‘Making Rome Appear More Roman’: Common Schooling and the Whig Response to Jacksonianism

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A republican government is the visible manifestation of the people’s invisible soul. Through the ballot-box, the latent will bursts out into authoritative action. In a republican government, the ballot-box is the urn of fate; yet no god shakes the bowl or resides over the lot. If the ballot-box is open to wisdom and patriotism and humanity; it is equally open to ignorance and treachery, to pride and envy, to contempt for the poor or hostility towards the rich. It is the loosest filter ever devised to strain out impurities.¹

—Horace Mann

Introduction: Posing Questions

Students of education history have long understood the development of common schools during the early- to mid-nineteenth century as a Whig reform movement supported by such civic leaders as Horace Mann in Massachusetts, Henry Barnard in Connecticut, and Calvin Wiley in North Carolina. The history of nineteenth-century education reform is intimately portrayed by a number of scholars who have written rich historical works illustrating the various purposes of Whig schooling including the development of a common culture, civic virtue, democratic citizenship, national unity, social improvement, respect for republican institutions, and political and religious stability. While his motives and efforts undergo various interpretations, Horace Mann continues to be viewed by historians as the paragon of the nineteenth-century common school reform movement. Previous interpretations of Mann and the common school movement include celebratory works by Ellwood Cubberley, who views the purposes behind Mann’s crusade as democratic, as well as subsequent works revealing a less-than-ideal picture of reformers’ motives by Merle Curti, Rush Welter, and Michael Katz. We continue to observe in recent scholarship such terms as “democratic,” “democratic equality,” and “democratic citizens” used to identify the purposes driving common school reformers like Mann specifically and the Whigs generally.²
In this paper, I question the historical interpretations that present Whig intentions as democratic, and I conclude to the contrary that the purposes of Whig schooling were driven considerably by a fear of democracy and democratization of the republic. Democratic interpretations of the Revolution had been contested since the separation from Britain, and nineteenth-century Whigs continued to resist democratic reforms. For the Whigs, republican and democratic forms of government remained separate and distinct, and as a response to the democratization of the electorate during the early nineteenth century, they regarded common schooling largely as a remedial institution, intended to correct the problems they were witnessing in a rapidly changing society or as preventative in nature by maintaining order and stability through the teaching of dominant cultural and religious values. Horace Mann, for example, viewed schooling as a bulwark intended to thwart the profligacy he witnessed as a result of the rapidly changing society around him. Mann’s advocacy for common schools was a moral crusade rather than a democratic quest. In his 1840 Lecture on Education, he depicts ominously and biblically, the consequences of parents failing to educate their children with a proper moral vision.

And now, you, my friends! who feel that you are patriots and lovers of mankind,—what bulwarks, what ramparts for freedom, can you devise, so enduring and impregnable, as intelligence and virtue! Parents...you have not a son nor a daughter who, in this world of temptation, is not destined to encounter perils more dangerous than to walk a bridge of a single plank, over a dark and sweeping torrent beneath. But it is in your power and at your option, with the means which Providence will graciously vouchsafe, to give them that firmness of intellectual movement and that keenness of moral vision,—that light of knowledge and that omnipotence of virtue,—by which, in the hour of trial, they will be able to walk, with unfaltering step, over the deep and yawning abyss below, and to reach the opposite shore, in safety, and honor, and happiness.3

While Mann (and the Whigs generally) viewed common schools as giving greater opportunities for children than they would have enjoyed otherwise, he also viewed public education as a catalyst capable of infusing Protestant and republican virtue and moral harmony amongst a growing and diverse population, an “instrument” of “redeeming” qualities, he asserts, the purposes of which did not embrace democratic citizenship.4
Common Schooling to Save Our Country

