DAVID F. LABAREE

ADVENTURES IN SCHOLARSHIP

Instead of writing an autobiographical sketch for this volume, I thought it would be more useful to write about the process of scholarship, using my own case as a cautionary tale. The idea is to help emerging scholars in the field to think about how scholars develop a line of research across a career, both with the hope of disabusing them of misconceptions and showing them how scholarship can unfold as a scary but exhilarating adventure in intellectual development. The brief story I tell here has three interlocking themes: You need to study things that resonate with your own experience; you need to take risks and plan to make a lot of mistakes; and you need to rely on friends and colleagues to tell you when you're going wrong. Let me explore each of these points.

STUDY WHAT RESONATES WITH EXPERIENCE

First, a little about the nature of the issues I explore in my scholarship and then some thoughts about the source of my interest in these issues. My work focuses on the historical sociology of the American system of education and on the thick vein of irony that runs through it. This system has long presented itself as a model of equal opportunity and open accessibility, and there is a lot of evidence to support these claims. In comparison with Europe, this upward expansion of access to education came earlier, moved faster, and extended to more people. Today, virtually anyone can go to some form of postsecondary education in the U.S., and more than two-thirds do. But what students find when they enter the educational system at any level is that they are gaining equal access to a sharply unequal array of educational experiences. Why? Because the system balances open access with radical stratification. Everyone can go to high school, but quality of education varies radically across schools. Almost everyone can go to college, but the institutions that are most accessible (community colleges) provide the smallest boost to a student's life chances, whereas the ones that offer the surest entrée into the best jobs (major research universities) are highly selective. This extreme mixture of equality and inequality, of accessibility and stratification, is a striking and fascinating characteristic of American education, which I have explored in some form or another in all my work.

Another prominent irony in the story of American education is that this system, which was set up to instill learning, actually undercuts learning because of a strong tendency toward formalism. Educational consumers (students and their parents) quickly learn that the greatest rewards of the system go to those who attain its

highest levels (measured by years of schooling, academic track, and institutional prestige), where credentials are highly scarce and thus the most valuable. This vertically-skewed incentive structure strongly encourages consumers to game the system by seeking to accumulate the largest number of tokens of attainment – grades, credits, and degrees – in the most prestigious programs at the most selective schools. However, nothing in this reward structure encourages learning, since the payoff comes from the scarcity of the tokens and not the volume of knowledge accumulated in the process of acquiring these tokens. At best, learning is a side effect of this kind of credential-driven system. At worst, it is a casualty of the system, since the structure fosters consumerism among students, who naturally seek to gain the most credentials for the least investment in time and effort. Thus the logic of the used-car lot takes hold in the halls of learning.

In exploring these two issues of stratification and formalism, I tend to focus on one particular mechanism that helps explain both kinds of educational consequences, and that is the market. Education in the U.S., I argue, has increasingly become a commodity, which is offered and purchased through market processes in much the same way as other consumer goods. Educational institutions have to be sensitive to consumers, by providing the mix of educational products that the various sectors of the market demand. This promotes stratification in education, because consumers want educational credentials that will distinguish them from the pack in their pursuit of social advantage. It also promotes formalism, because markets operate based on the exchange value of a commodity (what it can be exchanged for) rather than its use value (what it can be used for). Educational consumerism preserves and increases social inequality, undermines knowledge acquisition, and promotes the dysfunctional overinvestment of public and private resources in an endless race for degrees of advantage. The result is that education has increasingly come to be seen primarily as a private good, whose benefits accrue only to the owner of the educational credential, rather than a public good, whose benefits are shared by all members of the community even if they don't have a degree or a child in school. In many ways, the aim of my work has been to figure out why the American vision of education over the years made this shift from public to private.

This is what my work has focused on in the last 30 years, but why focus on these issues? Why this obsessive interest in formalism, markets, stratification, and education as arbiter of status competition? Simple. These were the concerns I grew up with.

