

# Identities and Contours: An Approach To Educational History<sup>1</sup>

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Introducing *City of Words*, a study of recent American fiction, Tony Tanner writes:

I shall try to show that there is an abiding dream in American literature that an unpatterned, unconditioned life is possible, in which your movements and stillnesses, choices, and repudiations are all your own; and that there is also an abiding American dread that someone else is patterning your life, that there are all sorts of invisible plots afoot to rob you of your autonomy of thought and action, that conditioning is ubiquitous.<sup>1</sup>

This duality of dream and dread has haunted many of our writers since the days of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Until the present day and the appearance of new or revisionist educational history, it has not found expression in the literature of education. Educators and literary artists have traditionally looked upon the culture through different perspectives: educators, from the vantage point of concern with socialization and "improvement"; writers, from the vantage point of concern with the plight of the person in an ambiguous, often threatening world. Educational reformers, most particularly, have given voice to what they chose to believe was a "public philosophy," a culture-wide consensus of opinion; whereas artists have concentrated on what Harry Levin calls "the dark other half of the situation, and

their distinctive attitude has been introspection, dissent or irony." Levin, a literary historian and critic, goes on:

Where the voice of the majority is by definition affirmative, the spirit of independence is likeliest to manifest itself by employing the negative: by saying *no* in thunder—as Melville wrote to Hawthorne—though bidden by the devil himself to say yes.<sup>2</sup>

That "no" is not to be understood as either didactic or political. The independent artist is not interested in remaking institutions. Forming his own perceptions of reality, he is attempting (in gravity, ardor, and sometimes in despair) to provoke others to see for themselves, to order their own experiences of what it is to be alive and to exist in history.

Today's revisionist historians—Colin Greer, Clarence Karier, Michael Katz, Joel Spring, Paul Violas, and others like them—are saying "no in thunder." In the context of educational history they are employing the negative for the sake of exposing the myth of the common school. They define the school, therefore, as "a vast social machine for the imposition of values and control,"<sup>3</sup> rather than as a means of promoting equality of opportunity, popularizing knowledge, teaching the young to learn how to learn. Within existing structures, the revisionists assert, legitimate educational reform is and always has been

impossible. Any attempt to teach values or to do what is called "humanistic" teaching is, by definition, an effort to impose social controls. Katz wants the school to concentrate on teaching fundamental skills and to exclude any "conscious attempt to formulate social attitudes."<sup>4</sup> The assumption seems to be that any concern with values, moral issues, or even cognitive awarenesses, is inevitably transformed into "formulation," whether the teacher knows it or not. Given the nature of our society, it is implied, given the pressure of our institutions, there is no hope of freeing students to choose themselves. Joel Spring is even more explicit. Once the power of the family, church, and community began waning at the beginning of this century, he writes, the school became "the agency charged with the responsibility of maintaining social order and cohesion and of instilling individuals with codes of conduct and social values that would insure the stability of existing social relationships."<sup>5</sup> If this is the case, the teacher within the public school has no alternative but to be an accomplice of the system.

There is, I think, a doubleness in revisionist educational history. On the one hand, having broken with moralistic approaches, the new historians are disclosing phenomena long hidden by official pieties. Using techniques unknown in Ellwood Cubberley's "wonderful world,"

some of them have disclosed relationships between social structures and social purposes, between demographic shifts and human plights never examined before. They have demonstrated the long neglect of pluralism, the maltreatment of immigrants and ethnic groups, the curious conservatism of municipal and school reforms. Without the new history, we might not have begun looking at the connections between schools and politics, education and social stratification, endemic racism. We might not have confronted the rationalizations inherent in professionalism. We might still be treating the battle against district control as an archetypical heroic battle, one absolutely necessary if the Good were to be attained. It is clear enough that the new history has effectively invalidated what Lawrence Cremin calls the "narrowly institutional"<sup>6</sup> approach, in the light of which contemporary writing seems so liberating and so sound.

