

Thinking about Schools and Universities as Institutions

By Steven Brint

In spite of strenuous efforts to typify the all-American kid, I valued books, learning, and imagination too much. I plunged into books in the same way many kids plunge into dessert. I found reading to bring me into touch with people and worlds more complicated and interesting than those I generally encountered in Albuquerque. I also liked the boy intellectuals in my neighborhood, the kids who brought telescopes out in the evening to gaze at the stars and the science fiction buffs who created their own “alien” worlds, stranger and more advanced than the one we inhabited.

Although I would not have used the word at the time, I was ambivalent about school. When I could imagine it to be the repository of learning and imagination, it excited me as a place of limitless adventure. During chaotic periods in my family’s domestic life, there were times I prized the predictable structure and steady rewards school provided. However, much of the time I found the classroom to be terrifically boring. I refused to attend school for most of a year, at age 8, because I was so bored by the make work. There were many times when I thought of school as a kind of prison. I noticed that “the inmates” marched in rows, were required to raise their hands when they wanted to speak, and could not go to the bathroom without the “warden’s” approval. I occasionally joined the rebels. I helped to lock a music teacher in the broom closet in grade 7. She had forced us to listen to *The Barber of Seville* over and over for three months without teaching us about the opera.

I first engaged in organized study of schooling during my graduate school years at Harvard. At that time I was among the friends of Jerome Karabel who attended a biweekly seminar at the Huron Institute that he led on the themes of power and ideology in education. Others who attended included Paul DiMaggio, Kevin Dougherty, David Karen, Katherine McClelland, David Stark, David Swartz, and Michael Useem. At sessions that stretched long into the night, we mixed it up over books like *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, *The Credential Society*, *Learning to Labour*, *Who Gets Ahead?* and *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*.

I mention these perceptions and experiences because they have influenced the themes of my work.

As in critical theory, the sharpness of contrasts between the world of possibility and the world in which we live brings out important features of the world in which we live.