

FAMILY EDUCATION: WHO ARE WE SERVING, FAMILY OR POLITICAL ECONOMY?

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This paper is a critical analysis of the state of family education from the perspective of a male practitioner who wonders why he is one of few men in the field of family education. The analysis begins by questioning gender ideology in American public education and traces this historically to the dominant forces of political economy that shaped not only the nation, but the public school agenda. Arguably some of the most influential people that founded public education and family education are addressed in regard to the way they established the field based on the political economy of its time and its accompanying gendered ideologies. Specific examples from primary texts show evidence of the dominant thinking of the time. A cross-cultural comparison is then offered comparing current American ideologies about gender with Sweden's and how these values impact public practices that affect families. A questioning of values ensues followed by a discourse on the implications for family education. The conclusion invites family education practitioners to critically assess who they are really serving, critically question why there are still so few men in the field, and take some meaningful action toward not only professing but representing the full equality we say we value for families.

As a man committed to public family education, I have been perplexed with the number of contradictions I see in society in general and public education in specific regarding male participation in family education. I find it intriguing, given that the American families which make up society (however "family" is currently defined) are composed of a relatively equal proportion of men and women, that the field of family education is almost completely dominated by women. It would seem to make sense that men and women would be equally involved in the education of families. This would seem especially prudent given the reality that the American family is supposedly such a topic of interest and that today's boys and girls, our future men and women, will both be equally influenced by the quality of such education. The current situation in public family education is that almost all early childhood family educators and family consumer science teachers nationwide are women. It seems so diametrically opposed to the very make-up of family in our society. This caused me to ask the question: What were the forces occurring in the United States during the formation of public family education that afforded such a disproportionate gender balance?

As I began to pursue this question from a historical perspective, I found extensive evidence demonstrating a marked gender ideology present at the time of family education's inception. Gender ideology is generally considered the socially constructed meanings people have in regard to the differences between men and women and the roles considered socially acceptable in accordance with these meanings (Greenstein, 1996; Wachira, 2002). A very rigid paternalistic division of social duties was practiced, separating women's traditional domestic homemaking role from men's work-oriented economic responsibility. There seemed to be many forces at play, affecting the manifestation and proliferation of such an ideology. An exposition

of all of the forces involved in shaping the gender ideology of the time would be quite tedious, exhausting and prohibitive given the scope of this paper. While reviewing the predominant influences for the formation of gender ideology in family education, one strand continued to appear in the historical literature. This force seemed to maintain a very prominent role and influence during the time period where family education had its beginnings. Thus, the focus of this paper will be an exposition of the force of political economy and its influence on shaping the gender ideology present in family education.

Political Economy

Merriam-Webster (2003) defines political economy as “the theory or study of the role of public policy in influencing the economic and social welfare of a political unit.” Political is defined as “of or relating to government, a government, or the conduct of government; of, relating to, or concerned with the making of governmental policy; organized in governmental terms.” Economy is defined as “thrifty and efficient use of material resources, frugality in expenditures; efficient and concise use of nonmaterial resources; the arrangement or mode of operation of something; the structure of economic life in a country, area, or period; specifically an economic system.” What will be seen in the following exposition of political economy is a conglomeration of the above definitions, particularly as they are applied to public family education. A review of history will show us how the public schools in early America were the political vehicles “organized in governmental terms” for the main purpose of forging “the structure of economic life in a country.” Furthermore, political economy will be considered in this paper as “the arrangement or mode of operation of” the public schools for the sake of “influencing the economic and social welfare of a political unit;” where that political unit is those that most benefit from the capitalization of America.

I will begin my discourse on political economy and its influence in the formation of public family education by taking a look at the history of public education in America. Although intimately intertwined with this history, my exposition of family education’s beginnings will follow the public education disclosure. This will include a revelation of social efficiency, how it played into the political economy agenda, and how it was manifest in family educational thought. A cross cultural comparison is offered to expose a potential alternative gender ideology that further exemplifies the political economy that has been illustrated up to this point. The current state of education and political economy is debated along with the implications this ideology has for the future state of family education in America. My conclusion further emphasizes the importance of addressing this issue head on and questioning in truth; who are we really serving in family education, families or political economy?

