

Reflections from the Field

Culture, Education, Anthropology

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This article argues that the anthropology of education must focus on what people do to educate themselves outside the constraints constituting the problematics of schooling. Anthropologists must do this precisely to fulfill their public role as legitimate participants in the conversations about understanding and transforming schooling. When anthropologists work at losing control in their research practice, they discover the breadth of the educative efforts that are triggered by the arbitrariness of cultural forms and, most interestingly, produce new forms. If this is the case, then the anthropology of education is the anthropology of cultural transformation that it has been difficult for the discipline to produce. [cross-cultural research, culture change]

We, anthropologists of education, must be concerned that so much of our work is written by Americans, for Americans, and in the terms of American public schools.¹ It might seem less prejudicial to drop all references to “America” and just say that we write as (unhappy) public school teachers to (skeptical) public school teachers in terms (of the problems) of the public schools.² But to do so would precisely elide the peculiar historical position of these teachers, and this “they” includes “us” as academic researchers. Together, we face the multiple institutions enforcing a cultural arbitrary that we cannot escape, even as we struggle to transform it. Not facing America would also elide what anthropology may have to offer that sociology and psychology do not, that is, “culture.” Anthropology, if it has to have any punch, must be the activity that fosters the sense that the world we all experience is a cultured world constructed in a contingent history that has made something totally concrete. America-as-culture, whatever our political orientation, must be our problem. How to deal with this problem analytically must be our concern. As anthropologists, we must face culture if only, I also argue, because facing culture will reveal something about “education” that will remain hidden if we fall for equating education with schooling.

Not that we have much choice. What we have come to know as the anthropology of education may have been constructed from the onset as the anthropology of American schooling. Renewals of its urgency, when associations get founded (as the Council on Anthropology and Education [CAE] was in 1968) or when their mission gets rewritten (as CAE’s was in 2007), have reconstructed American schooling as the world we must inhabit. This was already true in 1953, when professional anthropologists first met self-referentially to discuss the relationship between anthropology and “professional education.” The first paragraph of the first chapter of the first section of the first volume among the many George Spindler edited is very clear:

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Professional educators today face many problems. These problems are produced by such factors as the complexity and heterogeneity of American culture, the rapidity . . . of cultural change, the effort to provide equality of educational opportunity for all children and youth, . . . the competition for the tax dollar, current ideological conflict, and conflicting theories of education. [Spindler 1955:1]

At the time, I. James Quillen (1955) was dean of the School of Education at Stanford University. Spindler (1955:5–14) responded, first with a very broad summary of the importance of anthropology to the overall understanding of humanity and then with its use in foundation courses in schools of education. Finally, he turned to teacher education, school administration, schooling in the colonies and (American) Indian reservations, and so on. As the essay progresses it becomes clear that Spindler was addressing American school people. Anthropology had “come to help,” as M. Mead is said to have defined her role (McDermott 2000). It had, arguably, significantly helped the World War II effort, and now it was time to argue for the special contribution of the discipline to “the problems with our schools.”

After 35 years at Teachers College, I remain gratified that so many of my colleagues in teacher education and other forms of professional preparation for work in schools find anthropology useful. But I am not always sure why this should be. Why anthropology rather than, say, sociology, psychology, history? The most common reasons are methodological, with an emphasis on ethnography and close attention to what we used to call “the native’s point of view” now modernized as “what it means to the people,” to paraphrase Malinowski (1961) and Geertz (1973). Anthropologists are also sometimes expected to be helpful when people want to talk about some other people’s culture and, in recent years, about “multi”-culture. We are sometimes also queried about “America” or, perhaps more politely, “the culture(s) of the United States.” We are queried about what happens elsewhere in the world probably only in programs in “international” education. In other programs, students at Teachers College are often barely polite about the usefulness of reading about life outside the United States.

My students’ resistance has had the advantage of making me pay attention. What is special about Samoa, men on street corners, or even the everyday problems of one principal in a small school? Why should we, as masters of anthropological apprentices, suggest that they go where most of their scholarly peers in sociology, psychology, and so on do not go? Why should we encourage editors of major journals to seek papers on education that are not phrased in the terms of American schooling? Why, simply put, should we continue to push “cross-cultural” research? Actually, what are we to mean by “cross-cultural” research? In the first part of this article, I explore answers to these questions that take seriously both the critiques of older theories of culture and various attempts to reformulate them. In the second part, I sketch an argument that has come to fascinate me: facing culture as the ongoing human production of arbitrary constraints that are themselves openings for new possibilities places education at the core of what makes human beings human. A theory of culture is a theory of education, and vice versa.

