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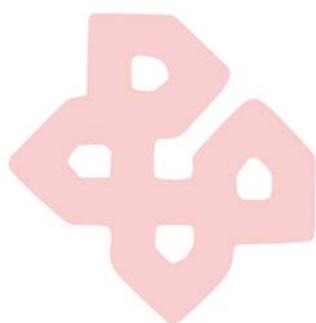
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## *THE UPSIDE OF PRESENTISM*

*El lado positivo del presentismo*



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### **Resumen:**

*El presentismo es visto generalmente como un mal necesario en historiografía. Este artículo explora lo positivo de esta inevitabilidad. Aplicando un enfoque filosófico al análisis discursivo en la tradición de la nueva historia cultural, se distingue -de una parte- entre un uso estratégico del presentismo, y -de otra- un enfoque racionalista en historia. El artículo concluye considerando algunas implicaciones políticas en historiografía de las explicaciones racionalistas y de las explicaciones estratégicamente presentistas. Los modos de comprensión racionalistas inscriben las expectativas del pasado en las visiones del futuro; asignando al historiador el papel de profeta; y perpetuando nociones de agentes ahistóricos. En contraste, las historias estratégicamente presentistas incorporan una orientación que deliberadamente emplea las lentes y perspectivas del presente en orden a tener en cuenta supuestos y perspectivas actuales. Cuando las asunciones son examinadas en relación a las perspectivas presentistas, dichos presupuestos sueltan su rienda en el pensamiento. Dado que el presentismo es inevitable, no debe ser desestimado por completo, sino que debe ser una cuestión sondeada y examinada críticamente. Con dicho foco, el presentismo estratégico en la historiografía debe posibilitar una reflexión sobre los límites de lo que es posible pensar.*

*Palabras clave:* presentismo, nueva historia cultural, genealogía, progreso, determinismo.

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**Abstract:**

*Presentism is generally regarded as a necessary evil in historiography. This paper explores the upside of that inevitability. Using a philosophical approach to discourse analysis in the tradition of new cultural history, the paper distinguishes between a strategic use of presentism on the one hand, and a rationalistic approach to history on the other hand. The paper concludes by considering some political implications of rationalistic accounts and strategically presentistic accounts in historiography. Rationalistic accounts inscribe expectations of the past into visions of the future; they cast the historian in the role of prophet; and they perpetuate notions of ahistoric agency. In contrast, strategically presentistic histories incorporate an orientation that deliberately uses the lenses and perspectives of the present in order to bring current assumptions and perspectives into focus. When assumptions are examined in relation to presentistic perspectives, those assumptions loosen their reins on thought. Since presentism is unavoidable, presentism should not be dismissed outright, but ought to be subject to probing and critical examination. With such a focus, strategically presentistic historiography allows for a reflection on the limits of what it is possible to think.*

*Key words:* presentism; new cultural history; genealogy; progress; determinism.

Rationalistic approaches to historiography:

- epistemologically impose a priori interpretations on historical phenomena, either that the present is the same as the past (presentistic mode), or that the present is different from the past (historicist mode);
- methodologically essentialise concepts in history (frequently manifested in the form of the assumption of progress);
- pedagogically construe the present as if it were caused or determined by the past.

In contrast, strategically presentistic approaches to historiography:

- epistemologically allow for the possibility that the present may be similar and/or different from the past;
- methodologically allow for both discontinuity and continuity in history, permitting a critical perspective on extra-historical mechanisms such as causality, linearity, or circularity;
- pedagogically recognise multiple interpretations of things both in the past and in the present.

To begin, I distinguish theoretically between *rationalistic* and *strategic* approaches to educational historiography<sup>1</sup>. Of course, these words have been used in many ways, and their

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<sup>1</sup> The meaning of *strategic* bears some resemblance to other terms that underwrite post-analytic or non-teleological approaches to historiography. Strategic history is considered *pragmatic* by some; see, for example, Donald H. Sheehan and Harold C. Syrett, eds, *Essays in American Historiography; Papers Presented in Honor of Allan Nevins* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960); Cleo H. Cherryholmes, *Reading Pragmatism* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999); and Norman J. Wilson, *History in Crisis? Recent Directions in Historiography* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999). It has been called *critical and effective* by others; see, for example, Mitchell Dean, *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 1994); David Owen, "Genealogy as Exemplary Critique: Reflections on Foucault and the Imagination of the Political," *Economy and Society* 24, no. 4 (1995 November): 489-506; and Allan R. Buss, "In Defense of a Critical-Presentist Historiography," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral*

meanings have been widely debated, but I specify particular meanings here in order to make a point. By *rationalistic*, I mean appealing to timeless, universal, perennial or general principles to explain change or dynamics in history. The designation *rationalistic* allows me to draw attention to the similarities between conventional notions of presentism and historicism. As an example, for radical revisionist historians, presentism was not a theoretical problem because it was more important for history to be told in a way that was useful for solving present problems. And for historicists, presentism was not a theoretical problem as long as there were methodological safeguards in place to avoid it. Rationalistic approaches to historiography seek phenomena, statements, storylines and conclusions that can be applied across various historical contexts. In rationalistic approaches to history, the problem of presentism is either avoidable by methodological rigor or forgivable as a means to politically useful ends.