George Orwell once described his family's social location as the lower upper middle class, and this captures the situation of my own family. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, his meditation on class relations in England, he talks about his family as being both culture rich and money poor.[1] Likewise for mine. Both of my grandfathers were ministers. On my father's side the string of clergy went back four generations in the U.S. On my mother's side, not only was her father a minister but so was her mother's father, who was in turn the heir to a long clerical lineage in Scotland. All of these ministers were Presbyterians, whose clergy has long had a distinctive history of being highly educated cultural leaders who were poor as church mice. The last is a bit of an exaggeration, but the point is that their prestige and authority came from learning and not from wealth. So they tended to value education and disdain grubbing for money. My father was an engineer who managed to support his family in a modest but comfortable middle-class lifestyle.

He and my mother plowed all of their resources into the education of their three sons, sending all of them to a private high school in Philadelphia (Germantown Academy) and to private colleges (Lehigh, Drexel, Wooster, and Harvard). Both of my parents were educated at elite schools (Princeton and Wilson) – on ministerial scholarships – and they wanted to do the same for their own children. What this meant is that we grew up taking great pride in our cultural heritage and educational accomplishments and adopting a condescending attitude to those who simply engaged in trade for a living. Coupled with this condescension was a distinct tinge of envy for the nice clothes, well decorated houses, new cars, and fancy trips that the families of our friends experienced. I thought of my family as a kind of frayed nobility, raising the flag of culture in a materialistic society while wearing hand-me-down clothes. From this background, it was only natural for me to study education as the central social institution, and to focus in particular on the way education had been corrupted by the consumerism and status-competition of a market society. In doing so I was merely entering the family business. Someone out there needed to stand up for substantive over formalistic learning and for the public good over the private good, while at the same time calling attention to the dangers of a social hierarchy based on material status. So I launched my scholarship from a platform of snobbish populism – a hankering for a lost world where position was grounded on the cultural authority of true learning and where mere credentialism could not hold sway.

EXPECT TO GET THINGS WRONG

Becoming a scholar is not easy under the best of circumstances, and we may make it even harder by trying to imbue emerging scholars with a dedication for getting things right.[2] In doctoral programs and tenure reviews, we stress the importance of rigorous research methods and study design, scrupulous attribution of ideas, methodical accumulation of data, and cautious validation of claims. Being careful to stand on firm ground methodologically in itself is not a bad thing for scholars, but trying to be right all the time can easily make us overly cautious, encouraging us to keep so close to our data and so far from controversy that we end up saying nothing that's really interesting. A close look at how scholars actually carry out their craft reveals that they generally thrive on frustration. Or at least that has been my experience. When I look back at my own work over the years, I find that the most consistent element is a tendency for getting it wrong. Time after time I have had to admit failure in the pursuit of my intended goal, abandon an idea that I had once warmly embraced, or backtrack to correct a major error. In the short run these missteps were disturbing, but in the long run they have proven fruitful.

Maybe I'm just rationalizing, but it seems that getting it wrong is an integral part of scholarship. For one thing, it's central to the process of writing. Ideas often sound good in our heads and resonate nicely in the classroom, but the real test is whether they work on paper.[3] Only there can we figure out the details of the argument, assess the quality of the logic, and weigh the salience of the evidence. And whenever we try to translate a promising idea into a written text, we inevitably encounter problems that weren't apparent when we were happily playing with the idea over lunch. This is part of what makes writing so scary and so exciting: It's a high wire act, in which failure threatens us with every step forward. Can we get

past each of these apparently insuperable problems? We don't really know until we get to the end.

This means that if there's little risk in writing a paper there's also little potential reward. If all we're doing is putting a fully developed idea down on paper, then this isn't writing; it's transcribing. Scholarly writing is most productive when authors are learning from the process, and this happens only if the writing helps us figure out something we didn't really know (or only sensed), helps us solve an intellectual problem we weren't sure was solvable, or makes us turn a corner we didn't know was there. Learning is one of the main things that makes the actual process of writing (as opposed to the final published product) worthwhile for the writer. And if we aren't learning something from our own writing, then there's little reason to think that future readers will learn from it either. But these kinds of learning can only occur if a successful outcome for a paper is not obvious at the outset, which means that the possibility of failure is critically important to the pursuit of scholarship.