Across Culture(s)

Why anthropology? Old answers can still convince some of our audiences and potential apprentices. Students, like some of our colleagues, can be convinced that,

without facing the complexity of learning about (researching) and then representing (writing about) the life of people who live far from America, they are not likely to learn and represent what they need to know to be effective teachers (administrators, policy makers, etc.). But, of course, this argument is less and less convincing to *anthropologists* who have come to doubt that simple geographical shifts are sufficient for anthropology to achieve its goals. The mere fact of residing for one year “elsewhere” is not enough to guarantee that one has experienced a “different culture.” In this theoretical climate, what is to count as (cross-)cultural research is not obvious. And yet we know that there is something peculiarly useful in reading about China, Sri Lanka, Botswana, and/or Bedouin women. If there is to be anything distinctive about anthropology, as a systematic way of knowing about humanity, if not a science, it has to be because it postulates that what is most important about humanity will be learned through a particular form of uncontrolled interaction (“participant-observation”) with people to whom we will give a chance to teach us what is most important for them. But this is much easier to say than to use as a rule of thumb for where to put our anthropological bodies.

Boasian theories of culture now seem almost simpleminded, particularly if one learns about them in 1950s textbooks, or in work criticizing them. But the core intuition was a powerful one: if one wants to learn about adolescence, sex and love, marriage, and so on, one must check how all this is done where it is most likely that human beings are under very different forms of control than are those we first think about. Think, for example, about the current success of genetic explanations of just about everything—including sexual attraction, love, marriage, and divorce. Notice the almost complete lack of recognition of what laws, customs, forms of control and retribution for disobedience, and so on can do to transform what our genes might encourage human beings to do. Only anthropologists can provide a coherent response to sociobiology and demonstrate that genetic impulses, including possibly ongoing physical evolution, only become consequential in the life of a particular person if a social space is open for it to become consequential.³ More precisely, the kind of consequentiality (positive or amplifying, negative or repressive, etc.) a person will experience for an impulse, or a physical property, will always depend on the mechanisms available for expression and sanction.

Again, nothing here is very new. Personally, I learned about the live arbitrariness of human constructions mostly from Ruth Benedict, Ferdinand de Saussure, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. And I learned it again from Pierre Bourdieu. The fundamental insight that human history is not rational, and that it is always violent, as well as fun (Boon 1999), cannot be abandoned, but it must be restated. McDermott and I tried to do this elsewhere (McDermott and Varenne 2006; McDermott et al. 2006; Varenne and McDermott 1998). But much remains to be done to counteract the new forms of universalism of which geneticism is but one form, particularly when the implication is that humanity should stop struggling with its biological fates. This, however, can only be done if we specify more carefully the basic terms that have made anthropology distinct, powerful, and peculiarly interesting to professionals who are given the authority to police (write policy for) other people, in post-neo-colonial developmental NGOs, and of course, in the public schools that have now spread globally. The terms *culture*, *cross-cultural comparison*, *relativity*, *learning*, and, I now argue, *education* itself must remain our core concern, particularly if we want to help. But this concern must take us . . . *away*, as far from *America* as possible.

Now, “away from America” should be understood as a complex deictic phrase about one’s standing in relation to those from whom we seek to learn. Moving away from America is not merely a matter of moving physically out of the United States. One might travel to Beijing, negotiating various matters in Chinese among Chinese nationals, and still be “in America.” One might move across the hall in a New York City building and not quite be in America anymore. “Away” in my argument is “NOT here *where I stand*.” This principle must be specified further: “Away” is “not where I stand that gives me the peculiar authority to speak about certain matters and not quite be challenged except in the terms of the set of positions I occupy.” For example, I claim here that the consequential position, for me, as I write this article, is somehow related to it being very hard to challenge the statement that “Hervé Varenne is a senior professor in a Famous School of Education who claims anthropology as a discipline.” That Hervé Varenne could also be characterized as a “60-year-old French white male” is interactionally inconsequential in *this* setting to the extent that it is not *because* of the later set of identifications that he (I) may publish in *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*. I may do so to the extent that I stand as a professional anthropologist.

