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Book Review: The Culture Factory by Stanley K. Schultz

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unreal expectations, and why

STANLEY K. SCHULTZ. *The Culture Factory: Boston Public Schools, 1789-1860*. New York: Oxford University Press (Urban Life in America Series), 1973. pp xviii, 394. \$11.50.

If the latest writing on American public education has a common theme, it is that the public schools are not living up to the aims society has set for them. Public schools, Jensen and others tell us, don't have much effect on inequality in American society. John Holt says that schools are terribly repressive places and that the children who are forced to go there hate them. A recent documentary film, *High School*, shows how authoritarian and arbitrary schools can be. The implication in all of this material is that sometime in the unspecified past the schools performed in a truly admirable way. The schools assimilated the immigrants, educated and transformed the poor and accomplished this in such a way that teachers and pupils alike remember them with affection and admiration.

Schultz argues that this perception is a myth. "I became increasingly annoyed," he writes in the preface, "by present-day pontifications about public education as the principal weapon in the 'war on poverty,' for I had read too many similar statements by Bostonians in the 1830's and Chicagoans in the 1880's about schooling as the panacea for all social ills." In the nineteenth century as in the twentieth, "too many citizens seemed to place most of their hopes for social order in the basket of public education." In short, Schultz is saying that Americans have always expected more from the public schools than they could provide. *The Culture Factory* helps to explain why we have had such expectations.

In 1789 Boston established the nation's first public school system open to the children of all residents and administered by elected officials. For the next three decades the school system limped along, hindered in part by a lack of financial support from the city government and by the requirement that pupils had to be able to read and write before they could be admitted to the school system. In the meantime Boston had grown into a large urban center, and a number of prominent Bostonians concluded the problems associated

with the city had weakened both the family and the church. Since these two institutions were the pillars that guaranteed the stability of society, something would have to take their place. According to Schultz, "Boston and New England educators affirmed that public schools had to replace the family as the chief institution for raising children to responsible adulthood." (p. 67) The school also had to supplant the church as the chief agency for the moral instruction of youth. Thus Bostonians expected the public schools to remedy the ills of urban growth in their city.

As the city grew, it had to come to grips with the problem of increasing enrollments in its public schools. Impressed with the efficiency of New England factories the educators took these industrial establishments as models of organization "for retooling the schools to cope with such urban problems as population density, residential mobility, and the increasing numbers of rural native Americans and foreign immigrants whose arrival required innovative methods of assimilation to the routines of urban life." (p. 104)

The Culture Factory is a major contribution to urban history, the history of education, and the social history of the United States. As such historians, sociologists, and educators should find this book worthy of a careful reading. Historians will find here a close look at the workings of a nineteenth-century American city, while sociologists will see a sophisticated explanation of some of the complexities of one well-known American institution. Educators may take some comfort from the knowledge that the problems of public school administration are as old as the system itself.

This is a solidly and thoroughly researched book written in a pleasant, accurate, and unobtrusive style. The main difficulty is its length. The last three chapters repeat much of the material in the earlier parts of the book and seem to be "tacked on." The topics discussed could have been integrated into the earlier chapters, producing a shorter and more coherent work. On the whole, however, this is an excellent book and deserves a wide circulation.

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