convicts." (McFadden 1871) *Harper's Weekly* in an article titled "School or Jail" asked, "Which shall it be?" (*Harper's* 1871) John Monteith, Missouri Superintendent of Public Instruction, stated in his report, "The obligation of property to sustain education is coming to be better understood and acknowledged. The relation between property and general intelligence is more widely recognized. It is ascertained too, that property must pay for police to protect its safety, or for criminal prosecutions to bring offenders to justice, if it does not pay for education." (Monteith 1871) State expenditures on education, proponents argued, conferred the economic benefits of an intelligent labor force, and savings in law enforcement.

Superintendent Grove Godfrey believed compulsory schooling to be, "the true policy of government" and that, "Economically, socially and morally the state has a very great interest in the education of youth." (Godfrey 1868) Godfrey wrote, "The common school system contributes essentially to the welfare of the body politic. Government must educate all her children for the cultivation of the masses lies at the foundation of our free institutions & is the hope & safeguard of constitutional government." *Harper's* observed that supporters of public education, "Felt that health, commercial prosperity, political quiet, and social and moral progress rest upon the steady growth of intelligence." (*Harper's* 1882b) Conversely, "A failure of intelligence in the people must result in a failure of the Republic." (*Harper's* 1880c) Therefore, compulsory education clearly reflected both dominant social values, and "the determination of the State to protect itself."

Acknowledging this consensus, the United States Commissioner of Education stated, "the necessity of systematic instruction in morals" in the public schools "is generally admitted." (Eaton 1882) Schoolbooks had previously infused moral lessons throughout the curriculum, now schools treated morality as a separate subject. The school law in California required that "instruction in morals and manners shall be given in all grades and classes through the entire school course." In Maine, teachers were to instruct pupils in "the principles of morality, justice . . . love of country, humanity . . . sobriety, industry, frugality, chastity, temperance, &c." In Minnesota students were to receive "instruction in civil government, social science, good morals and patriotism," in New Hampshire, "religion, piety and morality are to be encouraged, also humanity, general benevolence, public and private charity, industry, economy, honesty, punctuality, sincerity, sobriety, and . . . generous sentiments;" and in Oregon, "morality and cleanliness" were encouraged. Much the same curriculum was required in Massachusetts, New Jersey, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Vermont, West Virginia, and Montana. (Eaton 1882)

Education of the masses, hitherto designed to produce an educated and literate electorate, now assumed a social reform agenda. Proponents of universal and compulsory education asserted that the "knowledge" imparted in the public schools "would spread general comfort, health, industry, contentment; would diminish the spread of disease, banish pauperism, repress vice, build clean cities, . . . and promote and enforce the public welfare." (*Harper's* 1882a) In other words, in cities largely populated by immigrants bringing a variety of cultures, common schooling would instill middle-class values and morality.

Prominent among middle-class social reforms was the temperance movement. The Women's Christian Temperance Union (W.C.T.U.) was among the most active political organizations seeking to influence school curriculum. The W.C.T.U. encouraged school instruction on the evils of alcohol. The *Riverside Press and Horticulturalist*, of May 10, 1884 reported that teachers also lectured the boys on the evils of smoking. Political agitation by the W.C.T.U. prompted changes in school curriculum that remain discernible to the present day. During the 1880s, State Legislatures throughout the country added courses in temperance to the approved curriculum and ordered textbooks prepared on the new subjects.

The Redlands, California chapter of the W.C.T.U. frequently advocated the cause of temperance and education in the local papers, where Scipio Craig, an ex-school teacher, and editor of the Redlands *Citrograph*, provided favorable coverage. One temperance advocate reflecting, in the January 11,

1890 issue of the *Citrograph*, on the result of several unsuccessful prohibition campaigns observed, "If we will seek first the temperance education of the people, all other temperance blessings will in due time, be added unto us. . . . We must educate, *educate*, EDUCATE the masses to the realization of the frightful evils of the rum traffic, and the necessity of remedying them the first thing. When the majority reaches that point, reform is easy." That temperance reform education would take place in the public schools.