This is the problem we all face. Most of us, including our apprentices, fans, and audiences, stand caught in the worlds of academia, state-regulated schools, and any of the forms of policy making designed specifically to transform the forms of political regulations under which (American/French/Afghan, public/private/home) schools (that is, principals, teachers, students, parents) should be placed. This stance requires that we speak to our peers and contribute to the overall task. It also requires that we do it in a particular, peculiar, way—that is, “anthropologically”—and this continues to require that, in our professional practice, we move away from the set of relationships that usually control our professional activity. The usual word for this is “cross-cultural research,” but note the emphasis on modes of control rather than geography. Margaret Mead is not known for having written about control, but we can now say that the power of her experience in Samoa came from her temporarily escaping her standing as a student at Columbia. Like her, we must move where it is likely that we will lose at least some of the usual power of academics to control the forms of knowledge that are worth reporting and debating. This may be the best reason for requiring of our apprentices that they conduct fieldwork . . . away from master anthropologists, with people who do not care about anthropology, the social sciences, academia, or policy makers and who may even be hostile to them. The apprentices (and masters when they conduct fieldwork) will be responsible to their masters and, through them, to those to whom they are responsible (funding agencies, deans, boards of trustees, etc.), but for an essential moment they will be under other people’s control.

Obviously, I take seriously Foucault and Bourdieu when they emphasize the political situationality of all knowledge. I take seriously all versions of the sense that human construction is arbitrary (at least at three levels).⁴ But I do so more from the point of view of Garfinkel (2002), Latour (2005), and all those who have a clear sense that arbitrary situationality, as condition, is not a limit but, rather, the lever through which we can eventually do something. I lean (to develop the “standing” metaphor) on Merleau-Ponty (1973) and de Certeau (1984): “enunciation” of the not-so-far possible is our fate.

Let me mention a few striking examples of what can happen when we listen carefully after losing our frames for what is to count as knowledge. We have endless studies of people learning how to speak or read English in terms of an endless

number of theories about how English gets learned, whether by infants or by immigrants. We have very few studies like Tomas Kalmar's (2001) or Grey Gundaker's (2007) on how people not being taught teach themselves to speak English or to read it. Mexican laborers struggling in southern Illinois in the 1970s or Africans fighting for their survival at the turn of the 19th century in the United States—we now know—were involved in unique efforts to transform themselves and their conditions. That is, they educated themselves about what is possible and in fact what some of the people around them (think plantation owners) might think *impossible*—that Africans could learn how to read, let alone learn how to teach themselves how to read when doing so was severely punished. McDermott brought to our attention Conklin's (2007) work on the Hanunoo educating themselves to write love letters on bamboo using a borrowed script or the people of Martha's Vineyard to breach what we easily make an unbridgeable gap between the hearing and the deaf (Groce 1985).

All of this easily leads to sentimental pap about the greatness of the oppressed. Worse, it can lead to various attempts to appropriate what might be distilled as the "way these people educate *themselves* so that *we* can educate *them* better by using *their own methods*." In a series of articles on the literacy implicit in "spelling Mississippi" challenges in Philadelphia playgrounds, Gilmore (1983, 1984) gives still another example of those known-to-not-know doing something that those known-as-known might not be able to do. But she also warns us that this does not tell us what teachers should do. Evidence of productive resistance does not make oppression less oppressive. Cultural forms are always also constraints to the process of transformation. Anthropologists cannot make themselves curators of idealized forms. Cultures are not objects for possession, and nothing is more analytically confusing than writing about a people's "own" culture. Certainly we should never postulate that people, particularly children, are inherently limited by the constraints of the settings where they spend most of their time. The point of "culture" as an analytic concept is that it obliges us to confront the reality that human beings have transformed their conditions throughout their history. What anthropologists have done, mostly, is propose theories of reproduction. They have failed to propose powerful theories of ongoing transformation. We have many theories of the most easily possible for people staying within their boundaries. We do not have theories of the not-so-far possible as people cross all the boundaries that their history has produced, as they domesticate the wild around them, as they critique politically dominant practices, and so on.

This moves me to education.