Common school reformers had a much more passive understanding of commoners’ status in the community, viewing citizen virtue as obedience to the laws and respecting representative government. Like citizens, students were expected to be docile, to develop self-restraint and self-discipline, uphold moral (Whig) values, accept their status in the community, and learn that liberty must be tempered by conscientious service to the republic. Self-interest and the public interest were to unite for a common cause. In his *Patriot Improvers*, Whitfield J. Bell, Jr., explains that during the early republic, “patriots were understood to be lovers of their country in the best and broadest sense; and those who made improvements, whether in plows, pumps, or barnyards, were applauded for their patriotic services.” This conclusion is consistent with the subsequent Whig ideology. “Patriots were improvers, and improvers were their country’s patriots.” It is more than a coincidence that the Whigs’ vision for common schooling included a broad institutional approach to educating a nation about such proper moral principles, and since the Whigs remained Federalists in their thinking, there is no reason to believe that they suddenly became democratic in the Jeffersonian sense of the term. Broad-based schooling effectively institutionalized Whigs’ nostalgic worldview by inculcating among a diverse student population respect for and adaptation to their interpretation of civic virtue, republican (and not democratic) government, regard for social hierarchy, and, to venerate social custom and moral harmony, all viewed through the Whig lens of evangelical Protestantism. While schooling was expected to provide opportunities for children, Whigs perceived neither democracy nor democratic citizenship as purposes of common education. According to Wilentz, their primary rationale for common education was to “save souls,” which required Whig leadership and management, not to create democrats or “democratic equality.” Whigs associated the problems in the republic to a lack of individual morality and respect for traditional authority, “and their solution lay in individual self-reform” within Whig institutions.

Sean Wilentz describes the political conflict as a “moral war” or “essentially a…conflict, not between the privileged and the people or the wealthy and the poor, but between the righteous and the unrighteous.” Whigs viewed democratic reforms as symptoms of moral decay, and broad-based institutionalized schooling could rectify the Whigs’ growing anxieties by piloting the ship of state back on course. As Daniel Walker Howe argues, the more democratic the American electorate became, the more difficult it was to mold a national identity, and “the more important moral and religious issues came to be in politics.” As more individuals became detached from the moral roots
the church and family had established, Whigs considered public schooling and other social institutions as propitious substitutes for moral education and social improvement. Mann advocated a system of common schools that were humane and nurturing, established on the belief that all people should have opportunities to develop and pursue their human potential, internalize moral restraint, and refine independent judgment. Once we learn of Mann’s childhood and his aversion to the harsh Calvinist interpretations he was exposed to as a child, it becomes clear that his common school crusade exemplified his new commitment to Unitarianism. Like the Transcendentalists generally, Mann celebrated human nature and the ability of schools to cultivate the perfection of this nature, which helps us understand why he was unwilling to maintain local control over education. In other words, such an important crusade could not be left solely to the eccentricities of local officials who often resisted transcending their parochial customs for the larger Whig commitments to the common good. As Donald Warren argues, “the educational campaign that gathered momentum in the Jacksonian and antebellum periods aimed not merely to increase the number of schools.” More importantly, the effort was intended to refine them. “Schools represented a means to a greater purpose. They were to harmonize a diverse people, soften their antagonisms, and equip them to function as citizens in a changing society.” To achieve these goals, “the common school movement represented a battle against localism,” which illustrates an important distinction from Jefferson’s prior vision for schooling.

**Questioning the Democratic Purposes of Common Schools**

“Rome was no longer Roman,” declare the editors of the *American Whig Journal* in 1845. Whigs may have perceived the disintegration of the American republic similar to the way their protagonist Edmund Burke had observed the disintegration of the French Revolution: certainly less violent, but no less radical in spurning the stabilizing forces of tradition. Democrats controlled both houses of the 29th Congress and were victorious in retaking the White House in 1845, an indication that Whigs were waning as a political force in the US. In fact, Democrats controlled nearly every Congress (but for three) during the previous twenty years. Seeing their political power diminish, Whig editors were committed to educating their readers about the country’s growing self-indulgence and linking it to the Democrats and the unbridled free market. Indeed, Whigs viewed the election of 1828 (and perhaps the election of 1824 as an augur of what was coming) as confirmation of broad-based moral decay and Andrew Jackson, and his successor Martin Van Buren, as the antithesis of a virtuous republican leader and a consequence of American debauchery. “The standard by which to judge
a nation’s greatness,” the editors assert, can be found neither in its “materialist” culture (market liberalism) nor in her geographic size (westward expansion). Rather, it is “to be appreciated only by [its composition] of the moral, the pure, the thoughtful, the intelligent, [and the] reflective wisdom” among its citizens. An essential difference between Whig and Democratic politics that helps one understand their actions during the so-called “Age of Jackson” lies in their respective views toward history and change. For example, according to Daniel Walker Howe, both parties viewed the American Revolution in fundamentally distinctive ways. “For Democrats, it represented liberation from history; for Whigs, it was the climax of history.” It is understandable, then, that Democrats were more willing to accept change and see it as progressive, while the Whigs naturally resisted any moral or ideological conversion they perceived as weakening traditional social structures. By linking America’s decadence to that of Rome’s, Whigs were inclined to rely on and have faith in the ability of Whig public institutions to “redeem people,” as Howe has fittingly asserted, and aid in their atonement for the republic’s growing decadence. “The Whigs have…a character in history,” according to Daniel Webster, and this presumption rationalized Whigs’ moral authority, which helps one understand their interests in and purposes for establishing common institutions. “All men,” Webster proclaims, are “in want of culture” and knowledge, in want of something to explain to them not only what they may see around them, but their own nature, condition, and destiny.” It is “indispensable,” he lectures, to develop the “moral necessities of mankind [and] to children throughout…the country.” The republic was evolving into an unrecognizable and uncontrollable nation as the economy, immigration, and urbanization were seen as destabilizing local and collective social authority and contributing to large-scale change, illustrated by one of the most palpable junctures, Andrew Jackson’s rise to the White House.