The History of Public Education in America

Brown (1985), a respected historian on the establishment of American family education, notes the time period between the mid 1800s and early 1900s as the crucial period in United States history where the groundwork for family education was laid. Not coincidentally, this was also the period where general public education can trace its roots (Kaestle, 1983; Lazerson & Grubb, 1974). This was a period where America was experiencing a time of tremendous change. The United States had finally emancipated itself from British oppression in 1814 with the signing of the treaty of Ghent ending the war instigated in 1812 that completed the split from Britain that began with the Revolutionary War. This new beginning brought an incredible ambition for the American frontier and its promise of individualism and unsurpassed materialism for all

Americans. Brown (1985) defined this time in American history as a “radical democratic surge” (p. 200).

America experienced an unprecedented growth in industrialization and capitalism and the social challenges that went with it. As America grew westward, tackling the great frontier, building great industries in the large cities, and becoming a world-wide competitor for goods and services, the American family unit was experiencing an incredible amount of pressure to adjust, adapt, and conform. The American family was at a crisis point as immigration, isolation on the frontier, overcrowding in the cities, and greater corporate social controls began to threaten the foundational social institution of the family. Traditional European socialization patterns where education was centered in families proved ineffective as extended families common in Europe virtually disappeared with increasing immigration, frontier living, and migration due to overcrowded cities. A social crisis was at hand. New solutions became vital. The result for Americans was that more and more educational responsibility was delegated to the schools. The basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic were just the start; over the decades society assigned many other skills previously learned in the homes to be taught in schools (U.S. Department of State, 1848).

The American schools were increasingly looked to by political leaders as the place where American social challenges would be addressed. Not only that, schools also showed promise for instilling other values in the American public. The U.S. Department of State (1848) notes, “But aside from teaching knowledge and skills, reformers saw the schools as the logical place to inculcate democratic idealism” (§ 2). American schools not only provided the solution for many social ills, they became vehicles for producing the quality of intelligence and morality needed for the sake of developing the nation. “Political leaders in the new nation argued that upon the American experiment hung the fate of freedom and progress. The survival of the American republic depended upon the morality of its people...in the virtue of the propertied, industrious, and intelligent American” (Kaestle, 1983, p. 79).

Horace Mann, noted as the founder of the American public school (Kaestle, 1983; U.S. Department of State, 1848), emphasized the dependence the American society had on the public school and its crucial role in bettering the American political economy:

That political economy, therefore, which busies itself about capital and labor, supply and demand, interests and rents, favorable and unfavorable balances of trade, but leaves out of account the elements of a wide-spread mental development, is naught but stupendous folly. The greatest of all the arts in political economy is to change a consumer into a producer; and the next greatest is to increase the producing power,—and this to be directly obtained by increasing his intelligence. For mere delving, an ignorant man is but little better than a swine, whom he so much resembles in his appetites, and surpasses in his power of mischief.... (Mann, 1848, ¶ 7)

Mann and other founders of public education made it very clear that public education was a fundamental component to the American political economy. It has been said of Mann that “the most important element in Mann's faith was that schools could preserve and sustain a democratic society” (U.S. Department of State, 1848). The superintendent of public instruction in Illinois stated in 1862 the main purpose of public schooling: “The chief end is to make good citizens” (Kaestle, 1983, p. 98). The public school developed an almost ubiquitous nature as a system of

promise capable of developing and securing the American political economy. “Emphasis was on whether individuals would ruin the system, not the reverse. The morality of the social system as a system was beyond question; the moral quality of society was therefore to be improved by improving the moral quality of individuals” (Kaestle, 1983, p. 81).

The political power that public schooling had on society was profound, yet this came with a cost. The utilization of schools to strengthen and bolster the economy by specifically training people to meet economic needs established a questionable power structure among those in charge of setting educational agendas. “It gradually became clear that a technology-based culture is dependent on formal education and skill training for its survival...questions of pedagogical theory became highly controversial as the connection between educational change and economic and political realities became clear” (Wirth, 1980, p. 2). Public schools and the political economy of America were inseparable. This political economy of public education had a direct influence on the foundation of family education.

