



# Rethinking America's Internal Education Narrative:

*An Analysis of Historical Narratives and  
the Foundations of Public Schools*

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## **Rethinking America's Internal Education Narrative: An Analysis of Historical Narratives and the Foundations of Public Schools**

Historical narratives of an institution's origin can play a crucial role in shaping the perceived legitimacy of that institution. The institution will likely appear legitimate if the story of an institution finds the institution being created by altruistic people whose interest aligns with the people the institution will serve, and if the people were well-served by the institution. If the story is otherwise - of reformers who had their own motives that didn't align with the people, or an institution surviving despite poor service to the people - then doubt might be cast on the institution's legitimacy.

Standard histories of the American public education system depict its rise in a way that strengthens public education's felt legitimacy. They depict public schooling in America as having arisen in a very democratic fashion borne of public demand by reformers whose interests were solely benevolent. This paper is an analysis of two very different tellings of the history of American public education<sup>1</sup> that, as different as the tellings are, use historical method to undermine that standard narrative, and hence the perceived legitimacy of the American public school system.

The two histories I have chosen argue from quite different "directions." E.G. West's *Education and the State* (West, 1965/1994) argues that tax-supported public

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<sup>1</sup> When writing about public education, the historians that are the subject of this essay had in mind state-funded and state-run institutions. Thus, they did not have in mind things like charter schools (which are state-funded but not state-managed), a form of schooling that did not exist at the time they were writing their histories.

schooling is unnecessary and that the state's only role in education should be subsidizing the education of the least well-off. West's read of the ascendancy of American public schooling is of a school system that expanded unnecessarily in order to gain a quasi-monopoly in an education system that had previously been market-driven. Samuel Bowles' and Herbert Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Bowles & Gintis, 1976) argues that American public schooling largely serves to legitimize the economic inequality produced by capitalism and to train workers to take their place in that system. Their telling of American public schooling's history is of a system that was primarily in the interests of the rich and middle class, that would create workers for the new industrial economy and prevent the poor from agitating for a more just economic system or distribution of wealth.

While many critical historical narratives of American public education exist, I chose these two for their stark differences and striking similarities. Despite these very different arguments - West's pro-market economic analysis and Bowles and Gintis's Marxist social analysis - both historical narratives attend to many of the same focal points when attempting to delegitimize the historical origins of American public schools. Rather than paint a picture of public schools being borne of a community of interest between the reformers and the masses, Bowles and Gintis, as well as West, seek (with different accounts) to show that (1) there was massive opposition to public school reforms, (2) public schooling initiatives were passed by suspect democratic processes, (3) the reformers interests did not always align with the public's interests, (4) the schools did not in fact serve the public's interests, and (5) public schools may have

been unnecessary because existing institutions were serving the public's educational interests.

### **The Concept of Legitimacy and How “Standard Narratives” of American Public Education Confer Legitimacy**

There are many different conceptions of the meaning of “legitimacy” (Simmons, 1999). Some scholars suggest that an institution has legitimacy if it was established according to just rules. Others conceive of legitimacy as coming from an institution being established by the full (actual or hypothetical) consent of those “under’ it. Still others believe that legitimacy comes from the history of the institution’s relationship with its subjects being morally acceptable.

In all of these accounts, though, legitimacy has something to do with the institution being appropriate or just based on the story we can tell about the institution, what it does, and how it arose. Certainly, then, historians have much power in shaping our sense of an institution’s legitimacy, because they can shape the stories about how institutions come about and relate to their subjects.

Berger and Luckmann argue that legitimization of institutions is a key part of our social construction of reality. Institutions - whether formal or informal - must gain and keep authority over people and to do that requires that they maintain an air of legitimacy. While there are several elements that can contribute to the legitimization of an institution, Berger and Luckmann argue that one element of the process involves the production and dissemination of “explicit theories by which an institutional sector is

legitimated in terms of a differentiated body of knowledge” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 94). For instance, one way to legitimize a certain circumscription of gender roles is to tie it to a particular story of human nature. In a similar way, one component of the legitimization process of public schooling may be tying it to a historical narrative that might meet with public approval. While most folks will not likely turn to the history books to decide whether public schools are legitimate institutions, historical narratives about where an institution comes from and what it was intended to do can influence the cultural attitudes toward the institution.

