

Historia Pro Patria?

Jim Giarelli and Benjamin Justice
Rutgers University

In “Young Patriots or Junior Historians,” Jon Levisohn tackles one of the most persistent themes in American education: fostering patriotism through academic study. His essay ably distinguishes between Galston’s argument for the necessity and justification of a “sentimental” history undergirding the education of citizens and Callan’s argument *contra* Galston that our civic sentiments must and can be justified on moral and political grounds. While accepting the broad outlines of Callan’s position, Levisohn argues that the justification of historical narratives by which civic obligation or loyalty might be engendered is properly seen as epistemological, rather than moral or political. While each of these positions is nuanced and complicated, at root they differ in their conceptions of the nature of historical inquiry and inquiry in general.

Thus, we would like to raise two closely related sets of questions. The first set concerns what we might call the method of historical inquiry. What does Levisohn mean by the “epistemology of historical inquiry?” Is there something identifiable as “the nature of historical inquiry?” The second set concerns what might be called the content of historical inquiry. Is the content of American history the story of the nation, the people, the civic community, associated life? Is there a difference between “state-sponsored and state-mandated history education” and history education simpliciter? Is state education the same as public education? Is patriot education the same as civic education?

Levisohn’s argument works around two fundamental concepts: patriotism and history. While it develops certain aspects of each — delimiting critical versus uncritical patriotism and good history vs. bad history, in our view it does not develop a cogent definition of either and, to some degree, offers a view of the latter, “good” history, that is outdated. Levisohn argues that epistemologically there need be no tension between doing “good” history and fostering “good” patriotism. An examination of each, however, suggests that there is a great deal of tension between patriotism and good history. The tension does not come from the problem of dredging up morally incriminating facts, nor from instilling a sense of cynicism about the nation-state, but rather from the very heart of contemporary history inquiry: postmodernism.¹

Levisohn devotes considerable care to accommodating and sowing the complementarity of the epistemological and normative moments in historical inquiry and inquiry in general. The helpful and provocative distinctions he makes between the questions, “What is dominant?” and “What is best?” are intended to capture the tension between these moments. While historical inquiry that focuses on the “What is dominant?” question all too often leads to disinterested spectatorship, historical inquiry that focuses on the “What is best?” question all too often leads to jingoism and white-washed chauvinism. For Levisohn, however, the nature of

historical inquiry properly understood not only allows but demands attention to both questions. The normative concern for what is best makes no sense apart from a wider context of what is dominant and inquiry into what is dominant depends on the normative commitments of the historian in selecting and interpreting materials of significance. And, most importantly, responses to both questions can be systematically falsified and are thus properly seen as part of an epistemological project.

Interestingly, Levisohn cites Rorty in his opening paragraph to the effect that our contemporary civic malady of detachment has its root in the educational system. For Rorty, however, in the same source cited, the project of civic education is not primarily epistemological, at least in the way Levisohn defines it. As Rorty writes,

Nobody knows what it would be like to try to be objective when attempting to decide what one's country really is, what its history really means. . . . We raise questions about our . . . national identity as part of the process of deciding what we will do next, what we will try to become.²

That is, while Levisohn is right to point to epistemology as the epicenter of controversy over history education, in our view he is mistaken in his conclusion that “good” history leads to patriotism. As long as “good” history education reflects the methods and subject matter of contemporary trends in historical scholarship, which seems a reasonable gauge of “good” history, and as long as patriotism remains centrally concerned with the nation-state under whose authority one lives, there will be a conflict between history education and patriotism.

In our view, one of the most salient themes in contemporary historiography is the demise of the nation-state as a legitimate organizing principle for historical inquiry. In American history alone fields such as social history, immigration history, African-American history, and women's history have fundamentally recast the content and methods of historical inquiry. Even approaches to chronological periods, such as “The Age of Jackson,” have largely dropped the focus on the policies and practices of government in favor of nuanced examinations of how religion, immigration, social class, and gender played out across and within multiple forms of associated life. Such approaches often undermine the legitimacy of the nation state either explicitly or implicitly through its irrelevance. Questions of “what is dominant?” and “what is best?” (as well as others, such as “what is different?” or “what *is not* dominant?”) no longer revolve solely around the concerns of the state.

If we look at patriotism, however, it is a concept that has implicit in it, or at least at this point in human history, a strong component of the interest of the nation-state. Concern for “patria” is concern for the nation, and a particular gendered version of the nation as well. One may call oneself a citizen of the world, but in reality, no such status currently exists. The United Nations, which would presumably be the government of such citizens, recognizes no such concepts. Listed among its fundamental human rights is the right of every human being to belong to *some* nation-state. Patriotism, and the citizenship it fosters in any legal or practical sense, is all about filial piety — critical or otherwise — toward one's assigned nation-state.

