

An International Brotherhood of Whigs: Nineteenth Century School Reformers in the United States and Prussia

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That the example of Prussia has played a crucial role in the development of public schools in the United States has long been a commonplace among historians of education.¹ We have read a great deal of the many Americans and foreigners who reported on their visits to Prussian schools and whose accounts, like the 1834 *Report on the State of Public Instruction in Prussia* by the Frenchman Victor Cousin, were eagerly discussed in the United States.² It is quite apparent that American school reformers regarded the Prussian system as exemplary. They were most impressed by the thoroughness with which Prussian administrators supervised the training of teachers and the performance of individual schools. State direction and supervision of public schooling, it seemed to many Americans, was a Prussian specialty that might with profit be introduced into the United States. It was no hyperbole when David Tyack wrote that the defenders of the district system decried the reformers' drive to centralize school governance on the state level as associated with 'Prussian autocracy'.³ Americans realized that parental influence and choice, much more easily asserted in the context of community and district control, was to have a hard time to prevail once decisions were made in state capitals.

If one asks, as surely one must, how it was possible that schoolmen and citizens in republican America could have hoped to improve their educational systems by looking toward monarchical Prussia, one must consider the vigorous partisan debates between Democrats and Whigs that agitated the American people during the years of Jacksonian democracy. While Jacksonian Democrats generally favored free public education, they believed in schooling by and for common men and women on the local level without interference from outsiders. They had no love for intellectuals or learned scholars. The school reformers, on the other hand, for the most part associated with the Whig party, looked with horror at the self-serving individualism and insistence on local self-determination widespread among a rural population which, for the most part, favored the Democratic party. The Whiggish reformers upheld the duty of the well brought-up to spread morals and education among the less favored. For

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inspiration and examples they had, willy-nilly, to look outside the borders of the United States. They found their counterparts in the members of Prussia's humanistically educated elite, many of whom served as Prussia's *Beamten*. Both the American school reformers and the Prussian school administrators belonged to an international brotherhood of Whigs, men who firmly believed in the inevitability of progress a nation could attain if its people were well schooled and guided by men of superior knowledge, warm hearts, and refined tastes.⁴

In their respective societies these Whigs saw themselves as enlightened liberals in their social views and as conservative defenders of their respective political order. They expressed their convictions in the language of paternalistic *noblesse oblige*, a language understood as easily by the middle-class reformers of democratic America as by the aristocratic bureaucrats of monarchical Prussia or France. Prussia's Whigs comprised both aristocratic government bureaucrats and members of the 'educated bourgeoisie'.⁵ While they endorsed revolutions provided they lay safely in the past, they promoted expanded schooling for the people as a preferable alternative. As they stoutly defended the established order of state and church, they praised education for the opportunities it gave to talented and deserving individuals to rise within the framework of social classes and orders. At every social level, they held, educated individuals would contribute to the country's prosperity and security. American Whigs did not carry their class-consciousness as openly on their sleeves as did their Prussian confreres. They had begun their careers as moralistic educational missionaries and, after mid-century, turned into educational professionals.⁶ As such they were not averse to modernization and were by no means stand-pat conservatives. They viewed anarchy as the worst of all apparent evils and believed it could be checked by popular education under the guidance of the enlightened elements of society. Common schooling, they held, would slowly but irresistibly usher in the ultimate triumph of democratic forms of government everywhere.

The American school reformers shared the German administrators' confidence in education as the answer to threats of social unrest even though they knew that Prussia's leaders and people were far from endorsing the principles of republican representation and democratic participation in state and local government. They appeared to believe that Prussia's pedagogically progressive school administration could persevere and eventually soften the repressive features of Prussian political life. They portrayed the heavy hand of government direction and supervision in Prussia as necessary and beneficial for the eventual growth of democracy. Besides, many of them endorsed the conservative social views of the German educators. They agreed with Victor Cousin, a French champion of

Prussia's schools, who saw wisdom in the Prussian administration's policy of restraining the educators' pedagogical enthusiasm. Horace Mann saw nothing amiss with the cooperation of church and state in Prussia and the inclusion of confessional religion in Prussia's schools. In the United States, where he did not have to deal with established churches, he promoted his own brand of non-sectarian Protestantism as a common religious philosophy and urged that the Bible be read by all the children in the common schools. On both sides of the Atlantic Whigs proposed an alliance of religion and education as the safest way to insure social stability.

