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Tales of Future Past: The Living Legacy of Eugenics in American Education

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I have come to believe that democratic education, at least of the socially-reconstructive kind, must involve some shock treatment. By that I mean it must shock people into a new awareness of what they had previously taken for granted, and the shock itself results from the sudden, radical coming together of hitherto unconnected texts and narratives. This shocking experience happens most often when we read a text from an earlier era. In reading history texts of an earlier era, for example, we are almost always surprised and shocked to find that the people back then made some remarks that today would be interpreted as racist, classist, sexist, and homophobic. We are shocked that the voices and experiences of American subaltern groups are simply ignored, as if they did not exist or contribute in any way to American history. Of course, this shock may lead us to two quite different, although not necessarily contradictory, conclusions. On the one hand, we may come away feeling that real progress has been made in re-narrating American history so that it is inclusive and democratic. On the other hand, we may have an eerie, unsettling feeling that this past is still very much with us, and that we really haven't transcended it even though we now appear to be more tolerant, enlightened, and humanistic. In both cases, we have the shocking experience of viewing the present through the lens of the past.

In my own work with masters level teachers in a Curriculum and Teacher Leadership program at Miami University, I use a number of "shocking" texts to unsettle what teachers think they know about contemporary reform movements in public education, such as "No Child Left Behind." One of these texts that always has a profound and lasting impact on teachers is Ellwood P. Cubberley's *A Brief History of Education* (1922), a standard text in many teacher education programs across the U.S. up through the 1920s and 1930s. The concluding chapter in Cubberley's history is titled "New Tendencies and Expansions," and in it the author lays out a brave new world for public education

in the century ahead. Two sections in the chapter that I have teachers critique are titled: “The Education of Defectives” and “The Education of Superiors.” Of the former group, Cubberley notes how the modern state school system is moving in the direction of “the training of children who belong to the seriously defective classes of society.” Such work, he observes, is today largely humanitarian in motivation—the work of Christian charity. In the future “defectives” may be trained for “some form of social and vocational usefulness,” he argues, so that there is some return on investment in their education. Still, Cubberley concludes that it is unfortunate that so much attention is being paid to the education of “defectives,” since they “represent the less capable and on the whole less useful members of society.” These classes may be made minimally productive, but their education must continue to be a costly and unfortunate public burden. In contrast, the very future of democracy “hinges largely upon the proper education and utilization of... superior children.” One superior child, he estimates, “may confer greater benefits upon mankind...than a thousand feeble-minded children.” The advent of reliable new standardized intelligence tests and mass testing of students would now make it possible, he believed, to identify “superior” as well as “defective” children at an early age, so that their education could be differentiated according to need (450-451).

When teachers read this “progressive” text they almost always notice immediately how it frames some very unjust and anti-democratic social movements in terms of a narrative of progress, progress through the science of education tied to “enlightened” state policy, and also through the progressive extension of the Enlightenment promise of humanitarianism and justice to all people, including the “defective classes.” They argue that children are still being labeled “defective” and “superior,” even if we no longer use these labels. Special education teachers quickly make connections with the way “exceptional” children are still treated, and African Americans almost always remark that they too have been defined as “defective.” Others speak of the reign of standardized testing and the sorting and “ability” grouping of young people that continues in their schools and they openly question whether Cubberley’s vision might have indeed come true, and whether this progressive vision is itself part of what is wrong with American public education today. They begin to question not only how much progress has been made—the ostensibly easier question to answer—but what kind of “progress” has been made, and whose interests have been served. This shock of awareness, achieved through a radical connection of the past and the present, provides teachers some distance from the past, so they can deconstruct and decode it in ways that teachers in the 1920s probably did not. They can view it from a distance, with a critical eye, and also see it as still part of the present, as something that has not entirely disappeared—as we like to believe, just as we like to believe that fascism and racism have

disappeared, at least for all practical purposes, and that we have transcended this past. We now must face is eugenics was part of what Foucault (2002) called a “discursive formation,” a way of framing discourse according to certain rules of whose voices are privileges and whose are not, what can be talked about and what cannot, what questions can be raised for discussion, and what must remain unquestioned. We can also appreciate eugenics as an ideological formation, that is, an interested worldview, that has evolved and developed and taken on diverse forms in American history but has always been there in the background of the dominant or hegemonic “thinking” of social and educational issues.