At the same time, however, the conceptual focus strikes me as peculiarly narrow. The concern is almost exclusively with the patterning of presumably malleable, passive individuals—and the evils of social control. The distinctions among types of control are overlooked. Too little is said about the different ways in which individuals internalize control, experience the influences of community, order their own life-worlds. Nothing is said about variations in social reality, or the possibility of individuals transforming it. The *problem* of social existence is overlooked along with the inescapability of relationship for those who must learn to be human in a not always sustaining world. Yet these too are issues in human history, even when conditioning seems to be ubiquitous. The persons who compose the masses have chosen as often as they have blindly acquiesced, even if they have chosen to conform, to acquiesce. The so-called reformers—fearful, troubled, highly principled men—made decisions for their own good reasons, reasons ordinarily relevant to the world as it disclosed itself to them. We still know relatively little about their selective perceptions, the constructs actually

available for interpreting the "real," the "others" most significant in their lives.

Because the school system has become the exemplar of all systems in revisionists' eyes, the very archetype of bureaucracy, differences among schools are glossed over, as are their roles as reflectors and producers of values and beliefs. Almost as if they were expiating the sin of being educationists, the new historians seem compelled to discover the primary threats to personality at the heart of education. This has led on occasion to a neglect of multiple causation, to an often groundless determinism. I find encouraging the dawning interest in exploring new connections within and around the schools, the studies of persons' behavior and consciousness in other places, the *different* responses to class status, even to social control.

Largely preoccupied with images of monoliths and patternings, nevertheless, the revisionists see all-pervasive victimization; they see us all submerged in a system we never chose. "It is not mere selection," writes W. H. Walsh, "but selection in accordance with criteria of importance, that the expositor brings into history. . . ."<sup>7</sup> "Our concerns shape the questions that we ask," says Michael Katz, "and, as a consequence, determine what we select from the virtually unlimited supply of 'facts'."<sup>8</sup> The criteria being brought into history by the revisionists are partly derived from such constructs as those utilized by Paul Goodman and Theodore Roszak, both of whom Katz credits for affecting his concerns. Goodman, of course, believed that compulsory education was a "universal trap" and that the schools "less and less represent any human values, but simply adjustment to a mechanical system."<sup>9</sup> Roszak wrote at length about "centralized bigness," the "regime of expertise," and a technocratic system which generates its own legitimation.<sup>10</sup> Both were centrally concerned with the person and his survival, either by means of work, wandering, self-motivated inquiry, or (in Roszak's terms) through the proclamation of "a new heaven and a new earth so vast, so marvelous that the inordinate demands of

technical expertise must of necessity withdraw in the presence of such splendor to a subordinate and marginal status in the lives of men."<sup>11</sup>

There is a sense, too, in which the new history may have been affected by the same forces that have caused a general rebellion against formalism and moved novelists, as well as visual artists, to reject imprisoning structures and seek out novel forms. The old forms, in the view of writers and painters, not only constrain and inhibit; they *deform*; they falsify what exists. In a mood somehow similar, the new educational historians describe the distortions caused by bureaucratic structuring and "an implausible ideology ever more divorced from reality."<sup>12</sup> This ideology, in its turn, distorts the perception of those who espouse it. They then go on to defile the identities of those they are assigned to teach. Consciously or not, the revisionists are portraying social reality as many modern novelists do. The overwhelming structures begin to resemble the "new machines, new forms of organization, new ways of increasing efficiency"<sup>13</sup> that have taken over the country in Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano*. They evoke the all-encompassing bureaucracy, the syndicate in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*. ("They all belong to the syndicate," Milo said. "And they know that what's good for the syndicate is good for the country, because that's what makes Sammy run.")<sup>14</sup> They are like the mental hospital, as perceived by Big Chief in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*:<sup>15</sup> a false, automated environment where processed pictures of the "real" are forever being projected on the walls. All these metaphors—machines, syndicates, hospitals—point towards rigidity and alienating controls. In a world so dominated, there is scarcely any hope for the individual. If he rebels, he will be reconditioned, lobotomized, or forced to run away to save his life.