Unlike the Whigs, their “Democratic critics” believed that “political life had not yet reached the state of revolution” necessary to subvert the traditional social hierarchies Whigs supported. A shift of this magnitude necessitated a comprehensive and uniform response. Former moral sanctions were being uprooted, and Whigs identified a need for new social institutions that could restrain more broadly and stabilize more effectively the irrepressible changes taking place. The Whigs expected common schools to serve as an institutional means of preserving their cultural view of America or making their “Rome appear more Roman.”

There were multiple purposes driving Whigs’ interest in common schooling including the means to inculcate respect for republican institutions, to instill moral virtue, and to cultivate a common literate
culture—all of which were expected to contribute to social stability and the salvation of Whig social and political expectations for the nation. A few historians, however, identify democratic purposes behind the Whig agenda. For instance, David Labaree concludes that a political goal of common schools represents an attempt by Whigs to realize “democratic equality” or the cultivation of “democratic citizenship” intended “to prepare people for political roles” in the republic, illustrative of the Whig efforts to institutionalize “citizenship training.” While I agree with Labaree’s analysis as it relates to subsequent goals of schooling during the late nineteenth century and twentieth century, I question his use of the terms “democratic equality” and “democratic citizenship” as goals the Whigs sought to realize in their development of common schools.

Rather, I suggest Whigs regarded common schooling as a formal means of counteracting the democratization of the republic. In their eyes, “democracy,” a term they associate with Andrew Jackson (and Thomas Jefferson), was antithetical to republican government. In a Boston oration delivered in 1842, for instance, Horace Mann pointed out that, with an expansion of the franchise that contributed to the election of Andrew Jackson, “a...majority of voters...possessed [n]either the intellectual [n]or the moral advantages of a school.” This newly formed electorate, according to Mann, due to “their profound ignorance, will necessarily be incapable of discerning principles, or of appreciating arguments;—accessible through the passions alone; creating demagogues for leaders....” Furthermore, disoriented, short-sighted, and easily led astray as they are, “this class of men,” would be unable to “attach themselves to any one party,” resulting in their constant “shifting” to the “wrong side.” In his 1840 Lecture on Education, Mann asserts, “The theory of our government is...not that all men, however unfit, shall be voters...but that every man, by power of reason and the sense of duty, shall become fit to be a voter.” Republican government could not endure, he continues, “if vicious materials are daily wrought into its frame-work...” It is for this reason, he concludes, that education “must be universal.”

Given that Whigs viewed the American Revolution as the pinnacle of history, it was reasonable for them to pursue policies they assumed would anchor future developments to a former era illustrative of stability and republican tradition. Jackson’s election illustrated to them a fracture in the Whig worldview. The editors of the American Review express this concern in April 1845 in an article entitled “How Shall Life Be Made The Most Of?” In this article, strong criticism is directed toward the lack of adequate education among workers in various professions, and the frequent “changing of professions at pleasure.” Both of these “bad habits” were symptoms of a liberal market that was viewed as destabilizing for “all classes of society.” According to the editors, “Every man ought to be educated for his
profession or calling, whatever it be,” and “A man ought to continue through life in the same profession.” Whigs did not fully accept the idea of individual self-interest viewing it as “irresponsible,” beyond what was necessary in suffusing within students a strict moral code, a sense of right and wrong through disciplined reflection, internal restraint, and the duty to support the collective good above one’s own self-interest. Whigs knew that republican government could not be truly republican by force; rather, respect for republicanism had to be taught and internalized in the populace. For Mann, “two divine ideas” should remain constant in America: “duty to God and society,” both achieved through the “church” and the “school.” This set of ingredients was clearly not intended for democratic citizenship or democratic political participation.