Influential Works

David K. Cohen, "Teaching Practice: Plus Ça Change." In Philip W. Jackson, ed., *Contributing to Educational Change: Perspectives on Research and Practice*, (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1988), 27-84.

Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

Emile Durkheim, *The Evolution of Educational Thought: Lectures on the Formation and Development of Secondary Education in France* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1938/1969).

Michel D. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison,* trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

Albert O. Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970).

Carl F. Kaestle, *Pillars of the Public: Common School and American Society, 1780-1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983).

Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).

Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," in *Capital*, vol. 1, (New York: International Publishers, 1867/1967), 71-83.

Getting it wrong is also functional for scholarship because it can force us to give up a cherished idea in the face of the kinds of arguments and evidence that accumulate during the course of research. Like everyone else, scholars are prone to confirmation bias. We look for evidence to support the analysis we prefer and overlook evidence that supports other interpretations. So when we collide with something in our research or writing that deflects us from the path toward our preferred destination, we tend to experience this deflection as failure. However, although these experiences are not pleasant, they can be quite productive. Not only do they prompt us to learn things we don't want to know, they can also introduce arguments into the literature that people don't want to hear. A colleague at the University of Michigan, David Angus, had both of these benefits in mind when he used to pose the following challenge to every candidate for a faculty position in the School of

Education: "Tell me about some point when your research forced you to give up an idea you really cared about."

I have experienced all of these forms of getting it wrong. Books never worked out the way they were supposed to, because of changes forced on me by the need to come up with remedies for ailing arguments. The analysis often turned in a direction that meant giving up something I wanted to keep and embracing something I preferred to avoid. And nothing ever stayed finished. Just when I thought I had a good analytical hammer and started using it to pound everything in sight, it would shatter into pieces and I would be forced to start over. This story of misdirection and misplaced intentions starts, as does every academic story, with a dissertation.

MARX GIVES WAY TO WEBER

Influential Works, continued

John W. Meyer & Brian Rowan, "The Structure of Educational Organizations," in John W. Meyer & William R. Scott, eds., *Organizational Environments: Ritual and Rationality* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1983), 71-97.

James Scott. *Seeing Like a State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

Martin Trow, "American Higher Education: Past, Present, and Future," *Educational Researcher* 17 (March, 1988): 13-23.

Ralph Turner, "Sponsored and Contest Mobility and the School System," *American Sociological Review* 25 (1960): 855-67.

Willard Waller, *The Sociology of Teaching* (New York: Wiley, 1932/1965).

Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in H. H. Gerth & C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 129-56.

My dissertation topic fell into my lap one day during the final course in my doctoral program in sociology at the University of Pennsylvania, when I mentioned to Michael Katz that I had done a brief study of Philadelphia's Central High School for an earlier class. He had a new grant for studying the history of education in Philadelphia and Central was the lead school. He needed someone to study the school, and I needed a topic, advisor, and funding; by happy accident, it all came together in 15 minutes. I had first become interested in education as an object of study as an undergraduate at Harvard in the late 1960s, where I majored in Students for a Democratic Society and minored in sociology. In my last year or two there, I worked on a Marxist analysis of Harvard as an institution of social privilege (is there a better case?), which whet my appetite for educational research.

For the dissertation, I wanted to apply the same kind of Marxist approach to Central High School, which seemed to beg for it. Founded in 1838, it was the first high school in the city and one of the first in the county, and it later developed into the elite academic high school for boys in the city. It looked like the Harvard of public high schools. I had a model for this kind of analysis, Katz's study of Beverly High School, in which he explained how this high school, shortly after its founding, came to be seen by many citizens as an institution that primarily served the upper classes, thus prompting the town meeting to abolish the school in 1861.[4]

I was planning to do this kind of study about Central, and there seemed to be plenty of evidence to support such an interpretation, including its heavily upper-middle-class student body, its aristocratic reputation in the press, and its later history as the city's elite high school.

