"Very insightful and very readable...an authoritative yet manageable analysis of the current state of public education." —*Choice*

POPULAR EDUCATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Lawrence A. Cremin

POPULAR EDUCATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Lawrence A. Cremin

HARPER & ROW, PUBLISHERS, New York
Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco
London, Singapore, Sydney, Tokyo, Toronto

The Inglis and Burton Lectures
Harvard Graduate School of Education
March 1989

FIRST EDITION

Designer: Barbara DuPree Knowles

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Cremin, Lawrence Arthur, 1925–
Popular education and its discontents/Lawrence A. Cremin.
p. cm.
"The Inglis and Burton lectures, Harvard Graduate School of Education, March 1989."
Includes index.
ISBN 0-06-016270-8
1. Education and state—United States. 2. Education—Philosophy.
3. Educational sociology—United States. 4. Education—United States—History—20th century. I. Title. II. Title: Inglis and Burton lectures.
LC89.C7 1989
370'.1—dc20 89-45644

90 91 92 93 94 CC/RRD 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

POPULAR EDUCATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR:

American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876–1980
American Education: The National Experience, 1783–1876
American Education: The Colonial Experience, 1607–1783
Traditions of American Education
Public Education
The Genius of American Education
The Wonderful World of Ellwood Patterson Cubberley
The Transformation of the School
The American Common School

PREFACE

I was deeply grateful in the autumn of 1987 for the invitation from Dean Patricia Albjerg Graham and her colleagues to give the Inglis and Burton Lectures at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I had recently completed *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876–1980,* the final volume of my trilogy on the history of American education; and, beyond the high honor implicit in the invitation, it occurred to me that the lectures would provide a very special opportunity to reflect upon certain present-day problems of American education in the context of American educational traditions. The lectures were delivered on March 2, 9, and 16, 1989, and the present volume sets forth their substance in expanded form. It stands, in a sense, as a coda to the trilogy.

I ended *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience* with the argument that there had been three abiding characteristics of American education—first, *popularization,* the tendency to make education widely available in forms that are increasingly accessible to diverse peoples; second, *multitudinousness,* the proliferation and multiplication of institu-

tions to provide that wide availability and that increasing accessibility; and third, *politicization,* the effort to solve certain social problems indirectly through education instead of directly through politics. None of these characteristics has been uniquely American—we can see them at work in any number of other countries—and yet the three in tandem have marked American education uniquely. As I argued in the final volume of the trilogy, they have been associated with some of the formidable achievements of American education at the same time that they have created some of its most intractable problems. It is this combination of achievements and problems and its bearing on present-day educational policy that I explore in the essays that follow.

The first essay deals with the rising chorus of dissatisfaction, especially with regard to academic standards, that has accompanied the popularization of education in the United States since the middle of the nineteenth century. My argument there is that the ideal of popular schooling is as radical an ideal as Americans have embraced; that we have made great progress in moving toward the ideal, however imperfect the institutions we have established to achieve it; and that it is essential for our kind of society to continue the effort. I argue further, however, that our recent assessments of how far we have come, especially as those assessments have been expressed in the policy literature of the 1980s, have been seriously flawed by a failure to understand the extraordinary complexity of education—a failure to grasp the impossibility of defining a good school apart from its social and intellectual context, the impossibility of even comprehending the processes and effects of schooling and, in fact, its successes and failures apart from their embedment in a larger ecology of education that includes what families, television broadcasters, workplaces, and a host of other institutions are contributing at any given time.

The second essay explores the radical changes that have occurred in those nonschool institutions of education since World War II, especially in the education provided by families and workplaces as well as the education (and miseducation) provided by television. My argument there is that we need to recognize that schools and colleges cannot accomplish the educational tasks of a modern postindustrial civilization on their own, that a broader approach to education is demanded, one that considers schools and colleges as crucially important but not solely responsible for teaching and learning. And I point to some of the issues that seem to me inescapably involved in the crafting of a more comprehensive set of educational policies for our time.

The third essay examines the longstanding tendency of Americans to try to solve certain social problems indirectly through education rather than directly through politics. My argument there is that this phenomenon places enormous burdens on the schools and colleges, of millennial hopes and expectations, at the same time that it involves education in the most fundamental aspirations of the society. I argue further that the phenomenon by its very nature calls for a much more extensive body of tested knowledge about the institutions and processes of education than is now available to those charged with the development of educational policy and the conduct of educational practice. In the absence of such knowledge, I believe it is folly to talk about excellence in American education.