Howard Zinn agrees about the power of historical narratives to affect our perception of legitimacy regarding institutions. He recognizes that historians and other members of the “knowledge industry” have great power to affect an institution’s perceived legitimacy. While they “cannot confront force directly, [they] can counteract the deception that makes the government's force legitimate” (Zinn, 1970).

Historians Colin Greer and Diane Ravitch both agree, that the stories we tell about the origin and historical aims of public schooling matters to how we culturally experience the institution. Greer worries that too rosy a narrative - where egalitarian common schools exist to offer everyone a chance at upward mobility - “conventionalizes the faith” that “humanity - at least in America - is quite properly organized into social tiers,” and that “a place on any one tier... [is] no more nor less than a chance to rise and fall into another one” (Greer, 1972, pp. 33–34). Voicing concern about critical histories of education, historian of education Diane Ravitch has written that “By telling a nation how its institutions have succeeded or failed, the historian helps us to define the limitations and possibilities of the present and future” (Ravitch, 1978). For Ravitch, this

is concerning, as she believes American public schools to be legitimate and a positive force for social good. Despite their differences about which story should be told about American public schools, they agree on the main point: the historical narratives we tell matter.

What does the standard narrative - what historian Colin Greer calls "The Great School Legend" look like (Greer, 1972)? In his book *Changing Conceptions of Education*, eminent historian of education Ellwood Cubberley (who Lagemann suggests was for decades known as "the author of the standard history of American education" (Lagemann, 2002, p. 76)) provides a conventional account of the growth of public schools in the United States.

The movement for general education for all the people has been essentially a democratic movement... The masses, who have been the voting strength of the movement, have seen it as a chance for their children to rise, and educators and statesmen have seen in it the safety of the republic. School systems with us have been thoroughly democratic (Cubberley, 1909).

A similar account is found in a National Education Association report from 1955. The report's authors attribute "the slowness of the young nation to realize its finest dreams in the field of education [to the] the halting tempo of democratic advance," within the United States generally. By the very early 20th century "vast changes had come to pass;" the country had become more democratic, and this democratization, the authors

claim, led to “ a system of universal public education with its roots in the prophetic ideas of the 1790's.” (Commission, 1955). Variations on this story of the common school’s democratic triumph - a victory for egalitarianism - can be seen in Lawrence Cremin’s *The American Common School* (Cremin, 1951), and a more contemporary historical telling by E.D. Hirsch (Hirsch, 2010, Chapter 1).

As these historical accounts of the rise of public schooling have it, the ascendancy of public education owed primarily to democratic demand for state provision of schooling, and are beneficial to society at large. School reformers and statesmen who championed these public schools are generally portrayed as doing so uniformly from altruistic motive, and opponents of the growth of public schooling are generally portrayed as doing so for wholly selfish reasons. The inertia of this historical narrative led Greer to complain that “For the historians, as for most Americans, public education is a religion” (Greer, 1972, p. 33).

### **Different Historical Narratives, Similar Challenges to the Historical Legitimacy of Public Schools**

Contrast this narrative to the more critical tellings of the origins of American public schooling told by E.G. West as well as Herbert Gintis and Samuel Bowles. By their accounts, none of the above points in the standard account are accurate. Though these critical histories tell very different stories, they paint pictures of American public schools created for reasons other than overwhelming public demand that did not necessarily serve the felt needs of the public they were purported to serve, created by reformers who may not always have had interests that aligned with the public.

Economist E.G. West published his book *Education and the State* in 1965. In that book, he argues that tax-supported public education was generally unnecessary and that a free market in private education with state subsidy for those who cannot afford it is sufficient to address people's educational needs. He relies heavily on the history of public and private education in Britain to make his case. West's telling of the history of the American school system appeared in the 1967 article, "The Political Economy of American Public School Legislation" which would later appear as a chapter in the third and subsequent editions of *Education and the State*. West uses a public choice economic analysis to examine the story of New York State's attempt to increase state aid for education and to eliminate rate bills (tuition payments) for public schools to create and maintain public schools between 1800 and 1840. It depicts public school reformers as generally self-interested, working to capture the educational market by using political means to favor the public schools over private competitors.

Economists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis released their book, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, in 1976. Like West's *Education and the State*, they devote one chapter, "The Origins of Mass Public Education," to exploring the expansion of public schooling during the "common school" era in the early to middle 1800's as part of a larger economic argument. That larger argument is stated quite directly at the start of their chapter: "The U.S. education system works to justify economic inequality and to produce a labor force whose capacities, credentials, and consciousness are dictated in substantial measure by the requirements of profitable employment in the capitalist economy" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 151).