That was the intent, but my plan quickly ran into two big problems in the data I was gathering. First, a statistical analysis of student attainment and achievement at the school over its first 80 years showed a consistent pattern: only one-quarter of the students managed to graduate, which meant it was highly selective; but grades and not class determined who made it and who didn't, which meant it was – surprise – highly meritocratic. Attrition in modern high schools is strongly correlated with class, but this was not true in the early years at Central. Middle class students were more likely to enroll in the first place, but they were no more likely to succeed than working class students. The second problem was that the high school's role in the Philadelphia school system didn't fit the Marxist story of top-down control that I was trying to tell. In the first 50 years of the high school, there was a total absence of bureaucratic authority over the Philadelphia school system. The high school was an attractive good in the local educational market, offering elevated education in a grand building at a collegiate level (it granted bachelor degrees) and at no cost. Grammar school students competed for access to this commodity by passing an entrance exam, and grammar school masters competed to get the most students into Central by teaching to the test. The power that the high school exerted over the system was considerable but informal, arising from consumer demand from below rather than bureaucratic dictate from above.

Thus my plans to tell a story of class privilege and social control fell apart at the very outset of my dissertation; in its place, I found a story about markets and stratification: Marx gives way to Weber. The establishment of Central High school in the nation's second largest city created a desirable commodity with instant scarcity, and this consumer-based market power not only gave the high school control over the school system but also gave it enough autonomy to establish a working meritocracy. The high school promoted inequality: it served a largely middle class constituency and established an extreme form of educational stratification. But it imposed a tough meritocratic regime equally on the children of the middle class and working class, with both groups failing most of the time.

CALL ON YOUR FRIENDS FOR HELP

In the story I'm telling here, the bad news is that scholarship is a terrain that naturally lures you into repeatedly getting it wrong. The good news is that help is available if you look for it, which can turn scholarly wrong-headedness into a fruitful learning experience. Just ask your friends and colleagues. The things you most don't want to hear may be just the things that will save you from intellectual confusion and professional oblivion. Let me continue with the story, showing how colleagues repeatedly saved my bacon.

MARKETS GIVE GROUND TO POLITICS

Once I completed the dissertation, I gradually settled into being a Weberian, a process that took a while because of the disdain that Marxists hold for Weber.[5] I finally decided I had a good story to tell about markets and schools, even if it

wasn't the one I had wanted to tell, so I used this story in rewriting the dissertation as a book. When I had what I thought was a final draft ready to send to the publisher, I showed it to my colleague at Michigan State, David Cohen, who had generously offered to give it a reading. His comments were extraordinarily helpful and quite devastating. In the book, he said, I was interpreting the evolution of the high school and the school system as a result of the impact of the market, but the story I was really telling was about an ongoing tension for control of schools between markets and politics.[6] The latter element was there in the text, but I had failed to recognize it and make it explicit in the analysis. In short, he explained to me the point of my own book; so I had to rewrite the entire manuscript in order to bring out this implicit argument.

Framing this case in the history of American education as a tension between politics and markets allowed me to tap into the larger pattern of tensions that always exist in a liberal democracy: the democratic urge to promote equality of power and access and outcomes, and the liberal urge to preserve individual liberty, promote free markets, and tolerate inequality. The story of Central High School spoke to both these elements. It showed a system that provided equal opportunity and unequal outcomes. Democratic politics pressed for expanding access to high school for all citizens, whereas markets pressed for restricting access to high school credentials through attrition and tracking. Central see-sawed back and forth between these poles, finally settling on the grand compromise that has come to characterize American education ever since: open access to a stratified school system. Using both politics and markets in the analysis also introduced me to the problem of formalism, since political goals for education (preparing competent citizens) value learning, whereas market goals (education for social advantage) value credentialing.

DISAGGREGATING MARKETS

The book came out in 1988 with the title, *The Making of an American High School*.[7] With politics and markets as my new hammer, everything looked like a nail. So I wrote a series of papers in which I applied the idea to a wide variety of educational institutions and reform efforts, including the evolution of high school teaching as work, the history of social promotion, the history of the community college, the rhetorics of educational reform, and the emergence of the education school.