By 1884 Massachusetts, Michigan, New Hampshire, New York, Rhode Island and Vermont required that students receive instruction in hygiene, temperance, and the physiological effects of alcohol. (Eaton 1885) In 1887, the California Legislature adopted a law requiring scientific temperance instruction in all grades. Superintendent Ira Hoitt noted, in 1889, however, "Up to the present time the teaching has been desultory, and the results inappreciable." The Superintendent recommended that County School Boards require "an examination of their teachers in this subject and entomology before issuing renewals of [teaching] certificates." (Hoitt 1890)

Social reform efforts within the schools, stimulated proposals for political reforms outside the schools, as well. During the 1880s a rising tide of immigration from southern and eastern Europe transformed America's cities. By the mid 1880s near universal primary schooling and the resulting level of literacy attained by native-born American children, combined with increased immigration, and lingering fears of a link between ignorance and rebellion, to generate demands for an educational qualification for voting. The social notions that linked literacy and citizenship extended to encompass the notion that only literate citizens could safely be allowed to vote.

Increased immigration and efforts at a division of the school funds in the northeastern states during the 1870s and 1880s divided the two major political parties over issues of religion and allocation of the public school funds, and revived the nativist 'American Party' or Know-Nothings. The main plank in the platform of the American party stated "emphatically, that no person who cannot read and write the American language intelligently is fit to be entrusted with the ballot." (*Citrograph* 1889d) Clearly schooling and literacy were the foundations upon which the 'American' sought exclude the illiterate voter.

In Southern California, The San Bernardino *Weekly Times*, on March 13, 1886, observed, "The original object of the public school system was to make intelligent voters and better citizens. Every child in the United States should be able to read and write, have a knowledge of the rudiments of the common branches, understand the Constitution of the United

States and of the State in which he lives – if it be possible to understand them – and know something of the history of the land. And *every voter* should be required to give proof of such knowledge." The October 30, 1886 issue of the *Riverside Press and Horticulturalist* agreed that illiterate people "by their . . . lack of education, are unfit to govern themselves much less to govern the American people by the power of the ballot-box. The editor of the Redlands *Citrograph* believed a literacy qualification for voting, "Would put a premium on suffrage, which thenceforward serve to lessen the extent of illiteracy." (*Citrograph* 1889d) Meanwhile, Superintendent John Kincade wrote, "I am in favor of an intelligence test as qualification of [school] trustees." (Kincade 1871)

Echoing the necessity of a literacy requirement for voting *Harper's Weekly* told its readers, "There is no state in which provision is not made for public education, yet thirty-two percent of the voters of the country are unable to read the ballots they cast . . . There can be no more common interest than that of popular intelligence, no more common danger than that of an ignorant ballot." (*Harper's* 1882c) Another issue of *Harper's* observed: "In no country is general education so indispensable as in that where every man is voter . . . The question of illiteracy becomes, therefore, of peculiar importance." (*Harper's* 1889) The *Citrograph* told readers on July 27, 1889, "A man, be he native or foreign born, that cannot read and write should by no manner of means be allowed to vote." As Craig saw the issue it was ignorance, not race, that mattered.

Other west coast publications pointed out that not all "Americans" understood the matter so clearly. *Overland Monthly* told its readers that the American Party evinced "a desire to have the municipal offices administered only by native Americans." (*Overland Monthly* 1886) In a prescient argument *Overland Monthly* noted, "It brings in however, a discrimination between classes of citizens, which . . . must in our judgment, ultimately fall to the ground. So long as, under the law, the newly naturalized foreigner and the thorough American stand on the same ground, discriminations between them will not only prove impracticable, but are not just. They have the grave defect of drawing lines by class instead of by individual qualities." The editorial concluded, "If the public should farther reason that it would not hurt our own people to be obliged to show some such elementary fitness for taking part in government before they are permitted to do so, no harm would be done." (*Overland Monthly* 1886)

Curiously, throughout the debate no Southern California paper ever endorsed women's suffrage. The dichotomy in the school laws, and voting laws, was not lost on national publications. *Overland Monthly* observed that, "Nebraska gives women full suffrage in all school matters, but does not allow them to hold the

smallest school office save that of teacher; while California makes women eligible to all school offices and has for many years elected them to county superintendencies, but shows no disposition to allow them to vote in the smallest school election.” (*Overland Monthly* 1888)

