

— REVIEW ESSAYS / ESSAIS CRITIQUES —

BRIAN SIMON'S POLITICAL HISTORY OF ENGLISH EDUCATION

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Brian Simon. *Education and the Social Order 1940-1990.* London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1991. Pp. 646. £39.95.

For many people, in Britain and internationally, the history of education in England means Brian Simon. His considerable output, both historical and polemical around policy issues in education, has attracted consistent attention, and nothing more so than what is now his four-volume "Studies in the History of Education." *Education and the Social Order*, covering the period from the beginning of World War II, brings to a close a monumental effort not just to put a pattern on the history of education in England (only marginally in Wales, and not at all in Scotland and Northern Ireland), but also to change the way in which that history is conceived. The first volume, covering the period 1780-1870, appeared in 1960 when I had just begun my own research on Owenism and early nineteenth-century social movements, and I remember clearly the excitement with which I read the book, and the exasperation it provoked simply because there wasn't *enough* of it. It followed so many interrelated themes at so many levels of "education" that it had to leave many of them incomplete. It was a pioneering book that did not so much attempt explicitly to redefine "education," as Lawrence Cremin consistently attempted to do in the United States, as to direct attention to the political and social movements in which educational activities, more narrowly conceived than by Cremin, could be located. What that first volume, and in different ways subsequent volumes, sought to do was establish how, amidst currents of social and political conflict, educational ideas, commitments, institutions, and changes were shaped and reshaped.

There had been earlier attempts to move historical analysis of education in this direction, for example by historian A.E. Dobbs in the 1920s, and by sociologists and others, including Fred Clarke in the 1940s and R.F. Young (the latter in historical introductions to Consultative Committee reports on education in the 1920s and 1930s). These were important direction pointers, but they did

not have the research base and breadth of reference that Simon established. What Simon began essentially to do with the 1960 volume, having already established the *contemporary* roots of his historical interest most clearly in *Intelligence Testing and the Comprehensive School* in 1953, was to move the history of education decisively away from the limited foundations on which it mainly rested. His purpose, and his achievement, was to widen the search for educational action beyond the narrow interest in administration and legislation, institutions and disembodied ideas that had dominated the relatively slender literature. He sought also to establish how radical and popular social and political movements in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries became major contexts for educational aspiration and action. He drew extensively on Chartist, trade union, and other publications and records to identify forms of educational vision and activity, to bring popular and working-class action inescapably into explanations of change that had often been interpreted in terms of discrete legislative acts or ideas. He therefore reopened judgement on the major, formal stepping-stones in educational history—the parliamentary decision, the institutional foundation, the new concept or ideological shift—and their implementation or adaptation or abandonment. Much of the analysis was to remain intact; some was soon to be open to question in the light of important new developments in the histories of, for example, the labour movement, religion, and education itself. But Simon had provoked interest and set the pace.

In 1960, and then in the second volume in 1965, which took the analysis from 1870 to 1920, and in the third volume in 1974, covering 1920-40, Simon was situating education in a Marxist scrutiny of what he saw as the principal political and social contexts in which explanations of educational ideas, institutions and system-building, and alternative purposes and policies, and opposition, could be located. Emphases changed across the volumes as industrial and urban contexts changed, as the roles of the state and its agencies, social organization, and organized labour changed. The emphasis moved from radical movements to the labour movement, from the agendas of small-scale or loosely organized educational efforts to national pressure groups, parliamentary action, and counter-attacks on a solidifying system of class-based educational provision. Simon's focus and purpose in the second and third volumes moved more specifically from a socio-political to a political emphasis. In the second volume the social context of working-class experience remained clearly visible, with a range of emphases which included working-class radicalism and socialism, industrial action, youth movements, and war, but the range of complex educational development was beginning to dictate Simon's direction of attention—universities, grammar and public schools, education codes, commissions and Acts, pupil teachers and adult education, school meals and medical inspection, and the detailed backgrounds of educational reform. It was in these arenas that Simon found "education" pursued and explained its forms and derivations. If the diverse *experience* of education was becoming less of a focus, it was because the diverse educational representations of industrial, capitalist, urban Britain were

dictating the agenda in this period—their explanations being sought in different, more official locations.