*Education and the State* and *Schooling in Capitalist America* construct very different cases designed to be critical of American public education. *Education and the State* uses economic analysis to argue that state-run public schooling is unnecessary and that adequate education can be provided within private markets, with the state simply subsidizing those who cannot afford any education. *Schooling in Capitalist America* argues that the American public education system has, as a main purpose, the inculcation of capitalist values into students, thereby propping up an economic system that is unjust.

Both of these cases are aided by their critical treatments of the origins of American public schools. Convincing readers that American public education is unnecessary (West) or are obstacles to constructing a just economy (Bowles and Gintis), requires they explain why these institutions grew, especially within a democratic government. The standard account is that these institutions grew because the people demanded them and persisted because people were well served by them, both points that would confer a sense of legitimacy on the public schools. Undermining that felt legitimacy means telling a different and more critical narrative of how American public schooling developed. While the historical narratives offered by West and Bowles/Gintis are quite different, the histories converge on four points through which the felt legitimacy of public schooling could be challenged.

### **Point 1: People at Large Didn't Want Public Schooling**

Especially in liberal democracies, an important aspect of an institution's legitimacy is whether or not it serves the interest of those subject to its authority.

Institutions that do seem to serve the people they intend to serve, but serve only the interests of those who maintain the institutions, will be suspect. David Beetham, in his study of how institutions acquire and maintain legitimacy, writes that an institution's legitimacy often requires "the belief that the dominant and the subordinate, however much they may differ, are also linked by a community of interest, and that the distribution of power serves the distribution of the subordinate, and not just those of the powerful alone" (Beetham, 1991, p. 82).

Bowles and Gintis attempt to undermine the idea that the public (at least the poor and working classes) was largely behind the public school movement. First, drawing heavily on the work of historian Michael Katz (Katz, 1968), Bowles and Gintis focus attention on the 1817 formulation of a petition in Lowell, MA for "among other things, the establishment of a system of free public primary schools" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 160). Presumably, the primary beneficiaries of these schools were to be the poor and working class, yet Bowles and Gintis note that "only 21 percent of the petitioners appear to have come from this [laboring] class" (p. 160). They conclude that "the demand for public elementary school in Boston apparently originated with the large propertied class and what might today be called the middle class" (p. 161). If the public school system to be established was to primarily benefit the poor working class, data like this suggests that this group did not largely find such a system to be in their interest.

Bowles and Gintis also note that, despite the establishment and expansion of public primary schools in Lowell, MA (winning most of its support from the propertied and middle classes), strong objections persisted from the people. "The first major source of opposition came from the farming families in the outlying districts who

resented the growing elite domination of school policy through the district school boards” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 163). This resentment led to a tense Annual School Board meeting in 1832, which led to the voting out of the entire school board.

Bowles and Gintis also note strenuous objection to reforms proposed and enacted by Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education, Horace Mann, such as the creation of normal schools and increasing attempts to centralize authority for how schools should run. Like in Lowell, the opposition came primarily from “the rural population [who], not yet awakened to the social distress [of the industrial economy], explosive needs, and the needs of the new industrial order, found the State Board of Education meddlesome and a likely source of increased taxation” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 171).

Likewise, disagreement over the Board of Education’s projects led Democratic Governor Marcus Morton to propose a shutdown of the Board of Education, a proposal narrowly defeated in the state legislature. Bowles and Gintis conclude that “At its base, the incident reflected a conflict between an older, decentralized, community-controlled school system and those who, like Mann, sought to centralize over the schools in the hands of enlightened and specially trained professionals” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 172).

Similarly, E.G. West highlights controversy over New York’s proposed public school legislation in order to show the substantial opposition such legislation faced. West discusses an 1849 proposal to provide taxpayer funded “free” public schooling by doing away with rate bills. While the measure passed the state legislature, “the legislation proved to be unworkable, and the Act was met with immediate and

widespread hostility” (West, 1965/1994). Much of this, as we shall discuss in more detail below, had to do with the increase in taxes this meant for local districts and the fact that since districts did not want to tax themselves more than necessary, *free* public schools were often open fewer months of the year than when parents paid rate bills. “After only two or three months of operation there was a torrent of petitions from all parts of the state demanding a repeal of the act” (West, 1965/1994)/1994, p. 313).