Steeped in the teachings of American moral philosophers, the Massachusetts school reformers saw the Prussian school administrators and high government officials as admirable products of German humanistic *Bildung*. They were impressed by the spirit of scholarly discourse that characterized the communications and conversations among Prussia's ruling elite, and they were inclined to accept the Prussian predilection for equating administration and education and for portraying their monarchy as an 'educational state'.⁷ They appreciated and endorsed the ambivalence inherent in the Prussian efforts to encourage the country's pedagogues to be pedagogically progressive and, at the same time, to keep educational reforms within the bounds of class and caste. They recognized and accepted the introduction of public schooling as a balancing act between stimulating economic growth and preserving social stability.

Finally, in Massachusetts the common school reformers recognized similarities between their schools and those of Prussia. The state's decentralized district schools suggested a comparison with the small village schools of Prussia, even though there were obvious differences in the preparation of their teachers. But if the Massachusetts school reformers were to succeed in adopting the small teacher seminars of Prussia — which, in fact, they did with the introduction of the state normal schools in 1839 — would they not also provide the needed competent teachers and thus stem the threat of juvenile anarchy in the rural hinterlands of the state? A city like Boston might get along reasonably well with its more differentiated school system, its primary teachers, and its masters of grammar, high, and Latin schools. But for the problems of the state's rural common schools Prussia seemed to offer a solution.

There were, to be sure, occasional dissenting voices raised even among the school reformers, voices that recognized and warned of the repressive sides of Prussia's school politics.

In his report on elementary schooling in Europe Calvin Stowe, New England college professor, wrote in 1837 that the reforms promoted by European monarchies were designed to unite military force with moral power, and that there was 'in these countries a growing disregard for the

forms of free government, provided the *substance* be enjoyed in the security and prosperity of the people'.⁸ Horace Mann complained in 1844 about the 'half-barbarous conditions' of the mechanical and useful arts in Prussia and 'the sluggish and unenterprising' character of the Prussian people. The early school leaving age, the absence of school libraries, the lack of books for juveniles and young adults, and press censorship were to blame, but most of all the government's refusal to allow the people to exercise their skills and utilize their knowledge:

Government steps in to take care of the subject, almost as much as the subject takes care of his cattle. The subject has no officers to choose, no inquiry into the character or eligibleness [sic] of candidates to make, no vote to give. He has no laws to enact or abolish His sovereign is born to him. The laws are made for him He is directed alike how he must obey his king, and worship his God. The late Frederick William III's worst defect, [Mann concluded,] was his failure to redeem his promise of giving his subjects a Constitution.

Mann, nonetheless, kept his Whiggish faith and wrote confidently that the Prussian people 'will assert their right to a participation in their own government', and their new king, Frederick William IV, will 'through a peaceful revolution by knowledge save a fiery revolution by blood'.⁹ Mann, it turned out, was both right and wrong. In 1848 the Prussian people rose, yet their King opposed them and defeated that attempt.

One result of the failed revolution was that many of Prussia's liberal teachers crossed the Atlantic and arrived in the United States. There they came to see with their own eyes and to experience in their own lives the realities of American schooling. They had arrived with great expectations, having heard and read at home about the promises of a free public education system in a free, democratic country. They were to be disappointed. Much as they hated the repressiveness of their Prussian state school administration, in the United States they came to be equally distressed over the absence of what they considered a professionally respectable school system.¹⁰ One of its chief defects, they felt, was the unprofessional conduct of local school officials who, in disputes between taxpayers and teachers, most generally sided with their neighbors and refused to protect the teachers from criticism and harassment by parents.