Simon's third volume focuses intensively on the political framework of educational debate, change, hesitation, and reaction between the wars. The dominant theme is the Conservative agenda whose real content Simon found in Cabinet papers. The landmarks are committee and official reports, party manifestoes, and parliamentary debate and action. The educational battlefields are dominated by streaming, selection for secondary (grammar school) education and psychometry, pressures for and against reorganization. In one sense the second and third volumes reappraise the political dimensions of education in the late nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, in another sense they become confined in a more systematic search for formal political explanations of public educational events. Simon narrows the focus in order to strengthen the political message—particularly regarding the long conservative, and Conservative, defence of selective secondary education. Some of the changed focus was dictated by the events under scrutiny, some by Simon's chosen way of confronting this central issue. The sense of popular experience and forms of action diminishes in these two volumes, not just because industrial capitalism and the state has taken control in ways which demand different styles of analysis, but also because he is anxious to present the party political, governmental, parliamentary, organized oppositional, elements in the fight over a single dominant issue—selective secondary education. Through the journal *Forum*, through other writing—alone and in collaboration—Simon was from the 1950s a formidable protagonist of the comprehensive school and opponent of selection at eleven. The issue is central to his political and scholarly commitment. *Education and the Social Order* is the capstone to a particular kind of political history of education, and the overall title of the series, "Studies in the History of Education," does not sufficiently indicate that there are strict, self-imposed limits on the range that the studies have been prepared to cover significantly in particularly the previous and this volume. It is at this point that I have to combine admiration for what has been accomplished with disappointment at the interpretation both of "studies" and of "the social order." Secondary education—regarding selection, tripartite and comprehensive schools, and private education—was certainly the most visible educational issue in the political field during the period. It is difficult to see Simon's concern with the social order, however, other than as an oblique one. Its target is politics, the political order, the political manipulation of education. The dominant concern is with what he at one point calls the "tortuous politics of education" (p. 70). The politics of the comprehensive school occupy roughly one-third of this large book, and a parallel theme is that of the independent and "direct grant" schools.

The book successfully presents an intricate picture of the interrelationships of plans and policies, the system of schooling and examinations, ministers and officialdom, governments and political events, ideologies, pressures and counterpressures. Given the power of this focus, however, other aspects of education

are often shadowy presences in the book, which seems only to pause to remember, for example, higher education. It is minimally concerned with primary education, and almost not at all with preschool, special, or technical (except for higher technical) education. None of these, of course, assumed the political pre-eminence of selection and secondary schooling, which Simon addresses in terms of the precise and prolonged political battles surrounding them. Paradoxically, however, the importance of the central cluster of themes in the book—secondary schooling, social class, hegemony (“accelerating hegemony” at one point), conflict over direct grant and independent schools, the zigzags concerning the abolition and retention of selection—is diminished by the overwhelming attention they receive. The effect of Simon’s sensitive analysis of this range of policy and politics is in the end blunted by the narrowness of the range. The nature of the analysis prompts two questions—what is missing, and why?

Primary education is virtually absent for the first 200 pages, and then is represented by the issue of streaming and a discussion of the 1967 Plowden Committee which gives little of the flavour of the report and its impact (even suggesting that it was warmly welcomed by Anthony Crosland, Secretary of State in the Labour government, when in fact he gave it a cool reception to say the least). There are only passing references to further education, and the important 1956 White Paper is treated as though it was concerned only with the higher reaches of that sector. Special education and children with special needs are entirely off-stage. There is sporadic reference to the curriculum, but little interest in the related issues. Although race and gender have an occasional mention there is no real attention to how they became, or failed to become, issues in an educational system Simon sees as “central to the mediation of the social order” (p. 429). Simon’s single-minded pursuit of a certain kind of political “mediation” marginalizes what was not present on the public political agendas to which he has devoted the analysis in the book.