In contrast, by *strategic*, I mean deliberate recognition of the inevitability of presentism, using that vantage point as an opportunity to generate a critical understanding of our present circumstances. By critical understanding, I do not refer to the same thing as the radical revisionist normative project of solving current problems; I mean seeking multiple and unfamiliar perspectives on issues. For example, an educational historian may become fascinated with phrenology. A strategic use of presentism in historiography would frame a study of phrenology in the context of the current mania about mental measurement<sup>2</sup>. With this strategy, it would become possible to examine why phrenology might be regarded as an important or interesting thing to study just now. Such an approach to inquiry also puts an ethical/political burden on the historian. Strategic presentism means that historiographical investigation must include careful consideration of the politics of historical writing that influence the choice of subject, the construction of the reader, the rhetorical form of the argument and the authority of the historian.

## 1. Situating this argument in historiographical theories

In order to explain the context of my inquiry, I first introduce some of the historiographical contributions of Robert Nisbet<sup>3</sup>, Beverly Southgate<sup>4</sup> and Michel Foucault<sup>5</sup>.

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*Sciences*, 13 (1977): 252-260. Strategic presentism is also related to some meanings of *reflexive* in sociology; see, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). It also resembles the notion of challenging orthodoxies as in Sol Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies: Toward a New Cultural History of Education* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999). I use the term *strategic* here to emphasise a self-consciously ethical project in historiography.

<sup>2</sup> See Cohen's *Challenging Orthodoxies* for an example of a strategically presentist history of mental hygiene in education.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress* (New York: Basic Books, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Beverly Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, "On Ways of Writing History," in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, And Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion. Vol. 2 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1998); Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, And Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, Vol. 2 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1998); Michel Foucault, "Return to History," in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics,*

These theorists provide some insight into the ways rationalistic approaches have permeated historiography.

They show, in different ways, how historiographical assumptions have circumscribed educational discourse. The ways the histories are written renders some perspectives on education possible, and other perspectives unthinkable.

Robert Nisbet's *The History of the Idea of Progress* is a helpful examination of one particular type of rationalistic history, namely progressivism. Progress is a common *Leitmotiv* in history, and the assumption of progress has been heavily criticised by historiographers. Nisbet provides us with a history of history, and his history of the idea of progress cuts to the heart of the matter by documenting how the meaning of progress has changed over time.

I provide a brief summary of Nisbet's argument to illustrate how rationalistic assumptions about history can creep unannounced into historical accounts of almost anything.

Nisbet argues that from the middle of the sixteenth century until the middle of the eighteenth century, the idea of progress was associated with Puritan notions of Providence: 'The progress of Providence!' Burnet's phrase could serve perfectly to epitomize the crucial historical process we are concerned with ... that by which belief in the Christian God was supplanted in the minds of intellectuals by a belief in a certain natural and inexorable pattern of progress. In Burnet's phrase we see the God-the-being transposed into God-the-unfolding, God-the-advancing. The faith in the permanence and regularity of natural law which so many historians ascribe to Cartesian sources might better be ascribed to Christian, chiefly Puritan<sup>6</sup>.

Nisbet's overall point is that *progress* has meant many different things throughout history and that it is misguided to assume that *progress* is a natural or inevitable way to think about historical change. According to Nisbet, in the eighteenth century, "progress as providence" gave way to another idea of progress, namely, "progress as freedom". The newer idea of freedom was fundamentally different from previous ideas; moreover, the newer idea of freedom did not evolve from or follow inevitably from previous ideas like providence. That is, according to Nisbet, the history of the idea of progress is not progressive.

Nisbet documents the idea of "progress as freedom" by referring to the writings of Thomas Jefferson, Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant. This "enlightened" notion of progress (which was based on the assumption that humans had an innate propensity to advance in knowledge and develop in virtue) joined forces with Christian doctrine<sup>7</sup> to make the idea of progress-as-freedom into "not an accident but a necessity<sup>8</sup>".

What began with Turgot and Adam Smith, the American Founding Fathers, Godwin, and Mill reached its grand culmination and fulfillment in Spencer. No one since has added one iota to what is set forth so eloquently in Spencer's writings: the belief that freedom is

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*Method, And Epistemology*, ed. James Faubion, Vol. 2 of *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: New Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 129.