Midway through this flurry of papers, however, I ran into another big problem. I sent a draft of my community college paper to David Hogan, a friend and former member of my dissertation committee at Penn, and his critique stopped me cold. He pointed out that I was using the idea of educational markets to refer to two things that were quite different, both in concept and in practice. One was the actions of educational consumers, the students who want education to provide the credentials they needed in order to get ahead; the other was the actions of educational providers, the taxpayers and employers who want education to produce the human capital that society needs in order to function. The consumer sought education's exchange value, providing selective benefits for the individual who owns the credential; the producer sought education's use value, providing collective benefits to everyone in society, even those not in school.

This forced me to reconstruct the argument from the ground up, abandoning the politics and markets angle and constructing in its place a tension among three goals that competed for primacy in shaping the history of American education. "Democratic equality" referred to the goal of using education to prepare capable citizens; "social efficiency" referred to the goal of using education to prepare productive workers; and "social mobility" referred to the goal of using education to enable individuals to get ahead in society. The first was a stand-in for educational politics, the second and third were a disaggregation of educational markets.

ABANDONING THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY

Once formulated, the idea of the three goals became a mainstay in my teaching, and for a while it framed everything I wrote. I finished the string of papers I mentioned earlier, energized by the analytical possibilities inherent in the new tool. But by the mid-1990s, I began to be afraid that its magic power would start to fade on me soon, as had happened with earlier enthusiasms like Marxism and politics-and-markets. Most ideas have a relatively short shelf life, as metaphors quickly reach their limits and big ideas start to shrink upon close examination. That doesn't mean these images and concepts are worthless, only that they are bounded, both conceptually and temporally. So scholars need to strike while the iron is hot. Michael Katz once made this point to me with the Delphic advice, "Write your first book first." In other words, if you have an idea worth injecting into the conversation, you should do so now, since it will eventually evolve into something else, leaving the first idea unexpressed. Since the evolution of an idea is never finished, holding off publication until the idea is done is a formula for never publishing.

So it seemed like the right time to put together a collection of my three-goals papers into a book, and I had to act quickly before they started to turn sour. With a contract for the book and a sabbatical providing time to put it together, I now had to face the problem of framing the opening chapter. In early 1996 I completed a draft and submitted it to *American Educational Research Journal*. The reviews knocked me back on my heels. They were supportive but highly critical. One in particular, which I later found out was written by Norton Grubb, forced me to rethink the entire scheme of competing goals. He pointed out something I had completely missed in my enthusiasm for the tool-of-the-moment. In practice my analytical scheme with three goals turned into a normative scheme with two: a Manichean vision of light and darkness, with Democratic Equality as the Good, and with Social Mobility and Social Efficiency as the Bad and the Ugly. This ideologically colored representation didn't hold up under close scrutiny. Grubb pointed out that social efficiency is not as ugly as I was suggesting. Like democratic equality and unlike social mobility, it promotes learning, since it has a stake in the skills of the workforce. Also, like democratic equality, it views education as a public good, whose benefits accrue to everyone and not just (as with social mobility) to the credential holder.

This trenchant critique forced me to start over, putting a different spin on the whole idea of competing goals, abandoning the binary vision of good and evil, reluctantly embracing the idea of balance, and removing the last vestige of my original bumper-sticker Marxism. As I reconstructed the argument, I put forward the idea that all three of these goals emerge naturally from the nature of a liberal

democracy, and that all three are necessary.[8] There is no resolution to the tension among educational goals, just as there is no resolution to the problem of being both liberal and democratic. We need an educational system that makes capable citizens and productive workers while also enabling individuals to pursue their own aspirations. And we all act out our support for each of these goals according to which social role is most salient to us at the moment. As citizens, we want graduates who can vote intelligently; as taxpayers and employers, we want graduates who will increase economic productivity; and as parents, we want an educational system that offers our children social opportunity. The problem is the imbalance in the current mix of goals, as the growing primacy of social mobility over the other two goals privileges private over public interests, stratification over equality, and credentials over learning.

EXAMINING LIFE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SYSTEM

With this reconstruction of the story, I was able to finish my second book, published in 1997, and get it out the door before any other major problems could threaten its viability.[9] One such problem was already coming into view. In comments on my *AERJ* goals paper, John Rury (the editor) pointed out that my argument relied on a status competition model of social organization – students fighting for scarce credentials in order to move up or stay up – that did not really apply to the lower levels of the system. Students in the lower tracks in high school and in the open-access realms of higher education (community colleges and regional state universities) lived in a different world from the one I was talking about. They were affected by the credentials race, but they weren't really in the race themselves. For them, the incentives to compete were minimal, the rewards remote, and the primary imperative was not success but survival.