The Redlands *Citrograph*, on May 4, 1889, urged California voters to endorse, “The plank in the National American platform which reads that after a stated period every voter, before he exercises the right of suffrage, shall be able to *read* the Constitution of the United States in the English language, and to write his own name upon the Register, to show that he is fitted to share in the administration of the Republic.” Three months later, on July 27, the *Citrograph* praised the “Plucky statesmen” of Montana when that state included, “In her new constitution an educational qualification as a stepping stone to the right of suffrage.” In 1890, Mississippi imposed literacy qualifications for voting, which were selectively applied, and racially discriminatory, much to the disgust of ‘Americans’ on the West Coast such as Scipio Craig who repeatedly condemned the discriminatory measure in the *Citrograph*. (*Citrograph* 1889a; 1889c; 1889e; 1890a)

Harper’s commented that requiring “the *understanding* of the Constitution,” in order to vote, as Mississippi did, rather than the ability to read it, as Montana did, was a farce. *Harper’s* observed, “It is evident by the constant necessity of a judicial interpretation of the Constitution,” reached only “after long and able debates by learned counsel, that that venerable instrument [the Constitution] is by no means always understood when read by trained wits.” (*Harper’s* 1890) They asked, “Who is to determine . . . whether the voter understands it or not[?]” (*Harper’s* 1890) Most observers presumed the Mississippi law would apply only to Black voters. *Harper’s* had long expressed, “the belief that it is not the ignorance of the blacks, it is their complexion which is the real disability.” (*Harper’s* 1865) As early as 1865, *Harper’s* complained, “It is proposed to make ignorance a disqualification for the franchise . . . If reading the Bible or doing a sum in the rule of three are to be the tests of fitness, let every body be brought to the test. . . . We have heard nothing of disfranchising ignorant white men.” (*Harper’s* 1865)

Other states too, were actively promoting literacy requirements and English instruction. In 1889, legislation banning foreign language instruction in public schools passed in Illinois, with the Edwards Law, and in Wisconsin, in the Bennett Act. (Wyman 1968) The *Citrograph*, on April 19, 1890, endorsed the Bennett Act. Although neither of the major party’s platforms satisfied the “American,” nativists were unable to create a viable party, and in 1890, the movement collapsed. Political efforts to impose literacy requirements for voting continued, however.

In 1892, a referendum requiring voters to possess knowledge of reading and writing in order to vote appeared on the ballot in California. The San Bernardino *Weekly Courier*, on April 22, 1892, told readers, “Popular government is possible only among intelligent people . . . The illiterate voter is generally incapable of voting intelligently . . . The unintelligent voters are the prey of politicians and demagogues.” The referendum on educational qualifications for voting in California passed. (*Overland Monthly* 1893)

Even before the “American” party achieved legislative validation of its agenda at the polls, schools were co-opting the movement. The California Legislature, in 1889, voted to add the study of civil government to the list of subjects required by law. California’s Superintendent of Public Instruction, Ira Hoitt wrote, “In our country, where so large a foreign element forms a factor of our body politic, it is especially imperative that the underlying principles of our government should be implanted in the minds of our youth.” He went on to note, “The public school is the nation in miniature . . . it is appropriate and necessary that our common schools should find a place for a branch that is so important to the welfare of the state.” (Hoitt 1890) Superintendent Hoitt could not have stated it more clearly, schools added civics courses to acculturate the immigrant, and did so for the good of the state.

During the twentieth century, states removed all literacy requirements for voting, but the curriculum changes that occurred as part of that same political milieu remained. The linkage of ignorance with rebellion in the public consciousness, in the years after the American Civil War, altered social beliefs about the purpose of schooling, about who should be educated, and how society would deliver that education. The advent of compulsory instruction, the addition of civics, hygiene, and temperance courses to the curriculum, and calls for literacy qualifications in order to vote, were far from independent and unrelated events. All of these changes were part of a broader transformation of the social justification of public schooling, and manifestations of “the determination of the State to protect itself, and secure the safety and progress of society.”(Campbell 1880)

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