<sup>7</sup> Nisbet writes, "[I]f there is one generalization that can be made confidently about the history of the idea of progress, it is that throughout its history the idea has been closely linked with, has depended upon, religion or upon intellectual constructs derived from religion" (p. 352).

<sup>8</sup> Spencer, quoted in Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 178.

necessary to progress, and that the goal of progress, from the most distant past to the remote future, is ever ascending realization of freedom<sup>9</sup>.

Nisbet's analysis separates the notion of "progress as freedom" from the idea of "progress as power", exemplified in the writings of August Comte, Charles Darwin and Karl Marx:

Freedom, equality, popular sovereignty - each of these became more than something to be cherished, worked for, and hoped for; set in the context of the idea of progress, each could seem not merely desirable but historically necessary, inevitable of eventual achievement. It was possible to show - as did Turgot, Condorcet, Saint-Simon, Comte, Hegel, Marx and Spencer, among many others - that all history could be seen as a slow, gradual, but continuous and necessary ascent to some given end<sup>10</sup>.

Nisbet's work offers an appreciation for how the idea of progress has been transformed over time in a way that is strategically presentistic insofar as it deliberately adopts its perspective from the present. The analysis offers a historical argument that recognises and makes visible the particular type of progress that is being assumed in today's historical writing.

Nisbet's project does not solve any current educational or historiographical problems; however, the project does make it possible to ask several questions about histories of education: How does the historical narrative account for change? What are the assumptions in the text about where progress will eventually lead us? What factors are assumed to stand in the way of progress? What does this view of history assume about what people are expected to do in order to participate in the progressive flow of things? By asking these questions, the embedded assumptions and tacitly held ideals of an educational history can be made more explicit, and thereby subject to critical scrutiny.

Beverly Southgate offers more contributions to the theories of writing history. Drawing from Marxism, feminisms and postcolonial theories, Southgate outlines recent challenges to the "old model" of writing history (see especially chapters 4 and 5). She concludes that the destabilisation of historical standards and presumptions leads to a condition of productive dynamism in the field of history:

Marxism, feminism, and post-colonialism are, or were, themselves the product of a time and place, so subject to their own historical development, and destined for replacement by yet another 'post-'; for 'isms' themselves fragment or lose their cutting edge....But, however rapidly aspects of these movements may be replaced and disdainfully discarded, a central message remains. For what all share is a recognition that conventional historical accounts of the past can be challenged, inasmuch as a change in perspective results in a new perception, which in turn opens the way to new interpretations and narratives. Then realisation of that possibility entails a recognition that history - our accounts of the past present, *and future* - could be different. History, in short, is not fixed: change is possible<sup>11</sup>.

When we combine Nisbet's insights about progress with Southgate's insights about the mutability of history, it becomes easier to imagine why educational historians might want to embrace the presentism of their narratives in strategic ways. First, progress itself is "the product of a time and place" and "destined for replacement". Further, to challenge the

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<sup>9</sup> Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress*, 236.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>11</sup> Southgate, *History: What and Why?*, 106 (emphasis in the original).

assumption of progress is to recognise that history “could be different”. To problematise progress in this way helps to make visible various aspects of education that do not follow logically or causally from previous events. For example, this problematisation makes it possible to notice how today’s vocational education produces a (post-Fordist) flexible-role, multi-tasking, self-motivated worker in contrast to the Fordist model of the early 1900s in which roles were fixed and sequenced in an assembly line pattern. There is nothing natural, inevitable or rationally predictable about the change from Fordist to post-Fordist worker identity models. Strategic presentism de-naturalises (and thereby historicises) history. Nisbet historicises the idea of progress; Southgate problematises the grand narratives of history; and Foucault focuses on the political effects of writing history according to rational principles. Reacting in an interview to the criticisms of his 1966 publication of *Les Mots et les Choses* (*The Order of Things*) Michel Foucault stated: “I was struck by the following fact: professional historians recognised it as being a work of history, and many others, who have an antiquated and no doubt completely obsolete idea of history, clamored that history was being murdered<sup>12</sup>.”

He went on to explain that the problem with conventional histories, such as the tradition of the “history of ideas”, is that they appeal to “concepts that seem rather magical<sup>13</sup>” to explain change in history. Rather than describing the relation of statements in a given text, those conventional histories draw on “exterior” concepts such as mentality, intention, structure, existential choice or psychoanalytic function to generalize about a group of statements. It is Foucault’s project, and characteristic of historiography after the linguistic turn, “to try, by playing a systematic game, to forego these ... conveniences, and so ... [make] ... an effort to describe statements, entire groups of statements, while bringing out the relations of implication, opposition, exclusion that might connect them<sup>14</sup>”. The project of historical analysis after the linguistic turn, then, is a search for patterns *within* a group of statements (i.e. a text; a discourse), and to be self-conscious about resorting to any concept that is exterior to—or at a conceptual/epistemological distance from—those statements.