Whig anxieties resulted in what Russell Hanson describes as a “reversal of the classical republican formula” wherein the republic “is for the aid of virtue, and not virtue for the republic.” Concerned about the changes taking place, Whigs deemed it necessary to use institutions to “aid” in the development of “virtue” since families and churches could no longer be relied upon to serve this function effectively. Social changes occurring during the early nineteenth century gave rise to an ideological crisis as Democrats discarded social barriers, and the Whigs responded by trying to preserve them. As one reads Horace Mann’s annual reports, it becomes obvious that he is attempting to develop broad-based common schools founded upon his idyllic New England model. Yet, a new age was proving to the Whigs that liberalism, strongly Democrat-supported, was unequivocally contributing to the growing moral disintegration of the American republic, which resulted in their appeals for comprehensive, state-wide systems of education. A proper education could not be left solely to the dictates of parochial eccentricities or apathy and neglect. Education for the Whigs became a religious mission, a moral calling infused with a strong sense of urgency that rationalized state regulation of individuals and the economy.

The election of Andrew Jackson in 1828 confirmed Whig fears of democracy ensuing from the expansion of the franchise. Some even viewed his election as the beginning of the end of the republic. Noah Webster, for example, bemoans the emerging mob rule, viewing it as a death-knell to republican virtue and Christian morality. Through his distinctive spelling books and dictionaries, he may have viewed himself as one of the founders of American custom and habit, and in contrast he considered Jackson and the broader social and economic changes taking place later in his life as dismantling his architectural scaffolding. He expressed such contempt toward Jackson, and so desperate was he to circumvent the democratization of republican government, that he suggests “raising the voting age to forty-five,” according to Wilentz. Whigs refer to Jackson as having “made no pretensions to learning or
scholarship of any kind,” and condescendingly describe him as “a politician from choice” as opposed to a selfless, statesman-like figure fulfilling a public duty. He “devoted” his “mind” completely “to political strategy” and a “democracy which…allies itself with infidelity to religion…destructive of every rational plan for the good of the commonwealth.”

Nostalgically, Whigs call for acknowledging “the spirit of the Past—the chivalric and thoughtful spirit…when worth was not gauged by the standards of wealth or fashion, and a nation’s greatness was not computed by the arithmetic of numbers.” Their necessary remedy requires “preserving a nation in its primitive worth and freedom [through] universal moral education and the…conviction that [an individual’s] duty is [his] interest.” However, in 1845, Whig editors complain, “No man in America is content to be poor…or expects to continue so.”

The development of “commerce” was becoming “the universal pursuit of man” and “trade is destined to destroy…much of the beauty and happiness of every land.” The freedom the market personified and the material interests that it venerated, prevent us from “cultivat[ing] the graces of humanity…and the fear of evil consequences is more influential than the love of goodness.”

Deterrence rather than obedient commitment to the common good exemplified the uprooting of traditional moral expectations in the changing republic. Furthermore, these anxieties caused the editors of *The American Review* to exclaim, “our social condition makes us wary, suspicious, slow to commit ourselves too far in interest for others.”

William Ellery Channing, a leading New England Unitarian, makes a similar criticism in his 1840 publication, *The Elevation of the Laboring Classes*, asserting, “Adventurers” are attempting to “escape…the primeval sentence of living by the sweat of the brow” resulting in “the demoralization of the community” by creating “excessive competition, which of necessity generates…fraud…. Trade is turned to gambling; and a spirit of mad speculation exposes public and private interests to a disastrous instability.”

This necessitated a system of common schooling that would entail, not a direct and obvious form of social and regulatory control, but rather, a system fundamentally established for the purposes of developing of a more subtle method of inculcating self-discipline and moral responsibility in children. Schooling should subdue any individual desire to succumb to hedonistic tendencies to the extent necessary and prevent the student from being lured by the otherwise permissive and unmanageable effects of democratization and *laissez-faire* capitalism. Governing the nation took on greater significance and scope for Whigs as they forged their political agenda in a manner that required going beyond existing republican institutions in order to regulate and prepare future citizens in a fragile and potentially unpredictable, changing republic. In other words, as they witnessed their political power
diminishing within the formal electoral bodies of government, Whigs increasingly advanced reforms that were expected to have permanent and everlasting effects beyond the ephemeral nature of the new democratic politics. They could not leave the purposes of their moral crusade to political caprice or to the volatile nature of party politics. A degree of historical irony exists in this era: the Whigs constructed extra-republican institutions—common schools—in large measure finally yielding to Jefferson’s advocacy for public schooling a half-century earlier but as a response to rather than support for Jacksonian “democracy.” Unlike Jefferson’s schooling, Whig schooling was less a product of the “Enlightenment” than the “Reformation,” as Howe discusses.40