Fortunately, however, there was one place at the bottom of the educational hierarchy I did know pretty well, and that was the poor beleaguered education school. From 1985 to 2003, while I was teaching in the College of Education at Michigan State University, I received a rich education in the subject. I had already started a book about ed schools, but it wasn't until the book was half completed that I realized it was forcing me to rethink my whole thesis about the educational status game. Here was an educational institution that was the antithesis of the Harvards and Central High Schools that I had been writing about thus far. Residing at the very bottom of the educational hierarchy, the ed school was disdained by academics, avoided by the best students, ignored by policymakers, and discounted by its own graduates. It was the perfect case to use in answering a question I had been avoiding: What happens to education when credentials carry no exchange value and the status game is already lost?

What I found is that life at the bottom has some advantages, but they are outweighed by disadvantages. On the positive side, the education school's low status frees it to focus efforts on learning rather than on credentials, on the use value rather than exchange value of education; in this sense, it is liberated from the race for credentials that consumes the more prestigious realms of higher education. On the negative side, however, the ed school's low status means that it has none of the autonomy that prestigious institutions (like Central High School) generate for themselves, which leaves it vulnerable to kibitzing from the outside. This institutional weakness also has made the ed school meekly responsive to its

environment, so that over the years it obediently produced large numbers of teachers at low cost and with modest professional preparation, as requested.

When I had completed a draft of the book, I asked for comments from two colleagues at Michigan State, Lynn Fendler and Tom Bird, who promptly pointed out several big problems with the text. One had to do with the argument in the last few chapters, where I was trying to make two contradictory points: ed schools were weak in shaping schools but effective in promoting progressive ideology. The other problem had to do with the book's tone: as an insider taking a critical position about ed schools, I sounded like I was trying to enhance my own status at the expense of colleagues. Fortunately, they were able to show me a way out of both predicaments. On the first issue, they helped me see that ed schools were more committed to progressivism as a rhetorical stance than as a mode of educational practice. In our work as teacher educators, we have to prepare teachers to function within an educational system that is hostile to progressive practices. On the second issue, they suggested that I shift from the third person to the first person. By announcing clearly both my membership in the community under examination and my participation in the problems I was critiquing, I could change the tone from accusatory to confessional. With these important changes in place, *The Trouble with Ed Schools* was published in 2004.[10]

ENABLING LIMITATIONS

In this essay I have been telling a story about grounding research in an unlovely but fertile mindset, getting it wrong repeatedly, and then trying to fix it with the help of friends. However, I don't want to leave the impression that I think any of these fixes really resolved the problems. The story is more about filling potholes than about re-engineering the road. It's also about some fundamental limitations in my approach to the historical sociology of American education, which I have been unwilling and unable to fix since they lie at the core of my way of seeing things. Intellectual frameworks define, shape, and enable the work of scholars. Such frameworks can be helpful by allowing us to cut a slice through the data and reveal interesting patterns that are not apparent from other angles, but they can only do so if they maintain a sharp leading edge. As an analytical instrument, a razor works better than a baseball bat, and a beach ball doesn't work at all. The sharp edge, however, comes at a cost, since it necessarily narrows the analytical scope and commits a scholar to one slice through a problem at the expense of others. I'm all too aware of the limitations that arise from my own cut at things.

One problem is that I tend to write a history without actors. Taking a macro-sociological approach to history, I am drawn to explore general patterns and central tendencies in the school-society relationship rather than the peculiarities of individual cases. In the stories I tell, people don't act. Instead, social forces contend, social institutions evolve in response to social pressures, and collective outcomes ensue. My focus is on general processes and structures rather than on the variations within categories. What is largely missing from my account of American education is the radical diversity of traits and behaviors that characterizes educational actors and organizations. I plead guilty to these charges. However, my aim has been not to write a tightly textured history of the particular but to explore some of the broad socially structured patters that shape the main outlines of American educational life. My sense is that this kind of work serves a

useful purpose—especially in a field such as education, whose dominant perspectives have been psychological and presentist rather than sociological and historical; and in a sub-field like history of education, which can be prone to the narrow monograph with little attention to the big picture; and in a country like the United States, which is highly individualistic in orientation and tends to discount the significance of the collective and the categorical.