We can begin to see how the assumption of progress and/or the search for origins (“foundations”) might work to essentialise the meanings of schooling, teaching, citizenship, freedom and knowledge. Moreover, strategic presentism allows for the deliberate targeting of objects to be critiqued. Presentism invites the historian to ask not only “What knowledge is of most worth?” but also “What aspects of Spencer’s definition of knowledge do we take for granted today?”, “Are the political power struggles that shaped Spencer’s criteria of worth still relevant today?” or, alternatively, Foucault’s famous question: “What is it impossible to think?<sup>15</sup>”

## 2. An example of a rationalistic approach to educational history

In this section I examine a widely used educational history textbook that rationalizes historical explanation, and I analyse the political implications of its essentialised definitions.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault, “On Ways of Writing History,” 279.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (New York:Random House, 1970), xv.

The text I examine is generally used for teacher preparation courses in foundations or history of education, so part of my analysis has to do with the implications of historiographic theory for teacher knowledge.

John Pulliam and James Van Patten's *History of Education in America*, already in its seventh edition, is an example of a history of education text commonly used in teacher preparation courses<sup>16</sup>. There are three particularly striking aspects of this history text that are pertinent to my analysis: the semblance of objectivity, the essentialisation of key terms, and the specification of "future trends" in education. These are three of the theoretical mechanisms that operate to construct a rationalised account of history.

## 2.1. Objectivism

In its theoretical approach, the Pulliam and Van Patten text draws an explicit distinction between "interpretation" and "factual knowledge":

In order to pack as much information as possible into a succinct volume, interpretation is left largely to the reader or to professors who use the book as a text. Certainly the raging controversy between the traditionalists and revisionists is important. The differences between Michael Katz and H. Giroux (radical revisionists) and David Tyack (interpreter of social forces) are pronounced. Before judgments of interpretation can be made, there must be a wealth of factual knowledge, and that is provided in this book<sup>17</sup>.

Southgate describes this tendency as the "old model" of history, a model that is in denial about the inevitability of presentism<sup>18</sup>. Southgate attributes the tendency to separate facts from interpretations to the pervasiveness of a positivistic model of science:

The scientist, it is assumed, strives towards a direct perception and understanding of natural phenomena. There is an external natural reality, which is the subject-matter of science, and the truth of which may be grasped with the use of appropriate techniques. An account of that truth, free from personal bias, can then be presented, and it can be assumed that there will be general agreement about that truth, at least by experts working in the field. And similarly with history and its own subject-matter of the past<sup>19</sup>.

Historiographers have noted the irony of historians aspiring to this definition of science because practising scientists have problematised the possibility of "fact" for a long time<sup>20</sup>.

When educational histories are written in a way that separates fact from interpretation, they inscribe particular ways of thinking not only about history, but also about

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<sup>16</sup> John D. Pulliam and James J. Van Patten, *History of Education in America*, 7th ed. (Upper SaddleRiver, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, v-vi.

<sup>18</sup> She notes that the ideal of separating "what happened" from our perceptions and memories of what happened was expressed as early as the second century AD by Lucian.

<sup>19</sup> Southgate, *History: What and Why?*, 13.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

the meaning of education itself. First, they reiterate an obsolete and reductionist understanding of what history is. Second, they assume that knowledge is somehow objective rather than generated by historically specific sets of power relations, thereby dehistoricising knowledge. Third, by implication they construct the process of education as the acquisition of information rather than the production of knowledge. Fourth, the separation of fact from interpretation lacks reflexive and epistemological rigour because, since it is impossible to select information and organise it into a book without imposing a theoretical and interpretive framework, by claiming to separate fact from interpretation - in denying the inevitability of presentism - this history text undermines its own methodological framework.

## 2.2. Essentialisation

Despite its explicit claims to the contrary, the *History of Education in America* tacitly inscribes teleology and progress as evidenced when it describes the curriculum as “evolving”, the science as “developing” and information as “expanding”. Such descriptions are rationalistic because a curriculum can be conceived as “evolving” only if the narrative constructs an essential entity of *curriculum* that can exist apart from its incarnations in various social constructions; information can be seen to “expand” only if information is construed as quantifiable in some way.

The inscription of essentialism in Pulliam and Van Patten’s account of curriculum is evident in the language of sub-headings throughout the chapters, for example, “Curriculum Improvement<sup>21</sup>”, “Inhibited Development of Education in the South<sup>22</sup>”, “Development of Educational Philosophy<sup>23</sup>” and “Evolution of the Modern Institutional Structure<sup>24</sup>”. The questions for discussion at the ends of chapters include, “Give two examples of modern educators ‘reinventing the wheel’ because they lack historical knowledge and perspective<sup>25</sup>”. *The History of Education in America* claims to be a record of ideas that have already been tried in the past, and it promotes the assumption that the old ideas will be found lacking or deficient in some way. The implication, then, is that by knowing this “factual” record of old ideas, educators will not waste effort “reinventing the wheel” but, rather, they will forge new - and presumably better - ideas for educational reform.