Does this text from another era still speak to us today? If so, what does it have to say? How do we respond to Cubberley and the memory of eugenics in education? These are the kind of questions that Ann Gibson Winfield raises in *Eugenics and Education in America* (2007). Within the history of eugenics in the early 20th century, Cubberley, it turns out, was only one of the bit players. Winfield ignores his influential *Brief History of Education* text, but she does refer to his equally influential history text, *Public Education in the United States* (1934) in which he writes of the “difficulty” of educating “these Southern and Eastern Europeans” flooding the nation’s schools. He observed of the new immigrants that they were “largely illiterate, docile, often lacking in initiative, and almost wholly without the Anglo-Saxon conceptions of righteousness, liberty, law, order, [and] public decency.” Public education was unfortunately “made more difficulty by their presence” (485). Much of Cubberley’s concern was directed at the “new” immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe rather than African Americans directly. But his belief that intelligence tests provided an objective assessment of native ability, he was led to conclude that African Americans were, like Eastern Europeans, largely lacking in intellectual ability. But as the “new” European immigrants assimilated into the category of “white,” and as African Americans did not, eugenics became increasingly associated with policies and practices that resulted in setting low academic expectations, and vocational goals, for African American students. Although the language of eugenics is missing from our public discourse today, because of its associations with a rightist and proto-fascistic politics, is the spirit, the memory, of eugenics still directing educational policy toward urban youth of color in the age of “No Child Left Behind”?

Winfield argues that much of the reform discourse of NCLB indeed can be interpreted as an extension of the kind of thinking and practice that characterized the eugenics movement. I was a bit hesitant of this claim at first, and remain so, since it seems a bit too harsh a judgment to make of a reform movement that some would argue at least means well. I don’t happen to think its sponsors mean well, but I am a bit hesitant of viewing neo-liberals and neo-conservatives as direct

descendents of eugenicists. At the same time, a series of recent incidents has caused me to rethink my position somewhat. Several teachers and administrators enrolled in masters and doctoral programs at Miami University reported that at a recent teacher in-service, a consultant from the business community had shared with them the “blueberry story.” All reported virtually the same thing. The story goes like this:

Public school educators are like blueberry processing plants. Except that in a blueberry plant you have workers on each side of the conveyor belt as the berries pass by, and they pick out the defective ones and discard them. All “No Child Left Behind” is saying is that in public schools you can’t discard the defective students who come down the school conveyor belt. You have to bring them all up to a minimum standard before they reach the end of the belt.

I checked with the teachers and administrators who told me this story, and they confirmed that the word “defective” was indeed used to describe children. It is also used in a more detailed on-line version of the story (http://www.jamievollmer.com/blue_story.html). Of course, it just so happens that these “defectives” who are not up to standards in the U.S., these deficient “raw materials,” are overwhelmingly poor, black, Latino/Latina, and Appalachian youth, and NCLB is about making them at least minimally functional before they enter the work force. The collective memory of the word “defective” thus radically reconnects the past and the present in a way that casts current practices in a new light.

Before mapping-out the history of eugenics in education, Winfield devotes one entire chapter to develop a theory of collective memory, and another chapter to popular media and mass culture as popularizers and commodifiers of collective memory. Historians of education may find this a bit too much space developed to theory, and it does seem somewhat detached from the historical parts of the book. But it will be of interest to those in curriculum studies. Winfield draws upon a number of theorists of collective memory, although most are not well known in the curriculum field. According to the French philosopher Maurice Halbwachs (1952/1992), who Winfield says anticipated Foucault’s thinking, collective memory provides a “structure” and “model” to which individual memory conforms. Furthermore, the capacity of collective memory to endure is understood to be dependent on the social power of the group that holds it—an idea which links collective memory to both Foucault’s power/knowledge matrix and Gramsci’s conception of hegemony as a collective commonsense. Winfield then turns to Paul Connerton (1989) for a

typology of memory as personal, cognitive, and habit. She observes that “personal memories are important for understanding how ideologies such as eugenics can become part of an individual’s worldview,” and how they relate to identity formation. Cognitive memory includes that organized corpus of knowledge transmitted to young people through schooling that includes “whatever society deems fit to teach at any given time” (24). Habit memory is performative. It mobilizes the way people habitually interact with others and structure their lives—something consistent with Dewey’s idea that democratic education should involve practicing the habits of caring, equity and inclusiveness—as opposed, for example, to the habits associated with domination and submission, privilege and marginalization.