The Whigs’ common school agenda comprised institutionalizing their ideological perspectives materially and concretely, which included conserving traditional social and political structures. They viewed the status quo as a harmonious cultural balance that needed to be protected from history’s dangerous cyclical tendencies. Cultural harmony in the republic required relentless nurturing and cultivation of its individual parts in order to prevent imbalance and disequilibrium from occurring. The democratization of the electorate that resulted in Jackson’s and Van Buren’s elevation to the White House convinced many Whigs they must go beyond conventional politics in hopes of memorializing their ideological imprint on the republic. One can appreciate their level of anxiety present among many Whigs in their 1840 publication, *Letters to the People of the United States*, written under the penname, Concivis, which provides an extreme indictment against Van Buren and compares him to Rehoboam, King of Judah, who ruled recklessly and ambitiously for wealth and power from 930–913 BC. Throughout this diatribe, the author distinguishes the Van Buren and Jackson administrations from their predecessors, as “a change from dignity to debasement; from rectitude to profligacy; from the peaceful scenes of order, safety and prosperity, to confusion, disaster, and ruin!”42 Their rise to the presidency, according to Concivis, “should teach us the error…of flattering ourselves that the intelligence and virtue of the people, the excellence of our constitution, the wisdom of our laws,” and “our national glory, are as a matter of course to secure us from the plots of unprincipled demagogues,” who attempt to undermine our institutions, and destroy our freedom.”43 At times, the essay appears to parallel John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* as the author refers to Van Buren and his predecessor as having “repulsed the legitimate wishes” and “the rightful demands of the great, the free, [and] the high-minded people, whose creature he is, who voluntarily raised him to the lofty elevation which has inflamed his vanity and ambition into madness, and who can at their will hurl him back in a moment into his original insignificance!”44 The
elections of Jackson and Van Buren were evidence the people were wonting of “intelligence and virtue,” and by “undermining” traditional republican institutions, Whigs responded by erecting new institutions to counter the “profligacy” they witnessed.45

The educational reform movement was successful in establishing what would become an institutional and organizational framework centralized at the state level functioning as a site of political conflict over issues related to morality, curricula, purposes of education, teacher certification requirements, state and federal policies, and numerous political agendas throughout the history of American education. Ironically, the Whig institutionalization and centralization of education did not isolate schools from political conflict, as the Whigs quickly learned in cities like New York and Philadelphia where religious conflicts between Protestants and Catholics erupted. The Whig obsession with institutions and their efforts to establish a uniform culture, a standardized curricula, and centralization at the state level, resulted in their bolstering an organizational framework that social efficiency advocates could employ though the Whigs would have abhorred their many goals for schooling. For example, a primary purpose of Whig institutions was to regulate behavior and maintain social harmony; social efficiency advocates pursued utilitarian goals within the common school organizational framework focusing substantially on preparing students for the workforce and potentially displacing Whig emphasis on the development of moral habits. It was not that moral habits were unimportant during the social efficiency movement; rather, “social utility,” according to Kliebard, “became the supreme criterion against which the value of school studies was measured.”46 Although Whigs increasingly recognized immoral corollaries (i.e., competition and self-interest) emerging from an expanding liberal market, it is safe to conclude that the Whigs would have recoiled at the idea of subjecting the purposes of common schools and such other institutions as asylums and hospitals to the dictates and vicissitudes of a free liberal market’s demands and effects. Although the Whigs feared a market liberality lacking moral certitude infiltrating into schooling, that liberality became the modus operandi of the very school system they helped design. Their goal was to modernize the market, but to do so with both feet firmly planted in the past.

While various interest groups have vied for control over the curriculum, the growing systemization of Whig schooling contributed to organizational frameworks that facilitated top-down education policies and approaches that persistently subvert and undermine local democratic control. From an organizational perspective, the structure of common (public) schools has transcended the various goals school reformers in different eras pursued serving as an institutional means of supporting the
ideological agendas of politically powerful interests that emerge and then fade away, sometimes to reemerge again. However, while the Whigs would have been disappointed over the utilitarian emphasis of schooling in the late nineteenth century, they were successful in establishing a public institution that would serve as a systematic means of culturally assimilating millions of future students and aiding in their acquisition of right moral character in a rapidly changing society. According to Howe, “The agents of progress were often the enlightened few rather than the tumultuous many,” and “the outcome of [Whig] benevolent social change was greater order, not less.”