I should like to express my appreciation to Patricia Albjerg Graham and Loren R. Graham for their gracious encouragement and warm hospitality during my several visits to Harvard in March 1989. In addition, I owe a special debt of gratitude to my colleague Ellen Condliffe Lagemann. She and I have co-taught courses in the history of American

education and contemporary educational policy during the past ten years, from which much of the substance of *Popular Education and Its Discontents* has been drawn; and in any number of instances in the development of the material it was quite impossible to determine where my ideas ended and hers began. She was also kind enough to read and comment upon successive drafts of the manuscript. The book has surely benefited from her wisdom, though responsibility for its shortcomings is solely mine. Sarah Henry Lederman assisted me throughout with the research, and Alissa Beth Burstein typed more versions of the manuscript than she would care to remember. Finally, I should like to acknowledge the generous support of the Carnegie Corporation of New York for my research and writing over the past quarter century. No scholar has ever had more patient or steadfast encouragement.

L.A.C.

CONTENTS

POPULAR SCHOOLING

Every nation, and therefore every national system of education, has the defects of its qualities. —SIR MICHAEL SADLER, "Impressions of American Education"

I

The popularization of American schools and colleges since the end of World War II has been nothing short of phenomenal, involving an unprecedented broadening of access, an unprecedented diversification of curricula, and an unprecedented extension of public control. In 1950, 34 percent of the American population twenty-five years of age or older had completed at least four years of high school, while 6 percent of that population had completed at least four years of college. By 1985, 74 percent of the American population twenty-five years of age or older had completed at least four years of high school, while 19 percent had completed at least four years of college. During that same thirty-five year period, school and college curricula broadened and diversified tremendously, in part because of the existential fact of more diverse student bodies with more diverse needs, interests, abilities, and styles of learning; in part because of the accelerating growth of knowledge and new fields of knowledge; in part because of the rapid development of the American economy and its demands on

school systems; and in part because of the transformation of America's role in the world. The traditional subjects could be studied in a greater range of forms; the entry of new subjects into curricula provided a greater range of choice; and the effort to combine subjects into new versions of general education created a greater range of requirements. Finally, the rapid increase in the amount of state and federal funds invested in the schools and colleges, coupled with the rising demand for access on the part of segments of the population traditionally held at the margins, brought a corresponding development of the instruments of public oversight and control—local community boards, state coordinating boards, court-appointed masters and monitors, and federal attorneys with the authority to enforce federal regulations. In the process, American schools became at the same time both more centralized and more decentralized.[1]

It was in many ways a remarkable achievement, of which Americans could be justifiably proud. Yet it seemed to bring with it a pervasive sense of failure. During the 1970s, there was widespread suspicion that American students were falling behind in international competition, that while more people were going to school for ever longer periods of time, they were learning less and less. And in the 1980s, that suspicion seemed to be confirmed by the strident rhetoric of the National Commission on Excellence in Education. Recall the commission's charges in *A Nation at Risk:*

> We report to the American people that while we can take justifiable pride in what our schools and colleges have historically accomplished and contributed to the United States and the well-being of its people, the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a genera-

> tion ago has begun to happen—others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.
>
> If an unfriendly power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war. As it stands, we have allowed this to happen to ourselves.[2]

Now, there have always been critics of the schools and colleges. From the very beginning of the public school crusade in the nineteenth century, there were those who thought that popular schooling was at best a foolish idea and at worst a subversive idea. The editor of the Philadelphia *National Gazette* argued in the 1830s that free universal education was nothing more than a harebrained scheme of social radicals, and claimed that it was absolutely illegal and immoral to tax one part of the community to educate the children of another. And beyond such wholesale opposition, even those who favored the idea of universal education thought that the results were unimpressive. The educator Frederick Packard lamented that the schools were failing dismally in even their most fundamental tasks. He charged on the basis of personal visits to classrooms that nine out of ten youngsters were unable to read a newspaper, keep a simple debit and credit account, or draft an ordinary business letter. The writer James Fenimore Cooper was ready to grant that the lower schools were developing a greater range of talent than was the case in most other countries, but he pointed to what he thought was the superficiality of much of the work of the colleges and bemoaned the absence of genuine accomplishment in literature and the arts. And the French commentator Alexis de Tocqueville, echoing the English critic Sydney Smith, observed that America had produced few writers of distinction, no great artists, and not a single first-class poet. Amer-

icans were a practical people, he concluded, but not very speculative. They could boast many lawyers but no jurists, many good workers but few imaginative inventors.[3]

By the early years of the twentieth century, as some elementary education was becoming nearly universal and as secondary education was beginning to be popularized, the criticism became broader and sharper. A writer in *Gunton's Magazine* charged that as schooling had spread it had been made too easy and too entertaining. "The mental nourishment we spoonfeed our children," he observed, "is not only minced but peptonized so that their brains digest it without effort and without benefit and the result is the anaemic intelligence of the average American schoolchild." And a Maryland farmer named Francis Livesey became so outraged at the whole idea of free universal education that he organized a society called the Herbert Spencer Education Club with two classes of membership—one for those seeking the complete abolition of public schooling and one for those willing to settle for the repeal of all compulsory attendance laws.[4]