Winfield’s theoretical discussion indicates the potential power of the concept of collective memory in educational research. But the language of collective memory also needs to be questioned, for the irony is that those on the political right have also made good use of this term—including eugenicists. So it is important to distinguish a democratic version of collective memory from politically rightist versions. As Jacques Derrida (1989) has observed, the German word *Geist*, or spirit, implies a collective spirit, unconsciousness, and memory of a people—specifically the German people (see Carlson, 2005a). Of course, this Germanic “thinking” of the collective memory of a “race” became quite easily articulated with the ideology of National Socialism in the 1930s. My point here is not to dismiss the idea of collective memory. As I have said, it is a powerful metaphor for sedimentation of meaning in language, which connects our present thinking and acting with a history of usage, and with a cultural politics. However, if language is a collective memory, it is not a unified memory, of one “people.” Rather it is a language constructed out of dialectical opposition, contestation, and resistance, and a language which is inherently open to new meanings and uses. This means that there is not one but many overlapping collective memories, including collective memories in conflict.

At the same time, some collective memories have very deep roots in the soil of Western culture and so they are resilient and may never entirely disappear. Winfield observes of orthodox Marxists that they believed ideology to be a “pathological” worldview that was bound to wither away through the demystifying effects of critical reason (16). In contrast, the collective memory of eugenics is never entirely erased. It is like the virus in Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1948). It may go into a dormant phase and seem to disappear for a period of time. But it will resurface and flare up again again, at least if we fail to “keep endless watch on ourselves” (229). The trick is to remember this memory of eugenics in order to ensure that it is not our future, a kind of memory work to stay on guard, to be wide-awake to the possibility of new types of eugenics

and proto-fascism in the new world order. This is why it is important that teachers and others working in public education take responsibility for learning this history.

Some of this history has been reported elsewhere, but Winfield does a useful job of reviewing and assessing it. She refers, for example, to Steven Selden's (1999, 2007) oft-cited quantitative and qualitative analysis of biology textbooks used between 1914 and 1948. White Selden found traces of eugenics influence in all major biology textbook series, the most consistently eugenicist in its narrative structure was the Henry Holt series published between 1921 and 1963, and authored by Truman Jesse Moon. That series consistently presented a broad narrative to its adolescent readers which Selden identified as a "narrative of adjustment." Rooted in a reform version of eugenics, the text presented evidence from twin studies and IQ testing to support the contention that each individual's heredity limits their potential for achievement. Young people were encouraged to accept their fixed heredity and to adjust their academic and work-related goals accordingly, with the help of course of trained school counselors.

One of the stories that Selden reports was repeated in 60 percent of her biology textbooks, and which Winfield also discusses in some length, is attributed to the educational psychologist Henry Goddard. In *The Kallikak Family: A Study in the Heredity of Feeblemindedness* (1912), Goddard claimed to present a genealogical study of the descendants of revolutionary war era American named Martin Kallikak. Goddard traced two lines of genealogy from this one man: One that resulted from an affair with a barmaid, and the other out of his marriage to a good, upstanding Quaker woman. The former "dalliance" supposedly produced hundreds of the "worst sort" of people—morally, intellectually, and and physically degenerate. One of the things that gets taken for granted here is that only a person who was feeble-minded would be a barmaid, since feeble-mindedness was associated with immorality and degeneracy. Meanwhile, out of Kallikak's marriage to a good, Quaker woman, children of a higher type emerged. The lesson for adolescent boys, of course, is not to sleep around with "barmaids," and hold out for the equivalent of a Quaker woman. Winfield observes that the Kallikak story associates the science of eugenics with "public depiction of the dangers of wanton breeding." Because the story was used in both academic and popular texts, it "provides an apt illustration of the way eugenicists popularized eugenic ideology for the public" (68).