Making Human History: Education as Culturing

Moving to education is a challenge, given the sense anthropology has fostered that culture, being arbitrary, must be learned or "acquired" and that *education* is just another word for the more technical *enculturation*. This is an old sense that remains altogether too common. Levinson, for example, recently collected famous texts in anthropology and education. Interestingly, he titled this collection *Schooling the Symbolic Animal*, and he introduces this collection thus:

The process of education can thus be construed broadly as humanity's unique methods of *acquiring, transmitting, and producing* knowledge for interpreting and acting upon the world. In the broadest sense, education underlies every human group's ability **to adapt** to its

environment. Effective education allows a group to continually adapt and thereby **reproduce** the conditions of its existence. [Levinson 2000:2, boldface added]

To bolster this argument, Levinson quotes, among others, Bateson and Geertz. He does not quite point out that, arguably, and there is room for much disagreement here, Bateson and Geertz, in the two pieces included in the collection, implicitly critique the view of culture as mostly about adaptation and reproduction. Bateson's metalogue "Why Do Frenchmen?" does start with a rhetorical question that seems to contain its own answer, particularly given most recent forms of multiculturalism: "Why do Frenchmen wave their arms?" "Because they are French, of course!" because, during their early years, while watching their parents and older siblings, they learn to communicate through arm waving, or in the more modern vocabulary Levinson uses, "our cultural knowledge is 'embodied' " and "deeply encoded" (2000:22). It is unclear whether Bateson, in 1951 when the metalogue was first published, would have granted this point. What is much clearer is that Bateson was seeking to open a new problematic for anthropologists to consider, and that is the problematic of communicating the complexity of existence.⁵ Bateson ends with "dancers making their own music" (1972:13). As for Geertz, he does not quite face the problematic of "man" in the title of the essay "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man" (1973). The general issue is not gender but whether *man* is to refer to the species or to individuals. Given that Geertz spends several sentences talking about brains, he may be thinking about individuals. But he also keeps saying that "thinking consists not of 'happenings in the head' . . . but of a traffic . . . in symbols" (1973:44). Echoing Bateson on lying through smiles, Geertz (1973) is also famous for pointing out that one can never be quite sure whether an eye contraction is a wink or a blink. Most interestingly, Geertz proposes that culture is about "sets of control mechanisms." He analogizes this to computer hardware controlled by some software—thereby opening the door to a drift back into heads. But he may also have meant to direct us where G. H. Mead before him, and Garfinkel after him (not to mention Foucault), would take us: the control mechanisms are always external to the person and even the locally interacting people. Culture is not about learning.

Communicating publicly—that is, possibly lying while making music in concert with many others—is the cultural issue. Cultural arbitrariness requires human beings, from the moment of their birth, to find out what is going on and then to devise ways to deal with the uncertainty. One will never quite know why a (French) man (or woman) waved his arms at this particular woman (or man), but wave he did, and something must be done with it. "Knowing" that French people usually wave their arms while speaking will not help much when trying to get them to do anything! Cultural arbitrariness requires education as the broad process that includes teaching and learning but also includes all the other activities that may lead to or follow teaching and learning—including paying attention, investigating, deliberating, setting up, and so on. Culture is the trigger of education and its product. Cultural arbitrariness makes education necessary, and this education will produce new cultural forms.

Thus we move to the problematic of evolution (rather than reproduction) and the production of environments (techniques, languages, institutions) that *may be seen as having been new* in the history of the group and to have been, for the observing

anthropologists, as well as for the participants, "the culture of this group at that time." Temporality is of the essence. Particular orders are indeed produced and enforced at particular times, for particular people, in particular positions. But then, time passes.

It has been hard to deal with the apparent paradox that the ongoing constitution of social orders on the basis of older social orders is a matter of both enforced order and educated dis-order. A brief look at one of our ancestors may help us envision a solution. Almost a century ago, Saussure (see 1983) distinguished between synchrony and diachrony. He was trying to face phenomena that the historical linguistics of his time could not handle. At about the same time, Boas's students argued for culture as peculiar order as they moved away from historical explanations. We are all the products of this long moment, and, even as we have become dissatisfied with apparently disembodied accounts of linguistic or cultural orders, we have not been able to face productively the unpredictable change in language and culture that is also our phenomenon. How can languages and cultures change when there are so many people and mechanisms dedicated to preventing the change?