Institutionalization of Education Politics and Unanticipated Consequences

While they viewed themselves as the proper architects of benevolent institutions for a variety of reasons, they saw common schooling as a means of paternally communicating and collectively instilling in multitudes of future citizens their reputable worldview—to “redeem” a society increasingly viewed as morally deficient and qualitatively unbalanced. Therefore, while the goals for education shift among groups of reformers during the nineteenth century, the Whigs were responsible for developing a system of schools that would eventually undermine their own educational purposes. While curricular content was modified to serve the demands of influential groups, the structure and organization of common schools enables the development of further standardization, routinization, and assimilation in later decades, structural characteristics that transcend the various purposes of schooling yet facilitate their advance or their retreat. The Whigs’ attempts to develop a homogenous culture are manifest in their desire to create institutions that promoted uniformity in thought and habitual behavior. What they did not realize is that their creation of institutions built the means within which future generations could pursue other ends that would rarely focus on democratic citizenship.

The systematization and institutionalization of schools throughout our history illustrate a pattern of organized social management, of socializing and assimilating students to the normative expectations of dominant and powerful interest groups in society. Whether to produce virtuous citizens, good workers, or self-sufficient adults, institutionalizing common and public schooling beginning with the Whig crusade develops the organizational boundaries that create mass schooling as a formalized and systematized social institution responsible for defining the means to achieving opportunity and success. Whigs were successful in developing institutions that contributed to the uniformity and standardization of culture and social norms. Indeed, what is uniformly taught and standardized in schools is virtually always
contested, but when the pursuits made by special interests congeal into policy, social institutions have a strong tendency to diminish individuality and suppress difference by systematizing processes, patterns of organizational behavior, and upholding formal and informal rules and expectations. Despite the common perception that American culture is deeply individualistic, defined by Seymour Martin Lipset in the 1960s as the “American Creed,” recent historians question Lipset’s conclusions claiming that he makes the mistake of conflating elite and popular values. To the contrary, recent historians provide significant evidence to support the idea that local communities exhibit “strong communal orientations,” and characteristically discourage individuality in favor of collective obligations. In addition, this recent research “casts considerable doubt on the claim that liberal individualism was a widely-held orientation…either among the elite leadership of the Revolution or in the general population.” This is not surprising to many education historians who have long recognized how educational ideas and practices generally parallel the expectations of republican and Protestant leaders and reformers. Histories of schooling in seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth century America reveal a relentless pursuit to maintain national unity, cultural conformity, and the assimilation of dominant beliefs. Indeed, all societies need a level of “cultural coherence,” as Bruce Ackerman asserts. This is not to say that individualism is absent in America’s history; rather, it is to point out the fact that society’s political, social, and economic institutions tend to arrest or restrict cultural change. For example, in their study of early America, Grabb and Baern convincingly conclude the “localized values and beliefs shared in common [place] strong emphasis on conformity to communally-sanctioned, rather than individually-determined, standards of thought and behavior.” For most individuals, the fundamental influence comes from “communitarian religious and family values that prevailed in that period.” Since common or public schools generally reflected dominant cultural values, it is not surprising to find among the histories of education confirmation of this strong collectivist or communal purpose of schooling which is certainly compatible with the Whigs’ communitarian, static perspectives.

By the early- to mid-nineteenth century, faced with increasing urban poverty, high rates of immigration, and the election of Andrew Jackson in 1828, it is no coincidence that Whigs, the “redeemers of society,” according to Daniel Howe, look to the common school as an institution that can effectively supplant the traditional church and family in maintaining a cohesive, comprehensive civic culture in an increasingly diverse and politically attentive society. Broadening the franchise and the subsequent election of a Democrat from Tennessee only heightened already existing anxieties among Whigs who often viewed social change,
not as progress, but as social deterioration. It was not that Whigs were opposed to modernization, rather they favored only those modernizing features that yielded to their ideological expectations. Common schools, Mann convinced the business elite, would precipitate a cost-benefit by instilling in future workers the importance of private property, respect for authority and the rule of law, and the overall development of “pliant workers.” Whigs viewed schooling as an example of modernization; an institutional effort that did not include as one of its purposes the development of democratic citizens. Rather, schooling served as a bulwark against the liberal forces emerging during the period including but not limited to the unintended effects of free market liberalism. As Howe suggests in his extensive research on Whig political culture, “Just as Whig social reforms could serve conservative purposes, so other forms of modernization could represent means to old-fashioned ends.” For instance, “John Quincy Adams supported measures favorable to business enterprise out of a dedication to the classical humanist ideals of discipline and self-improvement.”