This response to the technological society is in many ways warranted. There is no question of the threat to the person implicit both in technology and in what Hannah Arendt calls "rule by Nobody"—or "the

of an intricate system of bur-  
rows in which no men, neither one  
nor the best, neither the few nor the  
many, can be held responsi-  
ble."16 The sociologists have  
for a long time talked of the inter-  
nalization of external "social facts"  
and their transformation into what  
Emile Durkheim described as con-  
straints upon the person—another  
way of describing social control.17  
The 19th century pioneers of school  
reform obviously were convinced  
that control had to be imposed on  
human beings, most particularly  
the alien and the poor. Without such  
control, social stability could never  
be achieved, nor could "American-  
ization." The problem of the early  
20th century progressives is far  
more complex and multi-dimension-  
al, in spite of their unabashed grad-  
ualist orientations. John Dewey's  
commitment to what he called social  
control is clear enough; but it cannot  
be assumed, in consequence, that his  
overriding purpose was to perpetu-  
ate existing class structures and  
maintain the prevailing system of  
ownership. Nor can it be assumed  
that he developed his theories of  
education in the same mood and  
with the same fears as Horace Mann  
or Henry Barnard in time past.

Clarence Kariet, in an almost  
paradigmatic revisionist treatment  
of liberalism, condemns John Dewey  
and his fellow-progressives for the  
present crisis in our culture:

In a very real sense the crisis is a  
result of both the success and the  
failure of the enlightenment phi-  
losophy of progress. The collective  
side of that philosophy with its  
scientifically organized tech-  
nology and computer-managed  
bureaucracy has become a reality;  
on the other side, however, indi-  
vidual freedom, dignity, and well-  
being have not fared so well.  
Caught up in collective institu-  
tional progress, the individual  
has become a means rather than  
an end to social order.18.

Computer-managed bureaucracy  
must be granted; so must the sci-  
entifically organized technology.  
But what solid evidence exists for  
the claim that there is a causal con-  
nection between Dewey's "cultural  
participatory perspective" and the  
staving off of revolutionary change?  
What evidence exists for the claim

that the masses were so indoctrin-  
ated with the uses of the scientific  
method as the key to progress that  
they readily acquiesced "in the face  
of political, economic, and military  
power"?19 What evidence is there  
for the claim that Dewey was able  
to anticipate the corporate state and  
was, for that reason above all others,  
stressing the values of cooperative  
intelligence?

C. Vann Woodward once wrote  
with respect to our attitudes towards  
history:

In moods of disenchantment and  
cynicism and self-criticism, Amer-  
icans have not contrived nihilistic  
or anarchist theories but have re-  
interpreted their past again, this  
time in an iconoclastic spirit, de-  
bunked their heroes, ridiculed the  
Puritan theocracy, and dwelt on  
the human motives of the Found-  
ing Fathers and the Constitutional  
Framers. Other moods, ranging  
from complacency to hysterical  
insecurity, have registered them-  
selves in laboured reinterpretations  
of American history.20

The revisionists' approach to the  
history of the progressive era is any-  
thing but iconoclastic. In fact, this  
may be the first time that historians  
have contrived admittedly anarchist  
theories; and it is interesting that  
they should have been developed  
in the context of educational history.  
The explanation may have to do  
with the long persistence of a kind  
of educational hagiography. It may  
be that iconoclastic reinterpretations  
came too late, considering the  
inequities and injustices that multi-  
plied as the years went by, consid-  
ering the "legend" of the public  
school. In any case, whether due to  
preoccupations with the danger of  
manipulations or to a generalized  
disgust with school systems *qua*  
systems, the new historians have  
pursued increasingly anarchist  
themes. This means that they have  
looked upon progressivism and,  
most particularly, Dewey's concep-  
tion of experience and social control  
through a perspective founded in an  
opposition (to use Joel Spring's  
terminology) to "the existence of  
the state in any form because it de-  
stroys individual autonomy."21  
Beginning with the conviction that  
autonomy is threatened by most  
traditional rules, regulations, and

forms of organization, then, the re-  
visionists are bound to focus upon  
social control as the source of the  
damage done by schools.

