

The Prussian-Industrial History of Public Schooling
Yehudi Meshchaninov
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If you would understand anything, observe its beginning and its development. – Aristotle

Although much has been written about the formation of public schooling in the United States (Kliebard, 2004; Pinar et al., 2008; Ravitch, 2001), most histories of public education overlook the true origins of state-sponsored schooling. First created in Prussia in the year 1716, compulsory state-sponsored education was engineered by King Fredrick William I as a means of solidifying the fledgling Prussian state into a uniform whole (Boli, Ramirez, Mayer, 1985). Further developed by his son King Fredrick the Great, the *Volsschulen*, or public schools, were explicitly designed for the purpose of consolidating imperial power. As expressed by Thomas Alexander (1918) in his historic study of the Prussian Educational system:

The Prussian citizen cannot be free to do and act for himself; that the Prussian is to a large measure enslaved through the medium of his school; that his learning instead of making him his own master forges the chain by which he is held in servitude; that the whole scheme of the Prussian elementary school education is shaped with the express purpose of making ninety-nine out of every one hundred citizens subservient . . . The elementary schools of Prussia have been fashioned so as to make spiritual and intellectual slaves of the lower classes (Preface, n.p.)

This was the model later transplanted by Horace Mann, the father of American public schooling, to the United States in 1843 (Cubberley, 1920). Although he was a strong lobbyist for the Prussian schooling design, even Mann acknowledged that the Prussian system had its critics. As he wrote in 1843:

Numerous tracts were issued from the English press . . . strongly denouncing the whole plan of education in Prussia, as being not only designed to produce, but as actually

producing, a spirit of blind acquiescence to arbitrary power, in things spiritual as well as temporal – as being in fine, a system of education adapted to enslave, and not to enfranchise, the human mind. (as quoted in Cubberley, 1920, p. 488)

Yet he still argued that:

Allowing all these charges against the Prussian system to be true . . . the evils imputed to it were easily and naturally separated from the good . . . [And that] If a moral power over the understanding and affections of the people may be turned to evil may it not also be employed for the highest good? (as quoted in Cubberley, 1920, p. 488-489)

However, while Mann may have been quick to shrug off critics' concerns, their fears were by no means unfounded. Forged in the crucible of Prussian militaristic thinking, the Prussian educational system was predicated upon what Dorn (1931) called the “intense pressure and severe discipline under which the Prussian bureaucracy labored (p. 405).” A part of King Fredrick’s national strategy, the educational ministry operated under the same rules as the rest of King Fredrick’s government—absolute submission. Understanding that total control lay in the monopolization of choice and knowledge, King Fredrick ensured that he was the sole true decision maker. This led to what Dorn (1931) describes as:

The incessant personal intervention of the Prussian monarch in all branches of the administration . . . They were bound by elaborate written instructions which embraced the entire range of their activities and provided an invariable rule for every administrative act . . . Here was an organization in which military discipline, absolute subordination, and centralization were complete. (p. 406-408)

This spirit of absolute subordination and central control was also built into the Prussian educational model. Concerned that “too expansive a course in instruction will awaken the spirit

of ability within them,” (as quoted by Alexander, 1918, p. 31) King Fredrick systematically established a schooling model engineered to ensure that the “spirit of ability within” was permanently extinguished. Children were depersonalized and isolated from each other at an early age. Seated in rows, they were easily silenced, controlled, and forced to engage in rote tasks whose sole purpose was to inculcate obedience. Taught fragmented subjects that deprived them of context and perspective, their thinking was intentionally and systematically stunted. These practices shaped the curriculum of the Prussian public schools for over a century. As late as 1919, German public schools were described by German philosopher Kurt Eisner as “veritable drill academy[s] in which children could be intellectually crippled for life” (as quoted in Gurganus, 1992, p. 211).

To staff King Fredrick’s newly created Prussian schools, a novel sort of teacher was needed. Unlike centuries of teachers before them, these teachers were to operate under the tight constraints of the imperial bureaucracy. Now a cog in the large state-operated machine, the teacher’s role was drastically redefined. No longer an inspirational mentor or wise sage, the Prussian teacher was the first of a new breed—an educrat. Just like their students, Prussian teachers became widgets, standardized and replaceable. Stripped of the ability to make decisions, teachers operated under the same rules King Fredrick set out for all of his officials: “You have no right of initiative whatever” (as quoted by Dorn, 1931, p. 414). Part of an elaborate hierarchy of teachers, principals, superintendents, and other ministers, pedagogues were continually micromanaged, evaluated, observed, and assessed. This created an atmosphere of constant fear. The students feared the teacher, who in turn feared the principal, who in turn feared the superintendent, who in turn feared his supervisor, up until the King. This fear was by design, and it was intentionally embedded system-wide. An integral part of his management strategy, the use

of fear-based control stemmed from King Fredrick's philosophy of mistrust. Clearly articulated by King Fredrick himself as "among one hundred officials you can always hang ninety-nine with a good conscience, for if a single official was honest it was much," (as quoted by Dorn, 1931, p. 421) this perspective lay at the heart of the Prussian educational system.