This essentialising view of educational history reiterates the assumption that newer is better, and denies its own presentistic agenda. For example, describing the age of the common school revival, Pulliam and Van Patten write:

Perhaps people of better quality and training would have been attracted to teaching if the pay and conditions could have been improved, but this was beyond the capability of the settlers in most of the newer areas of the country. It is true that even on the frontier some well-educated and excellent teachers could be found, but in most cases the quality of teaching was extremely

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<sup>21</sup> Pulliam and Van Patten, *History of Education in America*, 99.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

low and the children could expect to gain little learning in return for the brief time and small fees that were required of them<sup>26</sup>.

When this text asserts that money would have made better teaching probable, it does not take into account that the role and purpose of schooling in the mid-nineteenth century was unlike the role and purpose of schooling today. Pulliam and Van Patten's account asserts that early settlers would have constructed comprehensive common schools with formally trained teachers if only they had had enough money to do so. Assuming that the common school has always been the ultimate goal and value for United States citizens, this view obscures arguments such as David Tyack's that schooling was regarded by many people in the mid-nineteenth century as the imposition of an upper class world-view on the common people and a mechanism to perpetuate social inequalities<sup>27</sup>.

Ironically, Pulliam and Van Patten label Tyack's history of education as "interpretation", in contrast to their own "factual" account. However, I cite this example as evidence that the Pulliam and Van Patten text is an interpretation based on a particular set of rationalistic assumptions about the history of education, namely: (1) people have always regarded schooling as a means toward social betterment; (2) people have always aspired to have formally trained teachers; and (3) more educational opportunities means more progress for the citizenry. Tyack's history, in contrast, portrays the establishment of the common school as contingent on the power relations that came together to construct the possibility for public education in the nineteenth century.

What does this textbook teach us about the history of education? Pulliam and Van Patten's rationalising assumptions about schooling and the history of education teach us by implication to uphold today's beliefs in educational meritocracy, whether they intend that political message or not. After all, if the history of education is not written in a way that recognizes the contentious power relations involved in the establishment of the common school, then education appears to be a transcendental value, and the common school appears to be the inevitable result of developmental improvement. When the history of the common school is presented that way, it becomes too easy for today's educators to understand the history of education as a progressive extension of perennial and essential values. If schooling is assumed to reflect timeless and essential human values, then educational success becomes a process of dispersing those values in ever-widening circles, providing access to schooling for more people, and bringing people into schools for longer periods of time. From there, it is a short step to a meritocratic view of a student's success or failure: If schools embody essential human values, then attainment of school values means an individual's successful acquisition of human values, and failure to attain school values means an individual's failure to acquire essential human values.

Telling the history of education in this rationalistic way allows for meritocratic judgments about students, but it does not allow for some other questions to be asked, for example:

In what ways does a common-school curriculum embody injustices that are particular to a time and place? To what extent are some assumptions about perennial educational values actually socially and culturally specific? And how does the common school curriculum produce its own definitions of *normal* and *deviant*?

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>27</sup> David Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

### 2.3. Forecasting

Because Pulliam and Van Patten's history is written with the rationalistic assumption of progress, it is not surprising that they can offer a forecast of the future of education or that they envision the future of education as a continuation of present-day thinking and values.

Here is an excerpt from their historical predictions:

Although we cannot be certain about what will take place in the immediate future and long-range forecasts are always risky, there are certain trends in American education that seem likely to occur. Of course, any major change, such as a new technique of learning or a war, would alter trends in a dramatic way. If some degree of stability continues in the next decades, the following events seem likely to occur....<sup>28</sup>

Not surprisingly, the trends that Pulliam and Van Patten forecast are progressive in every sense. They predict the prolongation of schooling to "continue throughout life", the extension of schooling to remote parts via distance education, the expansion of the curriculum to be "as broad as life itself", an "increase in the number of people engaged in teaching and learning", more people will spend "a great deal of every day of their lives in some kind of learning environment" and, finally, the efficiency of information absorption will be intensified by means of "chemical and electronic learning aids including brain stimulation<sup>29</sup>". By objectifying, essentialising and forecasting, this history of education rationalizes history and constructs knowledge as abstract, neutral, exterior and (ironically) ahistorical. Furthermore, this history perpetuates existing injustices of power relations by reifying some culturally specific values of schooling. Finally, it forecloses the theoretical possibility of meaningful change in existing relations that construct education by casting the future in a seamless continuation of present trends.