Another characteristic of my work is that I tend to stretch arguments well beyond the supporting evidence. As anyone can see in reading my books, I am not in the business of building an edifice of data and planting a cautious empirical generalization on the roof. My first book masqueraded as a social history of an early high school, but it was actually an essay on the political and market forces shaping the evolution of American education in general—a big leap to make from historical data about a single, atypical school. Likewise my second book is a series of speculations about credentialing and consumerism that rests on a modest and eclectic empirical foundation. My third book involves minimal data on education in education schools and maximal rumination about the nature of "the education school." In short, validating claims has not been my strong suit. I think the field of educational research is sufficiently broad and rich that it can afford to have some scholars who focus on constructing credible empirical arguments about education and others who focus on exploring ways of thinking about the subject.

The moral of this story, therefore, may be that scholarship is less a monologue than a conversation. In education, as in other areas, our field is so expansive that we can't cover more than a small portion, and it's so complex that we can't even gain mastery over our own tiny piece of the terrain. But that's ok. As participants in the scholarly conversation, our responsibility is not to get things right but to keep things interesting, while we rely on discomfiting interactions with our data and with our colleagues to provide the correctives we need to make our scholarship more durable.

Influential Works
David F. Labaree

David K. Cohen, "Teaching Practice: Plus Ça Change." In Philip W. Jackson, ed., *Contributing to Educational Change: Perspectives on Research and Practice*, (Berkeley, CA: McCutchan, 1988), 27-84.

Randall Collins, *The Credential Society: An Historical Sociology of Education and Stratification*. (New York: Academic Press, 1979).

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NOTES

1 George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958).

2 I am grateful to Lynn Fendler and Tom Bird for comments on an earlier draft of this portion of the essay. As they have done before, they saved me from some embarrassing mistakes. I presented an earlier version of this analysis in a colloquium at the Stanford School of Education in 2002 and in the Division F Mentoring Seminar at the American Educational Research Association annual meeting in New Orleans later the same year. A later version was published as the introduction to *Education, Markets, and the Public Good: The Selected Works of David F. Labaree* (London: Routledge Falmer, 2007). Reprinted with the kind permission of Taylor and Francis.

3 That doesn't mean it's necessarily the best way to start developing an idea. For me, teaching has always served better as a medium for stimulating creative thought. It's a chance for me to engage with ideas from texts about a particular topic, develop a story about these ideas, and see how it sounds when I tell it in class and listen to student responses. The classroom has a wonderful mix of traits for these purposes: by forcing discipline and structure on the creative process while allowing space for improvisation and offering the chance to reconstruct everything the next time around. After my first book, most of my writing had its origins in this pedagogical process. But at a certain point I find that I have to test these ideas in print.

4 Michael B. Katz, *The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1968).

5 Marx's message is rousing and it can fit on a bumper sticker: Workers of the world, unite! But Weber's message is more complicated, pessimistic, and off-putting: The iron cage of rationalization has come to dominate the structure of thought and social action, but we can't stop it or even escape from it.

6 He also pointed out, in passing, that my chapter on the attainment system at the high school – which incorporated 17 tables in the book (30 in the dissertation), and which took me two years to develop by collecting, coding, keying, and statistically analyzing data from 2,000 student records – was essentially one big footnote in support of the statement, "Central High School was meritocratic." Depressing but true.

7 David F. Labaree, *The Making of an American High School: The Credentials Market and the Central High School of Philadelphia, 1838-1939* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

8 David F. Labaree, "Public Goods, Private Goods: The American Struggle over Educational Goals. *American Educational Research Journal* 34:1 (Spring, 1998): 39-81.

9 David F. Labaree, *How to Succeed in School Without Really Learning: The Credentials Race in American Education* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997).

10 David F. Labaree, *The Trouble with Ed Schools* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).