Concomitantly, reformers did not want to leave common schooling to chance by relying solely on local affiliations. State involvement, although initially minimal, followed the growth of common schooling. In order to pursue commonality, states slowly wrested control of education from local communities, contributing to curricular uniformity, structural organization, and the institutionalization of prevailing moral standards. Despite the fact that many Whigs opposed westward expansion and the growing liberalizing effects of industrialization, state legislatures not only acquired more control over education in their state constitutions and statutes, they also became increasingly controlled by business interests seeking to influence state education policies and the purpose of schooling.

It should also be noted that the purposes of common schooling include but are not limited to social management. In addition to providing basic literacy and cultural assimilation, common schooling provides what all social and political institutions attempt to deliver: a functional and efficient increase in social benefits while diminishing “compliance costs.” Richard W. Wilson, for example, argues institutions restrict “social relations” generally “thought of as the complex of norms, laws, and associated practices that undergird social life establishing explanations for status differences and the procedures for maintaining a particular pattern of relationships.” Although Wilson does not directly refer to public schools, common schools were certainly intended to perform these functions.

In *A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools and the Diffusion of Knowledge in Pennsylvania* (1786), Dr. Benjamin Rush asserts it is necessary
to “convert men into republican machines.” Indeed, Rush intends to illustrate the importance not only of developing citizens who respect republican government as he understands it but to institutionalize schooling so it can effectively serve as a functional and reliable means for creating unity and cultural homogeneity in the State of Pennsylvania and ultimately the US. Note that Rush does not use the term “democracy” in his description. Of course, although republicanism retained much of its communal focus on protecting the public interest above individual self-interest, society increasingly perceived republicanism as democratic. Indeed, Rush’s expectations were no different from those dominant groups in any society interested in educating citizens sought: to develop institutions for the purpose of perpetuating or socially reproducing dominant ideologies. Throughout our history American schooling has carried out this reproductive goal in a variety of ways, from subtly inculcating civic and moral precepts on the one hand to forcefully excluding or eradicating cultural differences on the other. Fundamentally, state education serves a conservative purpose—to perpetuate a society’s dominant culture while suppressing subcultures perceived as different, dangerous, or irreligious, an anti-democratic purpose in today’s sense of democracy. In other words, following Amy Gutmann’s thinking on this issue, if democracy requires institutional recognition of difference, then the history of American schooling has been profoundly undemocratic. Indeed, one reason early Americans rejected Jefferson’s proposals for schooling was because, like the purposes of republican government, they never conceived the purpose of public schooling to develop a democracy or democratic citizenry. In addition to providing basic literacy, common schooling was to cultivate cultural unity, political stability, social and economic order, and respect for representative government.

**Conclusion**

Distinguishing the American from the French Revolution, Edmund Burke, often heralded by Whigs in nineteenth century America for his conservatism, viewed the American Revolution as an attempt to recover time-honored British traditions. On the other hand, he viewed the French Revolution as a gratuitous and violent overthrow of all things French. “Government is not made in virtue of natural rights,” Burke asserts. Rather, “government is a contrivance of human wisdom” that requires “sufficient restraint upon [men’s] passions.” Such restraint requires “the inclinations of men should frequently be thwarted, their will controlled, and their passions brought into subjection,” which Burke believes could “only be done by [an external] power…subject to that will and to those passions which it is its office to bridle and subdue.”
Liberty can only be enjoyed if tempered by order:

Restraints on men, as well as their liberties, are to be reckoned among their rights. But as the liberties and the restrictions vary with times and circumstances, and admit of infinite modifications, they cannot be settled upon any abstract rule....

And to assume otherwise is naïve, he explains. Burke was not opposed to change; rather, he was opposed to impetuous and reckless disregard of tradition. He viewed the American Revolution as a resurrection of and respect for a well-established British republican tradition. American founders were attempting to re-educate the British on the republican canon. As for the French, “they had completely pulled down to the ground, their monarchy; their church; their nobility; their law; their revenue; their army; their navy; their commerce; their arts; and their manufactures,” all caused by “the excesses of an irrational, unprincipled, proscribing, confiscating, plundering, ferocious, bloody and tyrannical democracy.”