This is the legacy of the Prussian model. Designed to ensure control, it systemically disempowers students and adults alike with ruthless efficiency. Infantilized and fearful, its members are left weak—conditioned to obey those in command. It was this system that Horace Mann transplanted to US shores in 1843. While Mann understood the Prussian model's dark nature, he was seduced by its power, arrogantly supposing he could use it for "for the highest good (as quoted in Cubberley, 1920, p. 488-489)". The appeal of being able to systematically control people's mindset, and attitudes—what Mann called the "moral power over the understanding and affections of the people (as quoted by Cubberley, 1920, p. 488-489)"—was simply too strong. Like the Platonian philosopher-kings of old, Mann and his colleagues believed that they should be the ones to determine the values and ideas best perpetuated into the future. After all, surely they, as the educated Protestant elite, knew better than rag-tag (and often Catholic) immigrants, what should be taught to future generations.

Mann's rationalizations brought the Prussian design to the United States. Beginning in Massachusetts, where Mann was Secretary of Education, it eventually spread across the country, forming the foundation of the American public school. Recognizing it as the perfect vehicle for social engineering, the early proponents of the Prussian design in America (rechristened as the American public school system) sought to utilize it to reshape society. Unabashedly proclaiming their distrust of the general public, these educators looked to surreptitiously undermine individual freedom and choice through the use of education. In the words of the Rockefeller

General Education Board (1906) “In our dreams . . . people yield themselves with perfect docility into our molding hands” (as quoted by Gatto, 2010, p. 8). These chilling words were echoed by William Torrey Harris, US Commissioner of Education (1889-1906):

[Ideally] ninety-nine [students] out of one hundred are automata, careful to walk in prescribed paths, careful to follow the prescribed custom. This is not an accident but *the result of substantial education, which scientifically defined, is the subsumption of the individual* [emphasis added]. (as quoted by Gatto, 2010, p. 13)

While the Prussians sought to deprive the individual of his freedom for the good of the crown, in the United States the good of society became the altar upon which personal freedoms were to be sacrificed. As described by Kliebard (2004) in his historic account of the struggle for the American curriculum:

[Social] Efficiency became more than a byword in the educational world; it became an urgent mission . . . To go beyond what someone had to know in order to perform . . . [as an industrial worker etc.] was simply wasteful. Social utility became the supreme criterion against which the values of school studies was measured. (p. 76-77)

No longer was school to be about learning or intellectual development. To optimize society, individual growth was to be surrendered for the greater good. Under these aggressive new policies, schools were to become an extension of the factory—an assembly line, systematically churning out students conditioned for their future lives as workers in the industrial machine.

Moreover, just as in Prussia, the lack of freedom and initiative was extended to include the teacher as well. Here too, it was in the interests of social-efficiency that these sacrifices were made. As described by the founder of scientific management Frederick Winslow Taylor (1911):

It will be seen that the useful results have hinged mainly upon (1) the substitution of a science for the individual judgment of the workman; (2) the scientific selection and development of the workman, after each man has been studied, taught, and trained, and one may say experimented with, instead of allowing the workmen to select themselves and develop in a haphazard way; and (3) the intimate cooperation of the management with the workmen, so that they together do the work in accordance with the scientific laws which have been developed, instead of leaving the solution of each problem in the hands of the individual workman. (p. 114-115)

Adapted to education by social efficiency zealots, such as Franklin Bobbitt and Ellwood Cubberley (Pinar, 2008), scientific management became the preferred management style in schools nationwide. Like their counterparts in the factories, teachers were stripped of the power of “individual judgment” and left to work within the tight confines of a “scientific” curriculum.

Supported by the powerful business titans of the early 20th century, social-efficiency quickly assumed a position of prominence amongst the leading educators of the time (Ravitch, 2001). Moreover, the social-efficiency model of simplified, work-oriented schooling was given additional support by the new field of educational psychology. Heavily influenced by Charles Darwin’s evolutionary theory, psychologists such as Sir Francis Galton (1869) perpetuated the notion of inherited intelligence. Assuming intelligence to be a trait that is genetically transferred, they argued that children of poor, immigrant, or minority parents were uneducable (Oakes & Lipton, 2007). Such thinking was further extended by other prominent psychologists like H. H. Goddard (1914), who went so far as to propose mass sterilization for the “lower elements” of society. This unholy trinity – psychologist, who “proved” students were uneducable; social

theorist, who argued that an educated student was not in society's interest; and business leaders, greedy for obedient workers – perpetuated the Prussian model into the 20st century.

The history of the American public school system suggests a most disturbing fact; public schools are not failing at all. They are faithfully producing the results they were designed to generate—weak apathetic students with “the spirit of ability within them” forever extinguished (Gatto, 2009; Waronker et al., 2009). In fact, public schools have succeeded beyond their designer's greatest expectations. Despite tremendous advancements in technology, human rights, and social awareness, the system engineered in the 1760's by King Fredrick the Great still succeeds in dampening the creative spirit of its students, fostering mediocrity, and ensuring a subservient population. Deeply ingrained into our collective psyche, the legacy of the centrally controlled, highly scripted classroom continues. Trapped in an educational model explicitly engineered to breed submission and apathy, it is not surprising that student results remain dismal.

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