### 3. An example of a strategic approach

Through overuse, the meaning of the term *class* has decayed and deteriorated in educational discourse. Recognising this, David Hamilton wrote a book that documents how the term *class* (as in classroom or school class) has changed meaning over time<sup>30</sup>. Hamilton's history does not assume that the way we commonly understand *class* today is the same as the way *class* was understood a century ago, neither does it assume that the meaning is necessarily different. Rather, Hamilton shows how the meaning of *class* has undergone several changes commensurate with changes in ways of thinking and reasoning, and as a product of particular historical relations. For example, class has only recently been used to describe a group of students taught by one teacher. In other times, class referred to an age cohort or a proficiency level. The changes in the meaning of *class* are illustrative of changes in the way

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<sup>28</sup> Pulliam and Van Patten, *History of Education in America*, 303.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 304-305. Pulliam and Van Patten's history distinguishes itself from other more critical educational histories when it states forthrightly in the conclusion that "The challenge for education is to prepare individuals for job market reality" (p. 305). Not all progressive histories of education espouse this liberal view.

<sup>30</sup> David Hamilton, *Towards a Theory of Schooling* (London: Falmer, 1989).

curriculum has been perceived and studied, and the meanings of *class* are shown to be the product of event-specific power relations.

Considerable work has been done to document the increase in the role of the state has played in the institutional configuration of schooling from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries<sup>31</sup>; less commentary is available about teaching methods and classroom practices of those times. Hamilton, however, provides one example of a documented history of classroom practices. Hamilton argues that it was only after 1815 in Scotland, for example, that pedagogy was conceived in terms of class-based instruction. The transition from individualized instruction to group-based instruction is shown to have been contentious and historically particular. Andrew Bell's Madras System of class-based pedagogy, Hamilton writes, was developed to teach the "illegitimate" (i.e. mixed-race) children of military personnel in India<sup>32</sup>. An early form of simultaneous instruction was the "gallery lesson" in the 1830s<sup>33</sup>. After the 1830s, the organisation of teaching into groups - a reform that had been unsuccessfully promoted for several decades - finally took hold. In educational discourse of the mid-nineteenth century, it was part of the discourse to think that group-based teaching was actually more efficient for learning than tutorial or individual lessons. Group-based education had been promoted by educationalists for decades, but it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that the idea was taken up in popular discourse. The focus of teaching eventually shifted from the individual to the group: "Indeed, it was not until the 1860s and 1870s that teachers, rooms and classes began to converge into a one-to-one relationship<sup>34</sup>." Moreover, the rise of the concept of "class" in pedagogy was homologous with Linneaus' classification system in biology: "Few commentators ... have noted the contemporaneous emergence of equalised classes in educational, biological and social theory. In all cases, the shift was from individuals considered in 'ranks' to groups considered in 'classes'<sup>35</sup>."

Hamilton's analysis is strategically presentist insofar as it deliberately proceeds on the basis of current assumptions about the meaning of the term *class*. Historicising the meaning of the term *class*, Hamilton shows by historical comparison how our current common-sense meaning of the term is narrow, limited and culturally specific. When we denaturalise our understanding of the word *class*, then it becomes possible to see aspects of current educational practices in a new light. It becomes possible to question the ways current meanings of *class* produce other accepted definitions of classroom management, developmental appropriateness, class as community, and even the requirements for graduation and credentialing.

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Carl Kaestle, *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1983); and Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).

<sup>32</sup> Hamilton, *Towards a Theory of Schooling*, 78.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. Later, at the turn of the next century, pedagogical techniques would again target individuals, but that "individual" would no longer be the authentic humanist like *Emile*; rather the progressive individual would be seen to be in personal possession of populationally defined characteristics such as race, class and gender. For a discussion of "possessive individualism" see Thomas S. Popkewitz, *A Political Sociology of Educational Reform: Power/Knowledge in Teaching, Teacher Education, and Research* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1991).

<sup>35</sup> Hamilton, *Towards a Theory of Schooling*, 116, endnote 11.

Under other historical circumstances, with a different definition of *class*, other related assumptions about developmental appropriateness and credentialing would also be revamped. So Hamilton's strategic history of the term is a valuable intellectual and political contribution to critical studies of education.

Hamilton's history is not offered as a recommendation for solving current educational problems. Rather, it is an example of a strategic deployment of presentism because it recognizes the inevitability of presentism, and it also uses a historical orientation to challenge current assumptions or orthodoxies<sup>36</sup> about education. Citing Richard Hofstadter, Cohen writes:

Historians are caught between their desire to count in the world and their desire to understand it, between their desire to do good and to do good historical scholarship, between their desire to create a historically sound past and to create a usable past for the present. The problem is that such desires are at odds with each other<sup>37</sup>.

