

Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Campbell F. Scribner

A Is for Arson: A History of Vandalism in American Education

Cornell University Press, 2023. 240 pp.

In *A Is for Arson: A History of Vandalism in American Schools*, Campbell F. Scribner presents a well-researched and theoretically rich account of nearly two centuries of school vandalism across the United States, framing it as a historically and socially significant phenomenon. Organized chronologically, the book traces shifting patterns of destruction from the nineteenth century to the present, revealing how these acts often served as politically coherent expressions, forms of protest, cultural resistance, and identity formation. Rather than dismissing vandalism as mere mischief or irrationality, Scribner recasts it as a mode of engagement with institutions, authority, and selfhood. The result is a compelling historical narrative that challenges conventional understandings and repositions vandalism as a meaningful site of struggle and expression.

Scribner traces how interpretations of school vandalism have evolved, charting a shift from early moral panic to later frameworks rooted in psychological diagnosis and sociological theory. He links these shifts to broader institutional transformations, especially in public education, showing how dominant discourses repeatedly depoliticized student unrest. In the process, they reinforced a security-oriented approach to discipline, privileging surveillance and exclusion over genuine repair.

Part I showcases Scribner's command of archival material. He treats vandalism not as delinquency but as speech from below, from the marginalized, writing that "broken windows and burned-out buildings are often demands for justice...not random destruction but a rational and implicitly political bid for recognition" (3). These early chapters trace vandalism from the antebellum period through the Progressive Era, highlighting how many acts—especially those before 1890—were driven by clear political grievances.

In his work, Scribner, drawing on Foucault, portrays schools as a battleground where the state's power, community beliefs, and individual freedoms clash. Within these conflicts, vandalism often became a symbolic act of defiance against the very goals of education. Scribner illustrates this by detailing how rural families torched schoolhouses to push back against forced schooling, and how white supremacists attacked Black schools during Reconstruction to uphold racial segregation. He argues these acts were not random but deliberate challenges to educational policy and local control. As Scribner puts it, "Illicit markings on school buildings... not only call into

question the imposition of normative power but give a sense of the personalities that it attempted to efface" (8).

By the late nineteenth century, Scribner suggests, vandalism was redefined as a psychological problem. Between 1890 and 1930, psychiatric and psychological frameworks recast student resistance as mental illness, disproportionately pathologizing immigrant, working-class, and poor youth. This shift stripped vandalism of its political significance and legitimized school authority as a form of medical expertise. Fascinatingly, Scribner cites the rise of the fire insurance industry as contributing to this reframing by encouraging schools to view vandalism as a financial liability. Through this economic lens, schools began to prioritize property protection over their students' well-being. Rather than responding to unrest with dialogue, institutions adopted surveillance and risk management as default strategies.

Part II turns to the mid-twentieth century, when sociological theory and discourses on juvenile delinquency influenced education policy. Scribner shows how school personnel increasingly viewed student protest as a form of criminality, particularly in urban communities. Amid school desegregation and deepening inequality, many students—especially youth of colour—damaged school property to protest racist curricula, unsafe buildings, and underfunding. Scribner interprets these acts as “a rejection of unequal conditions” (77), not as random deviance but as targeted resistance. He critiques the rise of zero-tolerance policies and surveillance technologies, which reframed systemic grievances as individual failure. These shifts, he maintains, helped solidify the security state, in which schools began to look more like institutions that functioned more to control students than to educate them.

Part II also offers one of the book's best contributions: a reinterpretation of vandalism as a developmental and expressive phenomenon. Drawing on theorists such as Jack Katz and Stanley Cohen, Scribner examines acts ranging from graffiti and desk carvings to window-breaking as forms of symbolic communication. These behaviours, he suggests, form a kind of “parallel curriculum” through which young people test boundaries, assert autonomy, and construct identity (111). This reframing pushes against educational models that equate discipline with learning. Scribner instead calls on educators to consider what student misbehaviour reveals about life inside the institution—and how it might serve a pedagogical function.

The book's most abstract yet thought-provoking section is Part III, where Scribner introduces the idea of the “historical sublime” (150). Drawing on Burkean aesthetics, he suggests that some acts of vandalism exceed rational explanations and point to deeper cultural rifts. Through a series of short case studies—what he calls shards—Scribner revisits enigmatic episodes of vandalism, from the explosion of an eighteenth-century schoolhouse to a TikTok trend known as a “devious lick” (160). These moments, though challenging to decipher individually, surface enduring themes of alienation, absurdity, and collective resistance. Rather than offering neat interpretations, Scribner asks readers to reflect on what these moments suggest about our educational and social order.

Methodologically, *A Is for Arson* impresses with its interdisciplinary breadth. Scribner resists the temptation to explain vandalism through a single theoretical lens.

He moves fluidly across historical, psychological, sociological, and philosophical perspectives, drawing heavily on Marxist and Foucauldian thought. Marxist theory helps him trace how property and discipline intersect, revealing how student misbehaviour can act as a critique of capitalist structures. Foucault's concept of agonism—a reciprocal struggle between power and freedom—proves central to Scribner's argument, which suggests that attempts to enforce order inevitably provoke resistance.

While the book is persuasive and intellectually rigorous, some areas could benefit from further elaboration. Although Scribner addresses race and class, a more sustained intersectional analysis considering gender would further strengthen the argument. Likewise, his critique of school securitization could be deepened through engagement with alternative models of discipline. Still, these gaps do not detract from the book's overall contributions.

In a moment marked by increased surveillance, racialized discipline, and youth activism, *A Is for Arson* is both timely and necessary. Scribner challenges educators, scholars, and policymakers to rethink the meanings we assign to student resistance. What might we learn, he asks, if we read school destruction not as a breakdown of education but as a call to reimagine it? What would it mean to treat youth dissent as a source of knowledge rather than a threat to order? This book offers no easy answers—but in doing so, it opens space for deeper reflection and, perhaps, even transformation.

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Katsi'tsakwas Ellen Gabriel with Sean Carleton

When the Pine Needles Fall: Indigenous Acts of Resistance

Between the Lines, 2024. 304 pp.

When the Pine Needles Fall: Indigenous Acts of Resistance offers a compelling first-hand glimpse into the untold narrative surrounding the summer of 1990 when Canada's violent siege of Kanehsatàke and Kahnawà:ke shook the nation. As Sean Carleton explains in the preface, the book is written in conversational style, modelled after Staughton Lynd and Andrej Grubic's *Wobblies and Zapatistas* (2008), by offering an intergenerational exchange between himself, as a historian and allied settler scholar, and the lived experiences of Katsi'tsakwas Ellen Gabriel, known to many as the spokesperson behind the barricades. Extending some of the themes from *Rehearsals for Living* (2023) by Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Robyn Maynard, Sean Carleton engages in conversation with Ellen Gabriel, focusing on her lifelong work within anti-capitalist organizing and resistance movements. This conversation draws the reader into a humbling and invigorating exchange between the two, as readers think alongside Sean Carleton, who synthesizes the experiences shared by Ellen Gabriel with the work of other Indigenous intellectuals. The citational practices of Carleton and lived