Family Education

Brown (1985) cites Willard, Beecher, Richards, and the Lake Placid Conferences as key influences on the formation of family education in the United States. In 1819, Emma Hart Willard wrote her *Plan for Improving Female Education* where she states that the purpose of female education is “to regulate the internal concerns of every family...the character of children will be formed by their mothers and it is through the mothers that the government can control the character of its future citizens” (Brown, 1985, p. 183). Willard, as the first major influence on family education (Brown, 1985) made it clear that the political agenda was of primary importance. Catherine Beecher wrote her book, *A Treatise on Domestic Economy for the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School* in 1848, the same year Mann was cited above. It proposed a formal education in “domestic economy” for women that would help them overcome the poor health and domestic situations common during the mid 1800s in American. You can see the parallels to the political economy of the time. Family education almost seemed to be the matriarchal complement to the patriarchal political agenda

[Domestic economy] can be properly and systematically taught (not practically, but as a science), as much so as political economy or moral science, or any other branch of study; because it embraces knowledge, which will be needed by young women at all times and in all places; because this method will secure a dignity and importance in the estimation of young girls. (Beecher, 1848, p. 6)

The tone of Beecher’s book implied much of the same morality education doctrine cited earlier. It paints a picture of humanity that is in dire need of the system for its salvation. She stated, “It would be vain to attempt to depict the sorrow, discouragement, and distress experienced in most families where the wife and mother is a perpetual invalid.” Her solution was for women to be “trained for their profession” as housewives and mothers (p. 5). This was especially the case for poor and immigrant women not yet fully embracing the socio-political doctrines of the new American society.

Brown (1985) critiqued Beecher’s attempt to lay the groundwork for domestic economy, citing explicitly its foundational one-sided gender ideology and her neglect for questioning the socio-political status quo of the time

Domestic economy or domestic science in its beginning was certainly concerned for the home and family. However, it delegated responsibility for the success of the home solely *{sic}* to the woman and, in effect, it preserved without challenge the existing social structure of the family. In so conceptualizing domestic economy and limiting it to women, as Catherine Beecher did, the groundwork was laid for a field of study that catered to the Victorian cult of womanhood, that unconsciously froze the status quo of the paternalistic family with its negative effects on personality and social relations, and that encouraged nonreflective and anti-intellectual positions regarding not only the family but also larger social order and domestic economy itself. (p. 239)

Beecher's belief systems only exemplified what was common for all during that time in history. The concern for preserving and enhancing the values that had established and advanced the American political economy seemed to be of primary importance. Alexis De Tocqueville, who was described by Beecher (1848) as "a writer, who, for intelligence, fidelity, and ability, ranks second to none" (p. 28), illustrates the predominant values of the American culture in his writing

The Americans have applied to the sexes the great principle of political economy which governs the manufacturers of our age, by carefully dividing the duties of man from those of woman in order that the great work of society may be the better carried on. In no country has such constant care been taken as in America to trace two clearly distinct lines of action for the two sexes and to make them keep pace one with the other, but in two pathways that are always different. American women never manage the outward concerns of the family or conduct a business or take a part in political life; nor are they, on the other hand, ever compelled to perform the rough labor of the fields or to make any of those laborious efforts which demand the exertion of physical strength. No families are so poor as to form an exception to this rule. (De Tocqueville, 1830)

The Lake Placid Conferences of 1899-1908 likewise embraced the political economy of the culture, setting the precedent for the future of public family education. Ellen M. Richards stated that, "The present aim of the Lake Placid Conference is to teach American people, chiefly through the medium of schools, the management of their homes" (Brown, 1985, p. 250). It seems rather indicative of the social assumptions at the time that a reference to "American people" would be assumed by everyone at the conference to be the American women. Despite opposing viewpoints from men and women at the conference advocating equality of education for both men and women in family matters, the social role of women continued to maintain its domestic function (Brown, 1985, pp. 272-273). Richards (1910) demonstrates the political and economic motivation for this, stating that the housewife is "an important factor and an economic force in improving the national health and increasing national wealth" (p. 143). The National Education Association (NEA) solidified the political agenda of family education in their 1910 publication *The Vocational Education of Females*. It was clearly described that the focus of education for girls is: "To enable them, thru the right sort of homemaking training, to enter homes of their own, able to assume the most sacred duties with an intelligent preparation, and to perpetuate the type of home that will bring about the highest standard of health and morals" (Lazerson & Grubb, 1974, p. 115).

