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

Piers Legh

The Conservative Party and the Destruction of Selective Education in Post-War Britain: The Great Evasion

London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. 241 pp.

Many features of national education systems in Europe have been subjects of debate in the postwar period, but it is arguably the organization of primary and secondary education — and specifically, the extent to which systems separate pupils into different educational pathways — that has proven to be the most politically contentious. The basic organizational types are well-known to educationalists: highly stratified systems generally sort primary pupils into different secondary schools that vary in terms of curriculum, duration, certification, and prestige, while in less stratified systems, pupils attend not only common primary schools, but also non-selective comprehensive secondary schools at least through the lower secondary level. Many Western European countries began the postwar period with some version of the highly stratified type but undertook reforms in the 1960s and 1970s, reducing or eliminating selection and school differentiation and creating less stratified systems. This process was largely guided by left-wing parties, which came to view educational stratification as a key factor perpetuating social stratification.

Unsurprisingly, the focus among scholars interested in the politics of postwar education has largely been on the reforming role played by such parties. For studies of British education, this has meant an emphasis on the centre-left Labour Party and comparatively less consideration of the centre-right Conservative Party. Piers Legh's new book on Conservative policies toward selective and comprehensive schools from the Second World War to the present therefore represents a rebalancing effort for this literature. Despite its title, the book is almost exclusively about the English system of education. There is no separate focus on Wales or Scotland, where comprehensive schools were introduced more thoroughly and with far less debate than in England. The book leads with the core contention that histories of British education have inaccurately viewed the Tories as consistent supporters of state grammar schools and education selection. Drawing on archives of the Conservative Party and other manuscript sources, Legh aims to "unmask" how "the Conservative Party has been much more ambiguous regarding selective state education than is commonly supposed" (2).

By this measure, the book is successful. Across its nine empirical chapters, Legh traces in detail how Tory education officials and party leaders in successive decades not only failed to oppose efforts to close selective grammar schools and build non-selective

comprehensive schools, but indeed facilitated them in many instances. He begins with an examination of the debates associated with the 1944 Education Act that created the framework for the tripartite system of separate grammar, technical, and secondary modern schools and the use of the so-called eleven-plus exam given to pupils at the end of primary school and concludes with the (ultimately unsuccessful) efforts by Theresa May's government to introduce new grammar schools for the first time in decades. Much of the focus across this history is on Conservative policy actors at the level of the Education Ministry (or its equivalent) while the Tories were in government or the shadow roles while in opposition, with a particular emphasis on such actors in the period from 1959 to 1970, when — furthered by central Labour government directive and local reorganization — much of the tripartite system was dismantled.

Throughout the book Legh is open in his support for educational selection and his criticism of the Conservative Party for failing to fight for it. Fair enough. Yet at times the book borders on political screed (though a well-referenced one), which serves largely and unfortunately to undo many of its contributions. While Legh acknowledges, for example, the influence of academic researchers in the 1950s and 1960s who questioned the merits of the selective system, he simply dismisses them as "politicized" and "left-wing" before moving on (42). More recent studies on the potential negative effects of selection, such as those produced by the Sutton Trust, are likewise written off without consideration as promoting "policies of social engineering" (198). Similar language abounds. Moreover, instead of providing a general explanation for Tory policy and assessing it against alternatives,[1] Legh repeatedly emphasizes the character and courage (or lack thereof) of educational policy actors, attributing the phasing out of selection to the cunning and indeed "ruthlessness" of pro-comprehensive educationalists and Labour Party politicians (142) and the political and ideological weakness of decades of Conservative Party education leaders. It appears that the author — based on his occasional citing of public opinion data[2] — believes there has existed far wider support for selection in the country than is generally acknowledged. Yet if selection were truly as favored by the population as Legh seems to imply, why then have generations of Tory educational policymakers been so equivocal in their support? Is it truly the case that since the war Conservative governments — including those with massive parliamentary majorities under Macmillan and Thatcher — ignored a deep societal demand for grammar schools? It seems far likelier that successive party leaders and education ministers — recognizing internal divisions and public concern — have simply picked the best policy choice available, namely expressing support for — and occasionally acting on the basis of — selective principles while tolerating comprehensives.

Gregory Baldi
Western Illinois University

1 With the exception of a brief summary of Wiborg's argument about the role of social democratic parties in introducing comprehensive schools, Legh largely ignores previous explanations in comparative educational literature, such as those presented in Margaret Scotford Archer, *Social Origins of Educational Systems.* London: Routledge, 1984; and Katharina Sass, "Cleavage structures and school politics: A Rokkanian comparative historical analysis" *History of Education 49,* no 5, 2020: 636–660.

2 See the discussion on page 108 of survey results on preferences for comprehensive and selective schools published in New Society magazine in 1967.