There is some irony in the fact  
that Dewey and other progressives  
believed that they were rebelling  
against waste and exploitation, as  
well as against "formalism" in the  
early years of this century.22 Con-  
cerned about "the constraints of pre-  
vious morality and ideology," they  
honestly believed they were attend-  
ing to real social problems and to  
those forces that hindered human  
growth. As Dewey saw it, the most  
damaging constraints were cogni-  
tive ones. The freedoms so long  
fought for in this country meant  
little if they were not backed up, he  
thought, by "intelligence and in-  
formed conviction"; and so he con-  
centrated on creating classroom situ-  
ations which would elicit both. He  
saw individualism as "a product of  
the relaxation of the grip of the  
authority of custom and tradition as  
standards of belief."23 He saw co-  
operative intelligence as a way of  
reconstructing vitally shared experi-  
ence, and shared experience as  
educative for those who participated  
and sought to effect connections  
within it. "To have the same ideas  
about things which others have,"  
he wrote, "is to be like-minded with  
them, and thus to be really members  
of a social group, is therefore to  
attach the same meanings to things  
and to acts which others attach.  
Otherwise there is no common un-  
derstanding, and no community  
life. But in a shared activity, each  
person refers what he is doing to  
what the other is doing, and *vice-*  
*versa*. That is, the activity of each is  
placed in the same inclusive situ-  
ation."24 It is difficult to see, in  
this descriptive treatment of how  
human beings live together, the  
evil of imposed controls.

When Dewey did explain what he  
actually meant by social control, he  
talked of the shared experience  
characteristic of competitive games  
and said it illustrated "the general  
principle of social control of indi-  
viduals without the violation of free-  
dom." And then:

Games are generally competitive.  
If we took instances of co-opera-  
tive activities in which all mem-  
bers of a group take part, as for

example in well-ordered family life in which there is mutual confidence, the point would be even clearer. In all such cases it is not the will or desire of any one person which establishes order but the moving spirit of the whole group. The control is social, but individuals are parts of a community, not outside it.<sup>25</sup>

It must be admitted that here, as well as in earlier writings, Dewey was concerned with the cultivation of dispositions he assumed to be "desirable," with meeting demands set up "by current social occupations," and with the assimilative or unifying power of the school. In his early writing, there were relatively few signs of concern with fundamental inequities in the culture; and, at the start, he appeared untouched by the exclusion of minority groups from the mainstream of economic life. He seemed convinced that little more was required than a confirmation of "the shared cooperative activities which are the normal source of order," so long as individuals were equipped to reflect upon those activities in their wholeness and in the light of their contribution to social life. Later on, of course, he became active in the NAACP and other organizations combating discrimination; but he did not always appear to comprehend the increasing feelings of powerlessness suffered by people who had no share in policy-making, whose participation was ultimately meaningless.

In 1916, he wrote that "A society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms and which secures flexible readjustment of its institutions through interaction of the different forms of associated life is in so far democratic. Such a society must have a type of education which gives individuals a personal interest in social relationships and control, and the habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing disorder."<sup>26</sup> There is no question that this sounds conservative, appallingly moderate, even classical in its cherishing of social harmony. It should be noted,

however, that this is a normative statement: Dewey was describing the "good society," the one that might come into being if enough constraints were broken, if planning were to be intelligent and humane. Looking back on it over half a century, aware of how far we are from attaining "a society which makes provision for participation in its good of all its members on equal terms," we are likely to discern a certain innocence in Dewey, if not a blindness to what was happening in the world. The new historians, however, select out from normative statements of this kind notions like the "habits of mind" intended to bring change without "disorder." It is assumed that the object of Dewey's efforts was to cultivate such habits; and this, in turn, appears to be explicitly counter-revolutionary in intent. Moreover, it seems to incorporate and crystallize the point of view (first defined almost a century before) that public education could be relied upon to change the world. By implication, more radical, more *political* options seem to be closed. If this is how Dewey's normatives are read, his influence cannot but be considered to be protective of the *status quo*. The "direction" he spoke of cannot but be considered to be manipulative—on behalf of social stability and the myth of the common school. The revisionist, puncturing the liberal hope, concludes by categorizing Dewey as a proponent of a "controlled economy, state planning, group thought, and managed change."<sup>27</sup> The alternative? A concentration on the release of individuality; a deschooled society; an end to social control; the "abiding American dream."

I understand the need to reevaluate both liberalism and progressivism at each stage of our development; but I believe it takes a very selective reading to demonstrate that Dewey played an intentionally counter-revolutionary role and deluded people with his talk of intelligence, likemindedness, and the kind of social control that would not violate freedom. More seriously, I do not see evidence provided that those who were influenced by Dewey (and their names were not legion) would have or could have invented

the kinds of radical political strategies that might have overthrown capitalism and effected revolutionary change.