West also provides evidence to suggest that for the next decade and a half, the rate bills were still yielding significant sums of money towards localities’ education budgets. To West, this indicates that during an age where education was not compulsory and reformers argued that rate bills discouraged parents from using public schools, rate bills did not seem to be an obstacle to parents of ordinary means from paying rate bills to gain education for their children.

Whatever the attitude of the majority of a minority of negligent or poor families, there is no systematic evidence to show that the average parents, as distinct from public school teachers and administrators, preferred the method of paying for school through increased taxes to that of the rate bill” (West, 1965/1994)/1994, p. 313).

Thus, both Bowles and Gintis, as well as West, give evidence aimed at showing public school initiatives have been quite controversial among the people they were intended to serve. Yet, ultimately, public school legislation was instituted, an action which could be interpreted as a gradual realization by voters that public schooling did, in

fact, serve the general interest of the people. While Elwood Cubberley acknowledges some dissension over laws establishing public schools, he writes that “in time, though, the desirability of common, free, tax-supported, non-sectarian [sic.], state controlled schools became evident to a majority of citizens in the different American states” (Cubberley, 1919), p. 123). Critics of West as well as Bowles and Gintis could potentially argue, with Cubberley, that despite public opposition to public school legislation, the democratic success of that legislation is evidence that the people eventually realized that the legislation served their interests.

### **Point 2: Public Schools' Democratic Ascendancy Does Not Mean the Public Supported the Measures**

Neither Bowles and Gintis nor West deny that public school legislation passed via democratic means. Both historical accounts, though, give reasons why the legislation's success might not indicate that the general population believed the legislation served their interests.

Bowles and Gintis present evidence that while the legislation's passage was democratic, the legislation was largely supported by the upper and middle classes, rather than the poor and working classes it was intended to serve. In the case of Lowell, MA, the large majority of petitioners for taxpayer-funded public schooling were of the middle and upper classes rather than poor and working class (the groups the legislation was ostensibly designed to help). Once these public schools were established, districts gradually became centralized in a way that their school boards “articulated the concerns of teachers, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals, and through them the large

property owning elite of the town” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), 162-163). Bowles and Gintis depict Horace Mann’s efforts in Boston as a tale of reforms that were forced onto those without much influence by those who, like Mann, had established political capital and “political power stemming from virtually all influential quarters” (p. 171).

West also gives us a reason why the passage of public school legislation might not be evidence of the general public’s recognition that it served their interests. West suggests that the 1849 New York legislation to abolish the rate bill and establish fully tax-supported schools was likely misunderstood by the voting public; that the proposal was presented in such a way that the public might not have fully understood what the legislation entailed. While “teaching organizations insisted that “society” basically demanded the change” by a firm majority vote, “it is clear from the people’s immediate hostility to the practical operation of the Act that the political spokesmen had not presented them with all the issues.” (West, 1965/1994), 313). West goes on to explain:

The decision process that was involved in the legislation consisted of two parts: the demand choice and the supply choice. The two parts became arbitrarily separated at the ballot box. The voting issue, of course, as it presented itself to each individual voter, appeared mainly as a demand choice. People would have been irrational indeed if, believing that they could really obtain something for free merely by voting for it, they did not in fact do so” (West, 1965/1994)/1994, p. 313-314).

In other words, when the issue of abolishing rate bills and establishing free schools was put to a vote, the issue was framed largely as a demand choice about whether the people would prefer not to pay rate bills than pay rate bills. Yet, there was a supply choice accompanying that, about whether the people would prefer that the schools are paid for by increased state and district taxes than by state taxes and rate bills. As judged by the immediate opposition to the bill, West argues that it is obvious that the voting public did not appreciate that eliminating rate bills meant substituting them with a district tax, a trade-off the public would need to weigh in order to understand the full implications of the proposal.

Thus, not only do Bowles and Gintis, as well as West depict public school legislation as subjects of heated controversy among the public, but also give reasons to think that even when voted for, we should not assume that this is evidence of the general public's recognition that the legislation served their interest. Both of these arguments chip away at the idea that public school legislation was borne of a community of interests of everyone involved.

### **Point 3: The Public Schools Did Not Serve the Interests of the People at Large**

A believer in the idea that there was in fact a community of interests between reformers and the people could still argue the following: even if the people did not recognize public school legislation to be in their interests, the people might be mistaken about what their interests really were (which the public schools happened to serve).