The experiences and reactions of Wilhelm Wander sum up the teachers' story. In 1848 Wander, as spokesman for a Silesian teachers' organization, had challenged the Frankfurt National Assembly to create a common school system in all German states. In his speech he had pointed to the United States as an example and had quoted at length and approvingly from Horace Mann's 1844 report.¹¹ When he arrived in the States, he expected to find such a system in existence. But he found no evidence of it on the national level, and the state school systems, to the extent that they

existed, did not appear to him to function well. He was particularly upset with the few mediocre normal schools and the low pay for teachers:

The common schools of North America in many ways are no better and no worse than those in many parts of Germany, [he wrote], and the itinerant teachers of Hannover, the low-paid teacher-apprentices, and many other teachers would scarcely note the difference The German teacher will recognize that his profession does not flourish here. The country is too new; material concerns overshadow spiritual ones An uncared for system of education and a bountyfully thriving clericalism and Jesuitry are the two cancers of the otherwise magnificently flourishing republic.¹²

From a Prussian teacher's point of view, the state systems promoted by Horace Mann and the school reformers demonstrated noble intent but the district system of local control represented shabby reality.

The clericalism and the Jesuitry Wander decried call our attention to the German and American parochial schools that existed side-by-side with the public schools and permitted parents a choice of schooling for their children. Many German immigrants sent their children to these parochial schools out of traditional loyalty to their Lutheran-Evangelical or to their Catholic religion and because of their desire to preserve the German language. For many of them this was an act of choice made possible by the freedom prevailing in the United States. Also, as Juliane Jacobi-Dittrich concluded in her study of German schools in Wisconsin's rural areas, these German immigrant parents, accustomed to the confessional public schools of Prussia and other German states, did not assign great importance to the difference between public and parochial education.¹³ In America both types of schools exposed their children to religious instruction and Bible reading, but in the parochial schools parents could be assured that this instruction conformed to the creed of their confession. That churches in America were not state established but private institutions which people could join by their own free will likewise diminished any antagonistic feelings which immigrants might have had towards church-related schools.

Wilhelm Wander, however, did not see things this way. He looked upon the American scene as a Prussian professional teacher, not, as did so many of the German immigrants, as a parent or taxpayer. To him the Prussian system provided the model of how schools should be administered. This despite the system's repressiveness which, he expected, could be jettisoned in America. His political liberalism and his commitment to public education made him express his disapproval of parochial schooling in no uncertain terms. The earlier German immigrants, he wrote, had been rigidly orthodox in their religious views and dominated by their priests. They supported only denominational schools. Their choice was no choice, but submission to clerical direction. In addition, he commented, more

recent arrivals not only favored parochial schools. They also appeared to care more for their stomachs than for their souls. 'Used to compulsory education laws in Germany', he explained, these German immigrants, 'now that such compulsion was removed, shorten school attendance as much as possible.' Many were content to send their children from age eight to ten to an American school to learn as much English as was necessary for their business.¹⁴ Any schooling beyond that they regarded as superfluous. They had no commitment to any public school system, whether German or American. All that concerned them were considerations of private advantage. Wander made it clear that he was impressed neither with the country's public nor with its German or American parochial schools. Nor could he accept the power which, as he saw it, uneducated and self-centered country-folk wielded over the schools. The professional schoolman in him balked at the claims of parents to choose freely the scholastic fate of their children.