It is well established that synchronic linguistic analyses are not to be taken as direct description of the way people actually speak. Actual language, as it is spoken or written, is always a matter of emerging complex hybrids. Too often, however, an account of synchronic relationships is made to summarize what children must learn for survival and reproduction. But this is precisely wrong. Synchronic analyses are models for what is noticed as proper or sanctioned as improper.⁶ In this perspective, the issue for children in the United States is not that they must learn "proper 'English' as taught in school." The issue, instead, is that children, in America, *cannot escape* forms of English, forms of teaching English, and forms of testing whether they know English that will establish that most of them do not know English as well as other children. English is what children never quite acquire "right" and what they will necessarily change as they persist in developing private languages, alternate forms, and so on. English is what some children, after they have turned into adults, use to relegate the children of the next generations to subaltern status through the elaboration of esoteric languages that then become various kinds of barriers to full participation.

While the critical literature on Saussure's discussion of synchronic states is abundant, the critical literature on his discussion of diachrony has had little impact.⁷ It is as if the drifting of all languages into forms very different from the original and from each other was a nonissue or a completely automatic process.⁸ It is as if the very public political debates of the past half century on gender language, or the older dispute about the use of "thee" forms, had not occurred. It is as if the French Academy had been successful in maintaining French in some earlier, more perfect state. It is also as if "fat" could not only be "phat."

The interest in the drift of cultural forms also remains a peripheral concern for most anthropologists. It seems that the study of the processes through which cultures change died almost as it was born in the work of Marx, Weber, and other early social thinkers. I suspect that this had to do with the critique of all forms of historical determinisms. Historians may be willing to describe the shift from one state in the organization of a people to another, particularly when the shift appears to be produced by an act of external power, for example, in a colonized society. But few have attempted to derive from such description a general theory of what allows,

rather than causes, change. We can agree that the changes we are aware of, say, the emergence of many varieties of capitalism in the late 20th century, along with many forms of English, were not predictable as such. There is indeed very little evidence that any of the changes were systematic *in the way we expected them to be systematic*. And thus we are back with Saussure (and Boas), reconstituting the arbitrariness of synchronic forms but leaving open the question of what allows for this arbitrariness.

This is the question a broad theory of education may in fact address. I started this argument elsewhere (Varenne 2007) by emphasizing all the evidence that ethnography provides of people noticing the drifting of their favorite cultural forms and then deliberating about this drift—whether to try and stop it or to accelerate it. It may not be too extreme to reverse the association between cultural arbitrariness and embodiment: the deeper a cultural form may be embodied, the more likely it is that it will make itself open to deliberation as the world of experience imposes itself and reveals the gap between the form and what it seeks to deal with. It is Christians who keep reforming Christianity. And it is school people who will reform schooling. The fundamental cultural condition for human beings is productive ignorance, the ignorance that leads to finding out what is going on.⁹

I cannot develop this further here beyond mentioning the kind of evidence that supports the argument. For example, children and teachers in a reading group do not complete their tasks “because they know how to do it” but because, as McDermott demonstrated, they figure out, on an ongoing basis, what just happened and make a bid for a possible future (McDermott and Aron 1978). Elsewhere Fida Adely (2007) shows that adolescent girls in a Jordanian high school are not in any simple way “Muslim,” “Jordanian,” or “Arab.” But they cannot escape figuring out together what they are told about being Muslim, Jordanian, or Arab and then deliberating on how to deal with the consequences of any of the choices they have to make. National collectivities are in a similar position when, whatever political means they inherit from their history, they must deal with new demands, new conditions, new possibilities. Recent world history gives many ongoing examples of such transformatory deliberations: think of India as it transformed itself into a democracy, think of China as it lurched through at least half a dozen different political systems over the past century, think of the countries of Europe that continue the process of organizing themselves into a “Community” after massacring each other. For anthropologists to reduce all this to Indian, Chinese, or European “culture” is to abdicate their disciplinary mission. Simple calls to “Protestantism” or “capitalism” are similarly unhelpful to account for the day-to-day practice, deconstruction, and reconstruction on slightly altered plans, of a community of worship or a community of trade or industrial manufacture. Not only are they unhelpful because they stereotype the people caught in all these and hide their ongoing struggles, they are also unhelpful because they make us, anthropologists, not notice the radical impossibility of reproduction and maybe also the impossibility, for human beings, of not trying to reproduce and not trying to do it differently, deliberately and in deliberation with many others. In other words it makes anthropologists, and not only anthropologists “of” education, fail to notice the central place of, precisely, education as the other aspect of culture. Arguably, anthropology should claim education along with culture as its core concepts to the extent that one cannot hope to understand cultural evolution without also understanding education.