Even if true, this would paint a picture that might undermine the perceived legitimacy of public schooling's origins by depicting a situation where paternalistic reformers foist an institution on the masses, ignorant about what is good for them.

This also opens up the possibility that while the masses were ignorant of what their interests really were and what served them, paternalistic reformers could still be mistaken in their assessment of what serves the interests of the masses. In liberal democracies especially, this type of paternalistic project will tend to be viewed with some suspicion. As Beetham notes:

The problem intrinsic to paternalism is that, in denying the subordinate all independent means of expressing or defending their interests, there is nothing to stop it degenerating into the exercise of power in the interests merely of the powerful, except the latter's own integrity; and even integrity is no guarantee against self-deception or ignorance" (Beetham, 1991), p. 90).

The powerful reformers may believe they are creating an institution that is in the subordinates' interest. Even if the subordinates protest that the institution doesn't serve their interests or the powerful succeed in passing legislation without the informed consent of the subordinate, the powerful may still argue that the subordinate's actual interests are being served. Yet, this depicts a situation where the powerful privilege their assessment of the subordinates' needs above the subordinates' own assessment, and

the powerful could be mistaken or led astray in their assessment by their own bias and self-interest.

Toward this end, Bowles and Gintis, as well as West, assert two related arguments. First, they argue that the interests of the reformers were not always aligned with the interests of those the public schools were to serve. Next, they argue that, in fact, the public schools did not serve the best interests of the community they were meant to serve.

Bowles and Gintis, as well as West, argue that when we examine the results of what the public schools provided, the public schools were not ultimately in the interests of those they were to serve. Not only did the reformers have motives that were inconsistent with the actual interests of the people, but the effects of the schooling did not meet the interests of those they served.

To see how these authors argue that the reformers held interests that put them at odds with those they were to serve, we can look at all of the authors' treatment of Horace Mann. Bowles and Gintis depict a society with ever widening gaps in wealth between rich and poor, as well as an increasingly industrial economy where artisans and shopkeepers were increasingly at risk of becoming wage workers in factories. Bowles and Gintis argue that "Mann was a supporter of the industrial system," who "flatly rejected the notion that there was any necessary classes; class conflict would have no place in his program" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 166).

Not only did Mann not recognize the validity of a class conflict that could have potentially ushered in a more just distribution of wealth or economic system, but the public school system that Mann and others in Massachusetts created was quite

favorable to the interests of industrial business interests. Some poor and working class families saw education as a way to ensure social mobility for their children, and Mann sometimes employed the rhetoric of social mobility to justify the public schools. In practice, the schools inculcated students with habits that would fit them for industrial wage work. One reason, for instance, “why most larger employers supported public education apparently related to the noncognitive effects of schooling” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 169). Bowles and Gintis go on to review testimony from some mill owners that the virtues of the public schools lay most heavily in teaching children a good work ethic that can be used for work in factories (p. 169). The schools were also to train students to embrace the values of industrial capitalism, to take “on as their own the values and objectives of those in authority” (170). In light of Bowles and Gintis’s neo-Marxist analysis, these goals put the public schools and the intent of the reformers at odds with the communities the schools were supposed to serve.

Like Gintis and Bowles, West depicts Mann as having interests that differ from the interests of the communities the schools were supposed to serve (albeit in a different way). West’s economic analysis utilizes what he calls the “economic theory of democracy” (and what is now referred to as “public choice theory”) to argue that institutions often arise and expand for the economic benefit of their administrators and employees. In arguing that tax-supported public schooling came about when it was not necessary, West explains this by pointing to evidence that Mann and special interests (educators in public schools in competition with private schools) stood to benefit from eliminating rate bills and supporting public schools with taxes, thereby gaining a quasi-monopoly for public schools.

In speeches, for instance, “Mann was especially sensitive to the tendency of the private sector to bid teachers away from the public” and likely understood that gaining tax support for public schools would make public schools a more attractive, because more securely funded, option for teachers (West, 1965/1994). West also points out that:

[t]he suppliers of educational services to the government, the teachers and administrators, as we have seen, had produced their own organized platforms by the late 1840's; it was they indeed who were the leading instigators of the free-school campaign. Whilst conventional history portrays them as distinguished champions in the cause of children's welfare and benevolent participation in a political struggle, it is suggested here that the facts are equally consistent with the hypothesis of self-interested behavior...” (West, 1965/1994)/1994, pp. 317-318).