While largely avoiding other contents, Simon also minimizes other types of explanation. A major example is the way he largely by-passes the sociological analysis which dominated educational thinking from the late 1950s through the early 1970s. While occasionally using items of sociological “evidence” he allocates no importance to the immense sociological effort to identify and explain the “mediating” role of education. Floud, Halsey, and Martin’s path-breaking work in 1956 is used only as a fragment of data, and Halsey’s later work has little recognition. Basil Bernstein, whose work was probably the most widely known and discussed of all British educational literature in the 1960s, is not mentioned at all in the text of the book. He and Michael F.D. Young, whose edited *Knowledge and Control* in 1971 had a major impact on educational debate, are present in the references only. Many non-sociologists who nevertheless contributed importantly to the sociological momentum—John Vaizey and Stephen Wiseman, for example—are mentioned briefly, if at all, in other connections. The Plowden Committee (except in relation to “progressive” methods) and the Educational Priority Area developments and research are given no attention—

presumably because their focus was primary and community education, and not the comprehensive school issues.

Similarly, the cultural explanations linked with the movement in the sociology of education are totally absent from the book. Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, and Michael Young, for example, do not appear at all. The obverse of that tradition, one which became most associated with T.S. Eliot, F.D. Leavis, and G.H. Bantock, is also missing, in spite of the persistent and ultimately influential conservative critique built on it. Jean Floud's evidence to the Robbins Committee on higher education is mentioned, but there is no indication of the important way in which the 1963 Robbins report used and helped to legitimize sociological analysis in education. An account of this period which omits Bernstein, Hoggart, Michael Young, and Michael F.D. Young, and marginalizes Plowden and the EPAs, preschool, further education, the Warnock report on *Special Educational Needs*, is not only making omissions, it is presenting a case for a certain kind of interpretation of the way education relates to the social order. It does so without explicitly confronting the question of the massive primacy ascribed to the specific kind of political processes concerned. The book does not directly address the issues this kind of selection raises. It does not directly argue the case for a history based on dominant public agendas, on education as a mediating force operating almost exclusively through formal political channels. The implication, however, has to be that Halsey, Michael Young, Bernstein, the Plowden, Robbins, and Warnock committees, were either outside the political processes which shape the social order, or may do so only within different definitions of politics and of the social order. Increasingly in the series Simon accepts as his framework that which is formed by the dominant concerns of Cabinet and minister, party and election, the content of formal and public controversy.

The fourth volume of this series therefore seems to me to complete the trend marked out in the previous two volumes. This does not invalidate the extremely successful exercise in a certain kind of political history, but it does mean that the unsuspecting reader really needs to be alerted to the narrowness of the frame of reference. If this volume is taken to be the history of education in England since 1940, or even as "studies" in such a history, it should more properly be taken as a thorough exploration on a narrow front. The essential disappointment lies not so much in what is missing from the book, as in the absence of explanation of why it is missing. Simon is not unaware of other currents in education, other battles, other types of experience, as well as other directions in the history of education, other international debate about the parameters of definition of what constitutes "history" and "education." The fact that he has chosen to remain largely within the area of overt political manoeuvring around the educational structures has meant that wider aspects of formal and informal education, and other prevalent and emergent issues of the period covered, have been defined out of attention because they do not appear germane to political agendas previously and stringently defined.

This volume, and to some extent the previous two volumes, could arguably have forestalled this kind of criticism if the series had not, at an early stage, been labelled "Studies in the History of Education," which was the original title of the first volume. "A Political History of..." or "Studies in the Politics of..." would have made it clear that there was a deliberately defined focus, and deliberate areas of exclusion. It would have helped to know in this volume the author's explanation of a politics or a history of education which addresses primary education solely in terms of streaming, further education without relating it to a range of post-secondary issues, and a definition of politics that is relatively unconcerned with the curriculum, race, gender, disability, or the preschool. It is also arguable that in the construction of this book Simon has still been fighting earlier battles. He began by making it impossible ever again seriously to view the history of education over the past two centuries without reference to the social and political forces to which it related. The series has, however, resulted in a concentration of attention and a limitation of context which raise considerable historiographic questions. What the fourth volume does is reassert the importance of one cluster of threads which runs through the half-century covered, and to which Simon has devoted enormous and invaluable attention. More than any other British historian of education, Simon has, especially in these volumes, taken education into the wider canon of historical interest, and given to the writing of the history of education a legitimacy and a concern with underlying issues. It simply has to be remembered that there are other threads, that other experience and explanation compete for the historical and political labels.