Hamilton's text manages to be both historically sound and usable for the present precisely because it acknowledges the inevitability of a presentist perspective on historical events, and uses that inevitability to forge eye-opening analyses of the past.

#### 4. Rationalistic historiography versus strategic historiography: some political considerations

The previous sections were focused on the theoretical and analytical distinctions between rationalistic and strategic accounts of educational history. In this section, I focus on the political implications of different historiographical approaches. I argue that rationalistic accounts of educational history tend to be deterministic in so far as their imposed relations between past and present are isomorphic with the presumed relation between present and future. Moreover, rationalistic accounts reiterate existing hierarchies of privilege by essentialising the meanings of terms. In contrast, strategic presentism tends to destabilise existing power relations through more contingent and less certain explanations of relations. Further, assumptions about education get unpacked and denaturalised, making its components susceptible to critical analysis.

##### 4.1. Rationalistic approaches

As we have seen, some educational histories rationalise relations between events as an unfolding of timeless and universal truths (e.g. divine prophecy; cause and effect; dialectic; progress). In the process, the accounts of curricular change tend to essentialise meanings.

For example, current liberal and critical modernist histories of curriculum generally inscribe metaphysical assumptions through the use of concepts like *reason* and *freedom*, and the belief in a humanist agent with the capability of resistance. Both of these assumptions depend on *essentialisation* of concepts to explain history. In the case of Pulliam and Van Patten's history text, the teleology of progress is possible only because *reason* and *freedom*

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<sup>36</sup> See Cohen's *Challenging Orthodoxies*.

<sup>37</sup> Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies*, 56.

are understood as rationalistic, essential qualities that change only in magnitude over time. The way to chart the progress of *freedom* is to assume that there is such a thing whose continuous development can be recorded. Most significantly, with the teleology of progress driving their historical narrative, it becomes inevitable that current curricular practices will be regarded as allowing more personal freedom than previous practices did; their assumption of progress does not allow for the possibility that we may have “gone backwards” and become less free. From this historiographical perspective, current educational practices that discipline and normalise people in new ways will not fit into the progressive narrative, and so will be rendered invisible and unexamined.

The assumed rational relation between past and present events carries over as the assumed rational relation between present and future events; the future becomes predictable on the basis of relations in the past (teleology or coherent linear time). This assumption of teleology suggests a degree of determinism in predicting the future. I do not claim that analyses that deny their own presentistic tendencies are wrong. Rather, I argue that they inscribe a particular analytic point of view with particular theoretical consequences. One consequence is that histories that assume continuity limit possibilities for the future according to what follows continuously from the past and the present. If a historical analysis assumes that a sequence of events in history could be explained as predictable causes and effects, then it follows that events in the future ought to be predictable in terms of the same patterns of causes and effects. Therefore, in continuous-narrative histories, possibilities for the future are theoretically limited to what can be regarded as continuous with the relation between the past and the present. This constraint is problematic for an emancipatory agenda because untold possibilities for the future are theoretically foreclosed. Histories that assume continuity tend to foreclose the future possibility of radical change from present social relations<sup>38</sup>.

Most liberal educational discourse today inscribes the theoretical consequences of rationalising history, namely, it tends to advocate continued progress and evolution. The resultant attempts to initiate reform in education are thwarted in so far as the assumption of historical continuity sustains existing social relations and power structures. Liberal visions of the future resemble visions of the past. When liberal histories advocate that we go “back to basics” or “reclaim our humanity”, they invoke a “golden age”. This tendency has sometimes led to the characterisation of histories as expressions of nostalgia<sup>39</sup>. In any case, liberal assumptions of historical continuity work against the possibility of change. Therefore, studies of curricular change that impose or assume rationalised explanations for change - like “progress” - may limit the possibilities for the future according to what it was possible to think in the (culturally specific) past or present.

Further, rationalising accounts place the educational historian (or other intellectual) in the position of oracle (great portender?) vis-à-vis the future possibilities for education. For example, alluding to Cornel West’s *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*, Dennis Carlson writes, “progressives have a responsibility to speak in a ‘prophetic voice’ and engage in ‘prophetic visioning’”<sup>40</sup>. Carlson aims to make “progressivism more attuned to a rapidly

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<sup>38</sup> Remarkably, it was Marx whose theories told us that true freedom could not be envisioned by those who were not yet free.