Wander had correctly pointed to the absence of widespread popular commitment to public schooling in the United States at mid-century. Compared with the government supervised and directed Prussian school system, however great its insufficiencies, the American state systems lagged behind. What mattered to most Americans was not whether their state could boast of a public school system but whether the school in their neighborhood responded to what they desired for their children. Thus even American educators did not always match Wander's single-minded commitment to public schooling. In nineteenth century Wisconsin, for example, urban schoolmen and teachers easily switched from public to private schooling. The American born John McMynn began his teaching career as principal of public high schools in Kenosha and in Racine, then became a Regent of the state university, then agent for the state normal schools, and then state superintendent of public instruction. He concluded his career as principal of the private Racine Academy. The move to a private school after a life-time of service to public education does not appear to have been a problem for him. The German-born Peter Engelmann, ardent promoter of public education in Wisconsin, nonetheless founded the private German-English Academy in Milwaukee.¹⁵ To be sure, the urban educators were concerned primarily with the academic standards of Wisconsin's schools, whereas the German immigrants in Wisconsin's rural areas chose German parochial schools for religious reasons and because of their desire to preserve the German language. But neither group felt that loyalty to public schooling should prevent them from teaching in or sending their children to private schools.

As was true in Prussia, the differences in the availability of schooling of different kinds were great in the United States. In both countries there

existed a marked gap in quality between schools in urban and rural areas. Rudolph Dulong, another of the Prussian observers, noticed this in 1866 and praised the superintendents in America's large cities for their well-informed intelligence and their commitment to reforms. But he also noted the widespread lack of pedagogical expertise among the rural teachers.¹⁶ He and others ascribed that lack of expertise to what they viewed as the inadequacies in teacher training. Badly or untrained teachers were prevalent in the countryside, their ignorance of Pestalozzian principles of pedagogy was apparent, and the emphasis they placed on memorization was appalling.¹⁷ Why could not American normal schools, introduced after the Prussian model, bring relief to the countryside?

The answer points to the very different views Prussian educational administrators held of their teacher seminaries and American taxpayers, parents, and students had of their normal schools. The Prussian government's reaction to the attempted revolution of 1848 had been to declare Pestalozzianism, the progressive-liberal pedagogy of Prussia's reformers, a heresy. The ministry prohibited the instructors in the teacher seminaries from preparing their students through the liberal arts for teaching in the advanced urban primary schools. Instead, the regulations stated that the task of the teacher seminaries was to prepare male teachers for one-room elementary schools in the countryside. For that purpose a college preparatory education was unnecessary and a basic education in the 4 Rs (the fourth being religion) sufficient. The result was that the graduates of teacher seminaries, inadequately educated as they were, dutifully performed the country teaching jobs they were meant to fill.

In the United States, by contrast, parents and taxpaying citizens demanded choice for their children's education, and instructors and students of the normal schools were only too happy to oblige. Their schools offered an education suited for more than a narrowly defined elementary school teaching career. As a result, the Massachusetts normal schools of the 1840s, 1850s, and 1860s turned into vocational training centers for many diverse occupations. They allowed the state's young people, both male and female, to escape the rigors of farming. In Illinois, where the state normal schools played the roles of community colleges, state universities, high schools and academy substitutes, President Hewett of the Normal University admitted in 1871 that a majority of the school's graduates had not devoted their lives to teaching.¹⁸ They had found more attractive job offers in business and offices. In both states, these had been opened up for them by the normal schools' liberal arts curriculum. The low pay of a teaching job and better paying opportunities elsewhere had left the demand for well-trained teachers unfilled.

There were, then, at mid-century, similarities and differences between the educational systems of Prussia and the United States. In both countries the process of establishing and strengthening a public school system had gained momentum, though in rural areas the one-room elementary school was still the dominant educational institution. In the cities of both countries a variety of post-elementary schools had come into being, schools that responded to demands for vocational and business training as well as for college and university preparation. But there were differences as well. No state school administration in the United States approximated in any form the strict and repressive supervision exercised by the Prussian authorities. Though religious influence was apparent in many American schools, members of locally elected school boards, not *ex officio* clergymen, supervised teachers. If some of them were priests or pastors, they fulfilled their supervisory function as board members, not in their capacity as clerics. The German teachers also acknowledged that America's tax-supported common schools were generally, though not always and entirely, free of fees. They applauded the separation of state and church and the fact that school curricula, particularly in the natural sciences, bore a closer direct relation to the demands of everyday life than had been true of the classical studies in Germany.