Along with the dissenting voices at the Lake Placid Conference, there were other educators at the time trying to advocate for a different model of family education. Marion Talbot and Sophonisba P. Breckinridge's 1910 publication *The Modern Household* communicates their stance on family education: "This means the education of husbands and fathers as well as wives and mothers. Little can be accomplished for the betterment of the home until this fact is recognized by public opinion and the significance of the home...is recognized equally by men and women" (Brown, 1985, p. 426). It seems that this logic didn't have much effect, perhaps showing evidence that family education at the time wasn't as concerned with the "betterment of the home" as it was with the betterment of the American political economy.

Social Efficiency

No exposition of the history of education in America would be complete without the inclusion of the contributions of David Snedden and Charles Prosser in the early 1900s. Snedden and Prosser are known for their ideology of social efficiency in education. I would argue that their social efficiency doctrines served to bolster the American political economy in the public schools. This is especially evident in family education. "Social efficiency advocates went on to contend that public schools were an arm of the social system; and, as such, they had an inherent mission to further the good of society by contributing to its efficiency" (Doolittle & Camp, 1999, p. 2). Snedden and Prosser's fundamental theories that formed the basis for social efficiency included social control which posited that "for any society to exist, its members must adhere to both the implicit and explicit norms of society. For society to endure over time, such adherence must be voluntary and near automatic on the part of the citizenry" (Doolittle & Camp, 1999, p. 3). Public education was the vehicle to ensure society's survival. Its efficiency was crucial to provide the greatest potential for American political economy. Prosser writes in his 1913 *Practical Arts and Vocational Guidance* that it is public education's responsibility to "direct and train all children for useful service...many workers are inefficient because they are not adapted to the work they are doing, and some because they have not been properly prepared for it. This lack of efficiency constitutes a permanent handicap not only to the worker but to the calling which he follows" (Lazerson & Grubb, 1974, p. 135). The thinking of Charles W. Eliot, the president of Harvard University, and Edward C. Elliott, a prominent professor at the University of Wisconsin, follow the social efficiency premises and lay the groundwork in their writings of 1908 for the segregation found in family education; they argue that "schools should be sorting devices, placing youth into curriculum based on expected societal roles" (Lazerson & Grubb, 1974, p. 136).

Family education embraced this thinking. Ellen H. Richards wrote *Euthenics* in 1910 which became one of the most influential writings for home economics educators (Brown, 1985). According to Richards (1910), euthenics is:

The betterment of living conditions, through conscious endeavor, for the purpose of securing efficient human beings...not through chance, but through increase of scientific knowledge; not through compulsion, but through democratic idealism consciously working through common interests, will be brought about the creation of right conditions, the control of the environment. (p. vii)

The political economy ideology is prolific in her writing

Household engineering is the great need for material welfare, and social engineering for moral and ethical well-being. What else does this persistent forcing of scientific training to the front mean? If the state is to have good citizens, productive human beings, it must provide for the teaching of the essentials to those who are to become the parents of the next generation. No state can thrive while its citizens waste their resources of health, bodily energy, time and brain power, any more than a nation may prosper that wastes its natural resources. (Richards, 1910, p. 158)

Political and economic forces, social traditions, social theory, and morality dogma all came together and “unconsciously froze the status quo” of the United States at the time of family education’s beginnings (Brown, 1985, p. 239). Female dominated family education became an “economic force” most effective in manifesting the “great principle of political economy” used to establish the “great work of [American] society” (De Tocqueville, 1830; Richards, 1910). The false consciousness of this ideology is particularly lucid given the consistent ignoring of contradicting views. This historical discourse has made evident the presence of an unexamined and assumed mode of thinking which guided and shaped social practices regarding public education and specifically, family education. What will be seen in the following comparison with Swedish culture is that the same influences that shaped this ideology, sustain the ideology, and may inhibit the potential for change.

