

Education: Essay

Horace Mann And The Creation Of The Common School

by Graham Warder

Horace Mann (1796-1859), “The Father of the Common School Movement,” was the foremost proponent of education reform in antebellum America. An ardent member of the Whig Party, Mann argued that the common school, a free, universal, non-sectarian, and public institution, was the best means of achieving the moral and socioeconomic uplift of all Americans. The reform movement he led sought to create the virtuous republican citizenry needed to sustain American political institutions, the educated workforce required to expand the American economy, and the disciplined generation necessary to forestall the social disorders so common in American cities in the decades before the Civil War.

Brother-in-law of Nathaniel Hawthorne and close friend of Samuel Gridley Howe, Mann was well connected to the cultural and political elite of New England. Mann held numerous political offices in Massachusetts state government in 1820s and 1830s, and he represented Massachusetts as an anti-slavery Whig in the House of Representatives from 1848 to 1853, taking the seat vacated by the death of John Quincy Adams.

The most influential post he occupied, however, was that of Secretary of the Massachusetts Board of Education. From that pulpit, to which he was appointed in 1837, Mann would spread the gospel of education as social redemption. The common school would mitigate class conflict, circumvent anarchy, enhance civic engagement, and perhaps most importantly inculcate moral habits, all by molding society’s most malleable members. Like his friend Howe, Mann was a Unitarian, and his inclusion of the Bible in school curriculum was based on Unitarian doctrine. Children were to be exposed to the words and moral teachings of the Bible but would not be indoctrinated to any specific denomination. Such openness merely reflected the liberal theology of his Unitarianism. The orthodox Congregationalists of New England opposed many of Mann’s reforms.

Mann’s ideas reached far beyond the borders of the Bay State. A national spokesman for education reform, he wrote numerous books and founded and edited *The Common School Journal*, a periodical that successfully spread the message that public schools should be more open and nurturing, with a wider curriculum delivered by professional teachers. He visited Massachusetts schools to determine their needs and went to Europe in 1843 to research educational institutions there. He was especially impressed with the school system existing in Prussia, including the Prussian approach to educating deaf children.

Like those of many reformers, Horace Mann’s historical legacy is mixed. Some historians consider his movement as an important step toward a more open and fluid society in which merit would trump birth. Other historians view the common school as a rather blunt tool for social control, one that tended both to stifle intellectual curiosity and to suppress diversity. He certainly sought to universalize the values and beliefs of the mainstream Protestant middle class of the North. The Irish immigrants to Massachusetts were especially vociferous in their condemnation of his Protestant-centered morality and reacted by constructing their own system of parochial schools.

For people with disabilities, Mann legacy is especially troubling. The controversies about Mann’s reforms influenced Howe’s handling of Laura Bridgman. For Deaf Americans, Mann’s role as an early proponent of oral education had long-term negative consequences. According to Mann, intellect required spoken language. While lauding Howe’s work at Perkins Institution, he was far less sanguine about the approach to deaf education initiated by Thomas Gallaudet at the American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. Mann’s attacks on sign language may represent the opening salvos of oralism.

Selected Bibliography

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