Reflections on Carl Kaestle’s *Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools and American Society, 1780-1860*
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As an historian (B.A. in History and Government/Legal Studies from Bowdoin College) and a teacher of history courses for over twenty years, I was delighted to finally read Kaestle’s *Pillars of the Republic*. While I may have been in middle school when it was first published, this overview of American common school development before the divisive Civil War provides far reaching insights into the development of American education and, in fact, American ideals and values. It chronicles the acceptance and growth of the state school system under a newly formed Republican government, layered with a wide-array of socio-economic influences spanning the first century of our nation’s history. From bedrock colonial, Protestant values to the emergence of capitalism in agro-industrial America, the populous weaved an educational fabric that became the common school system for the common good of society.

Grounded in the ideals promoted by our “founding fathers”, American ideals and values were rooted in the concept that the nation’s ability to exist, grow and flourish would be pinned to republicanism, the forming of a representative government in which the general will would be defined, refined and articulated by the best men of society. As described by Kaestle, “Education could play an important role in reconciling freedom and order.” A sound education would prepare men to vote intelligently and prepare women to train their sons properly for a growing nation. Again, as Kaestle states, “Republicanism united concepts of virtue, balanced government
and liberty.” This concept of shared opportunity and responsibility to mankind was based on Enlightenment principles promoted by the Philosophes back in Europe, and the French Revolution was a very visible demonstration that this ideal form of government was not an outlier but, rather, the global trendsetter that raised the self-imposed stakes for achieving national success in this form of representative government. Some degree of state-sponsored schools would be necessary to educate the populous so that they could be active and regular participants in local, state and national discourse and determination. As Jefferson noted in the preamble of his 1779 bill for free schools in Virginia, state-sponsored education leads to educated, virtuous lawmakers that can create the platform of laws for the government to conduct its affairs. This basic tenet of republican leadership, as Jefferson viewed it, meant that men should be chosen, “without regard to wealth, birth or other accidental condition.” As such, there would be a shared cost to educating the nation’s citizenry, and that burden would be well worth the costs. Jefferson continued by saying, “A thoroughly American curriculum would help unify the language and culture of the new nation and wean America away from a corrupt Europe.” As such, the proverbial “call to arms” for the common school was declared by Jefferson in the nation’s third year of existence.

Over the first century of our nation’s history, we have certainly witnessed incredible growth, both in shape and scope, of our nation’s schools and the opportunities we afford our children and citizens to become active participants in our democratic ideals and republic. The irony, of course, is that most Americans are not active participants in the very citizen-centered government we have created for the purpose of fully engaging the populous in its own affairs. And while the calls for educational reform in American continue to increase in volume, frequency and voice, citizen participation in the reformation process has not hit that watershed
mark yet. When will the collective voices be enough to turn the cogs of the political machine of our representative government and, thus, lead America into consideration of new, post-agro-industrial models of public education?

To better understand our national government’s 19th century need to, and interest in, regulating the morals and virtues of its citizens in the early years of the republic, Kaestle explains the basic justification: “From their beliefs in Protestantism, republicanism, and capitalism, cosmopolitan spokesmen justified government intervention at a time of rapid change, to regulate morals, develop institutions, and create a more homogenous population.” The U. S. government firmly believed in its infancy that it had an obligation to play a very direct role in actually controlling the various institutions that affected the lives of its citizens. In the 21st century, however, the winds of change are present in terms of redefining the paradigm of American public education. However, our citizens are not yet prepared to capture this wind, this energy source, and demand through the process and perils of representative government that a (r)evolutionary time is upon us in terms of our national education system. As Kaestle notes in his epilogue, while changes and battles are inevitable as society moves forward, what is held over from the common school reform days is America’s faith in education and the cosmopolitan ideal of inclusive public schools. Reformers believed that schools could solve the problems of diversity, stability and unequal opportunity. There is no reason why these ideals should be forsaken as the nation enters another significant period of education reform in the early 21st century.
References