West does not take as strong a position as Bowles and Gintis do to suggest that the reformers goals were *necessarily* in opposition to the people's interest. Within West's account, it is completely possible that Mann and public school teachers and administrators did intend that tax-supported schools would benefit the public and that they would also benefit their own self-interest. “Every profession no doubt has its share of benefactors and altruists. But on any realistic assessment the typical member of a profession can reasonably be regarded as having more than one motive in life” (West, 1965/1994)/1994, p. 316). Teachers, administrators, and reformers may intend to help those who will consume public schooling, but they also likely have an interest in

maximizing budgets and pay, which will sometimes be in conflict with the interests of the consumers.

West also points to the failed Act to do away with the rate bill and create fully tax-supported public schools as a demonstration that the effects of the legislation were not in the interest of the general public. By doing away with the rate bill and replacing it with local taxes going to public schools, this meant that localities now had to raise taxes to support the public schools. Predictably, many localities - mostly in poor areas - did not tax themselves a sufficient amount to keep schools open more than four months a year, compared to the eight or so months per year schools were generally kept open when revenue was generated by rate bills. "The new legislative provision, therefore, far from facilitating the supply of schooling, actually reduced it. Moreover, the parents' direct means of action to encourage supply, the rate bill, was now removed" (West, 1965/1994)/1994, p. 312).

Thus, Bowles and Gintis, as well as West, tell different stories about why public school legislation did not align with the perceived interests, but the real interests, of those the public schools were intended to serve. For Bowles and Gintis, the public school system assimilated the working class into an economic system that would prove bad for them, and assuaged the class conflict that might have led to a more just economic system or distribution of wealth. For West, the public school legislation replaced a well-functioning system of schooling where parents paid directly for educational services with a fully tax-supported public school system. This led to an overall reduction in the number of days schools were open per year and reduced parental choice.

#### **Point 4: Public Schools Were Unnecessary**

There is one more area where Bowles and Gintis, as well as West, attempt to undermine the perceived legitimacy of American public schooling's origin. To varying degrees, the historical narratives in *Schooling in Capitalist America* and *Education and the State* contest the idea that state-administered, tax-supported public schools were necessary. Both works suggest that there were other educational opportunities that were already being used by the people public schooling was intended to serve.

Why would this help undermine the legitimacy of the growth of American public schooling? Even if one disbelieves everything Gintis and Bowles, as well as West, have argued about why public schools were inimical to the people's interests, one could imagine an institution being consistent with the interests of the people at large yet being unnecessary because existing institutions already serve those interests. For instance, one could imagine a government taking over the manufacture of cars and doing so in a way that serves the interests of the car-driving public. Yet, if the existing private system of car manufacture was adequately serving the interests of that public, one could plausibly question why the state was justified in creating an institution that serves interests that were already being served by other means.

Also, we've seen that Bowles and Gintis, as well as West, explore instances where the people whom public schools were designed to help did not often favor their establishment. To fully understand why the public might not have been enthusiastic about such legislation, it is important to understand what existing educational options were that might have already been serving their interests.

As we've seen, Bowles and Gintis note that the 1817 push in Lowell, MA to establish free public schools did not garner much support from the working poor. What type of educational options might they have been utilizing that prevented them from seeing tax-supported public schooling as necessary? Bowles and Gintis tell us that "Two centuries ago [the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries], the structure and scope of American education bore little resemblance to our current school system. Along the way, many diverse alternatives were considered and tried" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 152).

What were some of these options? Bowles and Gintis mention "dame" schools, "writing" schools, charity schools, and apprenticeships. All of these were forms of education that were "extension[s] of the home" (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 153). Bowles and Gintis depict an early United States (and Massachusetts) where:

radically different proposals for the control and financing of education were... debated. Some would have left schooling in private hands, trusting to philanthropy to cater to the educational needs of the poor. Others promoted public schooling, but sought an extension of the prevalent "district system" which assured strict neighborhood control (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), p. 153).

This plurality of possible approaches to schooling in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century meant that "public nonsectarian compulsory and tax-supported schooling was far from a foregone conclusion in the early years of the nineteenth

century” (Bowles & Gintis, 1976, p. 153). Thus, it is possible that the working class were not enthusiastic about proposals for tax-supported public schooling because they believed other forms of education were already serving their needs.