To the German teachers in mid-nineteenth century America, local control — the freedom it permitted taxpayers to direct their schools and the choices it allowed parents to make for their children's schooling — was, beyond question, the most outstanding, and also the most troublesome, characteristic of American schools. The absence of repressive state government direction of their professional lives and the absence of clerical control over their daily activities embodied to them the essence of American freedom. This they appreciated most of all. But as one of them reported, local control, exercised by their neighbors, 'precludes state concentration of school organization, administration, and supervision, and this causes progress to be slow and troublesome'.¹⁹ It could and frequently did mean arbitrary and capricious interference of laymen in the teachers' work and violated their sense of professional autonomy and responsibility. When, as happened more than once, teachers witnessed that 'a sixteen-year-old-girl from a country school [had been] hired to teach by an uncle who was the elected school district clerk', they felt betrayed in their professional pride. When, as one superintendent once wrote, '[t]he record shows that most rural school districts simply wanted the cheapest [school] they could get, and many voters came to the annual school election meetings as recalcitrant taxpayers, not as concerned parents',²⁰ they saw their contributions to the community undervalued and underappreciated. The immigrant teachers could not help but wonder whether the

administrative state control they had come to detest in Prussia as repression and had fled from had not also been the strongest guarantee of their professional integrity. Now they had traded it in for the benefits and troubles of local control. In Prussia, government administrators had ruled over them; in the United States they were subject to the whims of parents and taxpayers. Had they but exchanged one evil for another?

NOTES

1. See Henry Geitz, Jürgen Heideking and Jürgen Herbst, eds., *German Influences on Education in the United States to 1917* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) and the earlier John Paul Carter, 'German Influences on the American Common School Movement', Ph. D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1979, as well as John A. Walz, *German Influence in American Education and Culture* (Philadelphia, PA: Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, 1936).
2. See 'Note' in Henry Barnard's *American Journal of Education*, XVI (March 1866), 89-92, which is appended to a reprint of an 1835 report on Prussian teacher seminars by a German physician, Dr. Heinrich Julius of Hamburg. The 'Note' mentions John Quincy Adams, *Letters from Silesia* (London, 1805); Henry E. Dwight, *Travels in the North of Germany in the Years 1825 and 1826* (New York: Carvill, 1829); Victor Cousin, *Report on the State of Public Instruction in Prussia* (London: Effingham Wilson, Royal Exchange, 1834), published in New York in 1835; William C. Woodbridge, 'Seminaries for Teachers in Prussia', *American Annals*, I, part II (June 1831), 253-257, and 'Seminary for Female Teachers', *American Annals*, I, part II (August 1831), 341-346; a lecture by Eliza Robbins based on Cousin's report and published in Philadelphia in 1836; a series of lectures by the Rev. Mr. Charles Brooks in Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and New Jersey from 1835 to 1838; Calvin E. Stowe, *Report on Elementary Public Instruction in Europe* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1838), and others. Summaries of some of these reports are available in Edgar W. Knight, ed., *Reports on European Education by John Griscom, Victor Cousin, Calvin E. Stowe* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1930), and Robert Ulich, *A Sequence of Educational Influences* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1935).
3. David B. Tyack, *The One Best System: A History of American Urban Education* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p.34.
4. For my concept of Whiggism or Whiggery I have relied on Daniel Walker Howe, *The Political Culture of the American Whigs* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), particularly on the book's Introduction, pp.1-10. I am aware of the problems in using the English-American term 'Whig' to describe a mentality that I see as shared by Americans and continental Europeans. I trust that the term will be found useful to highlight the elements common to Prussian and American educators.
5. For the 'educated bourgeoisie' and its relationship to the concept of professionalism in Anglo-American and continental European usage see Werner Conze's and Jürgen Kocka's introduction to their volume, *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert*, part I: *Bildungssystem und Professionalisierung in*