<sup>39</sup> For a discussion comparing the attitude of nostalgia with that of imagination, see Stephen E. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Dennis Carlson, “Finding a Voice, and Losing Our Way?,” *Educational Theory* 48, no. 4 (1998): 548.

shifting cultural terrain and more capable of articulating a powerful new voice - one that leads to a 'progressive restoration' in American education and culture<sup>41</sup>". By assuming this role, the modernist historian assumes a peculiar place in relation to history and in relation to subjectivity. That is, if history is theorised in terms of dialectical reasoning, continuity and/or teleology, then that same history cannot account for changes in who has power unless they appeal to some extra-historic mechanism. In Carlson's account, it is the autonomous resisting agent - in this case the critical intellectual - who can move history. The intellectual must assume a position outside of history in order to "resist" dominant forces. This relation suggests that a theory of history that rests on rationalistic explanations of historical change requires autonomous (ahistoric) agency<sup>42</sup>.

## 4.2. Strategic approaches

In contrast, strategic approaches to understanding change that do not assume such rational relations over time have other consequences. Historicising approaches to accounts of curricular change explain events as particular to a time and place, and strategically presentistic accounts take the inevitable effects of current perspectives into account. Events are assumed to be exemplary of a specific historical moment, having no necessary or rational relation to events that came before or afterwards, in other words, educational phenomena are produced by circumstances of historical contingency.

Presentism as a critical strategy may be useful on two grounds. First, strategic presentism does not embed the predictive theoretical mechanisms of continuity that constrain historical and future possibilities. A strategically presentistic approach allows a historical analysis to un-determine future possibilities - to challenge orthodoxies<sup>43</sup>. This is a departure from progressive histories that tend to paint a picture of a better future (or a golden past) as a means of offering "solutions". Rationalistic histories seek to formalize regular and predictable relations that are essentialised, meaning precisely not historically contingent. Unlike rationalising accounts, strategic arguments seek to explain that current circumstances did not arise teleologically as inevitable, necessary, natural or predictable effects of previous circumstances. Strategic presentism construes the present as mutable instead of fixed. By allusion, assumptions that seemed solid melt into air. Analytically speaking, then, historical contingency avoids the theoretical trap of determinism.

Strategically presentist historiography incorporates an orientation that deliberately uses the lenses and perspectives of the present in order to bring current perspectives into focus.

When present assumptions are examined in relation to various historical contexts, those assumptions loosen their reins on thought. Since presentism is unavoidable, our presentistic lenses ought to become objects of our critical examination<sup>44</sup>. In this way, the

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 553.

<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, any possibility of emancipation requires the intervention of the critical intellectual in order to write the autonomous agent into theory

<sup>43</sup> See Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies*.

<sup>44</sup> This proposed vantage point is also inevitably shaped by a presentistic perspective. As they say: It's turtles all the way down.

limits of what it is possible to think can be approached. Herein lies the critical potential of an approach of strategic presentism.

Finally, strategic accounts displace the historian/intellectual from the position of vanguard, and they open up more diverse sites for investigation and untold possibilities for change. The sense of control in rationalistic accounts of change comes from the belief that one can predict what is going to happen and, with proper planning, one can anticipate problems and take proper precautions. Ian Hacking calls this “the taming of chance<sup>45</sup>”. In contrast, more strategic accounts of educational history do not inscribe the ideal of the intellectual historian as prophet; they do not assume it is the intellectual’s job to take control of the situation. In this way, historicising accounts embody a definition of democracy that assumes contributions from widely dispersed and diverse constituencies.

## 5. Conclusion

It’s not a defect of [history and archaeology] to find their point of departure in our own actuality. (Michel Foucault<sup>46</sup>)

When reading, writing and teaching educational history, it is fruitful to examine the extent to which that history inscribes teleology, progress or other rationalistic mechanisms. If the history inscribes progress or rationalises its objects of study, then it may inadvertently prescribe conservatism and foreclose possibilities for change. Engaging in such histories may also serve to reiterate the very premises or ways of thinking that the history purports to undo. On the other hand, when reading accounts of education that historicise the events and terms, then it is useful to examine the language and practices that render something “reasonable” in its own time. In this way, strategic presentism can help point out unintended dimensions of historiography. As Cohen writes:

The new cultural historiography provides a recognition that there are other ways to be relevant and useful to the profession: useful in challenging orthodoxies in education, raising questions about ‘solutions’ in education, providing historical contexts for critical thinking about the present moment in education, and helping to make our colleagues, our students, and the general public more sophisticated consumers of history<sup>47</sup>.

Strategic accounts can offer a perspective that highlights the diverse technologies (i.e., languages, practices and ways of thinking) and the density of repetitions in language, reason and performance that serve to support the status quo. When educational history is written with present assumptions in mind, then educational practices may become less naturalised, less reified and more susceptible to study. Moreover, when education is analysed as the product of multifarious historical influences, then accounts of educational change are less determined by the oracular skills of the historian, and more open to multiple and diffuse sites of intervention and change.

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<sup>45</sup> Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>46</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Order of Things,” in *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961-1984*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 14-15.

<sup>47</sup> Cohen, *Challenging Orthodoxies*, 27-28.

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**Notes on contributor**

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