It is, of course, central to West’s overall case in *Education and the State* that the tax-supported system of public schools was unnecessary. West’s argument is that the then-existing market of private schools and public schools where parents paid rate bills was sufficient to meet students’ educational needs.

In 1811, the state of New York commissioned a study to look into creating a statewide establishment of public schools. Prior to that, New York schools were largely a mixture of private forms of education and rate bill-accepting public schools in areas which subsidized those schools with local taxes. West notes that the commissioners concluded that except for rural areas, where geographical location more than poverty was a problem “schooling was indeed already widespread” (West, 1965/1994)/1994, p. 298). Once legislation established that each district maintain its own public schools financed by a combination of tax dollars and rate bills, subsequent state reports bore out that a combination of rate bill-charging public schools, private schools and academies were doing an adequate job of educating the state’s population. For instance, “the fact that education could continue to be universal without being free and without compulsion seems to have been readily acknowledged” in the annual Superintendent’s report of 1836 p. 304). Even one year before the state legislated that public schools be completely tax-supported, the revenue generated by rate bills showed that “Parents of ordinary means... were still buying education for their children” and, while not yet compulsory or free to families, was “almost universal” (p. 313).

In recounting the educational options available to families in absence of tax-supported public schooling, Bowles and Gintis, as well as West, give reason to think that not only did the public school legislation not align with the interests of those the legislation intended to help, but may also have been superfluous. If forms of education were available and being utilized by families before the proposals of tax-supported public schooling, it is reasonable to think that they did not see the proposed public schooling reforms as necessary.

## **Conclusion**

Both of these critical histories went on to influence later critiques of public schooling. Most notably, E.G. West's economic and historical arguments against public schooling have proved useful to conservative and libertarian authors who argue in favor of privatization and school choice (see, for instance, McCluskey, 2007 and Tooley, 2014). West's historical telling had a particularly formative impact on Milton and Rose Friedman's influential advocacy of school choice (Friedman & Friedman, 1990, Chapter 6). Before reading West's *Education and the State*, the Friedmans believed that the state had a role in providing vouchers to all families for the purchase of education. West's history convinced them to revise their position, arguing that only the very poor would need state subsidy in an education market (Currie-Knight, 2014, Chapter 5).

The work of Bowles and Gintis has also had an impact on critiques of neoliberal (corporate) education reforms, but its impact has been smaller. Upon the book's release, critical pedagogues who seemed the best suited to incorporate the authors' Marxist arguments in fact criticized the book for its orthodox Marxist - and hence

economically determinist and functionalist - analysis. O’Keeffe, for instance, complained that Bowles and Gintis’s analysis depicted “[t]he education system... as trailing, functionally, behind the economy, whose structure it reflects and reproduces in a mainly mechanistic way. As much as any functionalism the Bowles and Gintis thesis reflects an over-socialized view of man” (O’Keeffe, 1978, p. 235). Overall, though, several leftist critics of existing neoliberal public schools have returned to more Marxist-inspired critiques of existing public schools in a capitalist system, which includes drawing on the work of Bowles and Gintis (Blacker, 2013; McLaren, 2007).

When they seek to criticize public schooling (whether to abolish or radically reform it), the right and left employ, among other things, historical tellings in order to undermine the institution’s legitimacy. If legitimacy consists partly of the stories we tell about an institution and what it does for those it is meant to serve, telling a critical story has the potential to undermine that perceived legitimacy. Since different groups have different goals in mind for why they seek to undermine the legitimacy of public schools, they will often tell different critical stories. Advocates of markets will tell stories meant to convince readers that the market can do, and historically has done, a better job, and that public schools arose by government actors appropriating flourishing private educational markets. Critics of schools’ role in neoliberal or capitalist economies will tell stories tying the rise of public schools with an upper class desire to train the lower classes to accede to a place in the industrial economy.

Despite their differences though, undermining an institution’s perceived legitimacy often means highlighting similar points, such as addressing how the institution does not truly serve those it was ostensibly designed to serve, or that the

institution's rise does not necessarily indicate that the people at large wanted it. In this paper, I have analyzed how two very different critical histories converge on many of the same points (in different ways) to undermine the perceived legitimacy of public schools. The success (in different circles) of West's *Education and the State*, and Bowles and Gintis's *Schooling in Capitalist America*, and the impact both have had on subsequent ideological critiques of public schooling, demonstrate how historical narratives can play a role in examining and possibly undermining the legitimacy of even such a storied institution as public schools.

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