

Article Discussion: *Historical and Organizational Dimensions of Canadian Education*

Terry Wotherspoon has presented us with a very concise description of the development of the educational institution in Canada. The task is difficult, considering the utter immensity and variety of institutional structures: universities, vocational schools, independent, public and separate schools, trustee boards, administrative structures etc. None of these are described in any depth, understandably, but their origins, histories and internal structures are nicely outlined through the narrative the author creates to contextualize these developments.

I must say that, due to the ambitious nature of such a description, Wotherspoon's emphases are somewhat disproportionate: for the amount of space devoted to Aboriginal education and the earliest parochial intrusions thereupon, very little (if anything) is said about northern education or the spread of European influence into Canada's interior first nations; furthermore, this description limits itself to the 18th and early 19th centuries, with no mention of the constitutional measures presently in place vis-à-vis indigenous peoples. Military education, the other institution over which the federal government exerts direct control, is omitted altogether.

Throughout the chapter, it becomes clear that Wotherspoon employs a distinctly structuralist framework through the idioms and approaches he uses to describe education. As a structuralist myself, I have no problem with this methodology inasmuch as, if undertaken properly, it makes concise, descriptive narratives much easier to understand as a reader; the irony, however, lies in the fact that the educational institution is just one of a great many structures that compose Canadian society, none of which are mentioned in reference to education. Especially because this is a summary of the development and growth of a new institution within a society, I felt that more emphasis should have been placed on the dynamic between the fledgling system and those institutions that had to adapt themselves to accommodate its growth: the effects on labour unions, the family, local communities

etc. One of the principle critiques of structuralism is its ostensible inability to account for social unrest or disorder, precisely because this dynamic is overlooked.

In the same vein, a few examples describing the emergence of foreign-language schools and the multiculturalism movement, as well as the social resistance that they engendered, would have been a welcome inclusion. As it stands, these elements are mentioned in passing as lobby groups during the diversification of education in the post-war era. I seem to recall several ethnic enclaves gaining ground in this arena as early as the late 19th century (Ukrainians in the prairies, Greeks and Italians in Toronto, etc.). Furthermore, there are other forms of resistance that are completely overlooked, or only suggested indirectly: the responses of trustee boards and teachers' unions to the centralizing tendencies of provincial governments, the alienation of intellectual authority to design and direct curricula and learning materials, the sometimes militant activism of parents' organizations. Wotherspoon's inclusions and omissions are all the more puzzling when one considers the variety of sources, particularly social historians, cited throughout the chapter who have dealt specifically with the issues listed above. The structuralist reading of education does not necessarily preclude these.

The chapter's greatest strength is its description of the abstract structure of the institution, balanced nicely with a few anecdotal details and localized narratives such as the firsthand experience of natives in residential schools, or the rules and general attitudes that guided and imposed upon teachers' activities (if only in the early part of the century). The weakness, in my opinion, is that as a national account of the development of education, very much is left out. Hardly any references are made to individual provinces or their distinct situations and problems. Issues like racism on the west coast, ethnic solidarity and 'self-determination' in the prairies or separatism in Quebec are phenomena that directly impacted the educational institution in very specific ways. Only the most abstract description of the institution would be insensitive to these issues which, incidentally, were central concerns during the time

period most heavily emphasized herein. Though I am aware of the challenges and constraints Wotherspoon faced while attempting to condense centuries into pages, a little less emphasis on his own field of specialization may have freed up the space needed to address these issues cursorily. Students approaching the development of education for the first time will still find such a concise description invaluable, but should be cautioned against placing too much stock in the abstract generalizations made at the national level; things look much more different on the ground.