With respect to secondary and higher education, critics such as Irving Babbitt, Abraham Flexner, and Robert Hutchins leveled blast after blast against the relaxation of language requirements, the overcrowding of curricula with narrow technical courses, and the willingness to permit students to work out their own programs of study. The spread of educational opportunity in the United States, they observed, reflected less a spirit of democratic fairness than a willingness to prolong adolescence. The result was an inferior educational product at every level—high school programs were too watered down and fragmented; the colleges were graduating men and women unable to write and spell a decent English and pitifully ignorant of mathematics, the sciences, and modern languages; and the graduate

schools were crowded with students of mediocre ability who lacked the slightest appreciation of higher culture.[5]

Even those foreign observers who were prone to admire the American commitment to popular schooling wrung their hands at what they saw as the widespread absence of high intellectual expectations, particularly at the high school and college levels. Thus, Sir Michael Sadler, the director of the Office of Special Inquiries and Reports of the British government, and a great friend of the United States, noted an absence of intellectual discipline and rigor in American schools—too much candy and ice cream, he liked to say, and not enough oatmeal porridge. And Erich Hylla, a member of the German ministry of education who had spent a year in residence at Teachers College, Columbia University, and who translated Dewey's *Democracy and Education* into German, lamented what he perceived as the disjointedness and superficiality of secondary and undergraduate study and the resultant poor achievement of American students.[6]

As popularization advanced at every level of schooling after World War II, the drumbeat of dissatisfaction grew louder. Arthur Bestor and Hyman Rickover argued during the 1950s and 1960s that popular schooling had been literally subverted by an interlocking directorate of education professors, state education officials, and professional association leaders; they charged that the basics had been ignored in favor of a trivial curriculum parading under the name of Life Adjustment Education and that as a result American freedom was in jeopardy. Robert Hutchins continued his mordant criticisms of the 1930s, contending that the so-called higher learning purveyed by the colleges and universities was neither higher nor learning but rather a collection of trade school courses intended to help young people win the material success that Americans prized so

highly. And again, even those foreign observers who were disposed to admire the American commitment to popular education now made it something of a litany to comment on what they perceived to be the low standards and mediocre achievements of American students. The English political economist Harold Laski noted the readiness of American parents to expect too little of their youngsters and the readiness of the youngsters to see interest in abstract ideas as somewhat strange at best, with the result that American college graduates seemed to him to be two to three years less intellectually mature than their English or French counterparts. And the Scottish political scientist D. W. Brogan was quite prepared to grant that the American public school had been busy Americanizing immigrants for several generations at least—he liked to refer to the public school as "the formally unestablished national church of the United States"—but he saw the price of that emphasis on social goals as an insufficient attention to intellectual goals. For all their talk of preparing the young for life, Brogan maintained, Americans were not being realistic about what life would actually demand during the second half of the twentieth century.[7]

Within such a context, Paul Copperman's allegations of the late 1970s that Americans of that generation would be the first whose educational skills would not surpass or equal or even approach those of their parents, which the National Commission on Excellence in Education quoted approvingly in *A Nation at Risk,* and Allan Bloom's assertions of the late 1980s that higher education had failed democracy and impoverished the souls of American students were scarcely surprising or even original. Why all the fuss, then? How, if at all, did the criticisms of the 1980s differ from those that had come before? I believe they differed in three important ways: they were more vigorous and pervasive; they were

putatively buttressed by data from cross-national studies of educational achievement; and, coming at a time when Americans seemed to be feeling anxious about their place in the world, they gave every indication of being potentially more dangerous and destructive.[8]

II

The argument over standards is surely as old as the world itself. Just about the time Adam first whispered to Eve that they were living through an age of transition, the Serpent doubtless issued the first complaint that academic standards were beginning to decline. The charge of decline, of course, can embrace many different meanings and serve as a surrogate for a wide variety of discontents, only one of which may be that young people are actually learning less. As often as not, it suggests that young people are learning less of what a particular commentator or group of commentators believe they ought to be learning, and the "ought" derives ultimately from a conception of education and of the educated person.

One can observe this in the very different views of John Dewey and Robert Hutchins. For Dewey, education was a process of growth that had no end beyond itself, a process in which individuals were constantly extending their knowledge, informing their judgments, refining their sensibilities, and illuminating their moral choices. For Hutchins, education was nothing more or less than the cultivation of the intellect, the training of the mind, and there was a group of what he called "permanent studies" that had long been of proven value in achieving that end, namely, the arts of reading, writing, thinking, and speaking, together with mathematics, which he saw as "the best exemplar of the