Through Schooling and Beyond

Reading ethnographies of deliberate efforts to do something people have never done before is exciting and then depressing. Reading about Hanunoo children peering over the shoulders of their brothers and cousins as they puzzle love letters, or about Mexican immigrants composing their grammar and dictionary for English, makes one want to celebrate humanity at work in difficult circumstances. We will never have accounts of what had to be done for human beings to move out of eastern Africa across deserts, mountains, swamps, forests. We can be sure that it was not an automatic process. We can also be sure that the people involved deliberated extensively, and probably at times violently, about the moves. But what is the relevance of all this to reforming American school pedagogies? The naive teacher apprentice complaining that such ethnographies are irrelevant to "the problems of inner-city schools" must be taken to heart. It is also part of our professional task to educate.

In this mode, I am quite sympathetic to Mica Pollock's plea (this issue) to "deepen" our own cultural analyses of American schooling and, by implication, to demonstrate to our colleagues in teacher education, school psychology, or school policy that the easiest tools to confront culture are as likely to hurt as to help. We, as anthropologists of education, can be justly proud of the ethnographies of communicational mismatches summarized, for example, in the pathbreaking *Functions of Language in the Classroom* (Cazden et al. 1972). We should now be somewhat abashed at its role in making bowdlerized forms of "multiculturalism" common sense in American schools. Whatever we meant at the time, we must now face our renewed ignorance about the best ways of telling school people how "culture" may make a difference in their lives. As Pollock suggests, culture matters not because "they" are different from "us" but because of the (arbitrary) organization of schooling that distinguishes "them" (students with their multiple characteristics) from "us" (teachers with our own multiplicities). In this vein, Jill Koyama's (2008) recent ethnography of New York City schooling is exemplary. There she focuses on the ongoing, and renewed, production of the success/failure pattern Ray McDermott and I have proposed as governing American schooling. Koyama does this by tracing the multiple relationships among federal regulations, local political interpretations and regulations, large corporations, principals, and parents as they all fight the failure that they must demonstrate to receive the newly available resources.

In this perspective, Pollock's call for "deep" analysis should move us to Latour (who inspired Koyama) rather than Geertz. Culture is much more than interpretation or meaning. It is, as Garfinkel (2002) would put it, somewhat paradoxically for something that keeps changing, a matter of "immortal facts." Our anthropological task, and it is a fully scientific task, is to bring out the properties of these facts so that we can transform our own relationships to the facts and help others in the more applied fields consider other ways for achieving what hitherto seemed unachievable.

To do this, I go further than Pollock. School achievement is but a small part of American education, and we must convince policy makers (and I include everyone here, from senators in Congress to schoolteachers) that the main issue for American democracy is not getting everyone to achieve at grade level. Given the enormous power that has been given to schools by democratic evolution over the past two centuries, it is our duty, as given by those who maintain our positions as experts, to

challenge what policy makers actually enforce on each other. In other words we must directly challenge the wisdom of such statements as the following:

engaging directly with the policymakers and practitioners who will put [our knowledge] to use. Because of our preeminence, it is both our privilege and our obligation to focus our coursework and our research on the questions of the day in each of the fields we serve. To that end, we . . . seek answers that meet the genuine needs of teachers and other practitioners, and the children they ultimately serve. [Fuhrman 2007]

This quote from the president of Teachers College appears as a “Letter from the President” at the top of the college’s website. Broadly understood, as a call to speak about our research in terms likely to speak to various nonacademic audiences, it is beyond reproach. Narrowly understood, as a call to privilege research on this or that school pedagogy, or this or that method for funding public schools, it is a recipe for induced blindness—particularly as it takes us back to schooling as the preeminent institution of education.