As troubled by the heritage of pragmatism (in, say, the case of the Pentagon Papers) as anyone else I find questionable what I see as historicism in the approach of the revisionists. I find questionable too the oversimplification of social control and the strange, innocent optimism that leads to a setting aside of the *problem* of socialization. Even if it is the case that socialization in an inequitable society leads to destruction of the individual or to the maintenance of unjust social arrangements, a civilizing or enculturating process is always at work. The human condition is such that limits and sublimations are inevitable if individuals are to live together, certainly if they are to live together in equity. To deny this and to avoid the issue of social reality leads to a denial of a paradox that lies at the very heart of education, wherever and however it takes place. It is a paradox American writers have recognized, no matter how often they have said "no in thunder."

Tony Tanner calls it "a fundamental and inescapable paradox: that to exist a book, a vision, a system, like a person, has to have an outline—there can be no identity without contour."

But contours signify arrest, they involve restraint and the acceptance of limits. The main villain, Urizen, in Blake's myth is named after horizon, that is to say limit or boundary, and I think many American writers share Blake's feeling. For restraint means the risk of rigidity, and rigidity, so the feeling goes, is just about the beginning of *rigor mortis*. Between the non-identity of pure fluidity and the fixity involved in all definitions—in words or in life—the American writer moves and knows he moves.<sup>28</sup>

In Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*, the society on the man o' war is (by wartime necessity) so rigid in its controls that the innocent, spontaneous man cannot survive. Captain Vere recognizes the evil that has been at work when Billy unintentionally kills Claggart; and he cherishes Billy in his innocence

Nevertheless, he warns the drumhead court to be guided by duty rather than compassion. And long after the execution, he insists that forms, measured forms are everything...<sup>29</sup> The alternative, as he sees it, is submission to "invincible nature primeval," the blankness of the encompassing sea. In Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, the narrator takes refuge in an underground room from a society that has never recognized him as a man. He lights the room with 1,369 bulbs; because, without light, he has no form—and "to be unaware of one's form is to live a death."<sup>30</sup> Haunted by images of formlessness, rejecting the fixed categories of the outer world, he must somehow create his own orders. The alternative is continuing darkness, invisibility, or the "chaos" against which he must conceive a pattern if he is to live. Without that pattern, there would be nothingness, undifferentiated fluidity; he would be a blob. In John Barth's *End of the Road*, Jacob Horner is helped to overcome his "weatherlessness" (immobility, formlessness) through mythotherapy, a technique for imposing arbitrary forms on experience by assigning roles for people to play. In time, he recognizes how roles, names, "scripts," and myths obscure actualities, how they hide from the individual the contingencies of life—"the raggedness of things." He sees that even language falsifies and betrays experience; "but only so betrayed can it be dealt with at all, and only in so dealing with it did I ever feel like a man, alive and kicking. It is therefore that, when I had cause to think about it at all, I responded to this precise falsification, this adroit, careful myth-making, with all the upsetting exhilaration of any artist at his work."<sup>31</sup>

There are implications in all three illustrations, as there would be in numerous others that might be culled from American literature. There is the terrible question of duty and responsibility; there is the related question of whether any society can exist if every member—no matter how bigoted, exploitative, violent, or innocent—is permitted to follow impulse, if there are no consequences when harm is done.

There is the matter of preventing invisibility in an unjust world, just as there is the problem of permitting diverse people to create their own visibility, their own significant form. And, finally, there is the question raised by the necessity for languages and categories and systems of organization, all of which deform to an extent, all of which betray.

The point is not only the continuing consciousness of the tension between "raggedness" and falsifying orders, identity and contour, individuality and social control. There is a need for a tragic perception of the accommodations that are required if a person is to survive at all. Most of our writers have recognized this, understood what Melville called the "power of blackness." The exceptions are those Quentin Anderson describes as "imperial" selves: Emerson, Whitman, and Henry James, each of whom had "a profound extrasocial commitment." Anderson says that "their imaginative work ignores, elides, or transforms history, politics, heterosexuality, the hope for purposive change. They avoid or omit any acknowledgment that our experience has stubborn and irreducible elements which we cannot in a lifetime either alter or understand."<sup>32</sup> Nothing, clearly, is more at odds with a viable approach to education or to educational history.