- internationalen Vergleichen* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985), pp.9–26; the German-American comparison is particularly well brought out in Harry Liebersohn, 'The American Academic Community before the First World War: A Comparison with the German 'Bildungsbürgertum'', in *ibid.*, pp.163–185.
6. See Paul H. Mattingly, *The Classless Profession: American Schoolmen in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp.xii–xiii.
 7. On the 'professorial' character of Prussian administration in the 'educational state' see Reinhart Koselleck, 'Staat und Gesellschaft in Preußen 1815–1818', *Staat und Gesellschaft im deutschen Vormärz 1815–1848*, ed. Werner Conze (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1962), p.92.
 8. Quoted in Knight, ed., *Reports on European Education*, p.256.
 9. In Massachusetts Board of Education, *Seventh Annual Report of the Secretary of the Board* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1844), pp.155–160.
 10. See Bettina Goldberg, 'The Forty-Eighters and the School System in America: The Theory and Practice of Reform', in *The German Forty-Eighters in the United States*, ed. by Charlotte L. Brancaforte (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 207–208.
 11. Karl Friedrich Wilhelm Wander, 'Die alte Volksschule und die Neue', and 'Aufruf an Deutschlands Lehrer', in *Der Kampf um die Schule: Bildungspolitische und Pädagogische Schriften*, vol. II (Berlin: Volk und Wissen, 1979), pp.35–36, 50–52. See also 'Beschlüsse der 1. Versammlung des Allgemeinen Deutschen Lehrervereins in Eisenach (1848)', in Berthold Michael und Heinz-Hermann Schepp, *Politik und Schule von der Französischen Revolution bis zur Gegenwart*, vol. I (Frankfurt: Athenäum Fischer Taschenbuch, 1973), pp.384–385.
 12. Wander, 'Was hat der nach Amerika auswandernde Lehrer dort als solcher zu erwarten?', in *Der Kampf um die Schule*, II, 176–178, 182.
 13. Juliane Jacobi-Dittrich, 'Deutsche Schulen' in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika: *Historisch-vergleichende Studie zum Unterrichtswesen im Mittleren Westen (Wisconsin 1840–1900)* (München: Minerva Publikation, 1988), p.136.
 14. Wander, 'Schulwesen in den Vereinigten Staaten Nordamerikas', and 'Soziale Zustände Nordamerikas', in *Der Kampf um die Schule*, II, 172, 173, 178, 180, and 182.
 15. See my *The Once and Future School: Three Hundred and Fifty Years of American Secondary Education* (New York: Routledge, 1966), pp.80–81.
 16. Rudolph Dulon, *Aus Amerika über Schule, deutsche Schule, amerikanische Schule und deutsch-amerikanische Schule* (Leipzig und Heidelberg: C. F. Winter, 1866), pp.236, 238–239, 245–251, 254.
 17. See Bettina Goldberg, 'The Forty-Eighters', pp.207–210.
 18. See my *And Sadly Teach: Teacher Education and Professionalization in American Culture* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp.84, 116.
 19. Henry H. Fick, 'Warum kann die amerikanische Volksschule nicht leisten, was die deutsche leistet?' *Sammlung pädagogischer Vorträge*, ed. Wilhelm Meyer-Markau, XV,2 (1905), p.6, reprinted in *Retrospektiven in Sachen Bildung*, ed. Elmar Lechner, Reihe 10, # 10 (Klagenfurt, 1998).
 20. Quoted in Robert C. Nesbit, *Urbanization and Industrialization, 1873–1893: The History of Wisconsin*, vol. III (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1985), p.361.