Many teachers, education professors, and other educators who like to consider themselves "progressives" (and I include myself in this group) must cringe to hear progressivism and eugenics used almost synonymously in Winfield's book. But as I have argued more fully elsewhere, this should also give us cause to

question the mythology of progress out of which modern progressivism was forged, and the kind of progress progressivism promised—at least in its dominant or hegemonic forms (Carlson, 2007). Winfield uses Herbert Kliebard’s typology of progressives in the early 20th century to show how eugenics thinking was largely taken for granted among early reformers—except among social reconstructionists such as Dewey and Counts. As for the other three groups of progressives Kliebard identifies—humanists, developmentalists, and social efficiency progressives—Winfield links them all to eugenics in one way or another. She associates humanist progressives with the theory of mental discipline, which implied that mind is a muscle of sorts. Particularly for those with low “native” ability, mental discipline theory implied that the mental muscle could only be developed through “monotonous drill, harsh discipline, and verbatim recitation” (106). In my view, the link between humanism and mental disciplinarianism is not as strong as Winfield implies, and in some important ways humanists have challenged mental disciplinarianism. Something similar can be said about the second group of progressives Winfield analyzes: the developmental progressives, associated with the idea of “child study.” Winfield argues that the child study movement was consistent with a eugenics concern with a comprehensive, individualized, “mental diagnosis” to identify both superior and defective youth (107). Of course, other developmentalists such as Vygotsky (and to a lesser extent Piaget and Erikson) have provided a basis for a social constructivist theory that appreciates intelligence as something developed pragmatically within the context of culture and through the use of language more than as something assigned by “nature.” The third group of early progressives—associated with social efficiency—are more difficult to defend from a democratic progressive standpoint. Social efficiency progressives, according to Winfield, “believed ability was innate and that it was the job of education to successfully sort students and match them to the vocations for which they were best suited” (108). One might argue that is still the hegemonic commonsense in public school reform. And if we are still in the age of social efficiency progressivism, is it possible we are also still in the age of eugenics? For Winfield, the answer is clearly yes. She recognizes that many readers will probably dismiss her arguments for not being more “positive” about all the progress that has been made in education and for “wallowing in the negative”—something she says that critical theorists are often accused of doing. But she responds that the very desire for a “feel good” narrative is part of the collective memory that blocks us from facing the truth about the nation’s history (150).

While Winfield draws primarily upon secondary sources, she does include a chapter that presents her original research on ability and degeneracy in North Carolina public schools, from the 1930s up through

Brown vs. Board of Education in the 1950s. This is a fascinating and disturbing history of how public school teachers were “schooled” in the science of identifying defectives and degenerates as well as the gifted, how vocational education courses were tailored to the aptitude of “morons” and “imbeciles,” and how the ideology of intelligence testing was used to separate “Negroes” from “Whites” even after schools were desegregated in the 1950s. Winfield reports, amazingly, that in 1954 in North Carolina nearly 75 percent of African American students were classified as imbeciles or morons with significantly sub-normal intelligence and thus limited to vocational tracks. Intelligence tests, according to Winfield, “proved the expectations and therefore school officials could in good conscience claim to have provided the best most ‘appropriate’ education possible” (142). After desegregation, things did not change substantially for the better for most African American youth in the state, who were more likely to be categorized as low ability, labeled emotionally disturbed, and assigned to low-skill vocational programs by white teachers, administrators, and counselors.

In the face of this history and collective memory, Winfield is neither optimistic nor pessimistic about the future. But she is hopeful, based on a recognition that we need not automatically and unreflectively repeat the past, even if we may not be able to totally sever ourselves from it either. Her hope lies not in “waiting for the children to revolt,” since that is our job not theirs’, and our job begins by looking back and questioning. “Where did testing come from? ...What would happen if we tried to look at the present and the past, simultaneously?” (164). This is a hope that is tempered by an awareness that culture is not a blank slate and that the past is still with us, but also that by questioning the past we need not repeat it. This is what I have called a “hope without illusion” that emerges out of the dialectic between Gramsci’s “pessimism of the intellect” and “optimism of the will,” between a critical and reasoned assessment of the forces that stand in the way of a democratic reconstruction of public education and public life and the human will to strive against great odds to build a better world (Carlson, 2005b). Winfield’s history of eugenics in education is a testament to such hope.

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