Cross-Cultural Comparison

Haas (1992), from his study of Sweden’s family policies, draws an interesting comparison between Swedish culture and American culture in terms of their historical values and how these are reflected in the ideologies effecting public practices pertaining to family. Although his comparison is about family policy and not specifically family education practices, it sheds some revelatory light on the underlying values and gender ideologies of the two societies and how these have shaped and currently maintain public practices that affect families.

Sweden has developed parenting policies that support equal participation of men and women in raising children. Motivators in Sweden that led to equal parenthood policies were discussed along side potential societal hindrances in the United States which may impede such a political recognition of equal gender responsibility for families. The author detailed how gender ideologies in regard to men and women evolved in Swedish society to a point where “full equality” of genders is the majority value. Full equality is considered opposed to two other gender ideologies noted in current societies: (a) patriarchy and (b) conditional equality. The author noted how the United States has progressed from patriarchy to a conditional equality that he sees proliferated from both male and female perspectives. Men may traditionally condition equality with the assumption that women can have equal rights as long as it doesn’t interfere with their primary family responsibilities. Women maintain conditional equality as long as they advocate simply for the right to enter the workforce as they please as opposed to full equality which would make women and men equally responsible for both the work and family realms of the household.

Haas identifies aspects of the United States’ socio-political culture that may hinder efforts to embrace the full equality gender ideology required to bring about more equitable family

policies and practices. The political barriers he cites are (a) individualism—lack of concern for the common good, (b) privacy—mistrusting public and governmental involvement in “private” family matters, and (c) democracy—the domination of capitalism. Swedes are socialist, homogeneous and more likely to agree. He observes Americans to be only superficially socially oriented. In that, the individualism and small-business orientations of our democratic system seem to make social issues a lower priority. More rigid gender roles are seen as more functional in perpetuating capitalism and democracy. Haas (1992) cites how our priorities are elucidated when comparing them with other cultures. “The U. S. does not seem to be a very child friendly society; children’s welfare is not a high priority...society’s regard for the well-being of children...[is prioritized] in ways that Swedes would find unacceptable” (Haas, 1992, p. 206). He notes an American culture abounding in rhetoric maintaining the ideologies that support the political devotion to capitalism. Jerry Fallwell, a very influential political voice for the “religious right” has stated that, “A gender based division of labor in the family is seen as biologically natural and divinely ordained” (Haas, 1992, p.204). In order to reprioritize societal values that put families first, there may be socio-economic costs that many infatuated with the potentialities of individualistic capitalist gain may not be willing to pay.

A Question of Values

In comparing the historical gender ideology with the cross cultural comparison, it is hard to overlook some of the foundational aspects of the United States’ socio-political structure that have not only built, but propagated an unequal gender ideology. History indicates the necessity of embracing rigid gender separation for the sake of enabling a competitive, productive, and efficient capitalistic society. Wirth (1980) would argue that our society today has seen very little, if any ideological change since the period of history that was addressed in this paper; “while we speak at present of ‘the post-industrial society’ there are, in fact, major continuities between our present condition and the America that was emerging at the opening of the century—corporate and urban as well as industrial” (p. 2). Cultural comparison exposed how American capitalism continues to maintain gender divisions to meet its own valued materialistic ends. The very gender ideology foundational to constructing American capitalistic prowess has proved crucial for its sustenance. We have a political structure dependent on inequity for its success. Kinchloe (1999) describes this well, “This neoconservative politics of corporatism has induced broad segments of the population to accept the existing economic and political inequalities as well as discrimination against various racial and ethnic groups [I would add gender discrimination as well]. The politics of corporatism redefines equality in terms of the right to form a business and compete in the marketplace, while it rejects discussion of economic and political alternatives to such beliefs” (p.167). The ethical dilemma facing public education is the dualism between the best interests of children and families and the best interests of an economically prosperous capitalistic nation.