In the United States, history educators have long latched on to the patriotism argument to further their cause.³ And from the mid nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century, they had good reason. With few exceptions, method and subject

matter meshed with the interests of the state. One could scarcely pick up a high school, college, or professional-level text without seeing the nation-state, explicitly or implicitly, as the single organizing principle. But in the last half of the twentieth century, much professional history has increasingly divorced itself from the nation-state. The old argument for *historia pro patria*, on methodological, substantive, or sentimental grounds, holds less water than ever among those who define the “nature of historical inquiry.” Contemporary historians are rightly suspicious of the nation-state. The nation-state and the institutions such as state schools that support it ought to be suspicious of the contemporary historian.

Ironically, the last bastion of the old narrative is the textbooks we give our children — sources frequently and justifiably derided as vapid, thoughtless, racist, sexist and grossly misleading or inaccurate. What pittance of history school children do manage to learn and retain (and research suggests it is a pittance), recalls a long line of presidents, scattered wars, and a general disdain for the whole historical enterprise.⁴ Professional history is further from the textbook than it has ever been.

But this is not to say we should not teach contemporary history. On the contrary, the new methods and new subject matter offer something to students that they have rarely, if ever, received from history: an education that humanizes the past. Such study may not make them better citizens of American, Canada, or Kuwait, but it may challenge them to think beyond the narrow confines of each and advance their, and our, sense of a common humanity. In 1916, Dewey wrote:

Is it possible for an educational system to be conducted by a national state and yet the full social ends of the educative process not be restricted, constrained, and corrupted?...The question is concerned with the reconciliation of national loyalty, of patriotism, with *superior* devotion to the things which unite men in common ends, irrespective of national political boundaries....It is not enough to teach the horrors of war and to avoid everything which would stimulate international jealousy and animosity. The emphasis must be put upon whatever binds people together in cooperative human pursuits and results, apart from geographical limitations. The *secondary* and *provisional* character of national sovereignty in respect to the fuller, freer, and more fruitful association and intercourse of all human beings with one another must be instilled as a working disposition of mind.⁵

What does the state have to do with civic education or public education? Why do we move so easily from talk about citizenship and achieving our country to talk of nations and patriotism? In our view, Levisohn discounts these important distinctions. When writing about the legitimate aim of history education, he begins “within schools that are funded by the state, the liberal democratic state has a right to promote its own preservation.” Yet the state does not fund the schools, the public does. Indeed, the state in a democracy is created and legitimized by the people to carry out the public’s business. And when the state is unresponsive to the public’s concerns, it is the right and responsibility of the public to break and re-make existing state forms. State education is not identical with public education and indeed it might be argued coherently that the purpose of public education is to provide the kinds of understandings, dispositions, and competencies to break and re-make the state in forms that better reflect and serve newly emerging varieties of public and civic association. Thus, there is a significant difference between state education and public education and in turn between civic education and patriot education.

As discussed earlier, these distinctions have a direct bearing on the nature of historical inquiry. In our view, Levisohn's argument that there is something called the nature of historical inquiry which is constituted by falsifiable objective and normative claims about the nation-state is problematic on both methodological and substantive grounds.

For us, these problems raise far more important practical questions. In our view, there is good evidence that the system of state education is in trouble. One of the most far-reaching changes over the past forty or so years has been the serious blurring of the distinctions between private, public, and parochial education. It was once possible to distinguish between these forms of education by examining their constituencies, funding, methods, and aims. It no longer is. Where the authors live, and in many other places in the United States, state monies go to public, private, and parochial schools, and all three are funded by private monies as well. Parochial schools teach evolution, private charters focus on community service and social justice, and public school report cards are used in real estate market analyses and in the competition for capital investment. The received ideas of public, state, and private are gone. At issue is whether there will continue to be something we could sensibly call a system of public education or whether the public schools will become like the pauper schools of the nineteenth century, the only system for those without the capital to get out.

With Levisohn, we are concerned about the role of public education in a democracy. We worry that the focus on the nation-state will divert out attention from the more pressing problems of civic and public education. And we worry about the relationship between an epistemologically centered conception of historical inquiry and the task of deciding what kind of person one wants to become or community one wants to be part of. Whitman's belief that "democracy is a great word, whose history...remains unwritten, because that history has yet to be enacted," points us to a way of thinking about history, and democracy, that remains centrally important to any form of schooling worthy to be called public education.

1. For a fascinating evaluation of the implications of postmodernism on public education, see Peter Seixas, "Schweigen, die Kinder!" or, Does Postmodern History Have a Place in the Schools," in *Knowing, Teaching And Learning History, National and International Perspectives*, ed. Peter N. Sterns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineberg (New York: New York University Press, 2000): 20-39.

2. Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 11.

3. Jon Zimmerman, *Whose America?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

4. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me* (New York: Touchstone, 1995) and David B. Tyack, "Monuments Between Covers: The Politics of Textbooks," *American Behavioral Scientist* 42, no. 6 (March 1999): 922-32.

5. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1944), 97-98, emphasis added.