The original school reformers were obviously not aware of paradox, although imaginative writers contemporary with them were—in the deepest sense. As the reformers saw it, the imposition of controls on children led to their becoming independent citizens with the rights of free men. The reformers' moral absolutism was such as to prevent them from separating "voluntary compliance" from the ability to live in an enlightened republic, from self-determination itself. The pressures of expansion, urbanization, commercialization, and the rest alienated too many people from the functioning community for the traditional claims to be convincingly made, once the Gilded Age began. The progressives were sharply aware of splits in experience and the growing tendency to think in terms of either/ors; but they were no more

aware of the fundamental paradox than their forerunners. Dewey's transactional emphasis, along with his concern for continuities and communication, was intended to allay tensions, to overcome perceived discrepancies. The revisionists of today seem to me to skirt the paradox entirely by assuming that identity can indeed exist without contour, that contour is intrinsically hostile to identity. They seem, like Anderson's "imperial self," to avoid acknowledging the "stubborn and irreducible elements in experience," the elements that make our condition tragic and our future forever unclear.

Saying that, I am not proposing that historians resign themselves to cosmic injustices and the limits imposed by mortality. I am proposing a more complex, a "darker" approach, without reliance on scapegoats, determinisms,—without hope of a final resolution. The tension between the individual and civilization has been and will be irreducible. Education, because it takes place at the intersection where the demands for social order and the demands for autonomy conflict, must proceed through and by means of the tension. Teachers, whose risks and failures are functions of the uncertainty, can only try to enable students to understand how the social reality afflicts them, how (having confronted what community controls mean in their own life worlds) they can take action to transform. If it is indeed the case, as Christopher Jencks says it is, that the school is of "marginal" importance when it comes to determining the success and status of individuals,<sup>33</sup> educators may begin concerning themselves with making schools not only "satisfying places to be" but places where individuals may discover their originality, *create* their own autonomy. They may cease treating schools like factories and students like products if they recognize that the schools, under present circumstances, cannot—and probably never will—successfully meet what is called "market demand."

Reform will never be complete. The society will never become benevolent and pure. Attempts will be

made to manipulate and control—on the media, on the streets, in the workplaces, in the schools. Efforts will be made—unpredictably, passionately, spontaneously—to rebel. And, as has happened repeatedly before, numbers of persons will claim the right to determine the nature and quality of their membership in the society. Some will demand significant participation in making policies that affect them; others will assert their inherent right to dissent, to disobey; still others will withdraw into private undergrounds, self-study, self-creation. The majority will live their lives, “living and partly living,” consuming and acquiescing, because they know no better way.

Educational history, I believe must make room for incompleteness and for “raggedness.” It must avoid historicism, tempting as it is. It must find explanations supplementary to determinist ones; it must allow for the insertion of free will at crucial moments of time. On occasion, the new historians must seek to encompass those who have dropped out of history, who cannot be subsumed under categories like “masses” and “minorities” and “ethnic groups.” In *Invisible Man*, after Tod Clifton is shot by a policeman (and having plunged, as the narrator says, “outside of history”), the hero thinks:

For history records the patterns of men's lives, they say: Who slept with whom and with what results; who fought and who won and who lived to lie about it afterwards. All things, it is said, are duly recorded—all things of importance, that is. But not quite, for actually it is only the known, the seen, the heard and only those events that the recorder regards as important that are put down, those lies his keepers keep their power by. But the cop would be Clifton's historian, his judge, his witness, and his executioner, and I was the only brother in the watching crowd. And I, the only witness for the defense, knew neither the extent of his guilt nor the nature of his crime. Where were the historians today? And how would they put it down?<sup>34</sup>

The new historians have gone far in the direction of demystifying our educational history; and, by so do-

ing, they have removed the screens that kept us from seeing some of what was never seen, heard, or known—because it was not “of importance,” because it did not fit the recorder's ideology. Now I hope they will move past the negative, past their presentism. I hope they will venture now and then into imaginative literature, into oral history and diaries and letters as well as into demographics. They have expanded our statistical knowledge; they have exposed the impact of class values; they have demonstrated the proliferation of social controls. The time has come to confront the paradox that escapes measurement, the paradox of civilization itself.

#### Notes

This article was delivered as the Vice Presidential Address, Division F, History and Historiography, at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, February, 1973.

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