Implications for Family Education

Hartoonian (1999) writes, “The history of our republic is the story of the struggle to enlarge the set originally referred to as WE THE PEOPLE from a small group of white male adults who owned property in thirteen states to the inclusive set that defines the republic today” (p. 242). I would argue that the same ideology of this “small group of white male adults who owned property” that established the agenda for the public schools in its inception is still pervasive today and proliferated by the same group of people. Very little has changed. The

values of the “small group of white male adults who own property” are still the foundational values of our public schools. Educational systems are still instrumental in training people to serve the same ethnocentric, materialistic, male group of elitists by bolstering and enhancing their businesses for the sake of their own material gain. Hartoonian argues that, “The public school is the essential element for the preservation of both democracy and the free market....Public schools exist for the wider community. They are here for the common good in order to establish the intellectual, ethical, and aesthetic infrastructure for democracy and capitalism” (p. 241). I would argue that Hartoonian is either blind to the rhetoric of the dominant capitalists in our society or he is a participant purporting a thinly cloaked veil of “democracy” for the purposes of the traditional ambitions of the capitalistic agenda. Dewey (1944) and Kinchloe (1999) would question Hartoonian’s use of the term “democracy” describing the current state of public education and would be especially opposed to the “preservation” of the practices that are supposedly democratic. Kinchloe (1999) states, “Too much vocational and academic education is designed to instill compliance and facilitate social control rather than to encourage questioning and democratic empowerment of students” (p.148). The political and economic agenda of the public school system is compromising the social development that the schools and society are in such dire need of. “To be blunt and to oversimplify, the choice then and now is whether schools are to be servants of technocratic efficiency needs, or whether they can act to help men humanize life under technology” (Wirth, 1980, p. 1). There is a desperate need to expose the duality of public education for the sake of humanizing life, serving people instead of political economy.

The implications discussed are especially poignant for family education. A field of study that proclaims a devotion to the betterment of families needs to hear the critical voice that poses the possibility that intention and reality may be in contradiction. This reality of public education and its entrenched political economy seems to undermine a pure form of service to families and their educational needs. Furthermore, the possibility for the revolutionary change needed to transform family education from a political economy agenda may be hindered if family educators do not take an honest look at their historical support of the status quo. Breaking free from the status quo is vital for family education to become a truly authentic means for bettering society by meeting the educational needs of families.

Conclusion

What has been offered in this exposition is a critical analysis of family education and the ideologies that have shaped its practice since its early development in America. The American political economy of the time was shown to have a strong influence on family education’s beginnings. Some history of this influence was presented along with the argument for the reality of its continual influence today. What is required at this juncture for family educators is a critical reflection on the values that do drive our practice in comparison with the values that should drive our practice.

Questioning the true underlying values of family education is in order. Does the possibility of serving political and economic forces above the humanitarian needs of families pose a contradiction between intention and practice for family educators? Is there a possibility that Brown’s (1985) critique of family education at the turn of the century which existed “without challenging the existing social structure of the family” (Brown, 1985, p. 239) may still have relevance today in some of our practices? Is it possible that we today, “unconsciously froze the status quo of the paternalistic family with its negative effects on personality and social relations, and encouraged nonreflective and anti-intellectual positions regarding not only the

family but also larger social order and domestic economy itself' as Brown (1985) accused Beecher of in the 1800's (p. 239)? I would argue that the apple has not fallen far from the tree.

Why is there such a gender disparity in among family education practitioners? This illuminates a profound inequality in representation and practice. How has the political economy of our nation caused family education to compromise the convictions and services it would provide if it wasn't subject to such an influence? A number of voices tried to speak up in the past advocating a more gender equal model. Where would we be today if we followed such a course? Family education today is in need of some critical reflection. It needs to take a hard look at the programming it is supporting, the inequalities it is representing, and the very fundamental question, who are we serving, families or political economy?

As a man, still in the small minority as a family educator, I ask my fellow practitioners to consider their vision of what gender equity in family education might look like, reflect critically on why this might not be the reality today, and make some steps in their own practice toward this vision. I acknowledge and applaud the extensive effort in the past decade to provide services, develop curriculum, and create standards critically addressing much of the gender inequities implied in this paper. Yet, the reality is that there are still few men in the field. We simply do not embody the values we say we profess. We have a long way to go. We need to critically assess who we are really serving, deliberately choose the whole family, and take meaningful action toward not only professing but representing the full equality we say we value for the families we serve.

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