Indeed, the Founders were well aware of republican history. It taught them that maintaining a republic was not only arduous but likely to end in failure. Sustaining the proper checks and balances in republics and cultivating ample republican virtue had been consistently and empirically demonstrated for centuries to be a futile exercise in political statecraft. Nevertheless, the American experiment quickly grew from an embryonic to an adolescent stage of development undergoing social, political, and religious anxieties and ideological turmoil over the proper meaning of the Revolution and the purposes of the new republic. For the most part, however, elites were able to maintain respect for the status quo immediately following the conflict by linking the future success of the republic, neither to democracy, which they still viewed pejoratively, nor to democratic citizenship, but to individual and collective obligation and respect for representative rule. Although the initial political battles that transpired represented disagreement between the conventional and the radical, this debate was primarily restricted to elites in the Federalist and Jeffersonian factions. While few people could exercise the franchise during this period, it was taken for granted that elite rule would persist well into the distant future as a source of political and social order. In other words, civic virtue, while difficult to maintain in a republic, appeared to have a relatively firm federal foundation since the constitutional framework would limit rule to the social elite. With few exceptions, democracy was still perceived as ruinous of and harmful to republics. The presidential election in 1828 was considered proof that the American experiment was headed toward a ruinous path.

Growing out of an initial anxiety over parochialism and insular interests, George Washington proposes “the assimilation of the
principles, opinions, and manners of our countrymen...from every quarter.... The more homogeneous our citizens can be made in these particulars the greater will be our prospect of permanent union.”

Although it would be decades before common schooling emerged, many republican leaders during the late eighteenth century understood the importance of developing a common civic virtue that included harnessing one’s self-interest and suffusing students with a sense of selflessness and an attentiveness toward the public good which, at the very least, translated into maintaining the cultural status quo. Schools were born amidst political conflict, and Whig reformers expected common schools as public institutions to fortify what they perceived the American Revolution to have achieved—a confirmation of their ideological perspective of the revolution. Whigs expected schools to stifle democratic conflict, stabilize a rapidly changing society, and maintain a sense of order among an increasingly diverse population. Whigs developed common schools to serve as a bulwark against change, firmly to anchor in the hearts and minds of future citizens the Whig, undemocratic worldview. Time would reveal however, that rather than tempering democracy and shielding society from democratic politics as the Whigs had hoped, common schooling would serve as a new battleground upon which new political conflicts would be fought.

Endnotes


3 Horace Mann, *Lecture on Education* (Boston: Gale Sabin Americana, 1840).


Ibid.


Ibid., 488–489. Regina Morantz determines through an extensive newspaper analysis that 63% of newspapers from 1820 to 1850 considered themselves to be “Democrat” or “Democratic.” While this evidence confirms a developing Democratic party, it also reveals a party ideology in opposition to the Whig coalition which was very much anti-democrat. Morantz’s 1971 dissertation is cited in Russell L. Hanson, The Democratic Imagination in America: Conversations with Our Past (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 88.


Ibid.


For election results see Michael J. Dubin, United States Congressional Elections, 1788–1997: The Official Results (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 1998), 139–145; and Michael J. Dubin, United States


22 Horace Mann, An Oration Delivered Before the Authorities of the City of Boston, July 4, 1842 (Boston: W. B. Fowle and N. Capen, 1842), 59.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Horace Mann, Lecture on Education.

26 Ibid.


28 Ibid.


Howe, *The Political Culture*, 74.

49 Ibid., 512, 524.

50 Ibid., 524–525.


52 Grabb et al., 526.

53 Ibid.


57 Ibid.


60 For example, Amy Gutmann defines democratic education as “a guiding principle of deliberative democracy [that] is recipr[ocal] among free and equal individuals….” She views schooling as a public institution responsible for “cultivating” among students a respect for “deliberative democracy” and “conscious social reproduction in its most inclusive form.” *Democratic Education with a New Preface and Epilogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), xii, 42.

61 Edmund Burke, *Substance of the speech of the Right Honourable Edmund Burke, in thr [sic] debate on the army estimates, in the House of Commons, on Tuesday, the 9th day of February, 1790*, 2nd ed. (London: Debrett, 1790), 8.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid.

64 Ibid.

65 Edmund Burke, 12.

66 Warren, 244–245.