In the past few years, I have joined Edmund W. Gordon in his ongoing search for better ways to help urban populations educate themselves. Gordon instigated the 1965 conference that was the basis of the Cazden, John, and Hymes (1972) collection. Forty years later he convened a Study Group in Supplementary Education for both senior and junior scholars, many of them anthropologists, to renew their collective concern with education taken comprehensively as the total efforts of all people to confront their conditions. Some of the papers mentioned here were published in what is now the first of a three-volume series (Varenne 2007). The second volume (Varenne et al. 2008) brings together scholars from all disciplines to explore what approaching education comprehensively allows us to notice that is hidden by a sole concern with testing and its consequences: education into technology, language multiplicity, science in its relation to schooling, health, art, and so on. Most of these matters, to which we can add new immigrants and new threats to our physical environments, as well as the political debates about all this, religion, popular culture, economics, and so on, cannot be handled by any conceivable school curricula, but they have everything to do with education. Escaping schooling does open many news roads for anthropological investigation!

Hervé Varenne has conducted research in various settings with a dual interest in advancing culture theory and producing more careful accounts of “America” as a social fact. In the 1980s he began collaborating with Ray McDermott. Together they look at the historical contingencies that disable as well as enable. Currently, Varenne is collaborating with Ed Gordon on a project dedicated to exploring how to study education “comprehensively” (hhv1@columbia.edu).

Notes

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1. In this article, all first-person plural pronominal forms index “us, anthropologists of education.” All other human beings are “third” persons (incl. people in our field sites, peers, and colleagues in other parts of our academic worlds, other audiences in schools and elsewhere, [non-]Americans of every kind, etc.).

2. In this article, contentious words like *culture*, *education*, *America*, *community*, etc. appear first in quote marks to indicate that these are words we cannot escape but cannot take as given.

3. Much recent research is making the point that human biological evolution is ongoing. The usual example is the genetic encoding of new skin colors for *Homo sapiens*. More interesting is the apparent evidence that the ability to digest lactose developed *after* the domestication of cattle. This would be a case where cultural evolution led to biological evolution. This begs the question this article is opening: What are the processes that lead to the domestication of cattle, in the contingent history of particular human beings at a particular time?

4. Bringing together Saussure and Bourdieu, I argue that human behavior is arbitrary at three levels: (1) the same animal is “chien” in French and “dog” in English—thus the animal does not determine its human representation; (2) to get children to say “chien” or “dog” certain methods must be used, but these methods are not determined by the functional need for them—pedagogies are always arbitrary; (3) saying or writing the English representation of the animal as “dog” rather than “dawg” (to evoke issues of accent and graphics) requires the exercise of a political arbitrary.

5. Another version of the shift to expression and its conditions can be found in Jakobson’s seminal essay “Linguistics and Poetics” (1960), in which matters of code is only one among many of the functions of communication.

6. Whether it is useful to attempt a synchronic analysis of accountability patterns at any particular moment is the crux of the debate between classical structuralists and everyone else. Interestingly, as I have hinted, synchronic structural analyses are what ethnomethodology and conversation analysis produce and rely on as they show how people constitute “immortal” social orders (Garfinkel 2002). As discussed elsewhere (Varenne 2007), I am convinced that the most powerful social theory anthropologists can use is ethnomethodology. Garfinkel remains mostly concerned with the reconstitution of orders threatened by ignorance, lack of attention, or even bad faith, but the emphasis on the ongoing need for such reconstitutions must also mean that, locally and not so locally, the attempts must fail and new forms, grounded in the history of the group, will appear and become consequential. To paraphrase Garfinkel, “Passing as knowing or being something while knowing or being something else while risking full status degradation” (1956, 1967) has to be the condition of all human beings. In recent years Garfinkel (2002) has begun to highlight the ongoing “instructions” people must give each other to pass, thereby getting close to what I take to be the world of education. Ethnomethodology does not have much to say specifically about the production of cultural arbitrariness, but it will be relatively easy to expand it in that direction.

7. Actually, I have not been able to find any.

8. Historical linguists continue working on linking languages into families, and there is some recent work that is attempting to measure the “speed” of various kinds of drifts, but their work has become mostly descriptive.

9. I am building here on Rancière’s (1999, 2004) critique of those who, from Socrates onward, claimed that only certain people could and should pursue knowledge and help others gain it—the foundation of our own academic claim to expertise. Rancière argues effectively for recognizing all the evidence that the “ignorant” can and do teach each other—including how to teach: presenting this evidence is, of course, the anthropological task par excellence.

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